

ACT I

(September 15, 1990, Summer A small three-room apartment. The living room is sparsely furnished with a small sofa, a dinette table with two chairs sits DSL just outside the small kitchenette. A hallway just inside the front door DSR, leads to a small bedroom, a closet and bath.

A lamp and a small TV adorn the corner tables at each end of the couch. A second-hand, armchair sits just left of the couch. There are no pictures on the walls only a calendar hung above the armchair. No windows are visible. The television is playing at low volume. The apartment is full of normal family activity- mother cooking, father reading newspaper, children moving about, etc. The only light comes from the hallway, the lamp in the living room and the kitchen. Lights up on the front apron of the stage. Denise, Rena and Louise introduce themselves as though they are being interviewed.)

DENISE

College? Well, marriage was the one big goal! A lot of my friends were talking about getting married after high school. I never really thought about going to college or what I would be. But you know, it wasn't until much later that I ever thought about the fact that I didn't think of going to college. Because I was a very good student. I made high grades, and could have gone. Maybe part of it was that our college person never even asked me. She would ask the other girls where they were going. I don't know if it was because I was black or what, but she never did ask. When I think back too, my mother was always a career woman. She was the provider of our family, but I used to imagine when I had my children, I'd be there for them a little more than my mother could be there for us. I wanted to take care of them. *(Rena enters as Denise exits)*

RENA

I was born in 1924. My given name was Mary Rena Wilson. In parochial school I was called Mary, and I hated it. Such a common name. And my middle name . . . my mother named me Rena after the daughter of a Jewish woman she worked for. That's the name she used at home, and that's the name that has stuck. I lived in Washington D.C., until I was about four years old. We moved to New York City Manhattan - but how we got here I can't say. We must have come by bus - my older sister, Eleanor, my parents, and me. Our apartment was neat but very plain. We were a very poor family. Often there was no food in the house. In fact, the only physical fight my sister and I ever had, we fought over food. I think, though, that one of the things that made me most upset, was the ways my mother favored my sister. She wasn't as strict with her as she was with me. My mother doted over the fact that my sister was the smarter of the two of us. The thing was, my sister was smarter. I don't take that away from her. My resentment came because I felt that even if I wasn't as smart, I should have some recognition for trying. I did my homework. I never failed a class. But my mother didn't show me the same interest and affection she did my sister. Am I adopted? I'd always ask her that. She'd just yell... *(Louise enters)*

LOUISE

NO! Where do you get this foolishness from? *(Rena exits. Louise sits and reads from the Bible.)* For now we see through a glass, Darkly; but then face to face: Now I know in part: but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, Charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. Darlin' I have been a Catholic all my life. That's why I know how to live. I know what God tells me from the Bible. He has blessed me. Not everyone knows this man like I do. And sometimes I have to say I'm bad, real bad, cause I fuss with Him when He doesn't give me what I ask for. And I asked Him for kids. That's how I got my money, you know. Oh, yes. I took in kids. Everytime I pray to God, I pray for children. Once I had ten children . . .

Mothers used to leave their children with me, and I cared for them the same way I did my own. You have to care for children right, 'cause they can't take care of themselves. That's why I love them. I brought up my own children strict. They went to Catholic schools, so they didn't act up or they would get my strap. My children are good. Never had trouble with them. No jail. No hospital. Nothin'. Eleanor, my older child, is a college graduate. I'm blessed. God has always said to me, Louise, you behave yourself and I'll take care of you. Brothers and sisters? Myself, I had twelve brothers and sisters. My father had a farm. How exactly I was brought up, those times are misty. I remember the day my mother passed. I was three years old, but it's still with me. I was sitting on the front porch, and she came home from work. Sat herself on a small stool or a little box. I remember her clothes were loose, 'cause my mother was stout. She asked one of the children to bring her the baby. But before she could nurse him, she fell over dead. They ran to tell my grandmother down the road. But she couldn't take the news. They had a double funeral. Lord have mercy... *(She exits as the lights fade down on the apartment Leticia Johnson rushes out from the hallway and stops downstage and talks to the audience. She is excited. A young Black woman, cornrowed hair streaked blond, her T-shirt reads, SHIT HAPPENS. She is tough and articulate.)*

