

The Blue Book

by

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The Blue Book

The Characters

"The Blue Book" can be staged using six or ten actors. For this staging of the play, we are presuming six: the First, the Second, the Third, and the Fourth Women, the Lady of the Evening, and the Rounder. Each of the women also assumes characters using the names of prostitutes listed in an actual copy of *The Blue Book*.

The FIRST WOMAN and the SECOND WOMAN are women of color. The FIRST WOMAN is between 18 and 24 and also plays the parts of VIOLA DAFFREY and JANE DUMAS. The SECOND WOMAN is between 30 and 45 and also plays the parts of HAZEL MOORE and BELLE BROOKS. The THIRD WOMAN is between 28 and 35 and also plays the parts of CAMELIA BUTLER and SARAH STONE. The FOURTH WOMAN is between 35 and 45 and also plays the parts of UNICE FLOYD and RUBY CLARK. Both are white. The LADY OF THE EVENING ("The Lady") may be of any color and is over 35. The ROUNDER may also be of any ethnicity and between 30 and 45.

The Setting

The setting is the back room of a saloon in Storyville, New Orleans, in the year 1913. The action takes place in the hour or so between darkness and dawn. The stage may be accommodating in the style of the day or minimalist spare, as long as there's seating for the players, including several chairs and a sofa or divan – or their facsimiles. A half-dozen glasses are arranged on a small table. Bottles arrive and the characters pour and sip whenever they wish. There is a door at Right and a single window at Left. The door on the Upstage wall leads to the saloon where a band plays ragged tunes. Whenever the door opens for an entrance or exit, the music swells.

A Note on *The Blue Book*

The Blue Book was the pocket guide printed annually in New Orleans from the late-1890s until 1917, listing the names and addresses of as many as two thousand "sporting girls" who worked in the houses in the twenty blocks that constituted the legally-sanctioned red-light district called Storyville.

The book was published by a local gadabout named Billy Struve. As a free guide to prospective customers for the bordellos, it was never copyrighted, and therefore resides in public domain. The songs used in the text are also in public domain.

THE BLUE BOOK

The curtain rises. We hear music playing in the distance, a dirty trumpet blues. The music draws closer. We hear a door open and close and the music is closer still, as in just beyond the walls.

THE LADY OF THE EVENING enters in a gentle swoop, like a bird lighting on a branch. Dressed in something diaphanous, she stands surveying the stage. Throughout the duration, she listens attentively to the other characters and at times moves close to one or another in empathy. She also sways to the music. At times, she sits and knits invisible yarn.

She now stops to tilt her head to the music. Her gaze comes to rest on the audience and she regards the faces with a slow and bemused wonder. She appears about to speak when the THIRD WOMAN enters. She is in her mid-twenties and well-dressed, though her makeup has come undone and she moves slowly, tired to the bone. She is carrying a bottle of brandy which she places on the table. She pulls the cork, fills a glass, and takes a sip. She crosses to a chair and sits with a pronounced sigh.

The FOURTH WOMAN enters in a Mother Hubbard that has seen serious wear. She moves awkwardly as she holds a towel up under the dress and between her thighs. She stops to call OS.

FOURTH WOMAN

What? Well, you got more money in those trousers or don't you? Didn't think so. All right, then. Off you go. Go on. You're done here.

She draws the towel from between her legs and tosses it away. She steps to the table and pours herself a drink. As she sips, she notices the Third Woman regarding her with distaste.

What are you looking at? I'm holding a Liberty half I didn't have five minutes ago.

THIRD WOMAN

Right in the saloon?

FOURTH WOMAN

I found us a comfortable spot back in the corner. Where I could get my hands up.

She holds her hands on two invisible walls in an invisible corner to demonstrate. The Third Woman shakes her head in disgust.

THIRD WOMAN

And I'm guessing you've been at it all night.

FOURTH WOMAN

All damn night.

THIRD WOMAN

Did you even bother with the funeral?

FOURTH WOMAN

I went. Course, I went. I knew her. Surely did.

THIRD WOMAN

Oh? What was her name?

FOURTH WOMAN

Her name? It was N... N... Nellie.

THE LADY

Nettie.

THIRD WOMAN

Nettie.

FOURTH WOMAN

That's what I meant. Nettie. Uh... Albright?

THIRD WOMAN

Gasbright.

FOURTH WOMAN

Well, I was there, wasn't I? I do love a funeral. Especially the part after. You got the second line. You got all the shouting and noise and all. You got a lot of men drunked-up and thinking about how much more winding they can get done before they're gone, too. Yes, yes, they jump at this thing like they think it's going to save them from the grave.

THIRD WOMAN

Is that so?

FOURTH WOMAN

I do a service. Help them along. Soothe their souls. And make a few dollars for my trouble.

The Third Woman is about to comment when the ROUNDER enters, carrying a stack of Blue Books and a newspaper stuffed into a pocket. His cheap suit doesn't diminish his busy self-importance.

THIRD WOMAN

And what are you doing back here?

The Rounder stops at the challenge. He gestures with the stack of books.

ROUNDER

I'm... I...

FOURTH WOMAN

You, what?

ROUNDER

Brought something.

THIRD WOMAN

Ain't nothing no rounder ever brings but trouble. Well, what is it?

ROUNDER

Blue Books. Just come out.

FOURTH WOMAN

Oh. Well, all right, then. Let's see.

The Rounder crosses to place the stack on the table nearby, keeping three. He carries one to the Fourth Woman. She begins flipping pages. He carries a second to the Third Woman. He holds on to one. The Third Woman opens hers, then closes it and begins fanning herself.

THIRD WOMAN

Hot, ain't it? Hot and wet. That's New Orleans. Even when it's cold, it's hot.

ROUNDER

And wet. Someplace or other. That ain't no lie.

The Third Woman ignores the lewd comment. He lingers with his wolfish smile.

THIRD WOMAN

You want something?

His smile widens into a broad leer.

For walking ten damn feet?

FOURTH WOMAN

You're lucky we let you back here at all.

THE LADY

Go away, now.

The Fourth Woman shoos him and he moves off as The SECOND WOMAN enters in a Mother Hubbard also in condition. but of a different shade. She drops her hat on the couch and pours herself a drink.

SECOND WOMAN

I did want to see her to her rest. But do they have to go on so long after? God damn. (Yawning) Some of us got to get our sleep out. And you know, I'd just as soon they leave the preacher back at the church. Makes it too damn sad. (She sees the Blue Books) Oh...

She takes a copy from the stack and carries it to Center.

THE LADY

That's why there's a second line.

FOURTH WOMAN

That's what the second line's for. So you get both. You get the sad, you got the happy.

SECOND WOMAN

What do I need more sad for? Life ain't sad enough already?

THIRD WOMAN

Listen to y'all.

FOURTH WOMAN

Why are we talking about this?

SECOND WOMAN

Didn't you start it?

FOURTH WOMAN

You did. Going on about the preacher being too sad.

SECOND WOMAN

Oh. Yes. I loved the band, though. And that fellow singing. *(She sings)*

*Don't you leave me here,
Don't you leave me here,
But if you leave me, baby,
Leave a dime for beer.*

The Third Woman and the Fourth Woman laugh. The Lady smiles with delight. The Fourth Woman stops to regard the Rounder as if just noticing that he's still there.

FOURTH WOMAN

You got anything else?

THE LADY

Go on, then...or go away.

ROUNDER

I do, as a matter of fact. *(He opens his copy of the Blue Book)* This here is new. Listen, now.

The Women turn to listen as he reads.

“Why New Orleans should have this directory. Because it's the only District of its kind set aside by law for the fast women. Because it puts the stranger on the proper path as to where to go and be secure from... hold-ups... brace games... and other illegal practices worked on the unwise.”

The Second Woman lets out a loud laugh.

THIRD WOMAN
(*To Fourth Woman*)

How well were you acquainted?

FOURTH WOMAN

Well enough. We was both at Harriet Holland's some time back.

ROUNDER
(*Reading*)

"To know a thing or two, and know it direct, go through this little book and read it carefully; and then when you go on a lark, you will know who is who, and the best place to spend your time and money. All the best houses are advertised and are known as the cream of society."

The Third Woman lets out a louder laugh and claps her hands.

FOURTH WOMAN
(*To Third Woman*)

How about you?

THIRD WOMAN

Me? Not at all. I went for the second line. And the rest of it.

ROUNDER
(*Reading*)

"Names in capitals are madams. The star at the side of the landlady's name indicates a first class house where only the best wine is served."

THE LADY

They all say that.

THIRD WOMAN

Say what?

ROUNDER

'W' in front of a name stands for White. 'C' stands for Colored and 'O' for Octoroon. The Jew will be known by a 'J.' The '69' is the sign of a French house."

The Second Woman crosses to Center.

SECOND WOMAN

More like half that.

ROUNDER

(Reading)

“Wishing you a good time while making your rounds.”

The Third Woman and Fourth Woman nod to each other. The Second Woman returns her attention to her Blue Book.

SECOND WOMAN

Getting fat.

FOURTH WOMAN

What the fuck did you say?

SECOND WOMAN

The Blue Books.

The Lady laughs into her hand.

THIRD WOMAN

Oh. Yes. Too many in here. I’ve been saying that for years. Too damn many.

FOURTH WOMAN

(Flipping pages)

Looks like...mmm...

ROUNDER

Mister Struve said close to fifteen hundred.

FOURTH WOMAN

What?

SECOND WOMAN

Fifteen hundred pussies, open for business.

The THIRD WOMAN makes a face over this crudity.

SECOND WOMAN

What? Ain't like it's a secret. God damn. Wind's right, you can smell them all the way over in Algiers. (*Off the disapproving stare*) All right, then, two thousand of the... the...

ROUNDER

"Cream of society?"

SECOND WOMAN

That's it. Cream of society.

THIRD WOMAN

And look they got all this advertising now. Page after page.

ROUNDER

(*Reading*)

"Old Saratoga Rye. None better. Sold at Anderson's bar and other first-class places."

FOURTH WOMAN

(*Reading*)

"Jacob's Delicious Candies. Made Last Night. Buy Here."

SECOND WOMAN

(*Reading*)

"Raleigh Rye. For Men of Brains." Now where in the hell you going to find one of those?

The music winds down. The Second and Third Women perk their ears.

SECOND WOMAN

What, already?

FOURTH WOMAN

They're just taking a breath. Passing a bottle. Hell, it ain't but what, four-thirty? They got at least another hour in them. And some of those bastards won't stop until they fall.

The music starts up again.

What'd I say?

The FIRST WOMAN enters as VIOLA and makes her slow way first to the table for a drink and then to Center. At twenty, she carries herself with the confidence of one who already knows the world. The other Women glance her way with hints of envy as she picks up a Blue Book. The Lady moves close and stays there, displaying concern for her.

SECOND WOMAN

You know, for a minute, it kind of sounded like...

FOURTH WOMAN

Oh. It's not.

SECOND WOMAN

No... don't know what I was thinking.

THE LADY

He's a ghost. Still alive somewhere, but a ghost.

SECOND WOMAN

Sorry, what?

The Fourth Woman treats her to a puzzled gaze. She steps to the table and finds the bottle empty.

FOURTH WOMAN

That didn't take long.

THIRD WOMAN

Not on a night like this.

They turn to the Rounder with pointed looks.

ROUNDER

What?

The Fourth Woman dips into a pocket, comes up with a coin and holds it out. The Rounder makes a show of hesitating.

FOURTH WOMAN

It's just out into the saloon. Go on, now. Earn your keep.

The Rounder accepts the coin, with a pronounced sigh.

ROUNDER

All right. All right.

He takes the empty bottle and exits.

FOURTH WOMAN

Get two!

The Second Woman crosses to a chair, sits, opens her Blue Book, and fans through some pages.

SECOND WOMAN

Lord, look at all the names. Names... names... names. Lot of paper. Lot of ink. And they print, what, ten thousand of these?

FOURTH WOMAN

At least.

THE LADY

They're more than that, you know.

THIRD WOMAN

They are.

SECOND WOMAN

Are what?

The Second Woman and Fourth Woman turn to her with curious looks.

THIRD WOMAN

They're more than ink on paper. More than just... *(She gestures downward)* ... what's down here.

