

THE THREE GRACES

An African-American Adaptation of Chekhov's "The Three Sisters"

by

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THE THREE GRACES

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THE THREE GRACES

*Dedicated to the Three Graces in Woman of Color:
Brilliance, Joy, and Flowering.*

THE THREE GRACES

CHARACTERS: (5 Women, 6 Men)

EMMA GRACE.....28, eldest sister.
DELOREECE GRACE.....21, youngest sister.
IOLA GRACE.....25, middle sister.
NATHAN.....30, First Lieutenant.
DR. PARKER.....70s, Retired physician.
LUTHER.....30, Master Sergeant.
ZAHRITA.....80, Jamaican servant.
AARON.....33, the brother.
VERNON MAXTON.....42, the Colonel.
CECIL.....40, Iola's husband.
AYESHA.....30, Aaron's fiancée/later wife.

PLACE:

The entire action of the play takes place in and outside the family home near an all-black military base in Charleston, South Carolina. The back of the home has a covered porch extending along the whole side. A huge willow tree shades the house from the direct rays of the sun.

TIME:

During the Second World War.

THE THREE GRACES

The Three Graces had its world premiere produced by Our Place Theater Project and Roxbury Center for Arts in Boston, Massachusetts on March 3, 2006, with the following cast:

Emma Grace.....Talaya Freeman
Deloreece Grace.....Shauday Johnson-Jones
Iola Grace.....Rydia Q. Vieleh
Nathan.....Montez Cardwell
Dr. Parker.....Dennis Roach
Luther.....Alphonzo Moultrie
Zahrita.....Dee Crawford
Aaron.....Alan White
Vernon Maxton.....Gregory A. Francis
Cecil.....Joseph Eveillard
Ayesha.....Nicole Parker

Understudies: Danny Matta and Christopher Higgins

This production was directed by Jacqui Parker, costumes by Valerie Lee and Stephanie Marson-Lee, lighting by Jonathan Bonner, sound by Frank A. Shefton, production stage manager: Valencia Huges-Imani, assistant stage managers: Dziko Crews and Jordan Sawyers.

An early version of the play had a staged reading at Karamu House in Cleveland, Ohio, as one of the winners of the Annual R. Joyce Whitley Festival of New Plays (Arenafest) contest on May 12, 2000. Another staged reading took place at Cuyahoga Community College's Eastern Campus Theater on March 31, 2003.

THE THREE GRACES

THE THREE GRACES

ACT 1
SCENE 1

May, 1942. Afternoon. *Upstage inside the house, the sideboard in the dining room is filled with buffet dishes. The three sisters, EMMA, DELOREECE (pronounced "Delores") and IOLA, have chosen the porch, and the breeze offered by the shade of the willow tree as a welcome relief from the suffocating heat indoors. A mirror is mounted on the porch wall. Emma, age 28, a schoolteacher, paces back and forth reading student assignments. Iola, age 25, off to one side sits on the bench circling the willow, absorbed in her book. Deloreece, age 21, in a white dress, lounges on the swing with a thoughtful expression.*

EMMA. Oh Lord. I tellya, I didn't think we'd survive Daddy's death. How time passes! Know that, Deloreece?

DELOREECE. Why you ask a dumb question like that? He died on my birthday.

EMMA. Sure did. And hot, too... Just like now. *(Fans herself.)*

The heat down here... And now a whole year has past and here we are.

DELOREECE. We're here alright, and that's a fact.

EMMA. Why Deloreece Grace, you're wearing that same white dress.

DELOREECE. *(Shrugs.)* So what? *(Hear CLOCK CHIME four times.)*

EMMA. It was this very hour. Precisely four o'clock when Daddy drew his last breath. Remember how they carried the coffin out to the cemetery? *(Sighs.)* If it weren't for the crackers here, he would've had a proper military funeral.

DELOREECE. Emma Grace, that was a whole year ago. *(DOCTOR PARKER, and LUTHER come out of the house and on to the porch. PARKER, 70's, is a retired physician with a Southern drawl. LUTHER, age 30, is handsome, but obnoxious and ignorant, son of a tenant farmer.)*

EMMA. I got to thinking about the day Daddy brought us here from

THE THREE GRACES

D.C. We thought it was hot there, but nothing like here!

DELOREECE. And when the cherry blossoms are in full bloom... Oh Lord, how I'd love to see them again...

EMMA. It was no paradise there either... but it was a sight better than here... Twelve miserable, long-suffering years he was transferred to this to this segregated army base where white people all around don't wanted us. (*NATHAN, age 30, comes out of house. He is well-built, but homely, well-bred Northerner with fine manners.*)

DELOREECE. You said it, Girl.

EMMA. Know that? I woke up this morning, and realized it's time to go home... Away from the white folks here. (*Iola, lost in a reverie over her book begins humming a song like "Stormy Weather."*)

EMMA. Iola! Stop it! Your humming drives me crazy. I have enough headaches teaching school, planning lessons, and grading papers every night. Five years at that high school, and every blessed day I feel my youth slipping away. (*Parker and Luther, laughing, open screen door, go into the house's dining room, and join Nathan. Nathan and Luther make themselves a drink at the bar. Parker grabs a soft drink.*)

DELOREECE. Awful expensive living there.

EMMA. I don't care. Long as we get away from here. (*From dining room, hear Nathan and Parker laughing.*)

DELOREECE. Once Aaron gets his doctorate, what's he gonna do? Teach? Colored teachers don't get paid nothin' here.

EMMA. You can say that again. I'm a living witness to that.

DELOREECE. What about Iola? If you, me, and Aaron move back, that poor girl will be left here with no family. It'll just be Cecil, a town of strangers and white folk.

EMMA. I know. (*Sighs.*) She could come visit us. I would get her out of this lousy excuse of a town. (*Iola ignores their conversation, softly continues to sing her song.*)

DELOREECE. In these times it's family that means everything.

EMMA. Amen! (*Deloreece looks out over the yard, and a smile comes on her face.*)

DELOREECE. It's beautiful out today. Not a cloud in the sky, sun shining, and I feel good.

THE THREE GRACES

EMMA. You got that right.

DELOREECE. I was thinking this morning... about my birthday... and just like that, I was happy. Remember how Momma carried on about birthdays?

EMMA. Every birthday was special for her. I have such wonderful memories of Momma.

DELOREECE. Same with me.