LETICIA III

Today is my lucky day! I am ready! I volunteer! Leticia Johnson! I've always wanted to write a book about my life. O.K., O.K! Where you want me to start? Oh! I know... The day my parents broke up. It was the most devastating thing in my life. I remember it so clearly, as if it was yesterday or early this morning. I remember the smallest detail. (*Lights up on apartment as the action is reenacted without sound as Leticia tells the story.*) The telephone rang and my mother answered it. It was for her. My father asked her who it was and she wouldn't tell him so he grabbed the phone out of her hands. He spoke in the phone and then hung up. Then he hauled off and hit her in the eye. My grandfather was there and he grabbed my father, and they got into it. There was a bunch of guys at the table playing cards. Everybody started arguing, then my father yelled, "Where you goin'?" So my mother says, I'm leavin'. I don't know if she picked up my younger brother, Vernon or if he was even there. But I know I seen it. I was standing on a chair watching them fight. My mother grabbed me and we left. (*Everyone exits, lights come down Leticia continues.*) My parents' names are Charles Johnson and Denise Benjamin. My mother says, Leticia how come you recall that so good? You were so young. I know it was the end of me being close with my father. My father is the kind of person who promises you things and don't come through. Like one time I was about ten years old and he promised to take me and Vernon to Great Adventure. He told my mother to have us ready he was gonna pick us up. So we sat in the kitchen waiting and waiting but he never did come... and he did not call. The next day I found out he took his other kids from his second wife. I was crying and crying wondering why he didn't take us too. A few years ago I was working with my father's construction maintenance. I'd never do it again. We used to get paid fifteen dollars and apartment. But my father didn't like to pay people. So one day he gave me eleven dollars and said I'll give you the rest later, and I said, Uh-uh, I want my money now. I don't care if you are my father. I want my money. He said he didn't have it. I was warned by my grandmother, his mother, everyone told me. Don't work for your father because he is no good at paying people. Like a dummy I didn't listen. so I had to quit.... And on top of that, a few weeks after, he asked to borrow forty dollars. It'll never happen again. In the times that I've seen my father he never hit me- not once.... My father is tall. I think he is strong. He ain't got a lot of muscle or anything but it was his voice. He has a loud voice, and it alone scares the daylights out of me. I don't know why there is such a distance between us. When my parents split up me and Vernon and my mother moved to another apartment... in the same building as we was living only a different floor. It's where my mother has been living for eighteen years - very plain. (*Light up on apartment, Enter Reggie, Denise, and children.*) My mother saw a lot of guys. Then one day she brought home this guy and introduced him to us. His name was Reginald Carlton Benjamin. He was a big man, maybe six-two with a smooth voice. The next thing we knew he was moving in. Every morning when my mother went to work, she would leave us with him. Me and my brother we be crying our lungs out cause we did not know this man. Then a few months later they got married... four days before I turned five. They got married at City Hall and they had a nice reception at my great grandmother's house... but that day I feel my mother was taken away from me. My life was in invaded. (*Denise exits. Vernon follows Reggie, sits at dinette table. Leticia is seated on the couch.*) A few days after they were married. I can say it happened. We were sitting in the living room. My stepfather told me to come over to him. Which I did. He took me in his lap and starts talking to me... and that was the first day he started touching me. I was five years old. I didn't know what he was doing, my mother never told me, Leticia if a man touches you in the wrong place you let me know. She never told me that... and that's how it started. I didn't say anything; 'cause I didn't know it was wrong... but I'm not gonna lie. I know what he was doing felt good and it went on until I started high school. (*Young Leticia and Reggie exit.*) A few months after they got married, they sent us down south. For about a year we lived in Spartansburg, South Carolina with my stepfather's relatives. I was really petrified. I didn't know these people from Adam. My mother and stepfather sent us birthday presents down there. I got a Baby Alive - the doll that eats and my brother got Evil Knievel. My stepfather's cousin started molesting me - it was just fondling. All I remember is how scared I was. I didn't know if I was coming home again or not, or how long I'd be staying. (*Reggie enters. Sits on the couch. Young Leticia enters excited followed by mom and son.*) I remember being so happy to be back home. But then my mother put me in Catholic School - St. Cecilia's, which I hated 'cause it was so strict. And there's when I started coming closer to my stepfather. I remember I would sit on his lap when I came home from school - and he would buy me anything, whatever I needed, clothes, shoes, toys. (*Vernon knocks something off the table playing with Leticia. Mother snatches both down hallway to room.*) But then I was confused too. On one hand he was getting me what I wanted but on the other he'd also be beating me.... my mother never beat us until she married this man. She'd make us strip completely naked and she got ironing cords, and first she'd beat us until she got tired and then my stepfather would come in and beat us, then after.... (*Reggie exits to room.*)