FOURTH WOMAN

Oh, is that so?

THIRD WOMAN

Those are real women in there. Girls. Daughters. Sisters. Mothers.

THE LADY

And a few wives, too.

FOURTH WOMAN

All right, then. Let's see who's not just ink on paper. *(Reading)* "Lillie Belmont, three–nineteen Marais* Street. White."

THIRD WOMAN

(Reading)

"Lucinda Woods. Fourteen-thirty St. Louis Street. Colored."

SECOND WOMAN

(Reading)

"Iris Carter. Two-fifteen Basin Street. Octoroon."

The Rounder enters with two bottles. He places both on the table, opens one, and helps himself to a drink.

FOURTH WOMAN

(Reading)

"Kitty Wilson. Thirteen-o-seven-and-a half Iberville Street. White."

THIRD WOMAN

(Reading)

"Viola Daffrey. One-thirty-five North Franklin Street." *(She looks up)* Colored.

Viola turns at the sound of her name.

VIOLA

Miss Nettie was a friend of my mama's. Yes. And she was always kind. Used to say, "Why you want to raise a child in this place? With all these goings on?" See, I was trick baby. Means my mama was a sporting gal. And my daddy was one of her johns.

She crosses to Downstage Center, drink in hand.. The Lady follows, though not too closely.

See, when you grow up in a sporting house, fucking ain't nothing.

* *Pronounced muh-RAY*

She sips her drink, ruminating.

VIOLA (Cont'd)

I don't remember a whole lot about being little. The first thing I recall is the big party. All up and down Basin Street. The day they made the ordinance.

THE LADY

(To the Rounder)

Ah, yes. Please, sir?

The Rounder steps forward to orate, his eyes closing.

ROUNDER

“Be it ordained by the Common Council of the City of New Orleans, that from the first of October, 1897, it shall be unlawful for any public prostitute or woman notoriously abandoned to lewdness...”

The Women whistle and call out.

“...notoriously abandoned to lewdness... to occupy, inhabit, live or sleep in any house, room or closet situated *without* the following limits: South side of Customhouse Street from Basin to Robertson Street, east side of Robertson Street from Customhouse to St. Louis, from Robertson to Basin Street.”

The Women applaud. He takes a bow.

You know, when I was a street Arab, they'd give me a nickel every time I said that.

he Second Woman pats her dress.

SECOND WOMAN

Sure. I believe I got another nickel here somewhere.

ROUNDER

I'd welcome any kind of reward.

FOURTH WOMAN

You'll have to do a hell of a lot more than recite a bunch of damn words.

THIRD WOMAN

Like use that busy tongue of yours some other way.

The Second Woman and Fourth Woman cackle at the quip.

VIOLA

So, that's how they made it all legal here. It was an—

SECOND WOMAN

No, now, it wasn't like that. Did you hear that “without?” What they did is make it *il*-legal everyplace else.

VIOLA

What? Oh. Yes, ma'am. I remember now.

FOURTH WOMAN

Like people wouldn't know.

THE LADY

Go on, young miss.

Viola starts, then stops as if one of the Women spoke to her.

It doesn't matter that they can't see. Or hear all the time. Not everyone can. Or will.

Viola moves a few more steps Downstage.

VIOLA

Ever since the time I was a little girl, I seen men taking women in all kinds of ways. It wasn't nothing. Like watching the dogs in the alley. Or the monkeys at Audubon Zoo. Prick goes inside, comes back out. In, out, in, out. What's hard about that?

FOURTH WOMAN

Well, the prick better be.

The Women and the Rounder snicker at the comment.

VIOLA

Back then, there were lots of times I was in a room when my mama had a john. Some of them liked having me there. Not doing anything, just there. That's how it started. You

know the washing, right? Girl's got to wash the john's prick before you let it inside. (*She mimes washing a penis*) And the whores, they take that time, to see if anything's coming out that ain't clear. Yellow, anything like that, you send him on his way. Cause he's got something you don't want. Something that'll make him go for the medicine.

ROUNDER

Right here... (*Reading from his Blue Book*) "Dr. Miles Number Fifty Specific Mixture Patent Remedy. Guaranteed a sure cure for gonorrhoea and gleet."

The Third Woman rises, drains her glass, and puts it aside.

THIRD WOMAN

And if you don't, you're out of business for a good long while. I know what I'm talking about. We all do. Yes, we do... we sure do...

She meanders off then exits. Viola crosses to Left. The Lady stays near.

VIOLA

One night, this fellow says, "Hey, now, how about letting the girl do it?" Said he'd give me a Liberty half. Fifty cents! For that little bit of work. Mama said "All right, go ahead," and I did. I washed him. Then she took over and finished him off and got him out the door. I did a few more and word got around and the next thing I know, I'm washing all of her tricks. And some of the other girls', too. They kept dropping those Liberty quarters in my little hand. I was making three or four dollars a night. Those crib whores back on Robertson don't make that much.

SECOND WOMAN

And they just drink or smoke it all up. Every nickel.

FOURTH WOMAN

Or they give it all to some goddamn no good pimp sonofabitch.

She glares at the Rounder, who stops, startled, and mugs his innocence.

VIOLA

Later on, some men asked me to go ahead and finish them off. With my hand. So I did. When I got a little older, mama showed me how to do it... (*She motions to her mouth*) And I was getting a dollar, sometimes two, for that. It didn't bother me. Not at all. I liked it. I mean, liked having a grown man go all crazy and then go limp, like I wrecked him, you know? And now I was making ten dollars most nights. Sometimes more.

We hear schoolyard sounds. The Lady turns toward the sounds and smiles.

VIOLA (Cont'd)

I was still going to school. St. John School for Colored on Liberty Street. My mama sent me up there so no one would know where I lived at. The girls and boys were mostly silly. They didn't understand a thing about what I did every night when I went home. But I learned to read. Learned to write. Add, subtract, multiply, divide. What else did I need?

The schoolyard sounds fade.

Then I got to be, what, thirteen, and I had some grown-up curves. Men started looking at me in the house and out on the street. In that hungry way. Thirteen. That's young, yes. But listen, there's thirteen-year-old whores around.

SECOND WOMAN

Wouldn't know it to look at them, though. All gussied up with the hair and the mascara and all.

VIOLA

(Glancing at the others)

Then when they're twenty, they look twice that. And when they're... when they're...

Feeling the cool stares from the Second Woman and Fourth Woman, she steers away from the gaffe.

And some men, all they want is a young girl. I mean real young. Like not much more than children. But they're sick. You can find that in Storyville. French Emma Johnson. She trades in virgins.

The Fourth Woman rises and crosses to the table to pour a drink.

FOURTH WOMAN

There's others. But she's the queen. And don't you know that evil, cross-eyed witch has been caught at it about a dozen damn times.

ROUNDER

Oh, yes... listen to this... *(Opens his newspaper)* Where is it... ah, here... *(Reading)* "Lewd and Abandoned. Emma Johnson, the notorious keeper of number three-thirty-five Basin Street, is fined on the above charge."

SECOND WOMAN

She just pays and in two hours she's back at it.

The Lady shakes her head in disgust. The Fourth Woman crosses Downstage with her drink in hand.

FOURTH WOMAN

That ain't the half of it. You know the Circus?

VIOLA

I've heard.

FOURTH WOMAN

I thought I had seen the worst. I had no idea. Emma, she puts on these shows at her house down Basin Street. Men fucking women. One woman eating another one. Had a fellow they called Joe the Whipper. He'd whale on a woman until she bled red.

ROUNDER

How do you know all—

FOURTH WOMAN

And then there was the pony.

SECOND WOMAN

Oh, lord, yes. The pony!

FOURTH WOMAN

This one woman would crawl up on this little platform they made and slide under that animal while all these men watched. Their eyes all big like this... *(She mugs)* And I mean men in fancy suits. Men with money. Men I guarantee you'll see in church come Sunday morning. That kind. They was all right there. Watching.

ROUNDER

How do you—

FOURTH WOMAN

The woman? The one who took on the pony? She had a trick baby of her own. And the child would ride that animal in the back alley. Poor thing never got no rest. *(Beat)* But Emma still makes more in selling virgins than she does with any of those shows. She likes seeing them broke in. Especially if they cry.

VIOLA

I could have been put out like that. My mama said she had other plans. Now and then, some fellow would whisper to her and she'd say "No, you don't! No, sir! Don't think about it. I will cut that thing clean off!" These were her johns, you know? And they wanted to be first with me. She said, "No, that ain't going to happen for a while. With some man she cares for, not any damn fool with a wad of money in his trousers."

SECOND WOMAN

That's what she said, is it?

VIOLA

And I thought she just really loved me to care like that. I thought. But she—

FOURTH WOMAN

We know, child. We know.

SECOND WOMAN

All about it.

The THIRD WOMAN enters as CAMELIA BUTLER. She crosses to the table and helps herself to a drink. She raises her glass before sipping.

VIOLA

So this one night, she came and said there's this rich man in the house wanted to pay a hundred dollars to break me in. And I said, "A hundred dollars? What man?"

She stops to mime peeking through curtains.

She took me to where I could see into the parlor and he was sitting there drinking champagne with Miss Cora. The madam. He didn't look too bad. Kind of heavy. Fine suit. Gold watch and chain.

She pauses, starting to come unwound, then recovering.

I was going to do it sooner or later. A hundred dollars. That was a month's wages for a lot of people. And I could make that in an hour?

ROUNDER

Quicker, if you work him right.

VIOLA

I went up to the room and they brought him in. I got going on him, but he wasn't... he couldn't get ready, no matter what I did. I think he had too much champagne. I know it wasn't me.

He came back the next night and I did it. It hurt some, but not too bad. I was glad it was done with. I guess it would have been nice if I had been someone I... *(Stops, shrugs it off)* Anyway, I never saw him again. Probably took another hundred dollars on to some other house. Some other virgin. What I didn't know then was that my mama got some money, too. For giving me to him.

She pauses for a troubled moment.

Do I mind? I mean, that she did that? That she was just waiting for some fellow to pay the right price? That a stranger was first and not someone else? I mean someone who I... *(Pauses)* I guess not so much anymore. It's been what, five years now? That's a long time. And a lot of men. I can't even say how many.

FOURTH WOMAN

That's all right, baby. We all stop counting.

Viola considers this, appearing to lose her train of thought.

VIOLA

So... so...

THE LADY

(Prompting her)

So?

VIOLA

So I'm in the life. It's all I've ever known. Spending my evenings taking care of these men, one way or another. Staying up the rest of the night and sleeping away most of the day. I guess I never thought to do anything else.

Yes, I go by all the names. *Sporting gal. Soiled dove. Strumpet.* But if I'm out on the street, I don't know that you'd be able to tell me from any young lady shopping in the stores.

ROUNDER

Oh, now, some of us can spot it at a hundred paces.

VIOLA

But I don't care if I'm not fooling anyone. I know who I am here. What I am. How many women can say that? And I'm all right. I am.

She doesn't appear "all right." She turns away, then back.

Except... there are these times, just before I go to sleep, that I think about how things turned out for me. And now and again, I wonder about my father. The one who made me. If I was to pass him on the banquette, I wouldn't even know. Unless... unless he figures out that the sporting gal he was with twenty years ago had a baby and wants to see her.

She stands before an imaginary figure and holds out her arms.

And I could...

A long pause. She drops her arms.

No, I guess I can forget about that.

THE LADY

No, you can't.

VIOLA

No. I can't.

She crosses to Left and gazes into the distance longingly.

THE LADY

What are you looking for?

VIOLA

What am I looking for? What everyone is looking for. That's what.

THE LADY

But what are *you* looking for? Or waiting for?

VIOLA

What am I... (She ponders) To be someone else. Just for a little while. Wouldn't that be grand?

She sighs and shakes her head. The Fourth Woman regards her with curiosity until she exits, then returns to paging through her Blue Book.

SECOND WOMAN

You know how many times I heard a story like that? How many started that way? District's full of trick babies all grown up. With more on the way. (To the *ROUNDER*) Any of them yours?

ROUNDER

Couldn't say.

He starts edging away, looking all innocent. The Second Woman crosses to the table to pour a drink.

