

MAYME. What can I tell you, the man got taste, honey.

ESTHER. I've only seen fabric like this just once before. It's Japanese silk.

MAYME. How'd you know?

ESTHER. It's expensive fabric. Very hard to find. You see the pictures were embroidered by an imperial artist, he signed it there. He give you this?

MAYME. He say I his gal. But this time a little part of me is hopping he telling the truth.

ESTHER. And what about his wife?

MAYME. What about her? I'm sure she just a sorry gal.

ESTHER. How you know she ain't a good person? And he just saying what you want to hear. That his words are a smooth tonic to make you give out what ain't free. How you know his wife ain't good?

MAYME. I don't know. But do it matter?

ESTHER. Yeah it do. You ever think about where they go after they leave here? Who washes their britches after they been soiled in your bed?

MAYME. No, I don't actually. Why would I?

ESTHER. 'Cause there's some poor woman out there waiting, getting up every five minutes, each time a carriage pass the window or a dog bark. Who thinks a great deal of her husband, thinks so much of him that she don't bother to ask questions, she just know that there are places that he go that gentlewomen don't belong.

MAYME. I don't want to hear it.

ESTHER. She thinks he's playing cards or simply restless. But still when the door opens and he lies down next to her, that poor stupid woman don't feel angry, because his body is warm and she ain't alone.

MAYME. What? You troubled because he married? They all married. You ain't completely clean of this business. Truth. No, I don't care to think about those women. I don't care to think about the kind of lives that keep them sitting in their windows, worrying while their husbands —

ESTHER. I pity your heart. You are the worst sort of scavenger. *(Lights rise on George and Esther's boudoir. George stands in a brand-new suit.)*

MAYME. What's the matter with you?

ESTHER. I don't feel so good. That's all.

MAYME. I thought you'd be happy for me.

ESTHER. I think I'm gonna go home, if you don't mind. *(Lights cross fade. Esther and George's boudoir. George stands in a new wool suit.)*

GEORGE. Yuh tink I'd be taken for a Yankee gentleman? I do tink so, no? I'd like one them tall hars, whatcha call 'em? Like that fella across the way, yuh know, the one always be talkin' about 'e rich brother in Chicago. *(Affecting an American accent.)* Yes, sir my name George Armstrong and I from New York, yes sir, born here. *(George laughs.)* It fit real nice. But, it seem to me that the fellas be wearin' shorter jackets with a touch of color. *(Esther pins George's pants.)*

ESTHER. Sporting fellas, they ain't gentlemen. This Scottish wool. It white folk quality and it'll keep you warm through the winter. There is a lovely story —

GEORGE. Yeah? I'm sure it excitin'. *(Esther runs her hands down George's legs, then adjusts the hem. He does not respond to her touch.)*

ESTHER. Be that way, I won't tell it then. There. You look good, George. Really. Now take off the pants so I can hem them proper.

GEORGE. Nah, don't bother. I need them for this evenin'.

ESTHER. This evening? Why? Don't go out. I bought fresh pork chops from Mrs. Franklin's son. I was gonna smother them in onions, the way you like. But it ain't worth the trouble if you ain't gonna eat. And ... and I have something for you, I was going to save it for later ... but ... *(A moment.)* Do you want to see?

GEORGE. *(Excited.)* Sure.

ESTHER. Close your eyes. C'mon. And don't smile. *(George closes his eyes. Esther puts a rose in her hair and a touch of color on her lips. She nervously slips off her dress, revealing an elaborate corset similar to Mayme's.)* You can open your eyes. *(Esther awkwardly poses, awaiting George's reaction. His disappointment is palpable. He clearly was expecting something else. George chuckles to himself with a mixture of amusement and disgust.)*

GEORGE. What yuh doing?

ESTHER. Don't you like it?

GEORGE. Come, put yuh clothin' on.

