

ACT I

SCENE ONE

(OVERTURE begins, it is filled with ragtime and early folk blues, the last song of the overture is MEET ME WHERE THEY PLAY THE BLUES. In the dark a voice is heard, it is the voice of Irvin Greenwood, a Colored man in his twenties.)

IRVIN

Hey, y'all awake! That means open your eyes. Sassy Chelsea Sweetwater gonna give you your prize. So, fill your cups of tin, with Hop's best backwoods gin. Y'all give a Three Forks Juke welcome to the show y'all come to see, Chelsea Sweetwater & the Peanut Butter Babies! (Lights up in a small Colored whiskey joint, down south, circa 1928. The up tempo tune, THAT'S PLENTY cuts the air as Chelsea Sweetwater, a Colored woman in her mid-thirties dances on with women back up dancers called the Peanut Butter Babies. Irvin sings a bad note then jumps up trying to dance, but trips and almost falls into the audience. Everyone continues to dance, Irvin gets back up and starts to dance.)

CHELSEA

Boy, you messin' up the steps!

IRVIN

No, I ain't.

OLETA

Yes, you are! Irvin, git off the stage!

IRVIN What?

CHELSEA

Git your ass out the way!

IRVIN

Okay. (He takes one step over, then starts talking to the audience.)

Now, when y'all buyin' your drinks, remember me Irvin "Cocomo"

Greenwood! See we just outside of, Greenwood Mississ— (Chelsea throws him offstage. From offstage he responds.) Damn, Chelsea! (The number ends and the Peanut Butter Babies exit. MEET ME WHERE THEY PLAY THE BLUES begins to play.)

CHELSEA

This song is for all, y'all lonely people sittin' out in the Three Forks Juke tonight. (Singing.) **I GOT A HEART, THAT'S BROKENHEARTED, HOW DO I MEND IT? I GOT A CRYIN' JAG, YOU STARTED, HOW DO I END IT? BUT, IF YOU'RE FEELIN' GLOOMY, COME A RUNNIN' TO ME, MEET ME WHERE THEY PLAY THE BLUES. PEOPLE HAVE SAID THEY'VE SEEN YOU DANCE IN HIDE AWAY PLACES. PEOPLE HAVE SAID YOU'VE FOUND ROMANCE IN OTHER EMBRACES. BUT, IF YOU'RE MOOD IS DREAMY AND YOU GIT ZANY, MEET ME WHERE THEY PLAY THE BLUES. EYES THAT FLIRT WITH A TEAR, COME RUNNIN' 'ROUND HERE. AND MISERY LOVES COMPANY THEY SAY. SO THEY LINGER 'TIL DAWN, WHILE THE TRUMPETS WAIL ON, HOPIN' YOU'LL HAPPEN THIS WAY. I'M GITTIN' TIRED SIPPIN' WINE AND WATCHIN' IT BUBBLE. HOW DID OUR DREAMS GIT OUTTA' LINE AND WIND UP IN TROUBLE. BUT, HONEY IF YOU'RE LEARNIN' THERE'S A FLAME STILL BURNIN', MEET ME WHERE THEY PLAY! YOU'LL FIND ME EVERYDAY! MEET ME WHERE THEY PLAY THE BLUES!** (The song ends.

Chelsea speaks to the audience.) We gonna let y'all cool down and I'm gonna sip on me a tin cup of gin, and then I'll be back in a bit. (Play off ragtime music begins, then becomes distorted as the scene focuses around Chelsea and Irvin as they sit at a table

and drink in muted argument. All the customers leave Chelsea and Irvin still are drinking hard. The lights and movements denote time passage. Chelsea is asleep with her head on a table, scattered with empty whiskey bottles and tin cups. Irvin is passed out at the piano. An older Colored gentleman, in his fifties enters and starts picking up the place. He is Mr. Ty Hopkins the owner of the juke. He sees Chelsea and Irvin and stares at them in disgust, then he turns and exits back the way he entered. Suddenly, Irvin sits up and hits the keys on the piano, sings something unintelligible, then sinks back down. Chelsea sits up with a start, glares at Irvin with an evil eye. After a moment she lays her head back down. Mr. Hopkins reenters with a broom and whisk pan and sets them aside as he removes all the tin cups and whiskey bottles to the counter. When he starts to put the chairs on the tables, Irvin sits up again, sings his wordless song and sinks back down. Chelsea pops up.)

CHELSEA You, no piano playin' son of a bi— (Sees Mr. Hopkins.) Oh, Mr. Hopkins, I thought it was Irvin.

HOPKINS It was.

CHELSEA

It's already closin' time?

HOPKINS Two hours past.

CHELSEA Two-thirty?

HOPKINS No, it's (Looks at his pocket watch.) three o' five.

CHELSEA Oh man, I

gots to git back to the room, Oleta gonna be mad.

HOPKINS I expect she will. (Pause) Miss Sweetwater, I just wanna let you know—

CHELSEA (Slightly flirtatious.)

Whatever, you want, Chelsea'll fix you up. What you need Hop?

HOPKINS I would like to say I think

your act with them girl dancers and your sister is one of the best that's ever been here.

You really bring the people in. Now, I know what I'm talkin' about I played the T.O.B.A. circuit myself, when it first started back 1911. I'm a trombone player.

CHELSEA

(More flirtatious.) I know, I heard about you.