EMMA. (*Stares at Deleroreece.*) You know, you put me in mind of her. Look at you! You're just as pretty as you wanna be. Girl, whose head you tryin' to turn? And Iola... (*Turning her attention to Iola.*) Look at her! She looks more like her Momma than you do.

DELOREECE. And, what about Aaron?

EMMA. Now, Aaron... Well, Aaron is good looking. Except for that pot belly of his.

DELOREECE. And what about you, Miz Emma Grace?

EMMA. Me?... Oh Lord, it's pitiful. I've grown old and thin with what I have to go through. I mean, trying to teach these poor colored children. Teach these children the truth.

DELOREECE. You'd think the curriculum would do that.

EMMA. Those textbooks they gave us sure won't teach the children their heritage.

DELOREECE. White folks make sure we only teach their side. But why should you worry? There's nothing to be done about it.

EMMA. I won't worry about it any longer... At least today. For just one day I'll forget about it all.

DELOREECE. Sunday is a day of rest.

EMMA. And no headache. Fact is, I feel good.

DELOREECE. And God is everywhere. You're thirty-years-old, and got good times to come.

EMMA. Maybe I would have been happier if I married. Maybe I should be a wife and mother. (*Looking at Iola.*) I would have loved my husband. (*Luther and Nathan come out of house and sit down on the porch. Nathan has his harmonica. Luther removes a straight razor from his pocket.*)

NATHAN. Luther. Did you ever once ask yourself what we're being

THE THREE GRACES

trained for?

LUTHER. (*Fiddles with razor while he talks.*) I already know. Common sense 'ud tellya it ain't to do no fightin'. Colored's fightin' Japs and Germans?

NATHAN. I suppose. That's too much like right. I can't think about it. (*Luther sits down with an apple, and starts to peel it. Nathan blows some jazz softly. Luther puts the razor and apple down, and begins to snap his fingers and dances a few steps.*)

LUTHER. Oh, yeah! Blow that sweet sound. (*After a few bars, Nathan stops playing, and wipes his mouth. Luther sits back down, and resumes peeling the apple.*)

NATHAN. Emma, I've heard the new commanding officer is coming to pay a visit today.

EMMA. Vernon Maxton. He sent a note this morning. I never know what to expect.

DELOREECE. Is he old?

NATHAN. (*Scrunches his face.*) Middle aged, maybe. Forty, forty-five. (*Nathan plays blues on the harmonica.*)

DELOREECE. Wait a minute, Nathan. Play all you want to later. Right now, we want to hear about the Colonel. (*Nathan stops playing.*)

NATHAN. Well, what can I say?

DELOREECE. What can you say? Tell us all about him. What he looks like. Is he handsome?

NATHAN. Not to me, he isn't.

DELOREECE. Nathan, come on, you know what I mean. Is he interesting?

NATHAN. Not especially. (*Puts the harmonica in his pocket.*) He's a whiner. Goes on about his wife... it's his second one. How she annoys him, and he should have left her, but he still hangs in there. Whines to everybody he meets. How he's her savior, and how she needs him so badly. (*Parker comes out of the house, munching on a finger food and joins them.*)

LUTHER. I kin lift fifty pounds with just one arm, and almost 200 pounds with both arms. Hah! What you think 'bout that?

PARKER. So? What you trying to say, Home Boy?

THE THREE GRACES

LUTHER. (*Grinning.*) What I'm saying is it shows two men are not twice as strong as one man, but three times as strong as one. Maybe even more 'n' 'at! (*Parker finishes his food, removes his newspaper from his pocket, and reads it. He does not look up at Luther.*)

PARKER. Luther, Boy, ya know somethin'? For hair loss, I recommend you take an ounce of Naphthalene and drink a half bottle of whiskey, every day.

LUTHER. (*Looks confused, and puts a hand on his thinning hair.*) That'll keep me from going bald, Doc?

PARKER. Not particularly, but if it don't, it won't matter any, will it?

DELOREECE. Doc Parker?

PARKER. What is it? What m' Baby Girl want?

DELOREECE. I feel so good today, an' I don't know why. Like I'm floating in the clouds with white doves all around. What's going on, Doc? (*Parker holds Deloreece's hand. Luther finishes his apple, and cleans the razor before putting it back into his pocket.*)

PARKER. Sweet Baby Girl! (*Deloreece removes her hand.*)

DELOREECE. The Lord spoke to me while I was asleep and told me what I had to do if I was ever going to be happy. What colored people got to do. Know what that is?

PARKER. Find a place whuh ain't no white folks?

DELOREECE. Everybody's gotta work and plan for a quality life with dignity. And everybody's gotta pitch in... Doc, we all gotta work together to make it happen.

PARKER. So what you gonna do, Baby Girl? How you gonna make this dream of yours happen?

DELOREECE. I've decided to take a job... even if it's below my qualifications. Doc, you got to promise me if I don't do this you'll stop being my friend.

PARKER. "If you don't do it, I'll stop bein' ya friend."

EMMA. Daddy worked hard all his life. Got up with the chickens. But, Deloreece Grace here wakes up at five, and then she lays around and dreams about all sorts a things until eight or nine o'clock. (*Laughs.*) And the child look so serious.

DELOREECE. Emma, you're just so used to me being your little sister

THE THREE GRACES

it seems strange when you see I can be serious. After all, I am 21 today.

NATHAN. You ever thought about becomin' a WAAC?

DELOREECE. (*Sneers with distaste.*) Ughhh! What would I do in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps? Our men have it hard enough in the men's Army, or haven't you noticed?

NATHAN. I suppose so, but nothing compares to the pressure I get from my Daddy. He followed his Grandpa and worked like a dog laying bricks. Got real successful. Now, he owns one of the only Black construction companies up North... And expects me to run it when he retires. (*Looks away and sighs.*) My only real interest is music.

PARKER. When I wuz comin' up I woiked like a dog at whatever came my way. Had to. An' that wuz fo' I could even think about gittin' into Howard, and then med school. Yessir! That is all behin' me... Woik? Nuh uh!

NATHAN. But, you don't count anymore, Doc.

LUTHER. Yeah, in a couple yea's you'll up an' have a heart attack. Or git me riled, an' cause me to slice yo' ornery hide. (*Gestures with his straight razor, laughing. Parker laughs, too.*)

PARKER. No Sir! Since I retired I ain't done nuthin'. Ain't read a book! Ain't throwed a stick at a snake! No suh! Just read the newspaper. (*Gestures with his newspaper.*) And I can tellya, in all those years 'tween then and now, ain't nothin' changed for the Negrah. Same ol', same ol'.