ESTHER. What's the matter? Aint this to your likin'? Aint this what you want? *(Esther places George's hands around her waist.)* Feel it. It sain. See.

GEORGE. No, don't do this Esther. C'mon, this ain' yuh. 'Ear. ESTHER. *(Timidly.)* If I ain't mistaken, a man has certain obligations. *(A moment.)* Why won't you touch me? *(A moment.)*

GEORGE. You want me to touch yuh?

ESTHER. Yes. *(George grabs Esther around the waist. He plants a heavy hand kiss on her mouth. She nevertheless succumbs to his touch.)*

GEORGE. Like so? You want me to touch you. That all you want

of George? You want me to bend and please, so you can feel mighty. No. *(George pushes Esther away.)* Least in Panama a man know where 'e stand. 'E know 'e chattel. That as long as 'e have a goat 'e happy. 'E know when 'e drunk, 'e drunk and there ain' no 'e about the pretty avenues, she tell 'e plentiful. She fill up 'e head so it 'ave no taste for goat milk. She offer 'e the city stroke by stroke. She tantralize 'e with Yankee words. But 'e not find she. Only this woman 'ere, that say touch me, George. And ask 'e to lie down on what she promise, lie down on 'e stable with a dozen strong horses for the work sites, ask 'e to lie down as they haul lumber and steel. Strong sturdy beasts. They are. 'E lie down, but what 'e get? No, he aint gonna lie down no more.

ESTHER. Stop it. Why you talking this way?

GEORGE. I tink yuh know. *(A moment. George eyes the quilt.)*

ESTHER. No. Please dont ask me again.

GEORGE. But it there dreamin' a fine fine house wit it own yard. It taunt 'e so, 'e cant even show what kind of man 'e be. What 'e hands can do.

ESTHER. No. That half my life. Thousands of tiny stiches and yards of fabric passed through that old machine.

GEORGE. And for what, huh? For it sit?

ESTHER. No.

GEORGE. Stop sayin' no! Aint you see. If 'e own wife aint willin' to believe in 'e, who will? 'E stand in work lines that wind around city blocks. But 'e dont have to no more, 'cause 'e know a fella got twelve draft horses and want to sell them quick quick. And 'e buy for even. They'll have the finest stable in New York City. People'll tip their hats and pay tribute. They'll call them Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong. The Armstrongs. Them church ladies will clear the front row just for them. And 'e will —

ESTHER. *(Esther wants to believe him.)* He will what?

GEORGE. 'E will sit with she and nod graciously to the ladies. 'E will come home for supper every evenin'. *(Seductively.)* 'E will lie with she.

ESTHER. Only she? *(George strokes Esther's back tenderly, she savors his touch. He kisses her neck, her back, her shoulders, her breasts. He embraces her, almost too much so. Esther nevertheless surrenders to the unexpected affection.)* Are you telling me the truth? Is this the truth? GEORGE. Yes.

ESTHER. Please, you're not just saying that. You're not laughing at me are you?

GEORGE. No, I ain' laughin'. *(Finally, Esther breaks the embrace. She hesitates, then tears into the quilt, wrenching it apart with her bare hands. She pulls the money out and examines it, before placing it in George's outstretched hands.)*

ESTHER. There. There. *(She's almost relieved to be shedding the money. Surprised, George smiles and gathers the money into a pile.)*

GEORGE. So much 'ere. Sweet mercy, look at it all. Good lord, that fella ain' gonna believe it. I gonna place the money square in 'e hand, wipe that silly Yankee grin off 'e lips. I show 'e.

ESTHER. George, it's late, you aint gotta do this now ... put it back. It'll still be there in the morning.

GEORGE. Woman, how yuh get so much?

ESTHER. Leave it. Come. George, I said put it back, it'll be there in the morning! ... *(Esther beckons him to the bed. He looks at her pleading outstretched hand, but instead chooses to fetch a worn bag for the wrinkled money. Esther, humiliated, studies her husband with growing horror. Aghast, she slowly lowers her hand and pulls on her dress.)* George? *(George continues to take unbridled delight in the money.)* George?

