

ACT I

Scene 1

AT RISE: Lights rises on the seamstress shop. It is late afternoon and uneven light from the front window filter in illuminating a dark and dingy shop. Helen is working at her sewing machine. MS. SUMMERS, a robust full-figured woman, in her early thirties, stylishly dressed, carrying a plastic clothing bag enters right and crosses to the shop. She opens the door and a little customer bell sounds. Upon seeing MS. SUMMER, HELEN rises and crosses to greet her.

HELEN

Oh, good afternoon, Ms. Summers. How are you today? What can...?

SUMMERS

(Irate)

Don't good afternoon' me!

(MS. SUMMERS takes the plastic bag that she has been carrying, pulls out a red dress, and throws it on the counter.)

HELEN

Is there a problem?

SUMMERS

Is there a problem? Yes, there's a problem. You did a shoddy job altering my dress.

(MS. SUMMERS grabs the dress, holds it up and points to a split in the seam.)

SUMMERS (CONT'D)

Do you see this? It's a tear in my brand new, one of a kind, Famous and Barr original dress. A tear...

HELEN

Ms. Summers, that tear wasn't in the dress when you picked it up.

SUMMERS

Of course, it wasn't in the dress when I picked it up. You did a half-ass job fixing it. I paid you three dollars to take my Famous and Barr original in an inch, three dollar, and I don't pick my money off no money tree. No, sir! I work hard to earn my money. Oh, I could have given the job to the white folk downtown and got it done right the first time. Instead, I said to myself, "Why not give my people the business?" The white man has been getting rich off taking our money for centuries and still treating us like zoo oddities. Now, I gets the dress on, it's fitting real good, snug around the hips and waist, the way I likes it, so as to show off my sumptuous figure. Saturday night I attended the biggest colored affair of the year, given by the Esquire Club. Every respectable, important Negro in the city of St. Louis was invited. *(Beat)* Strange, I didn't see you there. I'm there socializing, having myself a fabulous time, getting all kinds of compliments on how good I look in the dress and I...

HELEN

Ms. Summer I'm sure the dance was wonderful, but that's not the reason...

SUMMERS

AND! If you don't mind. I was asked to dance by the most eligible, Negro bachelor in all of St. Louis, Dr. Edmond Joseph Watson, a fine, light-skinned, colored man with straight, wavy hair, beautiful, emerald eyes that makes you feel like you just took a dip in soothing, Caribbean waters, money in his pocket and a head on his shoulders. What more could a woman ask for in a man? Now, I'm out there cutting rug with my potential, future husband; he spins me around, and I stride back to him throwing my hips from side to side, with a little sexy shuffle, and I hear this ripping sound. "What was that?" one young woman said, and looks at me. Oh, I couldn't believe it! She saw right away what had made the noise, another face turned to stare, and another, then a giggle, soon the whole room was roaring with laughter. My butt was hanging out for all to see.

(HELEN giggles.)

You think that's funny, huh? I've never been so embarrassed in my entire life. Standing there with the most eligible, Negro bachelor in St. Louis--my ass is hanging out for public viewing.

HELEN

Ms. Summers, I tried to explain to you that taking in that dress..

SUMMERS

You ain't tried to explain nothin' of the sort. You ain't nothin' but a shifty, con artist.

HELEN

Ms. Summer!

SUMMERS

Hey, I call 'em like I see 'em.

(CAMILLA enters upstage right, outside the shop, carrying two large suitcases. SHE crosses to the front door and is about to enter the shop when she hears the exchange. SHE puts down her suitcases and listens.)

SUMMERS

My daddy always said, "If you want a job done right, don't give it to no damn nigga." One of these days I'll learn my lesson. (Beat) Now, what are you gonna do about this?

(HELEN examines the dress.)

HELEN

Well, I'll have to double stitch it this time and reinforce it with...

SUMMERS

No, ma'am! No, ma'am! Uh...uh...uh. I want a full refund, a full refund. Do you hear me! Every last penny back in my hand, right here, right now. I will be taking my business downtown to the white folk where they knows what they be doing.

HELEN

It's not my policy to give customers refunds once I have warned them of potential problems they could...

SUMMERS

I don't care if President Dwight D. Eisenhower decreed that it was the policy of the United of America not to give refunds to dissatisfied customers. I'd take my black ass to the White House, sit right down in that oval office he got, and I'd tell mister Dwight D. Eisenhower himself the same damn thing that I am tell you, I want my money back, and I want it now!

HELEN

Ms. Summers, I done told you right from the start if you insisted on taking in the dress in as much you wanted, that seam could give way at any...

SUMMERS

What are you trying to say, I's fat? Is that what you trying to say? Honey, I don't know if you have look at yo'self in the mirror lately, but beauty ain't one of yo' strong suits.