SECOND WOMAN

Couldn't or won't?

ROUNDER

Prefer not to.

FOURTH WOMAN

Uh-huh. You're a smart man. For a rounder.

SECOND WOMAN

Hold on there.

After filling her glass, she holds up an empty bottle and another coin. The Rounder heaves another put-upon sigh.

ROUNDER

All right, all right...

He takes the bottle and coin and exits. The Fourth Woman opens her Blue Book to read.

FOURTH WOMAN

Who else? “Marie King. Thirteen-twenty Conti Street.* White.”

The Second Woman opens her Blue Book.

SECOND WOMAN

(Reading)

“Carrie Duvalle. Fourteen-sixteen St. Louis Street. Colored.”

FOURTH WOMAN

(Reading)

“Safronice Carter. LaLa Cabaret. One-twenty-five North Franklin. Octoroon.”

SECOND WOMAN

(Reading)

“Lillie Williams. Two-forty North Marais Street. White.”

FOURTH WOMAN

(Reading)

“Camelia Butler. Three-twenty-eight Basin Street. White.”

Camelia turns at hearing her name. The Lady folds her arms and watches her with serious regard.

CAMELIA

We weren’t poor. I mean not dirt-poor. We were common, I suppose. But we weren’t trash. My sister and I were always clean. We got good marks in school. My father ran a little store. This was in Pass Christian,** Mississippi. *(Beat)* There was a boy.

SECOND WOMAN

Always is.

CAMELIA

His name was James. His people, they had money. The kind that got them a front pew at church. So I didn’t know what to think when he spoke to me that first Sunday morning. He said, *Well, I see who has the looks in your family.* Sweet talk. The next week, he whispered all sweet and low. Asked if I could slip away after dark to meet him. I was too

* *Pronounced CON-tie*

** *Pronounced Chris-tee-ANN*

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

much a fool to see what was in his eye. And he came from a good family.

The next few nights, I slipped away and we walked out back of town. He kept pouring that honey in my ear. Made me believe that I was something special to him. You know how they get when they want it.

She closes her eyes and sways a slight bit, lost in the memory.

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

Then this one night, he took me into an old barn. I knew it was a sin, but I let him. Yes, I did. I ain't ever going to forget it. I turned my head and saw the moon through the door. His breath was all warm. And his touch was so soft. I mean, at first...

She opens her eyes, breaking the mood.

And then he was on me. And just like that, it was over. I reached for him. But he just kind of moved away. Like...

SECOND WOMAN

Uh-huh. That's a man, all right.

CAMELIA

Turned out it was his first time, too. I had been a dare his friends made. So right away, he went to bragging. It got back to my family. My father was out of his mind angry. He said I was "ruined." I had heard that before, but I never understood. "Ruined" means broken, doesn't it? No good anymore? Was that me? Because I had this one little part missing? It wasn't like we were high-class. It didn't matter. He said, "Now no one will want you for a wife! Look at your sister! Why couldn't your keep your virtue like her?"

Truth is, my sister couldn't have lost her virtue if she held a pistol to some man's head. Cause she was ugly. Not so much the way her face was made as the way she fixed it. Like this (*Makes a face of hard lines*). She looked like a bulldog. Acted like one, too.

I didn't feel any different. And that boy wasn't "ruined." I'd see him walking in town as if nothing had happened. I would be across the street and he'd see me and look away, like he didn't know me. I wasn't about to stand for that. I went to see him, but his friends, they told me to stay away. They laughed at me. You know how boys are. I wanted to make him do right by me.

FOURTH WOMAN

What did that mean? Marry you?

CAMELIA

I had a notion, yes.

The Fourth Woman mutters frustration at this foolishness The Lady bows her head, dismayed. The First Woman enters.

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

For about one day. Then all I wanted was for him face me. Speak to me. So I went to his house.

SECOND WOMAN

Oh, Lord, no.

CAMELIA

His mother came to the door and looked at me like... *(She mimes and up and down inspection)* Like I was the worst kind of trash, a trollop who had brought her son low. She told me to leave or she would call the police. I went away. But I was back the next day. And the next. No one would answer the door. So I called out, "I will come again tomorrow. And the day after and the day after..."

FIRST WOMAN

You didn't.

CAMELIA

I did. You wouldn't?

FIRST WOMAN

No. I don't know. Maybe.

SECOND WOMAN

You're both out of your minds.

She rises.

CAMELIA

I was walking—

SECOND WOMAN

Wait. I done heard this before. And I know how it ends.

She exits.

THE LADY

You should not have done that.

CAMELIA

I know... I know...

She begins taking small, nervous steps left and right.

I was walking back home. It was dark. And they set on me. Three boys. I knew all of them from school. His friends.

She bolts from place to place as if trapped by invisible figures. Then she throws herself down on her back.

They carried me into the woods and pulled off my clothes and took turns. I fought them, but they were too strong. Too strong... too strong...

She now grows half-hysterical as she thrashes about. She gasps for breath for a few tortured seconds and then breaks down. The others watch her with pity. The Lady reaches out as if to comfort her. In the next moments, she collects herself.

I stopped crying when they started up a second time. *(Long pause)* When they finished, they pulled up their britches and walked away. I heard them laughing through the trees. I laid there, must have been half the night. I had all kinds of scratches from the ground. I was bleeding.

She rises unsteadily to her knees, then to her feet.

I found my way home and fell into bed. Clutched onto my pillow. I was aching. Sore. Broken. I thought I was ruined then.

She pauses for a long moment, gathering herself.

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

My father was waiting when I woke up. Everyone in town knew what had happened. He said, "You have shamed your family! Now leave this house!" Didn't matter what those boys had done. Somehow, it was my fault. My fault!

The Rounder enters with a bottle and, sensing something, stops to listen.

A good father would have gone after those boys. Beat them down. Murdered them, maybe. But not him. He was weak. Like so many men. So I had to go. My mother, she cried. "But she's my baby..." She couldn't talk him out of it. She gave me a ten-dollar gold piece.

I was eighteen years old. I walked to the station and sat there all day long, thinking someone would come for me. To say it was a mistake. "We're sorry. Come home."

We hear a train whistle.

Nobody came. The Southern Crescent was the last train out. So I bought a ticket.

She lifts a foot onto one of the boxes.

I had one foot on the train and one still on the platform.

She steps up.

Then I climbed on. I met a girl in the car. She had been *ruined*, too. Her family didn't take it any better than mine did. So she was running off. Said she was riding to New Orleans. She was going to live like a lady and make more money than anyone ever saw. We talked the whole way and I knew a world more when I stepped onto that platform across the way. So much that I almost got back on the train.

She steps down.

But I didn't. I walked into the District and started knocking on doors. A landlady invited me in and gave me tea.

FOURTH WOMAN

Which landlady?

CAMELIA

It was May Spencer on Franklin Street. We talked for an hour or so. She showed me one of the rooms. I ate dinner with the other ladies. When twilight came and they lit the lamps, she ask was I staying.

A little while later, a fellow came into the parlor and paid his money. I took him upstairs to the room and washed him, like Miss May told me to do. Then all I had to do is lie back, pull up my chippie and wait for him to finish. It was just the one that first night. Miss May put five silver dollars in my hand. I just stood there staring at it.

FOURTH WOMAN

Everybody remembers their first time taking money.

FIRST WOMAN

Mm-hmm. A lot of them cry after.

CAMELIA

I did.

THE LADY

And so did I.

FOURTH WOMAN

Some of them laugh.

FIRST WOMAN

Some do both.

FOURTH WOMAN

And some just lay there like they don't know what just happened. What they just became. But who ever said the world was kind?

CAMELIA

The other girls told me what I needed to know. Things men would want me to do. Some of it, I didn't believe at first. What did I know? But I learned. Learned how to talk to build a fellow up. To get his cash. Because that's all I wanted from him. From them.

I did miss a period right off. One of those boys, I suppose. Or maybe it was James. The madam brought someone around.

FOURTH WOMAN

Dago Annie?

CAMELIA

She took care of me.

A pause while she settles herself.

I worked hard. Learned manners. Kept up my appearance. And my health. Didn't get into trouble. After a year, I moved around the corner onto Basin Street to Gertrude Dix's mansion. I started watching Miss Gertrude real close and saw how it all worked. How much came in for what the girls did. Who had to be paid off to stay in business. Sheets and towels. Doctors for cures. Champagne and wine. All of that.

THE LADY

And about the money, too.

CAMELIA

Oh, yes, the money. The real money. I found out that on a good week, from one end of Storyville to the other, close to twenty-thousand dollars changes hands. Twenty-thousand dollars.

ROUNDER

That's enough to buy forty new automobiles.

FOURTH WOMAN

Or ten houses.

FIRST WOMAN

Or the biggest diamond ring in the world.

CAMELIA

I decided that I wasn't about to spend twenty years on my back, just to get old and have nothing to show for it. I wasn't going to be one of those women.

She stops, noticing the Fourth Woman with her nose in the air, mugging.

I had to dip my hand into that river. I watched. I studied. I saved enough to get my own little house on Villere Street. Four ladies. Nothing fancy. But clean. We did right by the gentlemen. It wasn't just get them inside, get their cash, and get them back out. We

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

made them feel entertained. Pleased. Pleasured. (*To the First Woman*) That's our business. Correct?

FIRST WOMAN

Mostly, yes.

FOURTH WOMAN

Ain't no "mostly" about it. No ma'am.

CAMELIA

I did well.. I kept my eyes and my ears open. So I understood how the machine operated. The paint. The smiles. The hips grinding.

FOURTH WOMAN

(*Spreading her legs*)

Them legs opening wide.

CAMELIA

A vast... complicated... factory. That's what it is.

HAZEL

(*Off-stage*)

Y'all blow them horns, now!

The shout brings turned heads and curious glances.

CAMELIA

I had gone from a little room to a whole house. And in just a few years. The money kept rolling in. A Liberty half for this, a dollar for that, five for the evening, twenty for the night. Two girls, twice that. A professor at the piano. And the rest. I do accept payment for all of it.

I made sure that my girls were acting right. They stay tidy. They're not drunks or hopheads. They don't fight. They don't bring bad men around. They know I won't stand for it. Been in this house for five years. I'll be on Basin Street one day. Right alongside Gertrude and Lulu White and all them.

A little secret. Every now and then I'll turn a trick. So I don't forget what it's like. Other than that, I don't have a lot of use for men. I have a fellow who comes to take me to

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

dinner...the opera...wherever I wish to go. Though in truth he would as soon be squiring another man. That's his secret. But he offers me what a lady expects. Because that's what I am.

FIRST WOMAN

What we all are.

HAZEL

Not all.

The SECOND WOMAN enters as HAZEL MOORE. She's a hard-looking woman who carries herself with the hunched posture and narrow-eyed gaze of someone who's always ready to fight – or fuck, for that matter. She picks up a Blue Book and carries it to one side. She ignores the bottle on the table and drinks from a pint of whiskey while she flips pages.

CAMELIA

I sure didn't need any fancy man, either. I saw how they latched on. More than one woman, one landlady, was ruined that way. Drained. Cleaned out. And left when they move on to the next victim. Like that fellow took twenty-thousand dollars of Lulu White's cash and disappeared.

FIRST WOMAN

I believe it was twenty-five.

ROUNDER

Wait now... *(He shuffles through his paper)* Here it is... *(Reading)* "Fair Lillian – Lulu – White, the diamond queen, says that she doesn't intend to go to the races anymore unless she is allowed on the grandstand. She says some people take her to be colored, but she says there's not a drop of Negro blood in her veins."

The Women laugh out loud. The Rounder continues to read.

FOURTH WOMAN

What paper is that?

ROUNDER

The Mascot. Always good for the gossip.

CAMELIA

Let them buy their own suits. Their own cocaine and hop. Let them gamble their own damn money away.

She treats the Rounder to a hard glance that is not without humor.

ROUNDER

Why are you eyeing me now?

CAMELIA

Because you're all the same.

ROUNDER

You are so unkind.

CAMELIA

Anyone care to disagree? *(No response)* Not a one.

ROUNDER

Well, I'm very much offended.

A beat and then the Women laugh.

CAMELIA

Go be offended someplace else.

