

SCENE: Outside of a tenement building on Hastings Street in an area known as, Black Bottom, in Detroit, Michigan.

TIME: August 1935

AT RISE: It is Tuesday, morning. Light jazz music plays in the background. VERA is sitting outside on the steps in front of a tenement building where she lives, holding an eviction notice in one hand and a handkerchief in the other. EDNA enters from one side of the stage holding a picket sign, facing the audience, with the words, "1935, DETROIT BLACK BOTTOM, BUILDING HITS ROCK BOTTOM," and walks to the middle of the stage holding the sign for a beat, and then she walks to the other side of the stage and exits. THELMA walks on the sidewalk leading to the building, carrying a brown paper bag full of Collard Greens and groceries close to her chest. THELMA notices, VERA in tears.

THELMA

Oh, my goodness, Vera? What's wrong? Tell me.

(VERA remains silent. THELMA sets her groceries down on the steps and sits next to her. VERA hands THELMA the eviction notice. THELMA reads the document quietly, then reads it aloud.)

THELMA (cont')

(Reading notice in hand)

'If your rent is not paid in full, you will be forced, (disbelief) to vacate??

VERA

In seven days . . .

THELMA

This ain't right. How much you owe?

VERA

Sev'ny-five dollars. He wants all three months.

THELMA

Lord ha'mercy.

VERA

Mrs. Miller cut my hours, and I fell behind. So, I tell the landlord 'bout it and he say I can barter my services. So, I been washing, ironing, and cleaning for him, trying to even out my tab, you know, and, he said he'd overlook the rent I owe . . .

I'm at his house cleaning, and . . . he started getting overly familiar with me . . . calling me Darlin', Sweetheart. . . touching and rubbing up against me when his wife ain't there . . . He wanted more'n his bed made up . .

. He starts showing up to my apartment unannounced, offering me wine, and—I knew something was muddled—

I say, 'Mr. Nicholson, you got a whole wife at home. I'm a godly woman.' He say, (Mocks his voice) 'You so godly, get God to pay yo' rent.'

THELMA

Durn shame. God'll deal with that ol' buzzard.

VERA

God? God ain't for the Coloreds or the poor. He only do for the rich.

THELMA

That ain't so. We gone pray 'bout this thang and--

VERA

I been praying.

(THELMA takes Vera's hand to
show her empathy.)

VERA

I went over to the Candle Woman, to see if she could tell my future, to see if she could just give me some sort of sign. She gives me a number to play with Cleeve, told me for sure I was gon' hit. . . and I give her and Cleeve the last few coins I had. Played my number and . . . it ain't come through . . . (a beat) I feel like a fool.

THELMA

Well, you should. Squandering the little you had to—

VERA

Just rub the salt in, Thelma.

THELMA

Well, you know how I feel about them numbers. The Housewives Association helped Elma and her family with their rent. They can help you too. You have to go before their board of course. Explain why you need it, and—

VERA

I go to them biddy's and my business a be all 'round Black Bottom. I do have pride. (A beat) Seventy-five dollars in seven days. . . I don't bring home but eight dollars a week! Work for four, five families, and this what they determine I'm worth?? (A few beats) Seem like that's all us Colored women got to look forward to— hard work and no money. Reckon we gone be po' all our life.

THELMA

I ain't claiming no po. It's many ways to be rich without money.

VERA

How?

THELMA

Rich in love, and spirit. Rich in family, friends—

VERA

And cain't none of them ways pay my rent!

THELMA

I ain't making light of you, Vera.

VERA

Colored folk work longer and harder for everything we get. (A few beats) I was on my knees, scrubbing Mrs. Miller's floors. I could feel her standing over me like bad luck . . . She say, (mocking condescending voice) 'No matter how *haard* you Coloreds scrub, you'll only get the scraps whitefolk leave behind.' Just like that. Then she tells me she can't pay me till next week. (A few beats) Two, three generations of their family done wore out the houses and buildings we forced to live in. Ain't painted no walls. Fixed no roofs. Replaced no floorboards, and we get stuck in the places they don't want . . . They eats high off the hog and we eats low. They get the best of the hog and we get what's left: ears, feet, tails and guts.

THELMA

(Jokes) Well, that's some good eating, if it's cooked right.