GEORGE. *(Snaps.)* What?

ESTHER. *(Whispered.)* Do you love me?

GEORGE. What the matter wit' you? You look as though you seen a duppy.

ESTHER. Do I?

GEORGE. Why yuh look at me strange?

ESTHER. I asked you something.

GEORGE. Yah my wife, ain't yuh?

ESTHER. Am I? *(Whispered.)* I didn't write them letters.

GEORGE. I didn't hear what yuh said.

ESTHER. *(Louder, almost too much so.)* I said I didn't write them letters. *(George studies Esther with disbelief.)* All this time I was afraid that you'd find me out. This good noble man from Panama. *(Esther retrieves a pile of letters tied with a satin ribbon.)* I have all of your letters here. I look at them every day. I have one that looks as though it's weeping, because the words fade away into nothing, and another that looks as if it's been through a hard day, because there's a smudge of dirt at each corner, and it smells of kerosene and burnt sugar. But I can't tell you what it say, because I don't read. I can't tell whether there are any truths, but I keep them,

'cause George give me his heart, though it covered in mud and filthy, but he give it to me in one of these letters. And I believed him. I believed him! (*A moment.*) But you ain't the man in these letters, because that gentleman would have thanked me. Who wrote them letters, George? Tell me! (*George considers.*) YOU TELL ME!

GEORGE. An old mulatto man. I paid him ten cents for each letter, ten cents extra for the fancy writing.

ESTHER. I ain't really Mrs. Armstrong, am I? I been holding on to that, and that woman ain't real. We more strangers now, than on the eve of our wedding. At least I knew who I was back then. But I ain't gonna let you hurt that woman. Nol! She's a good decent woman and worthy. Worthy!

GEORGE. Esther! (*George reaches out to Esther.*)

ESTHER. No, don't touch me! (*Esther backs away from George.*)

GEORGE. Please. I ain't a thief. No. They warn't my words, but that don't mean I ain't feel them rings. I go now, and I gonna bring yuh back them horses.

ESTHER. I hope they real strong horses.

GEORGE. You'll see. And, we'll begin here. (*Lights crossfade.*)

Mayme's boudoir. Ragtime music plays, fast and furious.

Scene 5

Smoking Jacket

Mayme's boudoir. Mayme is lying on the bed wrapped in the Japanese smoking jacket. She sits up, pours herself a shot of moonshine and slams it back. A knock sounds on the door.

MAYME. Hold on, hold on. (*Mayme opens the door. Esther, calm, enters. Mayme's unable to disguise her surprise.*) Esther. What... I got someone coming shortly. You can't stay. (*Mayme nervously wraps the robe around her body.*) I can't put him off. You understand. Come back later and we'll catch up. (*Esther grabs Mayme's arm.*) What's wrong? (*Esther gathers her strength.*)
ESTHER. He gone.

MAYME. Who gone?

ESTHER. George.

MAYME. You ain't serious.

ESTHER. He has another woman.

MAYME. How do you know?

ESTHER. She told me so.

MAYME. She did? Well, she must be a cruel heartless heifer.

ESTHER. You think so?

MAYME. Yes.

ESTHER. But, she ain't. When I left home this morning I intended to do harm to his whore. I was going to march into her room and scratch her face with my scissors. I was going to scar her. Make her ugly. Make her feel what I'm feeling. But, she gonna know soon enough.

MAYME. You gotta go now.

ESTHER. No.

MAYME. Please, we'll talk about it later. I got someone coming.

ESTHER. Do you know what I done? I tore a hole in my quilt and give him my beauty parlor. Half my life bent at the machine, and I give it to him, just like that.

MAYME. Oh, Esther. Why?