FOURTH WOMAN

And fetch another bottle while you're there.

ROUNDER

What? I just got back.

The Women wait. He relents and exits.

THE LADY

(Watching CAMELIA)

Yes. And now...

CAMELIA

You know when I finally realized that I was a woman of importance? The day Mr. Tom

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

Anderson invited me to Sunday dinner in the private dining room at the Cafe. The King of Storyville. Who could have imagined? I've come a long way from Pass Christian.

FOURTH WOMAN

It ain't but a few hours on the train. Just around the Gulf.

CAMELIA

Yes, that's so. I wonder do they ever think about me. Or if I've just been erased, like I was never there. I don't know if I'll ever see them again. What would I say if I did? "Hello, mother. Father. It's your daughter Camelia. Me? I became a New Orleans harlot and then a New Orleans madam." And James. By now, he's a lawyer or in some business. With a pretty wife. Someone from good stock. Like that Bethany Carter. Her people would be upright enough for him. Not the sort to end up in a Storyville sporting house.

FOURTH WOMAN

Might say the same about some others around here. You, maybe.

CAMELIA

Isn't that the truth? Wouldn't it be a thing if he walked into the parlor and didn't recognize me? *James? It's Camelia. The one you betrayed back home. The one you left to those animals. And this is my establishment.*

FOURTH WOMAN

Now get the fuck out.

CAMELIA

One of my girls told me this man who came to her room one night and it took her a minute to realize that it was her father. And then he recognized her. She said they just stood staring at each other and then he walked out. Never said a word. She cried like a child when she told it. Like the world had ended. But then she was all right. We never spoke of it again. *(Pauses)* I don't have to worry. My father would travel to hell before he'd come here. *(Beat)* And I hope he will. I hope they all will.

THE LADY

Come, now.

CAMELIA (Cont'd)

Never mind. The truth is what happened back there set me on my path. Made me who I am. And what I'm not.

FIRST WOMAN

And what is that?

CAMELIA

Somebody's prey, that's what. That once was enough. Never again.

The others watch her. After a moment, her good humor returns.

But what do I care? I'm not unhappy. And I'll be richer tomorrow than I am today. How many can say that?

THE LADY

So is that all?

CAMELIA

No. No.

She can't voice whatever she's thinking. After a moment, she retreats, then exits. The First Woman studies the door for moment, then turns her attention to a page in her Blue Book.

FIRST WOMAN

(Reading)

"Josephine Leon. Thirteen-o-six Bienville Street. White."

FOURTH WOMAN

(Reading)

"Yolenda Yarber. Fifteen-fifty-six. Saint Louis Street. Colored."

FIRST WOMAN

(Reading)

"Cary Dixon. Fourteen-fifty Conti Street. Colored."

FOURTH WOMAN

(Reading)

"Adele Marlowe. Three-thirty-one North Basin Street. White."

FIRST WOMAN

(Reading)

Hazel Moore. Two-twenty-six North Robertson Street.

She looks up and notices Hazel drawing closer.

FIRST WOMAN (Cont'd)

Colored.

HAZEL

Go on, raise that woman from the dead. Just see if you can.

She edges her way to Center as the others stare at her over the odd outburst, The Lady regards her warily throughout, as if expecting trouble.

That ain't my name.

She makes her slow way Downstage stopping to listen to the music.

Ain't my true name. And I ain't saying what it is. Or where I come from. Cept it was Arkansas. Out in the country. Way out in the country.

She lets out a raucous laugh, swigs from her bottle, and waves a rough arm.

You been listening to these here women? I don't care how many men they laid down for. How many houses they run. They don't know nothin. And for all their cryin, I ain't never heard of a goddamn one of them giving the money back.

Me, I don't even remember when I started fuckin. I was maybe, what, twelve? We had a little farm. Tenant farm. My mama. Six of us children. This boy, he'd been coming round with my brothers. I could see him watchin me. And this one evening, he caught me outside, behind the house. He put me against the wall and pulled up my skirt and stuck it in. That's how it all started. And you know what I do remember about it? The damn fireflies. The whole sky was full of them. Like the stars were dancing. That's what I recall. That, and him panting like a goddamn dog.

He come back the next day and made me suck him. Then he turned me around and put it in my ass. I didn't mind it much. I didn't know no better.

The First Woman and then Second Woman listen, growing appalled. Hazel notices this, grins, then drinks and wipes her mouth again. They continue to react as she goes through her tale.

HAZEL (Cont'd)

Well, it wasn't long before more come knockin on the door. Or tried to catch me outdoors. Cause I wasn't no ugly thing. No. I had meat on the bone and I let it spill all out. Didn't hardly ever wear no underpants, neither. I would sit up on the porch and some fellow would wander by and his mouth would open wide like this... *(She mimes)* Or I'd go out to the fields and they'd stop choppin cotton and stare. Sometimes they'd put down whatever they had in their hands and come get some. Times, it was two or three. Young boys, married men, granddaddies. If it was hard enough, I was ready.

I was a wild animal, is what. A bitch in heat, around the clock. I should have had babies, but I didn't. Found out later I'm not able. I ain't made right. Lucky for me, I guess.

FOURTH WOMAN

And for the babies.

Hazel turns with a cold stare and takes another swig from the bottle.

HAZEL

But listen here. It wasn't just them men. As long as I can remember, there was something else chasing after me. Something dark. A kind of a shape. I'd turn my head and it would be gone. It was there, though. It's still there, now and then.

She broods, then shakes it off.

My mama, she knowed what I was doin, but she wasn't no better. I swear I saw a different man come out her bedroom 'bout every morning. They sniffed like they was hounds, and pretty soon some of them was on me, too.

The First Woman retreats to a corner, as if she's heard enough. Hazel glances at her, sneering. The Rounder enters carrying a bottle, which he places on the table and opens.

Look here, I did all of that because I wanted to. Sometimes they got rough with me but I didn't fight them. Truth is, I mostly liked it. Because it felt good and because of what it got me. Boys on my tail. Making fusses. Bringing me little gifts and such. So I wasn't about to say no to none of it.

ROUNDER

(Aside, to the FOURTH WOMAN)

What the hell is this?

FOURTH WOMAN

I don't believe the half of it.

HAZEL

After I was fourteen, I never did go to school no more. I figured I was too dumb to learn, anyway. And it would have taken time away from fucking. Came to be what I did. I met a fellow I liked, I'd unbutton his trousers and give him what he come for. Most just took it and left. Only once or twice did one treat me regular. I don't recall their names, either.

All that time, I never thought one time about askin for money. I'd take it. Goddamn right I would. Some coins. Something to eat. Pair of shoes. But I didn't ask. I didn't *know* to ask. Like I said, I didn't go to school. I don't believe they'd have taught me about that, anyhow.

Later on, some fool or other would take me off somewhere just to have it steady, you know? A couple was criminals. I went with this one while he robbed a bank. Held a gun while he took the money. Yes, I did. We ran out and scatted down this alley and hid in some woods. After we knowed the police wasn't coming, he give me half what he took. More than five hundred dollars. Then he said, "Lay down, girl. We got to celebrate." He worked me so hard that I went off to sleep. And when I woke up, him and my money was gone. 'bout six months later, I heard the coppers got him. Gunned him down on the street in Vicksburg. Good thing. Cause I would have done it myself.

And I could have. Because I did. Kill someone, I mean.

The Fourth Woman and the Rounder come to attention.

THE LADY

It's no surprise, is it?

HAZEL

He was my man. The only one I stayed with any time. Had us a little tenant farm outside of town. Pretty place. Well, he come home from whoring one night. I could smell them tramps on him. Thinking he was going to crawl up on me next. I had done warned him about that shit. He told me to get shed of my clothes and get in the bed. I said no. He called me a bitch and went for his skinning knife. But I was ready for that.

She draws a pistol from her dress. The others react, startled.

I shot him. Right in his goddamn, no-good, lyin face. I sure did.

She takes another drink.

FOURTH WOMAN

My God. Did I just hear someone confess to murder?

HAZEL

Wasn't like it was no murder or anything. I told him to step back. He did just the opposite. You know how men get. Think they're brave and all.

She moves onto the Apron. She mimes the killing with rough gestures and an angry expression.

Fool didn't believe I'd snap it on him. Didn't see it in my eyes. Well, I did. He curled up and died right there on our kitchen floor.

She looks down as a sudden, alien sadness overtakes her. She recovers.

The house was out on the land, so nobody heard. And didn't nobody know he was there that night. He had been gone. I got the mule and throw'd him over the back and carried him up on the ridge. Dropped him down a gully where no one would find him. I expect he's nothing but bones by now.

With a sigh, she pockets the pistol, then takes a drink from the bottle.

The police come 'round a couple days later. Somebody had broke into a white lady's house and they was lookin for suspects. I said he wasn't there. They said, "Y'all were married, is that right?" I said, "Not married. Just together. But not no more. He done left. Last I heard, he was over in Tennessee."

They went away. Never came inside. Never saw the big old bloodstain on the floor. They didn't care. They probably as soon have him dead anyway. I sure wish I could have told them that I done laid the bastard down.

Them police didn't worry me. But his family, they were all outlaws. I knew they'd figure what happened. Dumb as they were. And they'd be comin for their revenge. So I got right on out of there.

FOURTH WOMAN

Oh. She ran away. And I thought she was a hard one.

HAZEL

Left the farm in the middle of the night, walked into town, and caught the first thing smoking for New Orleans. Because there wasn't but three things I knew how to do. Farm, fight, and fuck. And I had enough of those first two.

Her mood softens.

New Orleans. This place called to me. That river yonder. And the music. Very first night I was in town, I walked by this saloon on Robertson Street and heard a horn blowing. I went inside and this man was on the little stage singing.

(Singing)

*Love, oh love, oh careless love,
Love, oh love, oh careless love,
You caused me to weep, you caused me to moan,
You caused me to leave my happy home.*

And it was like I was in a dream. My feet was going to that music, no matter what.

She turns to listen to the music for a moment, then, turns back.

Them players out in the saloon? They good, ain't no lie. But they ain't getting close to what I heard that first night. Not a bit.

The music picks up. She takes a quick drink.

It was like...

*She begins to gyrate, swinging her arms and swaying her hips. The
THIRD WOMAN enters as SARAH STONE and stops to watch the dance.*

Oh, yes! That's it right there. Uh-huh.

The music winds down. With a final loop, she stops to catch her breath.

Anyhow, I knew this was the place for me. So I went and got a crib on Claiborne Street.

FOURTH WOMAN

And I bet she had to fight someone for it.

HAZEL

I has to fight this lowdown cunt for it. Yeah. I went in, thow'd the man she had in there into the gutter and then I slapped her and punched her and told her that was just the start. That she could be gone in one minute or dead in two. She picked gone. I gave the woman on the corner fifty cents and it was mine. I made three days of farm pay in one.

FIRST WOMAN

That's a lot of damn dimes.

HAZEL

Lot of dimes. Reason they call them dime-a-trick cribs. That's where I spend my days now. Room with a bed and a washstand. Fifteen, maybe twenty men when the ships are in port or Mardi Gras. I get them in and out, quick as you can spit.

THE LADY

A lot of yancies, too.

HAZEL

I can take it. I'm strong. I got my bottle of Raleigh Rye for in-between. And my music in the middle of the night. I like it that way. No one knows where I am. Or who I am.

The music goes quiet. She swigs from her bottle.

THE LADY

It ain't that simple.

HAZEL

No. The truth is, I still feel that dark come over me every now and again. A cloud that's gonna crush me if I don't run out from under it. Killing that man didn't help. But fuck him. He deserved it, didn't he? Well, didn't he?

She takes a drink and steps further Downstage.

Any of you bitches out there have so bastard sonofabitch cross you? Go ahead and shoot him dead. A warning to the next no-good motherfucker. He'll know, if he got any sense to him. He'll see. If you don't kill him, at least cut him one. So he got a scar to remember you by. Y'all know what I mean. Like that song goes... *Gonna take my razor and my gun. Cut him if he stands and shoot him if he runs.*

She stares into the audience as if waiting for a challenge.

HAZEL (Con't)

Someday I'll tell the world my story. Tell who I am. And my true name. Say what I did to that man. And all the rest.