NATHAN. What would you know about prejudice in the military?

PARKER. You didn't know ah wuz in the First Worl' War, didja? Well I was. My regiment ended up fighting under the French command, in the Argonne. Through the efforts of W.E.B. DuBois.

EMMA. You were at the Argonne? Wasn't that the last battle of the war? A whole generation of young men were slaughtered.

PARKER. You right. The Americans did in two months what took the allies four years.

EMMA. Then, aren't you some sort of hero?

PARKER. Hero? Hah. When I got out, made up for lost time. That's when I met yo' Momma. But she chose yo' daddy. He jess graduated from West Point. An' that's the story of my life. (*Suddenly remembering*

THE THREE GRACES

something.) Oh, I just remembered. I forgot something. Ah'll be right back. (*Exits, scratching his beard.*)

DELOREECE. He's up to something.

NATHAN. Isn't it obvious the old coot got you a birthday present?

DELOREECE. I wish he wouldn't...

EMMA. He's always doing something for you, Deloreece, like it or not.

IOLA. (*Rises and dreamily reads aloud.*)

“I love how we both dug Sunday mornings:
the organ music that swelled
over the waves of air
with its deep
ringing sounds of praise
that filtered in every fiber of the heart;
ringing praises that promised,
perhaps, much too much.”

EMMA. Depressed again, aren't you, Iola? (*Iola again starts singing a song like “Stormy Weather” as she puts on her hat.*)

DELOREECE. Now, where are you off to, Girl?

IOLA. Home.

DELOREECE. It's just like you, Iola Grace...

NATHAN. Leaving a birthday party before we cut the cake?

IOLA. What's the big deal? I'll have a piece when I return tonight.

Goodbye. (*Moves to Deloreece and kisses her.*) Though I've said it before: Happy Birthday, Girl!

DELOREECE. It wasn't like this when Mother was alive...

IOLA. It's so depressing. Remember when there used to be thirty or forty officers hanging around?

DELOREECE. Lord! But today...

IOLA. ... Only these half-men. It's dull as a dodo round here. (*Looks shocked at what she's just suggested.*) You all will just have to forgive me. I... I... (*Bursts into tears.*)

DELOREECE. You're getting strange, Girl.

EMMA. Well, I understand, Iola. (*Hugs Iola, looking sad, too, patting to comfort her.*) I understand, Iola...

LUTHER. Dig this, Man! When two women starts goin', it's just like

THE THREE GRACES

two hens. (*Imitates a chicken clucking.*) Chick, chick, chick!

IOLA. Luther, you awful man, just what's that s'posed to mean?

LUTHER. Ohhh, well nothin'... in particular. (Hear *PHONE RING.*)

EMMA. (*Calling into house.*) Zahrita, would you please answer the phone? (*ZAHRITA enters. She is 80, nearly deaf, chews tobacco throughout the play, and speaks with a Jamaican accent. She has a small container in her pocket to spit the tobacco juice into discreetly. She carries in a large bouquet.*)

ZAHRITA. (*To Deloreece.*) From Pastor Hairston. Pretty flowers for a pretty lady.

DELOREECE. How lovely! I'll have to thank Pastor Hairston. (*She accepts the bouquet.*)

EMMA. Who was that, Zahrita?

ZAHRITA. What did you say?

DELOREECE. (*Louder.*) I said, I'll have to tell the Pastor "thank you."

EMMA. I said, "WHO WAS THAT ON THE PHONE, ZAHRITA?"

ZAHRITA. I dunno. Wuz that contraption making noise agin?

EMMA. Offer the men a sandwich, Zahrita.

ZAHRITA. What?

EMMA. (*Loudly.*) I said, "PLEASE OFFER OUR GUESTS A SANDWICH."

ZAHRITA. What? (*Iola, frustrated, grabs Zahrita's arm and leads her off, then returns.*)

IOLA. I don't care if he does have the largest colored church in town, I still don't like that Pastor Hairston. Not at all.

DELOREECE. He wasn't invited.

IOLA. I'm glad to hear that. That man's a dog. (*Parker enters, carrying a small gift wrapped box, and hands it to Deloreece.*)

DELOREECE. Doc! You shouldn't have!

PARKER. Go on! Open it!

IOLA. What is it? (*Deloreece opens box and takes out a glittering brooch.*)

EMMA. Oh. For pity's sake! (*Looks jealous and disgusted, and rushes into the house.*)

THE THREE GRACES

DELOREECE. (*Embarrassed.*) What're you doing, here, Doc?

LUTHER. (*Laughs.*) I told you didn't I?

IOLA. Doctor Parker, shouldn't you spend your money to pay your room and board instead?

PARKER. Chile, alla y'all are the dearest things in mah life... All I got now is the love I have for you young ladies. You mah family.

IOLA. But still...

PARKER. Lord knows, I'da drank m'self to death long ago if it wasn't for you three... The Three Graces. That's what your Daddy used to call you.

DELOREECE. But you don't owe us. Just for us sharing our home here.

PARKER. (*To Deloreece.*) Chile, I brought you into this world. I held you in my arms.

DELOREECE. But it's such an extravagant present.

PARKER. You know what I feel about ya'.

(*Parker's feelings are hurt. He sit down in a corner alone.*)

IOLA. I'm cutting out.

ZAHRITA. (*Entering.*) A handsome officer just come. He in deh washroom. And Deloreece, don't forget to be polite.

NATHAN. Must be the Commander.

ZAHRITA. Another guest. Praise the Lord we got plenty of food.

Thankee, Jesus. (*Zahrита exits as VERNON MAXTON, age 42, enters porch. Luther and Nathan snap to attention.*)

VERNON. At ease, Men.

NATHAN. Colonel Maxton.

VERNON. (*Doesn't wait to be introduced as he approaches Deloreece and Iola directly.*) Ladies, allow me to introduce myself. Ah'm Colonel Maxton. Vernon Maxton. You don't know how very glad I am to be here at last.

DELOREECE. I'm very glad you've come, Colonel.

VERNON. Mah how you have grown.

DELOREECE. Have we met before?

VERNON. Oh, yes, Miss. Ah'm so sorry to hear 'bout your Daddy's death. Ah used to envy his beautiful wife and daughters. And now...