HELEN

Now, Ms. Summers I don't think...

SUMMERS

Ain't no man want no skinny-leg woman! Oh, you can always get a piece of a man with a bone, but a real man--someone who's got somethin' on the ball...

HELEN

Ms. Summers...

SUMMERS

...Somethin' worth having...

HELEN

Ms. Summers.

SUMMERS

...you need some delectable ham, succulent chops, tantalizing bresteziz, somethin' a man can sink his teeth into and savor. I admit, I am a full figured woman, and I is proud of it. If you got it, flaunt it. You is the seamstress, and you suppose to be able to make me look enchanting, beautiful, and VO-LUP-TUOUS. If you can't do the job, you ain't got no business sitting up here making people believe...

(CAMILLA bursts through the door and springs immediately into a counterattack on MS. SUMMERS. HELEN is stunned by CAMILLA'S appearance.)

CAMILLA

Excuse me...excuse me, sorry to interrupt, but I just happen to be passing by and overheard what this ahh...this ahh, stupid, black cow was saying.

HELEN

Camilla! Camilla! Is that you?

(CAMILLA gives HELEN a wink.)

CAMILLA

(To MS. SUMMERS)

Ain't nothin' less than a miracle from the All Mighty Himself gonna to make you look enchanting--you big, fat, sloppy heifer.

SUMMERS

How dare you talk to me like that!

HELEN

Oh, my God! It is you. What in the world are you doing here!?

SUMMERS

Do you know who I am? Well...I have never in all...

HELEN

Camilla! Where in the world did you come from?

CAMILLA

Stand back and watch me work, girl.

SUMMERS

What? Who...who is this woman? (*To HELEN*) Do you know this...this foul mouth Negro?

CAMILLA

Watch yo' mouth, sister. You wouldn't want me to rearrange your face for you, huh? Although, anything done would be a major improvement.

SUMMERS

The nerve of some-- Do you actually know this woman?

CAMILLA

Hell yeah, she knows me, Ms. Lard Bottom.

(*Crosses to HELEN and hugs her.*)

This thin, petite, pretty woman is my sister. She's ain't a member of the big, butt sister of America. Look at you, just shaking and giggling like a bowl full of Jell-O. If I had a figure like yours, you know what I'd do? I would go down to Famous and Barr and order myself a tent, a circus tent, of the three-ring variety.

SUMMERS

(*To HELEN*)

You just gonna stand there and let this woman insult me like this.

HELEN

(*To CAMILLA*)

You better let me handle this.

CAMILLA

(*To SUMMERS*)

You've been doing all the insulting so far. Now it's your turn to see how it feels to get your face rubbed in a little manure.

(MS. SUMMER starts to leave the shop, but CAMILLA blocks her exit.)

CAMILLA (CONT'D)

I done seen a lot of mean and ornery folks in my day, but you've taken being ornery to an all time low. I'm going to tell you something, and I want you to listen real good, 'cause I'm only going to tell you once. I don't want to see yo' black ass around here annoying my sister anymore; I don't want you spreading any malicious lies about her doing shoddy work; and most of all, I don't never want you disrespecting her again; 'cause if you do...if you do, you going to get more than a tongue thrashing from me. Is that clear? I said, Is it clear!?

(MS. SUMMERS gives an affirmative gesture.)

CAMILLA (CONT'D)

Hey, ain't that a hog call I hear in the distance? Suey, suey, suey, suey, suey! Girl, it must be yo' feeding time. You better high tail it on out of here befo' they done gone and closed down the trough. Go on, get! What you waiting for? Get the hell out of here!

(MS. SUMMERS exits the shop, forgetting to take her dress.)

SUMMERS

Ignorant niggas.

(HELEN and CAMILLA watch as MS. SUMMERS disappears into shadow.)

HELEN

Well, there goes my best customer.

(THEY turn to each other, embrace and celebrate their triumph.)

HELEN

Camilla, Camilla, let me look at you. I just don't believe my eyes. Why didn't you let me know you were coming?

CAMILLA

Wanted to surprise you.

HELEN

Six years gone from here, you don't write, you don't call, not even a Christmas card, and you appear out of nowhere. Will you ever change yo' ways, girl?

CAMILLA

I enjoy being the black sheep of the family too much to change. (Pause) Well, are you gonna offer yo' sister a drink. I've been on a Greyhound bus for more than twenty-six hours. Put up with a crying baby half the way and a drunk with them wondering hands the other half. After a trip like that, you need a drink to settle yo' nerves.

HELEN

Sure, sure, I guess you would. But I don't have a thing in the house. You see, I don't drink and neither does George, so I don't buy the stuff.

(Long pause. CAMILLA studies HELEN.)

CAMILLA

Well, I'll just have to buy my own bottle, won't I? Where is the nearest liquor store?

(CAMILLA opens her pocketbook and searches for money.)