THE LADY

If someone doesn't get to her first.

HAZEL

If someone don't kill me first. His people. Some no-good motherfucker. Some whore in a saloon. Leave me on the floor with my throat cut. I know it could happen. It's the life I live. Until then, nobody better fuck with me.

The music picks up again. The Fourth Woman rises and crosses to the table to pour a drink. She sips and regards Hazel with a cold eye.

FOURTH WOMAN

Good thing God we ain't any got more like that around.

THE LADY

Well, not yet.

FOURTH WOMAN

At least not yet.

HAZEL

(Turning)

You say something?

FOURTH WOMAN

Yeah. I said nobody here believes you and your damn stories.

Hazel bristles and takes an aggressive step her way. The First Woman and the Rounder come fully alert.

HAZEL

You better watch that mouth.

FOURTH WOMAN

Or what?

HAZEL

Or I'll shut it, that's what.

The Fourth Woman steps her way, returning menace for menace.

FOURTH WOMAN

You ain't going to do no such thing. You know why? Cause you ain't nothing but an ignorant, drunked-up, back-of-town crib whore.

HAZEL

What'd you call me?

FOURTH WOMAN

You heard.

In a sudden motion, Hazel draws the pistol from her pocket and points it directly at the Fourth Woman's face. The Fourth Woman responds by pulling a straight-razor from her dress, flipping it open, and holding it to Hazel's throat.

FIRST WOMAN

Oh, God...

The Rounder silences her with a sharp cut of his hand. A tense moment follows. Hazel blinks first, takes a step back, and heaves a sigh of surrender. She lets the pistol fall to her side, then turns away. The Fourth Woman folds and pockets the straight-razor. The First Woman and the Rounder relax.

HAZEL

Lord, don't mind me. I have lost my mind. *(She pauses)* I ain't here to worry anybody. Y'all go back to what you were doin.

She hesitates as if to add something, then pockets the pistol. She crosses to Left and stops. The Lady heaves a sigh of relief.

She's right. Most of the time, I ain't nothin. Just meat and bone.

She hears the music and smiles.

HAZEL (Cont'd)

Except every now and then. And then I am. I am.

THE LADY

If there was something I could say...

Hazel exits on shaky legs, swigging from her bottle. The Fourth Woman watches her go. She tucks away the knife.

FOURTH WOMAN

Shit. She wouldn't have lasted a day on Gallatin Street.

FIRST WOMAN

Where?

FOURTH WOMAN

You ain't heard the stories about the old days? And Gallatin Street?

THE LADY

The old sporting gals love tell them.

FIRST WOMAN

Gallatin?

FOURTH WOMAN

It was down by the French Market. It's gone now. But, ooh, they was wild as hell back in there. The police wouldn't even go in 'less it was two, three at a time. Those whores would spit tobacco juice in a man's eyes, then knock him cold and rob everything he had. Right down to his drawers. And leave him on the banquette. Alive, if he was lucky.

FIRST WOMAN

That bad?

FOURTH WOMAN

Bad? God-awful, is what. This one red-headed floozy name of Bricktop Jackson. Mean as hell. Her man John Miller had a chain and an iron ball where his left arm was supposed to be and he carried this big old buck knife in his right. Neither one did him no good. He got on Bricktop's wrong side and she took the knife away and stabbed him through the heart.

She begins pacing, all animated.

FOURTH WOMAN (Cont'd)

America Williams. Six feet tall with shoulders out to here. There wasn't a man in New Orleans could whip her. She did a half-dozen murders and not one day of time. One-legged Mary Duffy was another one. She got into a row with her man and was getting the best of him until he pulled that wooden leg off her and used it to bash her head. Beat her to death, is what.

Bad? I was there when Ella Speed got it. I was just down the hall. She and her man Bill Martini were spating and he shot her, right up close. I heard the gun go off and come running into the room and saw her standing there with one of her tits on fire. Them old cap-and-ball pistols, you know. I grabbed a pillow and put it out. She just stood there for a second and then dropped. What a way to die. Bill hanged for that one.

FIRST WOMAN

Ella Speed. Wait, didn't someone write a song about her?

FOURTH WOMAN

That's right. *(Singing)* *The evil deed Bill Martini done. Committed murder with a Colt 41. The folks back of town, their eyes got red, when they heard that Ella Speed was dead...*

FIRST WOMAN

So is the only way to get remembered here is to kill someone?

THE LADY

Or be the victim.

FOURTH WOMAN

Or be the victim? No, not always. Kidneyfoot Rella. That trollop walked up and spit in Black Benny's face whilst that poor man laid in his coffin. In front of his family and all. I mean the first Black Benny. And people still talk about that.

FIRST WOMAN

Sounds like we're first-class ladies compared to them.

THE LADY

Ladies compared to anyone.

FOURTH WOMAN

Weren't you here just a few minutes ago?

She sips her brandy

FIRST WOMAN

All right, now. (*Reading*) Sadie Green. Thirteen-twelve Iberville Street. White.

The Fourth Woman opens her Blue Book and reads.

FOURTH WOMAN

Mabel Vincent. Union Cabaret. One-thirty-five Basin Street. White.

FIRST WOMAN

(Reading)

Lucille Lewis. Fifteen–twenty Iberville Street. Colored.

FOURTH WOMAN

(Reading)

Della Tracy. Thirteen–twenty Conti Street. White.

FIRST WOMAN

(Reading)

Sarah Stone. Two–twenty-nine North Franklin Street...

FIRST WOMAN and SARAH

"Jew."

The Fourth Woman catches the Rounder's attention and tilts her head. He exits, now resigned to his errands. Sarah finds a page in her Blue Book and reads. The Lady sits and bows her head contemplatively.

SARAH

Sadie Grossman. Ida Kugler. Bertha Weinthal." (*Looks up*) Sarah Stone. It's Stein. Actually, Steinberg.

She closes the book and lays it aside.

I came here from Chicago. We were dirt poor. My mother died when we were small and my father fell ill. First he couldn't work. Then he couldn't get out of bed. And then started to lose his

SARAH (Cont'd)

mind. He said someone had set a golem on him. A curse. And he could never rise from it.

FOURTH WOMAN

Sounds like voodoo.

SARAH

Maybe. Our kind. But I'm not sure we're actually Jews. I mean in the official way. We were never mitzvah'd.

FIRST WOMAN

Never what?

The Fourth Woman shushes her.

Wasn't there anyone could help you?

SARAH

They have this word, *herem*. Means you're cut off. I was something that happened back in the old country. Anyhow, we were alone. No one on our street wanted us there. They were poor, too. Not an extra crust of bread to be had.

The people from the city, they were going to send us all to different places. Take the little ones and give them to strangers. I was the oldest. I couldn't let that happen, so... I had seen girls on the street. Going into hotels. I knew what they were doing. I made a nice appearance, so it wasn't that hard. It was that or starve.

FOURTH WOMAN

"None of the daughters of Israel shall be a harlot." Book of Deuteronomy.

The First Woman turns to her, impressed.

What? I know my scripture. (*Pats her dress*) Got the Good Book with me all the time. Right alongside my knife.

SARAH

Well, this daughter of Israel did. I had to. And when you have to do something... (*Pause*) The man never knew it was my first time.

FIRST WOMAN

What about the blood?

SARAH

The blood?

FIRST WOMAN

The *blood*.

SARAH

Oh, he didn't notice. He was drunk. Just as well.

She pauses, pondering, maybe grieving her start.

My father didn't ask where the money came from. How I paid for the food. The clothes. And the doctor. The one who couldn't do anything for him. But I could see in his eyes that he knew. As sick as he was, he knew. He went to fearing that other people would find out. That one day some man from our street would walk into my hotel room. I believe that's what killed him in the end. He just couldn't take it anymore. The shame. My shame on him. It broke what was left of his heart.

I hired a rabbi to say kaddish. Had him buried proper, in the Jewish cemetery. And he was gone.

The money didn't erase the mark that was on me. Another girl had told me about New Orleans and the Jew Colony. So I found a *tante* on another block without any children of her own to take care of the others. I bought a ticket on the Illinois Central. To get me far enough so that they wouldn't ever find out what I was doing.

I ended up here. With other women like me. I send money for the children every week. I never miss a single one. They write letters. They're going to school. Like good Americans.

FIRST WOMAN

One of those Jew schools?

SARAH

A city school. It doesn't matter. They know the beliefs. My father read from the Torah. And he loved to tell us the stories. Over and over again. The one thing he could do. Until he couldn't anymore. Before I went away, I shared a room in this boarding house. The other girl had a Bible behind. Read it all the time. She left it behind.

The Lady raises her head, then rises to her feet.

THE LADY

Because she couldn't take it with her.

SARAH

They found her in an alley. Strangled. *(She pauses, unnerved)* I kept the book. I would open it between visitors. It became my refuge. To get me through till morning. I read some parts so many times I could say them by heart. Just like my father did. And, yes, I saw all those places where they wrote about harlots.

THE LADY

"The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls..."

The Second Woman enters.

THE LADY and SECOND WOMAN

"...holding in her hand a golden cup, full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication."

SECOND WOMAN

That one is from Revelations.

Sarah and the First Woman eye her as she stops to pour a drink.

Lots of us know the Word.

SECOND WOMAN and THE LADY

"And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of harlots and the earth's abominations.'"

SARAH

(Closing her eyes)

"You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord for offerings..."

SECOND WOMAN

"...for both of these are an abomination." They sure do like those "abominations."

FIRST WOMAN

What does that mean?

SARAH

It means I'm not to give money I earn to the temple. Because it's unclean.

FIRST WOMAN

Unclean. You think that's how God sees us?

SARAH

I don't how He sees us. Or if He sees us at all.

The Fourth Woman rises, visibly upset, and exits.

FIRST WOMAN

And the Jewish men, they don't care that it's a Jew they're...

SARAH

Defiling? No. They're men. I did have this one little Jewish man who came to me. Mr. Chertzik. He was poor. And very lonely. A widower. He could only afford to visit once a week. He always brought me something from the bakery where he worked. A little cake, some biscuits. A bottle of wine. He knows my true name. He's the only one I told.

I stopped taking his money after the first time. Because he didn't do much. He was just alone. He talked to me about the book, too. About Moses and the Israelites. King David. He told me the stories I like to hear. Sodom and Gomorrah. The Temple Prostitutes. Rahab, the one who hid Joshua's spies.

SECOND WOMAN

(Singing)

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho...and the walls come tumbling down.

SARAH

She was the only one spared. She and her family. Because she was in God's favor. *(A sad laugh)* Mr. Chertzik said I was, too. But I'm not, am I? Or I wouldn't be here.

FIRST WOMAN

What happened to him?

SARAH

I don't know. He just stopped visiting. I suppose he either got sick or died. So no more stories. I miss them. Miss him.

SECOND WOMAN

Well, we all miss something. Someone.

FIRST WOMAN

So you get Christian...um, visitors, too?

SARAH

Oh, yes. Half of those who come to me. Catholics, especially. They don't want to *defile* a girl of their faith. But with me... somehow that makes it not so much a sin. (*With a sardonic laugh*) This one always asks me to pray with him. He talks to God. And he thinks God listens. Maybe it's true. I don't even try. I don't believe He'd hear me. Too far away. And what would I say?

She drops to her knees and clasps her hands.

“Lord – Yahweh – Was it Your will to put me in this house of sin, where men use my body for their pleasure? Or did You just allow it to happen? Wasn't I a good Jewish girl? Then what did I do to deserve this life? Why am I here?”

She waits for a long moment, then rises.

You see?

SECOND WOMAN

I don't believe it works like that.

SARAH

It did for Elijah. Others, too. He answered all them. Why not for me?

SECOND WOMAN

Well, it might be that–

SARAH

I think He's jealous.

FIRST WOMAN

Jealous?

SARAH

Yes. "You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God."

THE LADY

Exodus.

SARAH

(Off the SECOND WOMAN's dubious look)

Don't they come to me? Commit their sins of the flesh? Bow down at my pagan altar?
Offer sacrifice to a harlot, of all people?

*The Second Woman laughs. The First Woman regards her with curiosity.
The Rounder enters, again with two bottles.*

I said maybe. I don't know for sure.