ESTHER. I wanted to be held. (*Distracted.*) I thought if... He ain't come home last night. I sat at the sewing machine all night, trying to make something. I just kept sewing together anything I could find until I had a strip a mile long, so long it fill up the apartment. (*A moment. Mayme runs her fingers along the fabric of the jacket.*) Do you know where he is, Mayme?

MAYME. Why would I know?

ESTHER. Because you're wearing the jacket I give him on our wedding night.

MAYME. How come you ain't say nothing before? (*Mayme, horrified, rips off the jacket.*)

ESTHER. What am I gonna say?

MAYME. Yeah, yeah. Last night Songbird come around the saloon in a new suit with bottomless pockets, throwing dice all night, and boasting of easy money. I ask him where he got the money and he say his luck turn and he was gonna ride it out. If you can imagine that. He was gonna buy himself draft horses. The world changing and he wants big strong horses. He made me laugh. He promised to take me out someplace special, but I didn't have nothing nice to wear. And honestly it made me think about how long it been since

I done something for myself. Gone someplace like you said, where a colored woman could go to put up her feet and get treated good for a change. And I see the dice rolling, and I think Lord, God, wouldn't a place like that be wonderful. But every time the dice roll, that place is a little further away. Until it all gone. And then I put my arms around this man, and I know who he is. He George. And maybe I know all along.

ESTHER. Why didn't you stop him?

MAYME. Because, he belong to me as well. *(Mayme places it in Esther's hands.)* But this yours.

ESTHER. Foolish country gal.

MAYME. No, you are grand, Esther. And I ain't worthy of your forgiveness, nor will I forget what you done for me. You ain't never treat me like a whore. Ever. *(George knocks on door.)*

ESTHER. Please don't answer that door. *(George rattles door and knocks.)* Please don't, please don't answer.

MAYME. He's going to leave.

GEORGE. *(Knocks and rattles door more urgently, shouts.)* Mayme! *(He rattles door again.)*

ESTHER. LET HIM GO! *(Mayme moves toward the door, Esther grabs her arm.)* Let him go. He ain't real, he a duppy, a spirit. We be chasing him forever. *(George knocks and rattles door even more persistently. Eventually he stops. Silence. Mayme sits on her bed. Esther exits with the smoking jacket. Cross fade to Mr. Mark's Boudoir, as Esther moves into Mr. Mark's Boudoir.)*

Scene 6

Japanese Silk

Mark's boudoir. Mr. Marks unfurls a roll of ocean-blue fabric. As he turns, he finds himself facing Esther.

ESTHER. Hello, Mr. Marks.

MARKS. *(Surprised.)* Miss Mills, I'm sorry, Mrs. Armstrong. How have you been?

ESTHER. I seen worse days. And you?

MARKS. I've seen better days. *(He laughs.)*

ESTHER. I've been meaning to stop in. I walked past here a half dozen times trying to get up the courage to come in. You remember you sold me a rather special length of fabric some time ago.

MARKS. Please, remind me.

ESTHER. Japanese silk, with —

MARKS. Of course, I remember it.

ESTHER. Well, I made it into a man's smoking jacket, at your suggestion. *(She holds it up.)*

MARKS. It is very nice, it will please your husband, I'm sure.

ESTHER. I want you to have it.

MARKS. Me? I can't —

ESTHER. Yes, you will. *(Marks accepts the jacket, genuinely touched by the gesture.)*

MARKS. Thank you.

ESTHER. I can't stay. *(Esther begins to leave.)*

MARKS. Wait, one moment. *(He removes his outer jacket, revealing the fringes of his Talit Karen. He carefully puts on the silk jacket.)*

What do you think?