... He'd fondle me. I was so mixed up. When I think about his beating me now, it was a front for my mother to let her think other things than, 'Well, I'm having sex with your daughter. My mother pretends she has total amnesia for everything that happened to me. And I know she knows about the sexual abuse, 'cause there was a time I told my stepfather that I'd tell her, and all he said was, Go ahead. She ain't gonna do nothing. And she didn't - and she still hasn't. That's the only thing that messes with me now. Because he was right, you know. When I think about those years, I can't figure it out. He'd be walking around mad, and then at night he'd get up and come in my room- start touching me when I was sleeping. If I was in bed with my husband and roll over and he's not there, I'd look around to see where he is... I guess she felt he was in the living room... whatever. Nothing I can do about it- that's her husband. But I tell her I wish she'd understand my side, how I feel about it. But now I come to realize that's all right. It happened to me and its not happening no more. And it's not my fault. She tells me, Forgive and Forget. I hate to say it, but I wish someday he'd drop dead, and what goes around comes around. He knows he did it. He told my mother too. And he read this long sob story about how sorry he is. It came through one ear and out the other, 'cause it can't be undone - it happened. That's a part of my life that will always be with me. I don't care how many times he tells me he's sorry, I'll never forgive him. Ain't that much sorry in the world. *(She exits. Lights up on apartment. It is morning. Denise Benjamin is quickly rushing about trying to leave for work. Reginald Benjamin is sitting at the kitchen table opening envelopes and reading the bills inside. After reading a few he pushes the rest of the stack aside and grabs the newspaper and sips on a cup of coffee.)*

DENISE

O.K. I'm gone. I'll be home about... a little after 5p.m. You guys be good *(kisses Leticia)*.... Get that homework done before I come home. You hear me? And clean up that room. O.K. Bye honey. Oh! Reggie could you pick up some milk and bread?

REGGIE

Denise, can't you pick it up? I'm gonna be busy...

DENISE

Can you just do this for me? Please.

REGGIE

I'm not sure I'm gonna be back here before you get home. I got some things I gotta do... I don't have time.

DENISE

That's o.k. I'll get it myself. Bye! *(She exits)*

REGGIE

Bye. Leticia, you up? Get up.

LETICIA

(Entering) Yeah!

REGGIE

Come here. What are you doing? Come sit up here with me. You're gonna have to get up earlier and go to bed earlier too. Come on now wakeup. I know what will get you up. *(Threatens to tickle her.)*

LETICIA

(She laughs) We're going on a field trip today.

REGGIE

Oh yeah! You didn't tell me.

LETICIA

We're going to the museum.

REGGIE

Did your mother give you some money?

LETICIA
No, I think she forgot.

REGGIE
Well, here. How much do you think is good?

LETICIA
I don't know. A dollar.

REGGIE
Well I don't have a dollar. Let me look. No, I don't have a dollar... but I have two. Wait... Wait a minute what are you gonna give me. *(She hugs him.)* Oh that's my girl. Thank you. Go get ready for school. Leticia, wait a minute let me help you.

LETICIA
Vernon is still sleep.

REGGIE
Oh! He is? Well, we'll wake him up in a minute.

LETICIA
Am I gonna be late for school?

REGGIE
It's O.K., I'll write you a note. Go lay on the couch. *(Lights fade to black)*

(Lights fade up on apartment. Leticia enters. She is in a hurry. She lays her backpack on the kitchen table and looks at one of the bills. She looks for a pen. Finds it and begin to spell her mother's name. After a couple of tries she goes into the bedroom and comes back with her report card and begins to write. She hears keys at the door. Gathers her stuff and rushes to her room. Her mother enters with groceries.)

DENISE
Leticia! Leticia!

LETICIA
Yeah!

DENISE
Come out here and help me get these groceries in the house. Where's Vernon?