SECOND WOMAN

Well, I believe I do.

FIRST WOMAN

Why?

SECOND WOMAN

Because of *her*.

FIRST WOMAN

Who?

SARAH

Oh. She means Mary. Not their virgin.

She poses with her palms forward and eyes to heaven. She drops the pose.

The other one. The Magdalene. The one who followed their Jesus. Saw him die.

SECOND WOMAN

And rise again.

SARAH

They say. There's even been men that when they're on me, call out the name. And I tell them, *I'm not her*. It doesn't seem to matter.

FIRST WOMAN

Maybe you should charge extra for that.

SARAH

This one, he said that this... (*Gestures downward*) is a holy vessel. I don't think it's anything of the kind.

SECOND WOMAN

Maybe not yours.

The First Woman giggles. The Rounder is caught in mid-laugh when the FOURTH WOMAN enters as UNICE FLOYD and slips into the shadows. He and the Lady are the only ones to see her at first.

ROUNDER

God, no. Is that...

THE LADY

It's her. It surely is.

A bell tolls and Sarah turns to the sound.

SARAH

Getting late, isn't it? (*She stretches*) I'll go to sleep in a little while. It will be dark and then light again. Morning light. (*Closes her eyes*) "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For those who dwelled in a land of great darkness, a light shined."

SECOND WOMAN

And that would be Isaiah.

SARAH

The whole book begins and ends with light. Genesis to Revelations.

She gathers her things. The Second Woman lifts her Blue Book.

SECOND WOMAN

Not this book. This one starts and ends in shadows. Isn't that right?

SARAH

I don't know how it ends. None of us do.

THE LADY

So let the night take you for how. Embrace you.

SARAH

"Jacob had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." Wouldn't that be a sight to see?

SECOND WOMAN

Well, we sure got them climbing up the stairs and climbing back down. But it ain't heaven

FIRST WOMAN

And we ain't angels.

SARAH

I'm not sure about that.

She pauses, then makes a slow exit. The Lady watches her go. A moment passes, and the First Woman opens her Blue Book and reads.

FIRST WOMAN

(Reading)

Louise Joseph, fourteen-ten Conti. White.

SECOND WOMAN

(Reading)

Annie Noon, two-twenty-seven North Franklin. White.

FIRST WOMAN

(Reading)

Victoria Polite, fifteen-thirty-one Iberville Street. Colored.

SECOND WOMAN

(Reading)

Lillie Belmont, three-nineteen Marais Street. White.

FIRST WOMAN

(Reading)

Unice Floyd,* two-twenty-six North Robertson Street. White.

Unice creeps from the shadows. She is broken down, ragged, dirty and barely able to keep her feet as she ambles about in a sort of a delirium, muttering now and then. The others watch in pity.

ROUNDER

Not anymore. Not for a long time. She was run off of there a long time ago. That must have got left from an old copy.

FIRST WOMAN

Off of Robertson Street?

Unice begins making a staggering circle. At times, she wanders dangerously close to the stage apron, but catches herself at the last instant and staggers on.

SECOND WOMAN

Claiborne, too. She couldn't raise the fifty-cents a day to keep a crib. And then she couldn't keep it if she did.

Unice sways into a dance that is for a brief moment graceful, then stumbles out of it.

ROUNDER

Didn't start that way. I remember when she first got here. Fine-looking woman. She was at Gipsy Shaffer's. She had plenty of men visiting her.

*Pronounced you-NIECE

FIRST WOMAN

Where did she come from?

THE LADY

Where do any of them come from?

SECOND WOMAN

Nowhere. She just was just not here one day and here the next. She never said nothing about herself. Least not to me or anyone I know.

THE LADY

But you can guess. Taken. Beaten. Hurt. Abandoned.

SECOND WOMAN

She wasn't around that long that the sports got to talking about her being so crazy. Wild in her room. Do anything. With anyone. And do it all night long.

ROUNDER

But she got to drinking and fighting. Started talking like she was out of her mind. Accusing the other girls of all kinds of things. Got so that none of the madams at the good addresses could handle her anymore.

SECOND WOMAN

She went from house to house. She was on Liberty for a while. Then St. Louis. She just done just about all of them. And got put out of every one. At the end there, she couldn't even keep a crib. Then she was on the street.

Unice slowly crumples to the ground.

So sad. Too sad.

Dismayed at the pitiful sight of Unice, she turns away and exits.

THE LADY

And now...

ROUNDER

And now she gets nickels. If that. Sometimes they just stick them things in and finish and get off and walk away. And she lays there.

FIRST WOMAN

But how did it happen?

ROUNDER

It just did.

The Third Woman enters.

FIRST WOMAN

I want to know.

THIRD WOMAN

Go ahead. She needs to hear it. They all need to hear it.

She crosses to the table to pour a drink.

ROUNDER

Well, there's different stories. It was the Raleigh Rye took her down. A morphine habit. Or the syph that got to her brain.

THIRD WOMAN

Whatever it was started with a man. This no-good tramp of a rounder name of Joe Spikes. She was crazy for him. He'd use her up and leave her until she earned some more. So he could come back and use her all over again. He's the one got her going on the morphine. When she couldn't afford it anymore, she went to drinking heavy.

ROUNDER

Anything she could get down her throat.

THE LADY

She just fell apart, piece at a time.

THE ROUNDER

Took four or five years for her to end up like that.

They watch her sit up and then go down again.

FIRST WOMAN

It's hard to believe she ain't dead yet.

THIRD WOMAN

Because she's made out of iron. I swear.

She crosses to stand over Unice.

I found her in a doorway this one time. She had pissed all over herself. Her skirt was up and she didn't have nothing on underneath. Dried cum on her face and all in her hair. Black eye. Her lip split open. I wasn't going to leave her there, so I went to pick her up.

She bends to try and lift Unice from the floor. She strains, but finds the body too heavy to raise.

But she was too heavy.

FIRST WOMAN

She doesn't look it.

The Third Woman stands, breathing heavily.

THIRD WOMAN

I mean her body was hard. Like iron. I couldn't do nothing with her, so I got a roughneck from one of the houses to help me. And when he went to lift her, he said, *Goddamn. She might as well be a bag of cannonballs.* We got her down to the Ursuline Sisters so they could clean her up. They tried to keep her, but she went right back to the streets.

Unice rises unsteadily. The Women and the Rounder watch her resume her wandering.

THE LADY

How she used to sing.

ROUNDER

Remember how she used to sing?

FIRST WOMAN

Sing? Her?

THIRD WOMAN

Oh, hell, yes. Like she was on stage at the Opera House. She liked the gospel best. You could hear her Sunday mornings at Deliverance Baptist.

THIRD WOMAN (Cont'd)

*(Singing)**Since me and Jesus got married...**Unice stops and holds herself still to listen.**Haven't been a minute apart...**Unice mouths along with the words, making no sound.**Got the receiver in my hand and religion in my heart.**Dying will be easy... Dying will be easy... Dying will be easy...**Unice makes a feeble attempt to sing, first mouthing the words without making any sound.**Cause Jesus gonna make up my dyin' bed.**Yes, Jesus gonna make up my dyin' bed.**Unice attempts a word and her voice cracks. She draws in a gasping, groaning breath and summons the strength for one long, sweet note that lingers, then falls into nothing. She coughs as she staggers to the side. The Rounder steps up to catch her before she falls. She flails at him in a small panic and pulls away from him.*

THIRD WOMAN

Unice? Unice?

Unice crosses to left, whimpering as she begins to break down again.

FIRST WOMAN

She still won't talk?

THE LADY

No, but she'll weep and moan. All day long.

Unice exits, sobbing pitifully.. The Lady follows and stands gazing after her. The Third Woman enters, passing Unice before stepping to the table to pour a drink. A long moment of silence follows. A slow trumpet drag stirs again. They all listen for a few seconds, tending to their own thoughts.

FIRST WOMAN

You know what I'm thinking right now?

THIRD WOMAN

You're wondering how to keep from ending up that way. I know. It's a goddamn wonder ain't more turn out like her. The way this place works on us. Grinds us down. Shatters us like glass.

THE LADY

Will all the things they do with all those men devour them from the inside out? Who wouldn't want to stay drunk? Or be a hop head? Who wouldn't want to disappear sometimes?

FIRST WOMAN

But not *us*. Ain't that right?

THIRD WOMAN

What? Oh. No. Not us. Because we're hard, too. Maybe not like her. But hard enough. And lucky. That we ain't fallen victim to a bottle. A needle. (*Glancing at the Rounder*) Some no-good bastard rounder. So that ain't going to happen. Do you believe it?

FIRST WOMAN

I suppose so. Still...

Shaken, she makes her way to the table and the bottle. The SECOND WOMAN enters as BELLE BROOKS. The Third Woman opens her Blue Book as a way to dispel her mood.

THIRD WOMAN

(*Reading*)

Bertha Revel, fourteen-twenty-four Bienville Street. Colored.

FIRST WOMAN

(*Reading*)

Ivy Milton, two-twenty-three Basin Street. White.

THIRD WOMAN

(*Reading*)

Elizabeth Baptiste. Fourteen-twenty-six St. Louis Street. Octoroon.

FIRST WOMAN

(Reading)

Carrie Dorsey. Four-thirty-two North Villere Street. Colored.

THIRD WOMAN

(Reading)

Belle Brooks. Thirteen-thirteen Iberville Street. Colored.

BELLE moves Downstage, then stops to listen to the music.

BELLE

God damn, I do love it when they play that gutbucket down low.

THIRD WOMAN

Blues.

BELLE

What's that?

THIRD WOMAN

They call it "blues" now. Blues.

BELLE

Blues. All right, yes. I hear that.

The First Woman closes her Blue Book and exits.

Y'all want to know my story? Here it is. My mama had a man over in Texas. She would say that he was my daddy, but I knew it wasn't so. I didn't look a thing like him. He was a little bitty thing. But hard as nails. And mean. Evil.

He beat on her. She lost a couple babies cause of what he did. He called her ugly all the time. Maybe she was. But she was a kind woman. Just too weak. She thought if she didn't have him around, she wouldn't have anyone. She never saw that being alone would have be better than him. So she wouldn't send him away and she wouldn't kill him.

He started fucking me when I wasn't no more than twelve. Made me suck him. It never stopped. By the time I was fifteen, I realized that I didn't want anything to do with any man. Ever. It wasn't just because of him being so cruel and all. I was different that way.

BELLE (Cont'd)

I had just turned eighteen when this gal come to stay on the next farm over. Her name was Marcella. She was twenty. High yellow woman. Pretty green eyes. And she and I got friendly. Yeah. Like that. But it wasn't like we was bull-dykers. It just felt good. So good. I hadn't ever had anything feel that good. Just being with her. I liked the way she looked, the way she smelled... the way she tasted.

She pauses to savor the memory. The Lady drifts closer.

We were together for almost a year when the gossip started. And pretty soon it was looking like trouble. Marcella said she heard my mama's man was going around saying he needed to do some work to make us into real women. Like that. And then we saw how men looked at us... whispered...laughed. And they'd do like this...

She shapes a vagina with her thumbs and forefingers and flicks her tongue inside it.

Marcella told me that we had to leave before something bad happened. She said we could go to New Orleans. Said she had been here and they don't care who's loving who. They even got a house hidden away that's just for men. We could make us a decent living. She didn't say how, but it didn't matter. I wanted to get out so bad. It didn't take but two seconds for me to decide.

It was night time and I went back home to grab up a few things. My mama was still awake. I told her I was going away. She started to cry. Then she quick went into the kitchen and put together a little sack for me to carry along. Some chicken and a biscuit. And while I was getting my few little things, she slipped into the bedroom and came back out with two Liberty dollars. Her man's money. I knew that he'd beat hell out of her when he found out, but she did it anyway.

We went out on the gallery. I said...

She turns to her invisible mother.

“You come, too, mama.”

But she said it wouldn't do no good. If she tried to leave, he'd find her and kill her. I want to tell her that it would be better than dying slow out there. I didn't, though; it would only have caused her grief. I guess she had been pounded on all her life and it was the only thing she knew.