HELEN

No...no, I wouldn't hear of it. Now, don't go trying to get...

CAMILLA

No, no I ain't no free loader. I can support my own habits...

HELEN

Stop it, Camilla! Stop it! Just put yo' money away. Put it away. I'll run out and get you somethin'. What do you want to drink?

CAMILLA

You sure now?

HELEN

Yes, I's sure!

CAMILLA

Jack Daniels and soda. Get a fifth of the Jack and a couple bottles of soda water. You gotta have a drink with me to celebrate our reunion. (Notices her expression) Girl, the Lawd ain't gonna throw no lightning bolt down at you for takin' one drink.

HELEN

The liquor store is around the corner. Make yo'self at home. There is a place in the back to freshen up.

CAMILLA

Freshen up? Girl, you don't have go getting all high society with me. Get back there and wash some of that road dust off yo' rusty behind. That's how you talk to family.

HELEN

Camilla, you ain't changed a bit. Let me get out of here befo' the liquor store closes. We'll start catching up as soon as I get back.

(HELEN exits. CAMILLA begins to wander around the seamstress shop. SHE opens drawers, examines clothing, and tests out the foot-driven sewing machine. SHE eyes MS. SUMMERS' dress still lying on the counter. CAMILLA picks up the dress and holds it up against herself, crosses to a mirror stage left, models with the dress for moment, and then places the dress back on the counter. SHE pokes her head through the curtain that separates the seamstress shop from the back room. SHE crosses to her luggage, picks them up, and enters the backroom. A few moments past, GEORGE enters the shop.)

GEORGE

Honey, you back there? Helen?

(GEORGE starts to go into the back room. CAMILLA comes from behind the curtain just as GEORGE is about to enter. GEORGE is momentarily startled by CAMILLA appearance.)

CAMILLA

You act like you ain't never seen a woman befo'.

GEORGE

Oh, I's sorry, ma'am...so...sorry...ahh...I didn't mean to stare. Aahh...well...ahh yeah...I was looking for--hey! Wait a minute. Wait just a cotton-picking minute! What are you doing here? Who the hell are you!?

CAMILLA

Now I was just about to ask the same thing.

GEORGE

My wife owns— Listen, I don't have to explain anything to you. What are you doing up in here by yourself? She don't allow no strangers-- What you been up to in that back room? And where is my wife?

CAMILLA

So you must be George.

GEORGE

How do you know my name?

CAMILLA

Questions, questions! Is that all yo' use yo' mouth for?

GEORGE

Lady, if you don't start coming up with some answers, you gonna have to do some explaining to the police.

CAMILLA

Ooowweeee...you is scaring me now! Ain't nothin' like a big black policeman to straighten out a wayward woman.

(GEORGE begins to move toward the entrance to the back room. CAMILLA blocks his way.)

GEORGE

Excuse me. I said excuse me! What do you think you're doing? Get out of my way.

CAMILLA

If you want to get by, you gonna have to go through me.

GEORGE

What?

CAMILLA

You heard me.

GEORGE

I'm...I'm giving you fair warning. I don't want to hurt you.

CAMILLA

How you gonna hurt something that's already broke?

(GEORGE considers the situation and begins to force his way into the back room as CAMILLA persists in guarding the door.)

CAMILLA

Oh, you gonna to have to do better than that.

(GEORGE is momentarily thrown off by her lasciviousness.)

CAMILLA (CONT'D)

I'm just a little, defenseless woman. No match for a big, strapping man like you. Let me feel those hard muscular arms take control. Come on, baby. Move me.

GEORGE

I'm giving you one last chance. Get out of the way!

(CAMILLA stands staring at GEORGE. He begins to force his way pass.)

CAMILLA

Ooooo, now that's more like it. Don't be afraid to be rough.

(HELEN can be seen crossing left and enters the shop while the struggle is in progress.)

HELEN

Hey, what's going on here!? Stop it! You stop it, right now!

GEORGE

Helen!

HELEN

George, what are you doing to my sister!?

GEORGE

Yo' sister? This woman is yo' sister?

HELEN

George, I don't like your tone. (To CAMILLA who feigns a delicate nature.) Are you okay?

CAMILLA

Girl, I'll live. I'm not accustomed to being manhandled.

HELEN

George!

GEORGE

I didn't do...

HELEN

(To GEORGE)

I'm surprise at you manhandling a lady.

GEORGE

She wasn't acting like much of a lady a few minutes...

HELEN

George! (Beat) This is my sister, Camilla, the one who leads a very mysterious life in New York. (To CAMILLA) He didn't hurt you, did he?

GEORGE

I didn't know who she was and what...

HELEN

Camilla, this is my husband George.

(GEORGE shakes her hand. CAMILLA holds tightly as George subtly tries to extract his hand.)