VERA

(Smacks lips, chuckles a bit, holding back tears)

You always try to find the good in something. I try . . . But it ain't right how they do us. I want a place to live. A home. Somewhere I can relax, have peace, cook, and raise children. A place I can be proud of. My skin color ain't got no business getting in the way of that.

THELMA

(Wagging her head in agreement) Don't I know it, friend? Don't I know.

VERA

(Takes a long beat, sighs) You gotta use what you got, to get what you need.

THELMA

Ain't it the truth?

VERA

You ain't getting what I'm saying.

(She gives Thelma a look. Looks at her private area then back to Thelma.)

THELMA

(Catching on to what she's referring to, she shows her disapproval)

Ooooh, noooo! Vera. I don't care how hard it gets, ain't no woman of God gotta resort to that!

VERA

Well, he the one give it to us. So, I'm using what's between my thighs—to survive.

THELMA

OH, NO! NO! Vera it's always another way.

VERA

(Stands) Well, when God let you know what that way is, you let me know. Cause I only got seven days.

THELMA

He created the world in six.

VERA

And I'ma be out on my ass in seven!

(VERA's tear streaked face looks at her friend with desperate eyes. Thelma doesn't say one word. Vera goes back into the dilapidated tenement building that they share.)

(SOUND: Jazz music plays lightly in the background. PROJECTOR SCREEN SHOWS IMAGES of African American women doing grueling domestic work. Taking care of their white employer's children, while their own children are alone. We see the beautiful homes of their white employers contrasted by the deplorable homes domestic workers are forced to live in. VERA stands in the hallway of the tenement building looking at the deplorable conditions. She recites a poem she has written entitled, RENT. The poem's words come up on the PROJECTOR SCREEN.)

VERA

Rent.
Hear that word, and it reminds me,
I. Don't. Own. Nuthin.

Rent.
Hear that word,
And I know I owe somethin'.

Wear myself out,
Workin' in whitefolks castles,
Art-Deco's, and bungalows.
Dustin, cleanin', washin', an' scrubbin they flo's.

Shinin' they crystals chandeliers,
Hanging from perfect stucco ceilings.
While mines got rusty, brown stains,
And paint chippin' and peelin'.

Got us Coloreds,
Squeeeeeezed inside buildings falling apart.
Payin' double rent to landlords
That ain't got no heart.

We pilin' and packin' our black babies
Like sardines, on hard pallets,
Set low, on the flo',

Make you wanna cry.

VERA (cont.)

Specially, when you go to work
And tuck in white babies,

In soft-warm-beds, set up high.

God! Ain't you Our Father? Our Shepard?
In YOU we 'spose to trust.
Then how come you do more for THEM,
Than you do for US?

Rent.
Ever'time I hear that word,
It remind me I. Don't. Own. Nuthin'.

(looks up to the sky)

God? If you up there, please, please do som'thin'.

(THELMA goes inside of the building. She sees VERA in the hallway, at her apartment door, about to go inside. Thelma calls out to Vera before she enters.)

THELMA

Vera? We gotta keep holding onto hope. You lose hope, you lose everything.

VERA

(pauses a moment before responding)

Black folk holding onto hope . . . and white folk hold onto the money.

THELMA

(thinks a moment)

We'll get that sev'ny-five. I'm throwing a rent party for you. Right here in my 'partment, this Saturday night.

VERA

I don't wanna put you through that trouble.

THELMA

Ain't no trouble! (Smiles) And you need to think about going on a rent strike with us. We gone picket this place 'til that slumlord gets things fixed 'round here. That's how to fight fire with fire.

VERA

Y'all really gon' picket this place?

THELMA

Gon' march round this building till the walls fall like Jericho! Come to the meeting at Della's apartment. We organizing. And striking on Wednesday. (A beat) Vera, come inside and have a cup a coffee with me? Won't you?

VERA

I just need to go in here and fuss with the Lord for a while.

THELMA

Well, after you and Him finish fussin', how 'bout helping me clean these greens, and join us for supper this evenin'?

(VERA looks at THELMA cracks a slight smile.)

VERA

Thank you, Thelma . . . Thank you.

(VERA smiles and opens her door and walks inside her apartment. THELMA continues down the hallway and upstairs to her apartment.)

END SCENE.