THE THREE GRACES

what beautiful women y'all are.

NATHAN. Colonel Maxton was transferred from D.C.

DELOREECE. From Washington? Ah ... please, sit down.

VERNON. Yes'm. Ah used ta report ta your Father... bless his soul... when we were at the Pentagon. (*Looks at Iola.*) Your face. I especially remember you.

IOLA. Well, I don't remember you.

DELOREECE. (*Shouts toward the door.*) Emma! Come out here! You want to meet somebody. (*Emma comes out onto porch.*) The Colonel here says he knew our Daddy. Served under him in D.C. Isn't that somethin'?

VERNON. You must be Emma Grace, the oldest. You, you're Iola Grace. And you're... Deloreece Grace, our baby.

EMMA. So you knew Father?

VERNON. I used to come to y'all's townhouse in D.C. I got fond memories of those days.

EMMA. I thought I remembered everybody... For the life of me, I can't remember you.

VERNON. Name is Maxton. Vernon Maxton. Well, it was a long time ago.

DELOREECE. Well, Colonel Maxton, we sure didn't expect to see anybody from the Capitol here. What a surprise!

VERNON. Please, call me Vernon.

EMMA. Well... Vernon. Can we get you something to drink? A sandwich?

VERNON. No, thank you.

DELOREECE. We plan to move back to D.C. by fall.

(*Deloreece and Emma laugh at the thought.*)

IOLA. An old family acquaintance? H'm! You know, I think I remember you now... (*Suddenly remembering.*) You were the "Love-Sick Major," weren't you?

VERNON. Yes, I...

IOLA. You were a Lieutenant, but they called you the "Love-Sick Major!"

VERNON. (*Laughing.*) That was me. The "Love-Sick Major."

THE THREE GRACES

IOLA. Your hair was jet black back then. You're older.

VERNON. S'pose I am. I wuz always fallin' in love... (*Takes off his hat to reveal a baldhead.*) ...Back when I was a cock-struttin' youngblood.

EMMA. I wouldn't call you old.

VERNON. I'm forty-two... Uh, how long's it been since y'all left Washington?

DELOREECE. Eleven years. (*Iola bursts into tears.*) What are you crying for, Iola, you foolish girl?

IOLA. I miss our home... (*To Vernon.*) Where did you live in D.C., Vernon?

VERNON. Down by Choich Street. The "ol'" neighborhood.

EMMA. That's where we lived. Aunt Mabel is the only member of the family who still lives D.C.

VERNON. Lord, how I loved to walk along the Potomac. Going to the Smithsonian. I liked walkin' at night by myself. (*Iola stops weeping. He looks out at the far horizon.*) The ocean you got here is beautiful.

EMMA. But it's too damn hot. Worse than D.C., if you can believe that. And the mosquitoes are nasty.

VERNON. It's like a forest with all the trees and the woods. Ma'am, it's must be special living here... 'Cept for the white folks.

IOLA. They hate us... Maybe worse than they hate Germans and Japanese.

VERNON. When I marched the troops through town they closed their shades until we passed. I couldn't believe it. What're they 'fraid of?

IOLA. War's s'posed to bring folks together.

VERNON. Fightin' the same enemy.

EMMA. Some things will never change.

VERNON. They will! (*Pause.*) They must.

DELOREECE. In my lifetime?

VERNON. In your lifetime, young lady... Sure.

IOLA. And you all thought I was the dreamer.

DELOREECE. That's all we can do in this crazy town.

VERNON. Yeah... Speakin' about this town. How come the railroad station's almost three miles from town? Nobody I asked seems to know.

LUTHER. Oh hail, I know why. (*All look at Luther.*) 'Cause if it were

THE THREE GRACES

close to town, it wouldn't be far. And if it were far off, it wouldn't be close. *(All stare silently.)*

VERNON. Who the hail is that?

NATHAN. Uh... Luther. He thinks he's some sort of comedian, sir.

VERNON. That's the kind of fool who'd show up at a gunfight with a straight razor.

EMMA. *(To Vernon.)* Now I remember who you are. I know you.

VERNON. You remember?

EMMA. *(Stands near Vernon and scrutinizes him.)* Oh, yeah...

DELOREECE. Well, what do you remember, Emma Grace?

VERNON. I knew you'd remember Vernon Maxton.

EMMA. *(To Deloreece.)* He's the one who used to come around to visit us like he was visiting the whole family... *(Looks mildly scornful at Vernon.)*... When he was really trying to get into Momma's panties.

IOLA. To think you almost forgot that, Emma Grace.

VERNON. *(Smiles wide.)* So you do remember me. Girl, you're as smart as your Momma was. *(All burst into good-natured laughter.)* But Iola, you the one that looks mos' like her.

IOLA. Even so, do you know I'm beginning to forget that sweet face of hers. I suppose we all goin' be forgotten someday. Colored folk and white.

VERNON. We goin' be forgotten alright.

NATHAN. That might be right. But someday there'll be equal rights for colored folk. We'll stand together as brothers.

LUTHER. Just listen at 'em! That rich Yankee Boy would go wit' out dinner if y'all let him keep talkin' that philosophy stuff.

NATHAN. Luther, just leave me alone! Alright?... You're a... a... simple fool.

LUTHER. *(Imitating a chicken.)* Chiicckk, chick-chick, chick!

NATHAN. *(To Luther.)* You an idiot man.

LUTHER. Chick-ck, chick chick! *(Nathan snubs Luther, and turns toward Vernon.)*

NATHAN. And with all the bigotry in this world today... Do you think that despite everything mankind might be improving?

VERNON. Sure, I think that.

THE THREE GRACES

NATHAN. Well, I don't. There's a lot of small people in this world.

PARKER. (*Rises.*) Yes! Take me for instance... I'm five-foot-five.

(*Nathan, disgusted, puts his harmonica in his pocket and starts exiting into house.*) Yes, sir! One day the white man goin' have to accept the fact that colored folk are his equal. Well, Amen to that! (*Hear offstage HAMMERING.*)

IOLA. Our brother, Aaron, in the woodshop.

DELOREECE. He's the one with all the brains and the talent in this family. He's finishing his Ph.D.

IOLA. That's what Daddy wanted.

DELOREECE. Aaron's gonna teach up North.

VERNON. That right?

EMMA. We been kidding him all day. He thinks he's in love.