BELLE (Cont'd)

We caught the midnight train and were here by next morning. We got ourselves a hotel room across Esplanade. Marcella told me we would need to make some money and that we could go back to where she worked before. I said, "Where would that be?" And she said "It's a French house." I told her I didn't speak no French. I swear, I thought that's what she meant. She looked at me like I had said something crazy. Then she laughed and said, "Yeah, you do. C'mere, girl..." And she pulled me onto the bed.

She moves to an invisible Marcella, pausing to laugh over the memory.

Come that afternoon, she took me to this house down on the corner of Basin and Conti. A train was just pulling in across the way and I saw the women up in the windows calling over to the men in the cars and doing like this... *(She sucks her thumb)* I was about to ask Marcella why they were doing that, but she was already up on the gallery.

The Fourth Woman enters Right and stops to pour a drink.

She gave the landlady some money and we walked down the hall to this one room and went in. There wasn't nothing there but a chair in the middle of the floor with a towel hanging over the back and a stand with a wash basin and a little bowl off to the side. Marcella said "You go stand over in the corner." And she sat down.

She sits in the chair.

After a couple minutes, there's a knock and this fellow walks in. Ordinary-looking. Marcella points to me and says, "She's new." He says, "Learning the ropes, hey?" He goes into his pocket and drops two Liberty halves in the bowl. Marcella said, "Come on over, now." And he steps up.

She mimes unbuttoning trousers.

She unbuttons his trousers and pulls out his prick and goes to work on him. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Didn't take but about a minute and he let out that noise men make, like they been shot. She buttons him back up and he walks out.

She mimes spitting.

She spits into the towel and then looks at me and says, "You want to take the next one?" I was still staring at her with my eyes... *(She mimics wide eyes)* And I was thinking, *God*

BELLE (Cont'd)

Almighty, she just sucked that fellow's yancy like it was nothing. I didn't understand. She didn't fancy men any more than I did.

But she had made herself a dollar for about two minutes of her time. I watched her take care of three more. Then she said, "You ready yet? Or you want to go somewhere and scrub floors? Or head back to Navasota?" A few minutes later, a fellow walked in and I thought, *What the hell. I done it before without feeling a damn thing, so...*

She beckons to an unseen someone, then mimes unbuttoning his trousers.

We spent the afternoon taking turns. And when we were done, I had six dollars in my dress. I would have to spend two days scrubbing floors sun-up to sundown to earn that.

She rises from the chair.

When we was walking back to the hotel, Marcella told me that most of the women in a French house were like us. "But—" "But, what? You want to have to lay down and have them stick their nasty pricks in you? Have to worry about them diseases? Getting a baby? What we do is easy compared to that. You just don't think about it." She kissed me. "You think about something else." So I did.

It was maybe six months after we got here that she met a young woman – younger than me, I mean – and disappeared. It hurt me. It truly did. And then I met someone. Another girl from the French house. It was nice for a while, but she went away, too. They come and they go. That was eleven years ago. I been sitting in that chair ever since. Sitting here for four, five hours a day. And making a decent living. Decent...

The FIRST WOMAN enters as JANE DUMAS. She is wearing a kimono that hangs open and she moves about unconcerned with her intermittent nudity. Belle regards her wistfully.

Could I have done better? Yeah. But I could have done worse, too. Could have stayed back in the country and turned into my mama. Lonely... bitter... dead.

I did go back home a couple times. Last one was when they buried her. She died too young. That man of hers done finally drove her down. Crushed her like an insect. But I'm pleased to report that he ended up dead not too long after. I heard about it. He went chasing the wrong woman. She told him "The first time you raise a hand to me is gonna be the last." Course, he did just that, and she took a razor to him. Oh, how I wish it had

BELLE (Cont'd)

been me. I just hope she cut it off before she finished him.

She stops and lays her hands on the chair.

I don't know how long I'll stay in this place. I'm getting older and the women keep getting younger.

She stops to gaze at Jane again.

THE LADY

Any woman is a thing of beauty.

BELLE

It's true.

THIRD WOMAN

What's true?

BELLE

A woman is a thing of beauty.

THIRD WOMAN

No matter how young or old.

THE LADY

Nor who they lie with.

BELLE

I hope that's so. Indeed, I do.

She carries the chair to the side.

FOURTH WOMAN

I wish...

Belle exits.

THIRD WOMAN

What?

FOURTH WOMAN

Never mind...

She opens her Blue Book to read.

FOURTH WOMAN

(Reading)

Bertha Revel, fourteen-twenty-four Bienville Street. Colored.

THIRD WOMAN

(Reading)

Ivy Milton, two-twenty-three Basin Street. White.

FOURTH WOMAN

(Reading)

Elizabeth Baptiste. Fourteen-twenty-six St. Louis Street. Octoroon.

THIRD WOMAN

(Reading)

Carrie Dorsey. Four-thirty-two North Villere Street. Colored.

FOURTH WOMAN

(Reading)

Jane Dumas. Fourteen-ten Bienville Street. Colored.

Jane languishes on the sofa, holding an opium pipe in one hand and a Blue Book in the other. She speaks at times with a slight slur and at a languid pace as she slips from completely lucid to a narcotic haze throughout.

JANE

The Blue Book. First time I been in here. Look at that.

She raises her head and turns toward the window.

Oh, listen. You hear? That branch on the glass? Where I grew up, there was a tree right outside my window. Sometimes at night, when I'm in my room and I've had a pipe and get all drowsy, I hear branches touching the panes and it reminds me. Or the sound of the ships on the river. Just like the ones I used to hear out on Mobile Bay And the trains. I don't mean the ones running in and out of Union Station all day long, making that damn

JANE (Cont'd)

racket. (*Holding herself very still*) I mean when everything is quiet and I can hear a lonesome whistle. And the *clackety-clack, clackety-clack* of those steel wheels. Train rolling out along the Gulf. Going somewhere far away. Maybe passing through Biloxi.

What do you think they'd say now? Not much, I guess. Maybe they already forgot about me. I know it's not so far from here. In miles, I mean. Maybe a hundred. A few hours. A long way in my life.

The Lady sits down closer to her as the Fourth Woman exits.

Men always ask "How did you end up in a sporting house? How did you come to do this? A pretty girl like you?" And "What would make you want to stay in such a place?"

THIRD WOMAN

That same damn place they happen to be visiting.

JANE

I used to tell them it wasn't supposed to be this way. That I'm not supposed to be here. But none of them understand. So I don't try anymore. I'd just make up a story instead. Like... (*With melodrama*) "I was kidnapped as a young girl in New York and brought here in chains." Or... "I had to do it to feed my poor, ailing mother and my nine brothers and sisters." Or... "I chose this because I never wanted anything more than to please a fine gentleman like yourself."

The Third Woman laughs. Jane rises to begin her tale, moving in slow circles.

His name was Alphonse. He was from here. Beyond the Bywater. A Creole. He had been in the war. One of the Buffalo Soldiers on San Juan Hill. He got wounded and had government money. He came into town with this little traveling show. He played the piano and the guitar. And sang, too.

A soft guitar solo begins.

All the girls were whispering about how he was so handsome, So I went to see. The minute I looked at him... and heard his voice... it was... I was... there was nothing left of me. I remember he sang this one...

JANE
(Singing)

*Well, come back, baby
Baby, please don't go
The way I love you
You'll never know
Well, come back, baby
Let's talk it over, one more time.*

The guitar solo continues.

JANE

I just wanted to stand in that one spot and not move. And I didn't, not even when the dance was over and everyone went home. He saw me watching and came over and talked to me, like I hoped he would. He walked me back to my house. It was way late and I got into trouble. But I didn't care. I was so...

She catches herself and laughs self-consciously.

I went the next night when the show moved to the park. After he was done and the funny fellows came on, he asked me to go for a walk back of town. And after that, I met him any time I could steal away.

She crosses from one side of the stage to the other, growing animated.

He was thirty-three. I was only eighteen. And I was a virgin. I had never had as much as a boy's hand on my knee. But I wanted him. I wanted him to be the first. I didn't care that I wasn't married. He said, "No. Your daddy or one of your brothers will kill me."

We were out in this pecan grove and I pulled him down and lifted up my petticoats, like some hussy. Yes, I made him do it. I begged him. He had to show me how, but I was willing. I was so willing. After that, we were out there about every night. I couldn't get enough of him.

The guitar solo fades.

Well, of course somebody saw us together. It was a small town. He told my daddy. And he sent my brothers. They caught me and Alphonse walking. As soon as I got home, he laid into me. I told him that I was in love. He stomped around fussed and fumed. "He's in a damn medicine show, for the sake of Christ! You know what kind of people they are?" He told my brothers out to find him and bring him back. And he pointed his finger at me

JANE (Cont'd)

and said, "And you don't leave this house."

But I did. I slipped out and went to Alfonse and told him we had to get away. He wanted to stand and fight for me. I wouldn't allow it. I told him we had to *go*.

He said he'd leave the show and we could run off to New Orleans. He could play his music. Maybe join up with a true jass band. He'd take me to hear King Bolden at the Eagle Saloon. No one else like him, he said. You ain't never heard the likes of it. It didn't matter to me. I would have gone anywhere, done anything, with him. I didn't have nothing but my little job at the dressmaker's to leave behind. So I ran back home and packed a valise and slipped back out and we went and climbed aboard a train. And as it was rolling out, I could see the sun on the bay and I dreamed it was carrying us to paradise.

The horns resume. The Third Woman crosses to empty the bottle. She holds it up for the Rounder's inspection, along with a coin.

THIRD WOMAN

Last time. I swear.

The Rounder doesn't bother to argue. He takes the bottle and the coin, and exits. Meanwhile, Jane's swoon begins turning tragic by degrees.

JANE

We weren't here but three months and he got sick. Yellow fever. And it wasn't but another three months that he was gone.

I used the last of his money to get him laid out. Hired a little brass band, so that he could have a second line. It was just me and the men with their horns, walking away from St. Louis Number Two. That was all. And I was alone. With nothing. And nobody. I went around looking for work in the shops. But I couldn't find anyone to hire me. Maybe I didn't try very hard. And I suppose I looked sad.

Alphonse had showed me houses on Basin Street. Pointed out the sporting women on a stroll in their floradoras. Told me all what they did. I know he had been with some. I didn't care. He was mine. Had been mine.

So I walked over here and stepped up onto a gallery and knocked on the door. I was going to ask if I could be a maid. That's what I told myself. The madam looked me up

JANE (Cont'd)

and down, and asked me a few questions, and then said, "Oh, you can do so much better. If you're willing. Let me help you..." I understood what she was saying. What she was offering. Maybe it was in my head all along. I didn't care. I went empty inside the moment Alphonse died. So there was no one left to be shamed. My heart couldn't break any more. So why not?

But I told her that I wasn't about to be turning one trick after another. I wouldn't do like that. I'd rather scrub the floors. Or pick the garbage up off the street.

The Second and Third Women react, turning and frowning.

She got me a fancy man right quick. I been with him about three years now. He pays for my favors and buys me most anything I want. I just got to be available for him any day or night. He's a gambler, like most of them. Plays faro over at Anderson's. Taking money off rich men who go there just to get their bankrolls lifted by a genuine Storyville sharp.

When he was winning, he comes in ready to beat the world. When he was losing, he was ready to beat me. Almost did a couple times. Then I told him take it out the damn door. There's women here who allow that. Some who even like it. Fools. Not me. I told him I could find someone else. Anyway, he stopped then. Ain't said an unkind word to me since.

The Rounder enters with a bottle. He places it on the table and helps himself. The Second Woman joins him and he pours her a drink.

SECOND WOMAN

Some of these bastards, they just don't get it. I was in a house on Villere Street and I heard a fracas down the hall. Man had started whaling on this poor girl. You know I couldn't stand that. I went busting into that room and grabbed him by his yancy and said, "You sonofabitch, I will pull it out by the root." He got his hand around my throat. I could see that dead look that told me he was ready to do it.

She sets her glass down mimes her way through the beat-down.

So I started in to whaling on him right back. Beat him senseless, is what. Then I dragged him to the window and hung him out over the alley. About that time, the madam comes running into the room and tells me if I did it I'd be out. So I... *(She unclenches her hands)* ...did. *(Shrugs and smiles.)* He was all right. Once he got out of Mercy, I mean.

