

Scene 5
Mae's Apartment

(At the dining room table, CLEEVE (30s) meticulously counts money from brown paper bags and checks bets on number slips. Despite the second-hand furniture, the room is neatly arranged. The soothing notes of jazz fill the air from the RADIO. The TELEPHONE rings. CLEEVE rises, carrying his number pad to the phone, and answers.)

CLEEVE

Hello? Hey, there Frank. Naw, I ain't put 'em in yet. You want 2-2-4?
Straight and a combination? (Writes) Dollar on both? I got you. (Hangs up)

(Cleeve returns to the table, resuming the meticulous counting. The room enveloped in the rhythmic jazz tones, he's focused on the money and bets spread before him. Cleeve's sister-in-law, MAE (30's) enters, as her days work has ended, with a bag of food items. MAE, glances at Cleeve and immediately starts fussing, a familiar routine for them.)

MAE

I know you ain't got them numbers on my table??

CLEEVE

Hey-dare, Fuss-Box! I mean, Miss Mae.

MAE

(panting)

Don't 'Hey dare,' me. I just walked up a thousand stairs.

CLEEVE

Where you get money to go to the sto?

MAE

I ain't been to no store. Della give me these greens out of her garden.
You been watching my roast in the oven like I asked?

CLEEVE

You don't smell nuthin' burning, do you??

(Mae takes bag of food into the kitchen. Cleeve remains focused on counting money, paying her no mind, Mae comes from the kitchen, takes off her coat and hat and neatly hangs them on a coat rack.)

MAE

I done told you 'bout running numbers in this house, Cleeve.

CLEEVE

I ain't running nothing in here. I'm just counting money.

MAE

Same difference. Here-tell you be down at the train station picking up numbers, need to be seeing 'bout getting you a job there.

(Mae, ever the perfectionist with a touch of OCD, glances around the meticulously neat apartment. Despite its impeccable state, she feels the need to straighten and adjust. Starting with pillows on the couch, she ensures every picture is perfectly aligned on the coffee table and the banister of the piano.)

MAE

Cleeve get up and straighten this house! I can't stand grown folk sitting around with the house looking like this.

CLEEVE

Ain't nothing to straighten, Mae! What? You want me to give the cockroaches a bath??

MAE

Get that suitcoat off my good chair!

CLEEVE

Boy! I thought I left my mama in Mississippi??

MAE

I wish she'd come get you!

(Cleeve gets up and hangs his suit coat on the coat rack. Mae takes out a quilt she's been working on, sits down on the couch and continues sewing cut out cloth patches onto it.)

MAE

When Buford get home, he gon' put a stop to this!

CLEEVE

These numbers reason we eating. Reason the rent getting paid. That little money Buford making at that meat factory just putting *scraps* of meat in the pot.

MAE

At least it's clean money.

CLEEVE

Clean money, dirty money. It all spend the same.

MAE

Well, I don't want two worlds in this house. God's world and the underworld don't mix.

CLEEVE

The underworld keeping this house alive, I don't care what you say.

(BUFORD (30s), Mae's husband, arrives home from work, makes his entrance into the house, carrying a brown grocery bag filled with scraps of meat he got from his job at the meat factory. He casually hangs his cap and jacket on the coat rack.)

Hey baby.

BUFORD

Hello, Darlin.

MAE

Cleeve.

BUFORD

Hey, Buford.

CLEEVE

MAE

Uh-Un, Buford! You take them boots off and leave 'em outside the door.
Don't know what you been stepping in at work.

(Buford begins the process of removing his boots, handing them over to Mae. She efficiently places them outside the apartment before returning inside. She resumes her sewing.)

BUFORD

You got it smelling good, Baby! I got a heap of chicken thighs from work.
I'ma go through the building and sell the rest.

(Buford goes to the kitchen to put the chicken away in the refrigerator. Then re-enters the living room.)

BUFORD

Cleeve, they hiring down at the meat packing company. Gone over there
and apply.

CLEEVE

I ain't getting my fingers cut up messing with nothing like that.

BUFORD

And they hiring bellhops over there at Miss Corrine Hotel.

CLEEVE

I ain't operating no elevators or carrying no bags.

BUFORD

You need to come off that high horse and earn some steady money
'round here.

CLEEVE

Tween two jobs, working twelve hours, six days a week, you ain't getting but ten dollars a week, and you be glad if you see eight! Fish House Fats pays all his number's runners steady. I at least get fifteen, and ain't gotta work two shifts to get it.

BUFORD

Fish House what?

CLEEVE

Fats!

BUFORD

A grown man call hisself that?

(Buford goes into the kitchen and gets himself a beer.)

CLEEVE

His real name is Alvin Evans. He owns the Fish Market right here on Hastings.

BUFORD

(Talking from kitchen) Run numbers out the basement?

CLEEVE

Yep, that's him. The Bread-n-Butter Man! He pay for kids to go to college, help folk bury the dead, owns property. He's the big fella in this city. Seen his new car?

BUFORD

(Returns to living room) The Burgundy Continental with the white wall tires?

CLEEVE

Yeah, that's it. He even got a driver.

MAE

Well, I don't care what he got, I want you to stop running numbers in this house. God ain't pleased. Cleeve ain't doing nothing but blocking blessings in here.

CLEEVE

Ain't no different from you playing Bingo at Della's.

MAE

You betta get some work honest like everybody in this house or—

CLEEVE

Or what?? You gon' put me out??

MAE

Get a respectable job!

CLEEVE

Doing what, Mae? Great Depression ain't giving work worthwhile to nobody, don't matter what color you is. I'm competing with the white fella's wanting the same job I'm trying to get, and when I'm standing in line for it, who the Boss gon' pick? Me or his own?

MAE

I watch my husband bust his tail ever'day working two jobs just to make ends meet! You think I wanna be scrubbing floors and cleaning whitefolk houses for little to nothing??! But I do it cause I have to. I do it cause that's just the way it is!

CLEEVE

Buford, man, get yo' woman, I ain't trying to hear all that.

BUFORD

Now, Cleeve, you said you was coming up here to do right, and that's reason I let you stay here. Been here three months and you ain't making no moves.

CLEEVE

(Waits a few beats before responding)

I ain't come to Detroit to be doing the same work I left behind. Hell, if I wanted to stay a damn slave, I would've stayed in Mississippi! In the field sunup to sundown right there next to you. That's all we ever know'd. Shacks! Fields! Hunger! Hardwork! And no money! We ain't never had nothing and you know it! Now, if you fine doing what you do, then do it. I'm a man . . . let me find my own way.

(Buford, though reluctant to admit it, grasps Cleeve's perspective more deeply than he lets on. A brief pause lingers before he carefully chooses his words in response.)

BUFORD

Do what you do.

(Mae is outdone with her husband's response and upset that he is not on her side.)

MAE

But Buford!

BUFORD

Mae! I done said what I said. I don't wanna hear nothing else about it, hear?

(She stands a beat looking at both men. Mae storms off to the kitchen. Cleeve is bothered by seeing her upset. However, he wrestles with guilt but persists in justifying his stance.)

CLEEVE

Man, Buford, I ain't trying to come 'tween y'all. But they ain't giving us no other way to get out the mud . . . This my way.

BUFORD

She'll be alright. Cleeve? Don't get my house mixed up in yo' street politics, hear?

CLEEVE

I'd never do that. But I be damn if I keep on living hand to mouth. I ain't come to Detroit for that.

(Cleeve gathers the number slips and money from the table and exits.)

END SCENE