DELOREECE. Some tramp from the other side of town. She'll be around later.

EMMA. That floozy has no class. None whatsoever.

IOLA. Polka dots, ruffles, and cheap cologne. You said it! No class! Oh, our Aaron's in love with a red hot cinder!

DELOREECE. No way, Girl. He just loves her jellyroll.

IOLA. He's only playing. I just know it. Yesterday I heard she planned to marry Pastor Hairston. (*Moves to the door and hollers.*) Aaron, come on out here! Just for a minute, please! (*AARON, age 33, comes out onto porch. He is handsome, but paunchy.*)

EMMA. Vernon Maxton, this is my brother, Aaron.

VERNON. (*Extends his hand in greeting.*) At your service. Pleased to meetcha! (*Weakly shakes hands, then, wipes his lips with a hanky.*)

AARON. Pleased to meet you... Word is you're the new base commander.

VERNON. That's correct.

EMMA. Aaron, you're not going to believe this, but the Colonel here served with Daddy at the Pentagon.

AARON. Small world! Now, my little sisters won't give you any rest.

VERNON. Reckon I awready managed to bore them.

DELOREECE. (*To Vernon.*) Look what a nice picture frame Aaron made for my birthday. Aaron's a mighty fine carpenter, don't you agree?

THE THREE GRACES

VERNON. (*Examines the frame, embarrassed at being put on the spot.*)
Yes... it's, uh... very well-made, alright.

DELOREECE. And he made that flower box over there.

EMMA. Imagine... going for his doctorate, works with wood. And he cooks, too! (*Aaron waves a hand in disgust and walks away.*)

DELOREECE. Don't go away, Baby Brother. He's got into this habit of walking away from us. (*Hollers after him.*) Aaron... Come back! (*Iola and Deloreece take Aaron by the arms and laughingly leads him back.*)

IOLA. Come on, come on!

AARON. Leave me alone, will ya?

IOLA. Don't be so sensitive! Heck, the Colonel used to be called the "Love-Sick-Major." Didn't bother him none.

VERNON. Not a bit.

IOLA. Why don't we call you the "Love Sick Carpenter"? Ha-ha, ha-ha!

DELOREECE. Or the "Love-Sick-Professor?"

IOLA/DELOREECE/EMMA. (*Chanting.*) Aaron's in love. Our Brother's in love. Our Baby Brother's in lo-ve! Sitting in a tree
KISSING! (*Iola, Deloreece and Emma clap their hands. Parker moves, and puts a hand on Aaron's shoulder.*)

PARKER. Ain't nothing wrong with being in love, Son. "Be a man of action, and give some satisfaction." (*Roars with laughter, and sits down and takes his newspaper out of his pocket and proceeds to read.*)

AARON. Very funny, very funny. Listen, I'm in no mood today. I couldn't sleep a wink, so I worked on a translation of Swahili poetry.

VERNON. You speak that language?

AARON. Not as well as I can read it. Our Daddy, rest his soul, smothered us with education.

EMMA. Nothing wrong with that.

AARON. Since his death, I've just gotten rounder and rounder. Like my body had a great pressure taken off it.

VERNON. No such thing as knowing too much.

AARON. Thanks to our Daddy, my sisters and I know German, French, and Ibo. Deloreece speaks Spanish, too. We got a real education. And

THE THREE GRACES

for what?

IOLA. What good is it down here? Knowin' too much can getcha into trouble. Even get somebody killed. (*Nathan enters.*)

VERNON. (*Laughing.*) Well, now! No town could be so backward to have no place fo' sma't, cultured folk like you all are.

IOLA. Not for smart colored folk. Wait'll you've lived here awhile. Then tell us that.

VERNON. There's forward thinkin' whites in the South. Maybe, not the majority, but they will be, and then there'll be a different South.

AARON. And you don't think you're some kinda dreamer?

VERNON. If we gonna live togetha', we goin' ta need educated folk to make it happen. We just have to hang in there. (*Laughs.*) No. Ain't no such thing as knowin' too much.

IOLA. (*Takes off her hat while staring at Vernon.*) Think I'll just stay for lunch.

DELOREECE. (*Sighs.*) Too bad all that couldn't be a written fact, Colonel. (*Aaron quietly exits.*)

NATHAN. You're saying the South is going to change, and colored will have equal rights with white folks?

VERNON. Yeah. Down here, and up North, too.

NATHAN. You sure are an optimist.

VERNON. Son, it's the only way I can get through the day. Equal rights for all. (*Stands and looks around.*) Beautiful place y'all got. All these big trees. Plum and peach. And the rose trellis yonder. I can see it takes lotsa work. Lotsa work.

PARKER. (*Looks up from his newspaper.*) Most colored don't get paid no better than before the Civil War.

VERNON. (*Walks about.*) Alright here's somethin' to think about. Suppose we could sta't life all over again, knowin' what's worthwhile and what's not.

NATHAN. I think every damn one of us would try like hell to live someplace else.

VERNON. One thing I'd make sure of, I'd have lotsa sun, and flowers... and the ocean, too.

THE THREE GRACES

NATHAN. Flowers, light and water! If a colored man could make that happen, he ought to make sure he has everything else, too.

VERNON. Sure, you're right. Yeah, you're right. Shoot... If I had the chance to live an ideal life, I sure as hell wouldn't get married. No, sirree! (*CECIL, age 40, wears a suit and tie, and joins the Group on the porch. He sports a bushy mustache. He approaches Deloreece with a package.*)

CECIL. Deloreece Grace, allow me to wish you a happy birthday and many, many more. I've brought you a present, my Dear Sister. (*Hands Deloreece the present.*) It's the history of the high school Latin Club. I wrote it. (*Deloreece unwraps it and rolls her eyes at the book.*)

DELOREECE. (*To Vernon.*) This is Iola's husband... Cecil. He teaches history and Latin at the High School where Emma teaches. (*Cecil bows ceremoniously to Vernon, then turns to Deloreece.*)

CECIL. Feci quod potui, faciant meliora potente. (*Turns to Iola and kisses her delicately on the cheek.*) Hello, my Dear. (*Iola avoids looking at him, and sighs.*)

DELOREECE. Cecil, you gave me one of these book for Christmas.

CECIL. (*Laughs.*) Why, of course I did. Ipso facto. (*Dramatically gestures toward Vernon.*) And who might you be, Sir?

VERNON. Vernon Maxton.

