

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

SETTING: Barnes family home. FRED has come home from work. His picket sign is visible hanging on the coat rack. He is sitting at the kitchen table looking at mail.

AT START: VIVIAN is preparing him a plate in the kitchen.

Lights up on Barnes home.

FRED: (Sitting at the kitchen table.) I'm really frustrated right now, Viv. The Mayor is just dead set on ignoring our union. Even though Dr. King is helping us now, he still won't budge. (Picking up the mail.) Things are getting tighter and tighter around here.

VIVIAN: We're doin' okay honey. We still got some of the money left we been savin' and if we watch what we do it's gonna last us for a little while. (Knows FRED won't be pleased with her ironing for other people, she tries to slip it in.) Plus, I've started taking in some ironing, so I can help out.

FRED: Now Viv, I know you mean well and I don't mean no harm, but I don't think you really understand what's going on.

VIVIAN: (Puts his plate on the table and sits down.) How can you say that Fred? I've been keeping up with everything. I'm part of this too.

FRED: Now Viv, these people don't mean to help us in any way at all. After Cole and Walker got crushed to death in that truck, you know what they did? They gave their families a month's wages and \$500. \$500! Now how is that supposed to take care of they families? What are they supposed to do now, huh? All they was trying to do was to get some shelter from the rain cause we ain't got nowhere proper to go to take a break and what happens? They get crushed to death 'cause the equipment is so old and barely maintained. I swear these people, they cut us down on every turn and it just don't make no sense. I been trying to save money so my kids could go to college and not have to break they backs emptying garbage cans like I do every day. I work all these hours so you can stay home, and take care of our home, and take care our children, not for you to be taking in no ironing.

VIVIAN: Fred, it's just temporary since ain't nothing coming in. Now I know how hard you work and that's why I just don't mind helping some. I'm sure this will be over soon.

FRED: (Standing up.) We go through hell everyday just so we can provide for our families, keep a roof over our heads, keep food on the table and let our children know that they can be somebody someday. I'm supposed to show them that, be that example for them—I'm their father. Where are they anyway?

VIVIAN: They'll be coming along shortly, they stopped off at the library. Now Fred, you are a wonderful father and really, I don't mind, I...

FRED: (Interrupting VIVIAN and not to anyone in particular.) They don't want us to have nothing Vivian! I swear if God put any strength inside me—I need it right now because I can't let them take everythang I got. See people can take things, money, clothes, houses, cars, but when they trying to take away the very core of who I am, my manhood, when they try to cut me down so I can't stand anymore or worse, I give up, then they truly done destroyed me and I can't let them do that. I can't let them take my dignity, my mind. (Sits back down.)

VIVIAN: Fred, I understand, I really do. (Goes and tries to comfort him.)

FRED: (Pulls away.) I'm not so sure you understand this thing, Vivian. (A little patronizing.) You ain't no man. Now we tryna have this union and that means we got rights, but that mayor won't listen to a thing we has to say. We go out there into these people's yards and empty them 50-gallon drums, getting all dirty and smelly and then a little white boy thinks he has the right to call a grown man a boy just 'cause he's white. How is that right, Vivian?

VIVIAN: Umph. That's a shame. (Gently leads him back to the table to finish his dinner.)

FRED: (Walking back to table and talking, sits back down.) And now our brothers done gone and lost they lives. We done had enough! We had to walk out, we gotta fight back sometimes, Vivian. (Beat.) Anyway, word has it that when our stewards Beryl and Warren went to see old Loeb to talk about our working conditions, that ole Mayor kept addressing them as boys. They say steward Warren cussed him good and told him, "I am not a boy, I am a man!"

VIVIAN: Good for him!

FRED: You see my manhood is all I got, Viv. Why they trying to not let me be that, huh? We out here marching and all we want is fair pay and safe and decent working conditions, just like the white workers, but we treated like the very garbage we empty every day.

VIVIAN: I'm so sorry, Fred.

FRED: I'm glad Reverend Lawson and some of the other preachers got us more help and support and got Dr. King to come and speak. Boy, did he encourage us. He said we deserve to be treated with dignity and he's teaching us how to do this peaceful like. But Viv, it's hard to feel peace when they got guns pointed at you and they stand there ready to spray mace in your face. (Beat.) But that Dr. King is something special and he's coming back here to lead a march right here in Memphis. If that don't make City Hall take notice, I don't know what will.

VIVIAN: Oh, Fred, that's a blessing from God himself. Dr. King is helping so many people, he done been to the White House—he's a Godly man and he's educated and smart and understands these laws for himself. Fred, you watch; this is going to be over soon, you'll see.

GINA and DEXTER come in the door, they are talking non-stop.

VIVIAN: (Gets up from her seat, moves stage center to greet children, DEXTER sits on couch and starts reading his book and GINA moves toward kitchen area.) Well, welcome home. What are y'all jibber-jabbing about?

GINA: Well, you know, everybody is all excited about Dr. King coming back to lead a march in Memphis. (Hugs both parents and then sits at the table. VIVIAN brings her something to drink.)