LETICIA
I don't know. I think he's downstairs at Boogeys apartment

DENISE
I told him to bring his little butt home after school. Didn't I tell you all to come home after school?

LETICIA
Yeah.

DENISE
I'll fix his behind. He better get her soon! *(There is a knock at the door. Denise is startled, but quiet.)* Leticia, come over here. Be quiet. Go to the door, get the step stool, look through the hole and see who it is. *(Another set of knocks, as Leticia rushes to the door.)* Girl, be quiet! *(She puts the step stool beneath the door. Stands on it and looks through the peephole.)* Who is it?

LETICIA
(Climbing down from the stool. Excited) Its Reyna and Dee Dee!

DENISE

(Rushes to the door as Leticia opens it.) Leticia can't be playin' today. She got work to do around the house. You all go on back home. She'll see you later. *(Closes the door and crosses back to kitchen.)*

LETICIA

Can't I go for just a little while?

DENISE

You not going out. Stay your behind in this house. Get started on your schoolwork.

LETICIA

I don't have no schoolwork.

DENISE

You want me to find something for you to do? Cause if I find something for you to do you ain't gonna like it. Now get out from under me. *(Reggie enters)*

REGGIE

Hey! What's up? What's going on here? Look like some good eatin' tonight. Hey, baby.

DENISE

Hey, you talk to Sherman today?

REGGIE

Yeah. I told him we'd pay him today.

DENISE

I told him we would have the money Friday... I don't want him coming by here harassing me about that....

REGGIE

Don't worry. I got it covered. He's not gonna put us out on the street as long as he knows he's got money comin'. *(He picks up Leticia and puts her on his back and spins around)* Hey, Precious. What you call yourself doin'?

LETICIA

I'm helping with the groceries and dinner.

REGGIE

Oh! You gonna cook? Well, I better get ready then.

DENISE

Leticia, get down from there and go down to Boogeys and get your brother and don't take all night. You come right back.

LETICIA

O. K. *(She Exits)*

REGGIE

What's the matter with you?

DENISE

Nothing.

REGGIE

Oh.

DENISE

Reggie, you gotta get Leticia and Vernon up and dressed on Saturday because I have to work again this week.

REGGIE

What time you get off? Five? Six?

DENISE

I don't know! Whenever I get done!

REGGIE

What's your problem?

DENISE

I don't have no problem. Just get them up and dressed. Don't let them run around naked all day.

REGGIE

Hey! Look here, I have something to do on Saturday at four. You have to be back here by four.

DENISE

I said I can't leave until I'm done.

REGGIE

Well then you gotta make some other arrangements. Call your mother or...

DENISE

Why can't you just help out? You ain't working now. Do I have to do everything? Did you pay the phone bill?

REGGIE

No. I...

DENISE

So, now they gonna cut the damn phone off. Why didn't you pay it?

REGGIE

Hey, people from Con Ed called and said we had to pay them today by 4p.m. Or we'd be cut off. I figured we needed lights. There wasn't enough left over for the phone. What you want me to do?

DENISE

How much was much left? What did you do with the rest? Give it to me. I'll pay it in the morning. Where is it?

REGGIE

I didn't have nothing left.

DENISE

Give me the money, Reggie.

REGGIE

There wasn't nothing left. Can't you understand English?

DENISE

I'm tired of this. If you not going to do anything around here to help out just let me know....

REGGIE

I help out.

DENISE

... Because I can't do everything all day long and every time I ask you a question you got an excuse.

REGGIE

I'm not making excuses... and just because I'm not working full time somewhere doesn't mean I'm not helping out. I'm doing the best I can.

DENISE

Then do better!!! So help me God I'm tired of your lies.

REGGIE

Oh, so now I'm a liar too. *(Starts to exit)* I don't need this... *(Leticia enters)*

DENISE

Where's Vernon?

LETICIA

I don't know. I couldn't find him. I....

DENISE

What do you mean you couldn't find him? I thought you said he was at Boogees. I told you both to stay together and to bring your butts home... Reggie, would you look for Vernon, please?

REGGIE

No! You look for him. *(He exits)*

DENISE

(Pause) *(To Leticia)* You get your butt in that room. Now! I'ma tear both your butts up. *(Denise exits)*

BLACKOUT