CECIL. Would you like a copy, Brother Vernon? You could read it someday when you're bored.

VERNON. (*Looks skeptical and moves to leave.*) Uh... That's alright. I'm really happy to have met all of you, but I must take my leave.

EMMA. Must you? Please don't. Not yet!

DELOREECE. First have tea with us to celebrate my birthday. Please stay.

EMMA. Yes, please, Colonel!

VERNON. Forgive me, Deloreece. Permit me to extend my best wishes for a Happy Birthday! I plan to return soon... and visit "The Three Graces." (*Chuckles as he exits. Iola looks very disappointed.*)

CECIL. This is a day of rest, so let's rest, as tomorrow it's back to work. My it is warm here. (*Fanning himself.*) Very warm. Maybe you can bring some fans in.

THE THREE GRACES

EMMA. And Brother Cecil, are you gonna help us bring them in?
(*Cecil ignores Emma's question, and takes Iola by the waist, laughing.*)

CECIL. (*To Iola.*) Oh, I'm feelin' pleased with life. Remember, we've got to be at the Martin's get-together in another hour.

IOLA. I can't go. (*She pulls away.*)

CECIL. You can't? Why not? Are you ill? Is something wrong? Tell me.

IOLA. I'll tell you later. (*Steps away, takes her compact out and primps in the mirror. She turns back to Cecil, looking irritated.*) Alright. I'll go. Only leave me alone, now. (*Iola moves farther away.*)

CECIL. Then, it's settled. Good... What a man! Mr. Martin... our Principal... is still socially active in spite of his poor health. Yes, I got to say it, he's an alright guy... You know, at yesterday's committee meeting, Pastor Hairston was elected chair. It feels like we are getting tighter with our professional and social contacts. After the meeting, Mr. Martin said to me, "I'm tired, Cecil. I'm tired." And, today he's having a get-together for the faculty and their families. (*Looks at clock then at his watch.*) Did you know your clock is seven minutes fast? "Yes," he said, "I'm tired." (*Offstage hear HARMONICA playing.*)

EMMA. (*Offstage.*) C'mon everyone. Let's get some refreshments, and we'll have that birthday cake.

CECIL. Emma, you know, I worked 'til midnight yesterday and got so tired. But today I'm in top form. (*Moves into the house and pours himself a drink.*)

PARKER. (*Puts his newspaper in his pocket and combs his beard.*) A birthday cake. My, my!

IOLA. And, Doc, you don't drink a drop, not a drop! You hear?

PARKER. No problem. Hardly had a drop in yeauhs. Sippin' a little wine now and then. Where's the ha'm in that?

IOLA. You're not to drink, you hear us? (*Under her breath so Cecil shouldn't hear.*) Damn! Another dull afternoon with that old fool.

NATHAN. Don't go then. If it was me, I wouldn't.

PARKER. Nor would I.

IOLA. That's easy for you all to say. (*Starts to exit, followed by Parker.*)

THE THREE GRACES

PARKER. C'mon now, it couldn't be that bad. (*Iola and Parker enter house. Nathan and Luther follow.*)

LUTHER. (*To Nathan.*) Chick chick! Chick chick!

NATHAN. Luther! Stop that, will ya! (*Sees Vernon enter the house. He stops making chicken sounds.*)

VERNON. I've changed my mind.

EMMA. Oh, Colonel.

VERNON. Please, Dear Girl, call me Vernon.

DELOREECE. The war can wait a few minutes!

IOLA. May I get you a drink?

VERNON. A whiskey and water...

IOLA. Iola.

VERNON. Iola.... It's not every day someone has a birthday.

DELOREECE. My 21st birthday.

VERNON. Most special!

EMMA. Please... eat something.

VERNON. I believe I will. Too long since I had me some home cookin'. (*Vernon picks up a plate, Iola hands Vernon his drink. Cecil approaches with a drink in hand.*)

VERNON. Thank you, Iola.

CECIL. To your health, Colonel.

VERNON. To your health! ... Sure, do feel at home here.

DELOREECE. Nathan, we need to talk.

NATHAN. Sure.

DELOREECE. In private. (*She and Nathan move to the porch.*)

I know I can talk to you.

NATHAN. About what?

DELOREECE. It's private -- sort of... (*Deloreece pauses to think. Emma, at table inside house, calls to Aaron.*)

EMMA. Aaron, when are you going to join us?

AARON (*Offstage.*) In a minute. (*Enters and moves to the table.*)

NATHAN. What is it?

DELOREECE. (*Hesitates.*) It's about that Luther. Always saying obnoxious and hurtful things... He disgusts me.

NATHAN. Aw, he's just a "country bunkin'"... Get's on my nerves, too.

THE THREE GRACES

But you know, I feel sorry for him.

DELOREECE. What?

NATHAN. I think he feels out of place. He's regular folk around me, but he's pure country knucklehead around others.

DELOREECE. He's nasty. (*Deloreece and Nathan leave the porch, and enter the living room through the French doors.*)

NATHAN. (*To Deloreece.*) You're a beautiful woman, you know that? We could have a beautiful life. (*Moves close to her and looks into her eyes.*) Tell me what you are thinking. Come on!

DELOREECE. (*Moves away from Nathan.*) Folks might think life is beautiful. But for my sisters and me, we feel stifled. Lately, all I do is cry. And what good does that do?

NATHAN. (*Steps closer to Deloreece.*) Perhaps it's a lack of emotional meaning?

DELOREECE. Whatever that means...?

NATHAN. Being in touch with our feelings.

DELOREECE. We're educated, but have no careers. Only Emma's got a position. (*AYESHA (pronounced "Eye-ee-shah"), age 30, enters. She wears a ruffled short polka-dotted dress and a hat smothered in fake fruit, and far too much make-up. She does not see Nathan and Deloreece, but moves to the mirror.*)

AYESHA. (*Speaks to herself.*) They are already at tea and here I am runnin' late. (*Examines herself in mirror and adds more lipstick and powder.*) Now... to face those sisters. (*Turns around and sees Deloreece for the first time. She moves to buss [kisses the air next to the cheek] Deloreece, and gives her a cold hug.*) Oh! Dear Deloreece! Happy Birthday! So many well-wishers here. I hope I'm not too late. (*Emma and Vernon enter from the dining room. Emma embraces Ayesha coolly.*)

EMMA. How are you, Ayesha?

DELOREECE. Ayesha, I'd like you to meet Colonel Vernon Maxton.