VIVIAN: Well yes, that is very exciting. Dr. King is like, like, well, he gives people hope. He's out there on the front lines fighting for us. (Walks toward the living room and notices DEXTER'S blank expression.) What you think about that, Dexter?

DEXTER: (Sitting on the couch with a book in his hand.) Well I'm not excited about it like everyone else. People say his name and people act like he's a god or something. I don't get it.

VIVIAN: (Stands behind him a little, upstage, right.) Dexter, what are you talking about? Dr. King has helped lots of people get certain rights, President Johnson signed that Civil Rights Act and there he was, standin' right there.

DEXTER: (Addressing the whole family.) I just believe we need to be self-sufficient. We need to stop depending on the white man to give us our rights and our fair share. We need to create our own, take care of our own, and do what we have to do to make that happen.

FRED: (From the kitchen table, amused.) So what you sayin' Mr. Black Pride?

DEXTER: You're making a joke Dad, but we do need more pride, to be honest. What's marching gonna do? We can't be groveling asking these white folks, (Sarcastically in a mocking voice.) 'please Mr. White Man, can I eat at your restaurant? Or please Mr. White Man, can I shop at your store? I'll be sure not to dirty up none of yo' merchandise suh.' (Pause.) I say we depend on one another. They want to keep us out, I say we don't work for them and we don't support their businesses or anything they own.

IDA MAE walks in just as he is finishing his last sentence and goes to her rocking chair.

IDA MAE: (As she enters the scene and sits down in the rocking chair.) That's going to be kind of hard, since they own pretty much everythang and they runnin' the country.

VIVIAN: Dexter, your father is a proud man and that's why he's out there marching on that picket line, this is his way of demanding that he is treated fairly.

DEXTER: Well, don't hold your breath because it's not gonna happen. Them men out there striking are the ones not getting paid, not most of them white workers, so it's probably all right with them. They ain't going to treat us fair, they will never treat us as equals. Plus, they got us over there fighting a war and our colored brothers are dying every day for a country that won't even acknowledge them as full human beings. How is Dr. King going to change that?

GINA: (Getting up from kitchen table and sits on the couch with DEXTER.) Now, I finally agree with you on something. We ain't never going to get equal treatment so why bother with all this marching thinking we going to have this sudden kum bah yah moment and poof, just like magic, we are now all equal. That's just not realistic.

FRED: (Gets up and starts talking while crossing to his chair.) Listen, this is a fight that's been going on long before either one of you came into this world and it's going to continue until things change. Y'all think you have it hard? Both of our great grandparents were slaves, our grandparents was born into it and became share croppers. We enjoy things now they could only dream of. People have been giving their lives standing up for freedom since time began. Now I've seen lots of freedom fighters in my day and that Dr. King... now he is the real deal.

IDA MAE: And I've lived long enough to see the difference. Y'all couldn't have survived in my day. The way we made it was because we believed in God, and we had our faith. Now that's what y'all need. You need to read the Bible more. Fred, you need to make your children read the Bible. When I was a child, my parents made me read the Bible—they couldn't read so I had to read it to them, and I had to go to church. It was not my choice whether I knew Jesus or not.

GINA: Grandma Ida, I love you like the dickens, I really do and there's nothing wrong with going to church, but all this religion and the Bible and the church stuff ain't working for us. We are not better off because we go to church and learn about how much God loves us and how His son walked the earth loving and healing and what they do to him? They crucified him, Grandma! How is that right? (Beat.) I believe Christianity is the white man's religion anyway. That's just another trick of our oppressors. You don't see them inviting us to their churches.

VIVIAN: Gina, now you need to watch your mouth. You don't seem to know what you're sayin' right now.

IDA MAE: Vivian, your children are teenagers. They supposed to think a little foolish right now.

GINA: Grandma... we're not foolish... (Looks at brother.) well, I'm not. There's just other ways of looking at things, other points of view, you know?

IDA MAE: Hmmph, ain't but one way. God's way and he loves babies and fools. Give your grandmother a kiss, I'm turning in. Us old folks need a little extra beauty sleep.

GINA: Good night, Grandma.

DEXTER: Night Grandma. IDA MAE exits.

VIVIAN: (Moves to sit in IDA MAE'S chair.) You two sure have some interesting ideas. I don't understand where all of this is coming from and Dexter, you seem really agitated lately.

DEXTER: Like she said, there are different points of view and I'm interested in the one that works, because all this non-violent, peaceful, holding hands and marching in the street stuff is backwards. They don't mind being violent with us. I don't see why we can't take our fate into our own hands.

VIVIAN: You ain't making sense to me Dexter. (Gets up and goes to finish tidying up the kitchen.)

FRED: So tell me my son and daughter, what is your suggestion for taking our fate—that is what you said right?—our fate into our own hands?

GINA: (Stands up and pumps her fist in the air as she says last four words.) Well, in the words of Brother Malcolm... by any means necessary.

Blackout.