ESTHER. It fits wonderfully. *(Esther takes a step toward Marks, hesitates, then takes another step forward. She raises her hands.)* May I? *(He nervously holds his breath and nods yes. Esther reaches toward Marks, expecting him to move away. She smooths the shoulders of the garment, then expertly runs her hands down the jacket's lapels, straightening the wrinkled material. Marks does not move. Silence. Their eyes are fixed upon one another, then Esther reluctantly walks away, exiting the boudoir without a word. Marks is left along onstage to contemplate the moment. A gentle rag plays. Lights crossfade, were in Esther's original boudoir.)*

Scene 7

Patchwork Quilt

Esther's boudoir. Mrs. Dickson's rooming house. Mrs. Dickson folds laundry, humming a ragtime tune. Esther enters.

ESTHER. The girl downstairs told me I could find you up here.
MRS. DICKSON. My Lord, Mrs. Armstrong. I been telling everyone how you forgot us.

ESTHER. It ain't been that long.

MRS. DICKSON. Feel so. *(The women hug.)* Look at you. I was about to take some tea, come on into the kitchen, I'm glad for the company. These new girls are always out and about. They trouble me so these days, but whatcha gonna do? And I want to hear about everything.

ESTHER. Have you rented this room?

MRS. DICKSON. Why do you ask?

ESTHER. I don't much feel like saying why. If you please, just a yes or no would suit me fine.

MRS. DICKSON. No.

ESTHER. Well then, you won't mind another person at supper this evening. It's Friday and you don't know how I been missing your carrot salad.

MRS. DICKSON. Of course, Esther —

ESTHER. I'm fine. *(Esther takes Mrs. Dickson's hand.)* And I'd love that cup of tea.

MRS. DICKSON. Come on downstairs and we'll catch up. I'll tell you about Corinna Mae, girl's as big as a house, I swear to God. *(Esther barely listening takes in the room.)* She didn't waste any time getting pregnant and already talking nonsense about her man. When they first was married he was good enough for her, but to hear it now you'd think the man didn't have no kind of sense.

ESTHER. I don't care to hear about Corinna Mae.

MRS. DICKSON. Oh, I just thought —

ESTHER. I'd like to sit here for a moment.

MRS. DICKSON. Oh, yes. I gotta bring a few more things in off the line before the sunset, I'll see you downstairs shortly.

ESTHER. Of course. Mrs. Dickson, thank you for not asking.

(Mrs. Dickson lovingly takes Esther's hand, giving it a supportive squeeze. Mrs. Dickson picks up the laundry basket and exits. Esther lightly touches her belly. A moment. She walks over to the old sewing machine and begins to sew together pieces of fabric, the beginnings of a new quilt. Lights shift: sepia tone, the quality of an old photograph. A slow gentle rag plays in the distance. As the lights fade, projected title card: "Unidentified Negro Seamstress. Ca. 1905." Blackout.)

End of Play

PROPERTY LIST

Carnisole with lace (ESTHER)
Letter (MRS. DICKSON, ESTHER, GEORGE)
Brandy, snifter (MRS. VAN BUREN)
Sewing basket (ESTHER)
Paper, pen (MRS. VAN BUREN, MAYMIE)
Bols of fabric (MR. MARKS)
Carpetbag with corset (ESTHER)
Bowl of water (MAYMIE)
Bottle of moonshine (MAYMIE)
Lantern (GEORGE)
Pieces of fabric (GEORGE)
Socksings (MAYMIE)
Gin, glasses (MAYMIE)
Suitcase, clothes (MRS. DICKSON)
Handkerchief (MRS. DICKSON)
Cups of tea (MR. MARKS)
Cigarette, glass of brandy (MRS. VAN BUREN)
Needle and thread (MR. MARKS, ESTHER)
Wedding veil (MRS. DICKSON)
Smoking jacket (ESTHER, MAYMIE)
Scissors, money (ESTHER)
Cigarette, lighter (GEORGE)
Lace (ESTHER)
Money (MRS. VAN BUREN)
Pins (ESTHER)
Rose, lipstick (ESTHER)
Money (ESTHER)
Bag (GEORGE)
Letters tied with ribbon (ESTHER)
Laundry (MRS. DICKSON)