VERNON. Please to meet you, Ayesha. Call me Vernon.

AYESHA. (*Coolly.*) Hello. (*Moves to Emma.*) All these people. You know how I am in crowds.

THE THREE GRACES

EMMA. They're just friends. (*Attempts to conceal her disdain.*) That dress...

AYESHA. Is something wrong?

EMMA. Well, I've been meaning to tell you.

AYESHA. Tell me what?

EMMA. Well, refined folk just don't wear polka-dots and ruffles. And that hem is way too short, even if there is a war on. But that hat! You look like... like a...

AYESHA. Don't you say it! This is the latest fashion... No wonder you don't know. (*Goes into dining room where Everyone is seats for tea, and takes her place. She is followed by Emma.*)

CECIL. Deloreece, it is my wish that you find the man of your dreams.

PARKER. An' I wish the same for Ayesha, there, too.

CECIL. She already has her man.

IOLA. Let's have a drink and some fun, for once.

CECIL. (*To Iola.*) You just lost three good conduct marks, Wife-a-mine.

VERNON. Damn good whiskey ya got here. What kind is it?

LUTHER. Good ole Kentucky Bourbon.

DELOREECE. It's my birthday and now I'm so depressed.

EMMA. All of your favorite dishes: fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, greens, and sweet potatoes. Enough for two armies. They'll be plenty of leftovers for tonight.

VERNON. Tonight. What's tonight?

DELOREECE. We celebrate our birthdays in two parts. Second part is in the evening when it's cooler.

IOLA. (*Suddenly excited.*) Oh yes, you really must join us tonight for a game of bid whist.

VERNON. (*Looks into Iola's eyes.*) Ah do declare, that's one of my favorite games.

AYESHA. Ya'll are so warm and gracious.

PARKER. Way it oughtta be. Too little civility in civilization.

THE THREE GRACES

AARON. Why do you always have to share that trifling philosophy? I am so tired of listening to you talk.

EMMA. Let's make a toast to the Birthday Girl! (*Everyone in dining room raises their glasses. They toast, then moving past the sideboard filling their plates.*)

NATHAN. Isn't it time for the birthday gifts... Come on, everyone. (*Iola and Emma bring gifts to the table and place them in front of Deloreece.*)

DELOREECE. Oh. This is too much.

IOLA. (*Reads aloud from her book of poetry.*)

“The languorous lament of a saxophone counts
a string of troubles and vague promises and,
jagged or monotonous, its raucous cry
sometimes awakes a desire I had thought dead.”

(*Emotionally.*) I've been reading these words all day. Can't get them out of my mind.

CECIL. There are eight of us seated at this table.

VERNON. Now, come on! Don't tell me you believe in that superstition?

CECIL. If there are eight at a table then it means there are lovers present. Are you one of them, Doc?

PARKER. Just an ole sinner. But, why's Ayesha blushing? (*Laughter. Ayesha runs out of room onto porch. Aaron follows.*)

AARON. Don't pay them attention. They were just kidding.

AYESHA. Oh, Aaron, I ain't no good around your kind of folk.

AARON. It's just family and some friends.

AYESHA. They all laughin' at me. Think they's better'n me. Oh, I doan want them to see me cry.

AARON. They can't see you here... I love you, Baby. Know that? Like I've never loved anybody! Marry me, Girl. (*Aaron and Ayesha kiss. Lights fade.*)

THE THREE GRACES

SCENE 2

July, 1943. Evening. Every lamp is lit. Sound of sandpaper being rubbed lethargically on wood is heard. Ayesha enters wearing a robe. She turns off a lamp. She then moves into the living room and stops by the door which leads to Aaron's office. There is a large screen made from a sheet hanging on one wall or in the archway of dining room.

AYESHA. What're you doin', Aaron? I thought you'd be reading? I don't mean to be dipping, but it's just that... *(Ayesha moves to another door, opens it and peeps in. As she does this, Aaron enters, holding sandpaper and a piece of wood.)*

AARON. What are you doing, Ayesha?

AYESHA. Looking for the screen with a hole in it. Zahrita's more forgetful than ever with the revival in town. She wouldn't admit but she forgot to fix whichever one of these screens is gotta hole in it. *(Checks another window.)* Ah'm all bit up from these peasty mosquitoes.

AARON. Everybody gets skeeter bit in July down here.

AYESHA. Ya'lls rich enough to have good screens in every window. I shouldn't have be goin' around doing this.

AARON. *(Sarcastically.)* You're so sweet they find you irresistible. *(Ayesha pauses and stares at Aaron trying to decide if he was making fun of her, but tosses it off, goes to the next window and checks it, making sure the screen was secure.)*

AYESHA. Will Ah'm really worried about the baby, Aaron.

AARON. Oliver has netting over his crib. He doesn't get bit up.

AYESHA. Well he could. What time is it?

AARON. A quarter after eight.

AYESHA. Emma and Deloreece ain't back yet? All they seem to do is work. I tole her, "Emma," I say, "You shouldn't oughtta work so hard at that fund-raising thing. Leave that to them church folk." But do she listen? ... No... Are you sure Oliver'll be okay?

AARON. He'll be all right. 'Esha, after all, he didn't look bit up today did he? *(Exits to his study while Ayesha continues to speak. He returns with a book.)*

THE THREE GRACES

AYESHA. No. But still. We gotta watch out so he don't get all bit up. Child can get a temperature from too many bites. Ah'm worried. Nathan's bringing a movie here tonight. They'll upset Oliver. You tell them to show it somewheres else.

AARON. You know our home is the only one around to accommodate the projector he's borrowed from the base. You never used to worry about anything before.

AYESHA. This morning, when little Oliver woke up and saw me he smiled. "Good morning, Oliver," I say, "Good morning, Darling." And he started to laugh. Children know when they loved. He goin' ta sleep now. Cain't excite him... Tell Nathan not to come here tonight, Aaron. *(Ayesha moves to take the sheet down.)*

AARON. But my sisters! It's their house, too.

AYESHA. They'll do what I want. They ladies. *(Ayesha finishes taking down the sheet and begins to fold it.)*

AARON. You're gonna turn Oliver into a Momma's Boy. *(Ayesha is not looking at Aaron as she continues folding the sheet and looking wistfully elsewhere.)*

AYESHA. I sure do hope he turns out like his father.