GEORGE

Sorry about the little mix up, ma'am. I had no idea you were going to be coming to town.

HELEN

Neither did I.

GEORGE

It's a real pleasure finally meeting you, ma'am.

(GEORGE finally reclaims his hand.)

CAMILLA

Let's stop all this ma'am stuff, sugar. It makes me sound old enough to be yo' mama. You just call me Camilla, okay?

HELEN

My sister's arrival is a complete surprise.

CAMILLA

You see, Georgie, you don't mind if I calling you Georgie, do you?

GEORGE

No ma'am...I mean ahhh...Camilla.

CAMILLA

Helen, you got yo'self a good, old, fashion, country nigga.

HELEN

Camilla please!

CAMILLA

Sorry, no offense intended. You see Georgie, one of my peculiar talents is appearing unexpected, leaving a trail of calamities, and disappearing into thin air.

HELEN

Yes, Lawd...like a twister touches down in the dead of night practically destroying the whole town and is gone before the break of day. When you're absolutely sure you'll never see her again, here she comes roaring back into town.

CAMILLA

To pick up where I done left off. Raising hell and kicking tail. Well, where's the liquor, gal? I bet yo' man is a dry as the Sahara Desert.

HELEN

Oh, George, he don't drink. Never touches the stuff.

CAMILLA

Come on, one drink ain't gonna hurt you. Jesus even had a sip now and then.

HELEN

Please, Camilla, don't use our Lawd's name in vain.

(CAMILLA grabs the bag from HELEN's hand.)

CAMILLA

They all drank like fish back in them days. I ain't using his name in vain. I'm using it fo' a...ahh...yeah, a parable; a parable that's right, a story that teaches a lesson.

(Noticing the brand of the liquor.)

This ain't what I told you to get.

HELEN

It was cheaper. It's all the same, ain't it?

CAMILLA

It's all the same for those that don't drink!

HELEN

I'm sorry. If you want somethin' else--

CAMILLA

(Angry)

It's too late for I want somethin' else! Damn it! I told you what I wanted, and you deliberately go and--

(Suddenly a more amiable disposition.)

This is just fine, Sis. Sometimes my temper gets the best of me. You got some glasses, somethin' with a little class? None of those stupid Howdie Doody jelly glasses. You got some nice shot glasses.

HELEN

Well, you know George don't...

CAMILLA

I know he don't drink, girl! You done told me once. Just get three glasses, the best you got.

(HELEN disappears into the back room.)

CAMILLA (CONT'D)

Now, where was I...oh yeah...

HELEN (OFF-STAGE)

Will paper cups do?

CAMILLA

Yes! yes! Anything, girl. *(To GEORGE)* That wife of yours-- You must wanna just haul off and smack her right upside her head sometimes. She can wear a man's nerves tissue paper thin. *(Pause)* You listening back there, Helen.

HELEN

I can hear you.

CAMILLA

Good, listen and learn. Now, where was I? Oh yeah--Parables. The Bible teaches in parables. Yeah, Jesus he had a sip now and then. Just to show he hadn't gotten above his flock. He liked to have good cold goblet of wine.

HELEN (OFF-STAGE)

They ain't had ice back in them days.

CAMILLA

But he had the POWER to make it cold. Yes, sir! I don't know where all these Baptists and Sanctified folks get the idea that Jesus was walking around all the time with his nose up in the air, like he was smelling somethin' bad, or looking down on people for having a little fun. Jesus liked to get down with the people, experience how they lived, feel what they felt, understand their dreams. He was a hands-on kind of guy. Wasn't some righteous clown, floating around on no damn cloud.

(HELEN comes out of the back with paper cups.)

HELEN

Camilla! What you talking about ain't fun it's sin.

CAMILLA

(A flash of anger)

What do you know about sin, huh? What in the hell do you know—*(Amiable)* Hey, this is a joyous occasion. The prodigal sister has returned. Give your lovely husband a paper cup and you take one, Helen. I ain't gonna be the only sinner partaking of this lovely libation.

(HELEN follows CAMILLA'S instructions. Once the cups are handed out, CAMILLA pours large portions into each cup.)

CAMILLA (CONT'D)

Now, who is gonna make a toast? It should rightfully be the man present.

GEORGE

Ma'am, I ain't had much experience...

CAMILLA

Now what did I tell you about that ma'am crap, sugar?

GEORGE

I'm sorry ma'am...I mean...Camilla. I don't know much about fancy things like making toast.

CAMILLA

Fancy hell! A toast is commonplace ritual around the world, a celebration of the joys and triumphs of life. You know what the problem with Negroes is? White folks done brainwash us into believing that we are inferior; the finer things of life are beyond our reach. You ain't lived till you got a few toasts under yo' belt. And believe me, I've had my share.

(CAMILLA raises her glass.)