The FOURTH WOMAN enters as RUBY CLARK. She appears especially worn, though with a gentle bearing. She's carrying a pastry box, which she places on the table, opens, and begins placing small cakes on little napkins. Jane sits up and lets out the smoke from her last hit on the pipe.

JANE

I know there's lots of girls in Storyville who would trade places with me. Those that take on ten men a night, sometimes more. My gentleman doesn't mind who I lay with when he ain't around. But I pretty much don't. Not unless a fellow's got a whole lot of money. And has a gentle way about him. Other than that, the answer's no. Because ain't one of them is Alfonse. I keep looking, though. And meanwhile, I can make believe, Can't I?

THE LADY

Whenever you need to.

Jane sits again and reclines to light her pipe.

JANE

I smoke a pill every night. Sometimes two. It helps me sleep. And forget. And makes sweet dreams. Sweet dreams. All I ever wanted. Yes, I cry every night, too. But then it's morning and I'm still here. For now. I don't know how long I'll keep at it. Not sure where I'd go or what I'd do.

Sometimes I think of how I might have ended up if I hadn't ever met Alphonse. Would I be happy right now? Would I have been worse off? Like being back in Biloxi, married and all. And no hop to comfort me. No, I couldn't have lived that life. So even that little time with him was worth it. Even if I am all alone.

She tamps a pill, lights the pipe, takes a long pull, and lets out the smoke. After the plume disappears, she stretches out.

You know what I do sometimes after everything goes quiet? If it ain't too cold, I mean. I take off every stitch of my clothes and go out into the little courtyard behind the mansion. And let the end of the night come down around me like a shroud. That's when I feel him close. And I'm all right.

ROUNDER

When did you say you do this?

The Women laugh. Jane treats him to a bemused look. The Lady rises

as if to protect her. The Rounder lingers near Jane until the Second Woman shoos him away.

THE LADY

You know you can't bring him back.

Jane pauses in sad regret.

THE LADY

And what else do you yearn for?

JANE

If only I could go on with the memories... but without the parts that pain me.

THE LADY

You can't have one without the other.

JANE

No. It can't be that way. So...

She lights the pipe once ore and slouches back. The Third Woman regards her for kind moment before opening her Blue Book.

THIRD WOMAN

Let's see, now. Getting to the end. These here were added late. *(Reading)* Leah Mendoza, three-twenty-four North Franklin. Colored.

SECOND WOMAN

(Reading)

Marie King. Thirteen-twenty Conti. White.

THIRD WOMAN

(Reading)

Lucinda Woods. Fourteen-thirty St. Louis. Colored.

SECOND WOMAN

(Reading)

Ethel Gray. Two-sixteen North Liberty. White.

She closes her book, sniffs the air, and smiles.

SECOND WOMAN (Cont'd)

And... Ruby Clark.

Ruby moves about with the napkins and hands one to each Woman and one to the Rounder. They murmur with delight and begin nibbling.

THIRD WOMAN

Oh, Miss Ruby...

RUBY

Just a little something, is all.

Ruby watches them enjoying the treat before moving Downstage.

I been in the District twenty-three years now. Since eighty-seven. Had some good times. And some bad. *(A pause)* The landlady says I won't be here long. 'less things change. Ain't got but a few men coming to see me these days. Them who can afford someone...

THE LADY

Younger?

RUBY

Else. Can't hardly pay the two dollars a day for my room anymore. Mostly I help the others. The new girls especially. They say, *Miss Ruby, we wish you was the madam. You're such a good-hearted woman.* Well, you see what happens to the good-hearted in this world. Anyway, I don't know that I got the head to be a madam.

THIRD WOMAN

Or the cold gut.

RUBY

I come out of Rosedale, Mississippi. Right on the banks of that muddy river. One man said, "So many of you whores come from the Delta. Why is that?" I said, "I don't know. We just do." He said, "I know why. It's 'cause you bring the delta to work." Then he tells me... *(She makes a V with her hands below her waist)* "Cause of that there delta." Maybe he was correct.

SECOND WOMAN

So the Mississippi Delta is the pussy of the United States of America?

RUBY

The place where all the life flows from.

SECOND WOMAN

And so that makes New Orleans, what? That spot that makes you moan?

Ruby and the Third Woman laugh outright. Jane sits up and smiles in a dreamy way.

Just look at a map.

RUBY

Well, whatever it is, I was trouble from the start back there. Everyone said I was on a bad path and that I'd come to no good. Maybe bent over a chair in some shack where two roads crossed. But I fooled them. I landed my tender person in the only official red light district in the world.

As far as I know. But I don't know that much. I ain't been nowhere else. Cept Houston that once. Fellow took me there. I saw the ocean. Said he was going to come back and take me again. He never did. I guess I can stop waiting.

She pauses for a melancholy moment. Jane rouses herself to pay closer attention.

I know I'm running out of time. But Storyville's my home. I don't know where else I'd go. I wouldn't make it working in a rough house or a crib. The things they got to do. The things that get done to them. Sure, I did all that once, but I couldn't anymore. Ain't got it in me. Don't want it in me. I wouldn't last a week.

Maybe one of these days some little house will need a landlady and I'll go there. Or some gentleman will come along and decide he wants a woman my age as his companion. I sure would like to see that ocean again. Or maybe I'll meet some old farmer who lost his wife and wants someone to settle down with him. Can you imagine me with the cows and the chickens and the corn? Maybe that's what I need. Peace. Hell, I already done lived more in the last twenty years than most women do in ten lifetimes.

She looks at the Third Woman, who raises her eyebrows pointedly.

All right, never mind, I wouldn't last a week there, either. This is where I belong. It's my home.

We hear thunder and then a quiet rain beginning to fall.

THE LADY

For as long as it lasts.

RUBY

Yes. That's true.

JANE

What's true?

RUBY

You know Storyville can't stand forever. Them reformers, they're always sniffing around, looking for a way to drag it down. And the criminals want to take it over. So far, they ain't been able to do any such thing.

THE LADY

And everyone knows why.

RUBY

Because a whole lot of these houses are owned by rich white people who, come Sunday morning, sit up in the pews they bought and listen to some preacher talk about how evil this place is. How evil we are. Bound for hell. Them. Then they get even richer collecting rents off what goes on here. The Church owns houses, too. And you know they ain't giving up a dime without a fight. But they keep on making noise.

SECOND WOMAN

So, wait now. They think that if this place was gone tomorrow, all the fucking would stop?

THIRD WOMAN

Well, of course it would. They'd put those things back in their trousers and go right back home.

JANE

Because they don't need us. Not at all.

THIRD WOMAN

Don't need anyone to do what their wives won't.

JANE

And don't need a place to take their sinful little secrets.

SECOND WOMAN

The truth is we do no harm. So they can just leave us alone.

THIRD WOMAN

When's that going to happen?

JANE

Not today. Or tomorrow.

RUBY

Those do-gooders, the League of Decency and all them, they say that Storyville is such a godless place. And we're the sinners.

SECOND WOMAN

The sodomites!

THIRD WOMAN

The harlots!

This brings a round of laughter.

RUBY

They'd like to believe it. But God's here. So many of these whores go to church. To Mass at St. Rocco. To Second Baptist over on Euphrosine.* The places for them in the Jew Colony. And the *voudun*. Everybody pays heed to that. No, we're not the devil's maidens. We believe, just like other folks. We are just like other folks. Or all different, just like other folks.

SECOND WOMAN

Except that we don't go hiding who we are.

THIRD WOMAN

Yes. They're the ones bearing false witness.

SECOND WOMAN

And we're the ones they want gone.

**Pronounced you-fro-ZEEN*

RUBY

Is a bit of kindness too much to ask?

THIRD WOMAN

Kindness from who?

RUBY

From them. From each other.

SECOND WOMAN

We're kind to each other. Mostly. Who else is there? Not the men. So who?

RUBY

This place.

SECOND WOMAN

This place?

RUBY

Storyville. Look at what we give it.

JANE

We serve. That should be enough.

She notices Miss Ruby beginning to break down.

Miss Ruby? What is it?

RUBY

I don't want to be thrown away!

THIRD WOMAN

What? Ain't no one going to let that happen? Ruby?

The others murmur in agreement.

RUBY

(Recovering)

Oh, well. Maybe they'll get what they want The District will shut down and we'll all be scattered to the wind. Or taken away by the rain. The way it pours here sometimes. Could

come a flood and wash it all into the river. And take us with it. And leave it like at the beginning. Before Storyville. Before Congo Square. Before New Orleans. Before the slaves. Before the first Frenchman. When it was only the Houma. The original ones.

SECOND WOMAN

That would be some flood, all right.

THE LADY

And what is your wish?

RUBY

What I would like is to take my last breath here.

SECOND WOMAN

We would remember you. Give you a funeral like Nettie. And the second line. All that.

RUBY

And I would be most grateful.

SECOND WOMAN

All right. Don't nobody need to be talking about that this morning.

Slowly, the music winds down and stops. The Second Woman and the Third Woman rise in turn and stretch. Ruby looks toward the window.

RUBY

Ain't right that anyone dies cold. That's all.

THIRD WOMAN

Miss Nettie didn't.

RUBY

No, she didn't. It's how I'd want it. That's for sure. A roomful of floozies... (*Gesturing to the Rounder*) And maybe just one damn fool of a rounder.

SECOND WOMAN

Drinking from a bottle and listening to the horns and telling our crazy stories. Yes. Yes.

Ruby turns to a window.

RUBY

Is that the sun I see?

Jane turns dreamy eyes to the window.

JANE

No. Rain's still coming down. It's just morning.

THIRD WOMAN

Well, damn. The music stopped and I didn't even notice.

SECOND WOMAN

For now. They'll be back at it.

JANE

What day is it?

THIRD WOMAN

It matter?

JANE

No, I suppose not.

Jane rises and perks an ear. The Lady moves close to her.

THE LADY

And now?

JANE

I can hear a train rolling out. Rolling down along the river. Going somewhere far away. And taking me with it.

THE LADY

Maybe that's how it ends.

JANE

Maybe it is how it ends. A train to carry our souls off to somewhere.

SECOND WOMAN

Our souls? Now, now. Ain't going to be no more talk about dying. We get through today and another night and then there's tomorrow. That's something, ain't it?

THIRD WOMAN

It surely is.

She rises, readying to exit.

THE LADY

(To the Third Woman)

And where are you off to, madam?

THIRD WOMAN

Well, I have business to attend to. Always.

She ambles off and makes a slow exit.

THE LADY

(To the Second Woman)

And you?

SECOND WOMAN

I want breakfast. A good breakfast.

RUBY

I'll join you. Might even fix it for you.

SECOND WOMAN

Wouldn't that be pleasant?

Jane rouses herself.

THE LADY

And you, young miss?

JANE

And I'm going to sleep now. So I can wake up all over again.

She exits in a dreamy drift. The Rounder looks around the empty stage. He crosses to the table, lifts the bottle, and finds it empty. He sets it down.

ROUNDER

All right, then...

He yawns, then ambles off and exits.

THE LADY

So. They made it through another night.

She crosses to the table and selects a Blue Book. She flips pages for a moment, shaking her head in wonder.

What did that rounder say? Fifteen hundred in here? My name's not among them. It was once, but not anymore. I don't have one story. I have all the stories.

This place. If it's so evil, why hasn't God erased it? Anyway, we all know that once it's gone, there won't ever be anything like it ever again.

And the women. Some are lost, but not all. I know that someday these pages will crumble away and most of them will be forgotten. But not all. Not all. Anyway, they're alive now. And if you look close enough, you can still see the dreams in their eyes. If you look. If you look.

After a moment's pause, she opens her copy of the Blue Book. She reads aloud as she makes a slow exit.

“Josie Chandler. Three-twenty-three Marais Street. White... Queen Vinal. Two-thirty-five Basin Street. Octoroon... Bessie Parker. Thirteen-hundred Bienville. Colored... Fanny Cohen. Two-fifteen North Franklin. Jew... Melvine Jackson. Two-o-eight St. Louis. Colored... Rosie Hart. Thirteen-twenty Conti. White...

The lights go down.

CURTAIN