HOPKINS

On the circuit, you always movin' from one town to the next, it's easy to get wild. Now Chelsea, don't take this wrong, cause I don't want my place busted up. I just think, you need to clean up your act, that's your offstage act. You and that fool on the piano was so wild after the show you scared some of my older customers away. (Starts sweeping.) The next time you come through, drop on down, see if I can use you.

CHELSEA

You gonna cut my run short?

HOPKINS

Yes ma'am, I'm sorry.

CHELSEA

(Sarcastic) Yeah, you sorry.

HOPKINS

That boy Irvin, his act is weak on or off the stage. What's that boy's stage name? Coconut?

CHELSEA

Cocomo.

HOPKINS

Cocomo? What's that? See what I'm sayin' that's stupid. You need a new lead in act.

CHELSEA

I'm sho' you right, Hop. Yeah, Irvin's weak, but he's my friend. How short are you gonna cut us?

HOPKINS

I'll give you another day, after tomorrow night. I'm sorry Miss Sweetwater. *(Hopkins turns his back to her and starts sweeping, again.)*

CHELSEA

You ain't sorry. Cut my run short and turn your back on me! Niggah, I'll take that broom and break it across your head! Turn your back on me.

HOPKINS

I been nice Chelsea, ain't no need in you actin' up!

CHELSEA

Niggah, don't tell me what you done been to me!

HOPKINS

I gotta finish pickin' up, but I think I'll have me a little walk, let you and Irvin find your way back to the boardin' house.

CHELSEA

You can find your way out of my face! Yeah, we'll be gone when your rusty ass gits back.

HOPKINS

Have me a pipe out in the moonlight. Just pull the door when you leave. *(Hopkins exits, in the same moment a figure appears in the shadows, it is the memory of Mama.)*

CHELSEA

What's the matter, you forgit somethin', Hop.... *(Sees Mama.)*
Oh, what you here for?

MAMA

You always goin' carry me with you Lemon Drop.

CHELSEA

Don't call me that!

MAMA

That's what we called you back at home, Miss Lemon Drop.

CHELSEA

No, Mama, you was the only one to call me that. That is after—

MAMA You was ruin't? *(Laugh)*

You was born ruin't, you was born Niggah, ain't you? Girl, you was given a lot of good thin's. Now you act like you ain't want 'em, but you took 'em. You think you too good?

CHELSEA

What you give me that was so good?

MAMA

Maybe, I'll slap you across your head with my spoon. I ain't gonna hear you yell at me again, Lemon Drop!

CHELSEA

You'd hit me in the back of the head so the customers won't see the bruises! I remember your wooden spoon.

MAMA

It ain't killed you. Ain't give you anymore sense, but it ain't killed you.

CHELSEA

I wish it had.

MAMA

Give you some sense?

CHELSEA

Killed me.

MAMA

You do? (*Mama pulls out the wooden spoon.*) I should slap you across your head for sayin' some stupid like that.

CHELSEA

Mama, you can't hit nothin', you ain't real.

MAMA

I ain't?

CHELSEA

You just in my mind.

MAMA

I am?

CHELSEA

Go ahead hit me.

MAMA

Don't tell me what to do.

CHELSEA

No, you ain't real, you look just like the last time I saw you, you younger than me. (*Pause*) Mama, you look so sweet—

MAMA

I am sweet.

CHELSEA

But your soul is rotten. I hope you're dead.

MAMA

That's an evil wish Lemon Drop, after all I gave you, good food, a warm bed and a lotta' pretty thin's.

CHELSEA

You gave me? What did you make me give?

MAMA

Chelsea, it ain't about what I made you do, it's about who you are! What I am.

CHELSEA

Shut up!

MAMA

Hell you had it good. Now, me? I didn't have no Mama or Papa. I was raised in a Chicago orphanage for the Colored, which was a few steps below shit, and right in the middle, of hell!

CHELSEA

You had me livin' in hell, too!

MAMA

'Cause, you lighter than me, you think you better than me.

CHELSEA

I ain't said I was better than you.

MAMA

That's right cause you ain't never goin' be better than me! You do what I do.

CHELSEA

Mama, I hated doin' what you do!

MAMA

And I liked it?

CHELSEA

I just don't understand.... Oleta never had to.... I-I.... Why did you make me?

MAMA

You wanted Oleta to do it?

CHELSEA

No! I mean, I'm your daughter too.

MAMA

Oleta is the lovin' kinda of woman and you the gittin' fuck kinda of woman. *(Laugh)*
Yeah, men like you for how they can poke you, not for stayin' with you. You're the kind that makes a good man run off.

CHELSEA

I hate you.

MAMA

Then you hate yourself. You made that nice Mr. Hopkins run you and Oleta off.

CHELSEA

What man ever stayed with you?

MAMA

Ain't no man I wanted to stay with me. You? You're different, you really wanna stay but you fuck up in every town, you go to. You ruin every good thin' you touch, that's why you ain't never gonna be shit! *(Mama laughs as she moves back into the shadows.)*

CHELSEA

Don't laugh at me, Mama. I-I— I'm goin' make thin's right for Oleta! You wait and see! *(Notices that Mama is gone.)* Mama where you gone? Well, you stay gone. Stay outta my fuckin' head! *(Chelsea takes a moment to gather herself.)*