AARON. *(Looking down.)* I'm gonna need more sandpaper soon.

AYESHA. But still, we gotta watch out so little Oliver gets his rest. Ah'm worried. They were gonna show that movie at nine. Yes, tell them to go away.

AARON. I'm not sure I should do that.

AYESHA. I'm as serious as a headache about this, Aaron!

AARON. But my sisters live here, too.

AYESHA. I told you, they'll do what I want. *(Turns to leave, then stops.)* Oliver's room's so stuffy and hot. He should be in on the shady side of the house. Deloreece's room is just right. And I'll move in with him so there won't be any problems... She an' Emma can share a room. Anyway, it ain't as if Emma's home in the daytime. She juss sleep there. If you won't tell her, I will.

AARON. I was just thinking... Nothing, really.

AYESHA. Uh-oh! I most forgot to tell you. Zahrita come from the Pastor's, an' she waitin' on the porch for you. *(Ayesha exits. Aaron turns*

THE THREE GRACES

on porch light, and steps out. Zahrita is asleep on a porch chair with a packet of papers on her lap.)

AARON. Zahrita. (*Zahrita snores away.*) ZAHRITA!

ZAHRITA. (*Stirs, half asleep.*) What?

AARON. Do you have something for me?

ZAHRITA. (*Sits up, suddenly alert.*) Pastor send deeze here. Soon as I find dem. (*looks all over, despite the packet being right on her lap.*)

AARON. Your lap.

ZAHRITA. I awready take a nap.

AARON. Your LAP! (*Points to packet.*)

ZAHRITA. Oh, here they is. (*Hands Aaron packet.*)

AARON. Thank you. What took so long? It's past eight.

ZAHRITA. What? Speak up, Boy.

AARON. (*Louder.*) I said you're here awfully late, it's past eight!

ZAHRITA. I come when light is still out, but dat woman, Ayesha, she wouldn't let me in. She say, you too busy. What I do? If you is busy, you busy. I don't have to be nowhere till liddle Oliver go asleep.

AARON. (*Examines the papers from the packet as he speaks. Zahrita appears to be listening.*) Tomorrow's Sunday. I'm not supposed to go to work, but I'll go in anyhow. Do some bookkeeping and letter writing for the Pastor. He wants his correspondence taken care of "as soon as possible." ... Life's so dull. Ever notice how strangely life changes and how it deceives... Today, out of sheer boredom I looked through my university lecture notes, and I couldn't help laughing. My God! Here I am, the glorified secretary to some small-town pastor! Ha! Me! An educated Black Man who dreams every night that I am a university professor back in D.C. And in that dream everyone is proud of the famous Negro scholar. Ain't thatta hoot?... Why am I telling you this, Zahrita?

ZAHRITA. What you sayin', Boy? You gotta speak up. (*Aaron moves close to her and speaks loudly. Zahrita pats him on the leg with affection.*)

AARON. I don't understand my wife. And my future ... I dunno.

ZAHRITA. You is afraid.

THE THREE GRACES

AARON. Afraid..? Maybe... I don't know why. If I were in Washington, I wouldn't be afraid.

ZAHRITA. Washington? I were at City Hall the other day, and Spit, dah shoe shine boy, he were tellin' me bout dis salesman from Washington who were eating pancakes. Deese mon, he hate forty pancakes. Den, he up an' died... Forty or fifty, I forgit.

AARON. In D.C. you can sit in a great big restaurant where you don't know anybody and where nobody knows you, and you don't feel at all like a stranger. But here you know everybody and everybody knows you, and you still feel like a stranger.

ZAHRITA. Whuh?... An' Spit, he say, dey is a golden rope dat go from de White House all the way to the Capitol Building.

AARON. What for?

ZAHRITA. Doan know. But dat Spit, he say it true.

AARON. Baloney... Were you ever in D.C.?

ZAHRITA. God did not lead me dere ... I gots to go now. (*Aaron continues reading the papers and doesn't notice Zahrita leave.*)

AARON. Sure. Oliver will be needing you. In the morning you can pick up these documents. I should be done with them in the morning, Zahrita... Zahrita? Uh... 'Night, Zahrita. (*Aaron shrugs. He straightens the stack of papers, then stretches, and heads back into the house. He turns off a lamp and exits into his room. Offstage, Hear Zahrita singing a lullaby to the baby. Iola and Vernon enter house. Iola turns on a lamp in the living room.*)

IOLA. I guess we're the first ones here...

VERNON. Thank you for inviting me to join ya'll. What are we gonna see?

IOLA. Crazy Cat, Betty Boop, Heckle and Jeckel. Cecil doesn't like cartoons. Says they're unrefined.

VERNON. He seems to have an opinion on everything.

IOLA. Funny, how when you marry young, somebody who seemed so smart and important, can look like such a fool, just a few years later.

VERNON. Zat so?

IOLA. Mind you, he didn't change. It's just that, well, I'm a woman, now... and... He bores the wave outta my hair!

THE THREE GRACES

VERNON. Men are all the same. Mos' men'll say he sick o' his wife. Sick o' the way his kids gotta live... not having a fine car, not having enough of this, not having enough of that.

IOLA. I see I'm not the only one who's feeling low.

VERNON. S'pose I am. Haven't eaten nothin' since seven this mornin'. Started in to arguin' before breakfast with that wife of mine, and by nine I just walked out... I like talkin' to you. Alone. (*Grabs Iola's hand and kisses it. She looks startled, but pleased.*) Don't be mad. I got nobody to talk to... Nobody. (*Kisses her hand. Iola does not resist.*) You a fine woman, Iola. I can see ya eyes shine. (*Iola moves to the settee, and pats the cushion, gesturing Vernon to sit beside her. He moves swiftly to her side, and embraces her.*)

VERNON. Oh, Baby, you don't know how I love you. I been watchin' you since the first day I came here. Honey, you could make a blind man see. Damn, how you move, how you talk. Baby, I even dream of you. You one fine woman!

IOLA. What is the matter with you? Quit it, now... (*In an undertone.*) No. Don't stop! I like that kinda talk... From you. (*Covers her face with her hands. Hear Footsteps approach. To Vernon.*) Stop! Somebody's coming. (*Deloreece and Nathan enter through the dining room. Nathan enters carrying in a movie projector case and movie reels and a brown paper wrapped package he sets down on a table.*)

NATHAN. Deloreece, I'll be at Woolworth's to see you every day until I shipout.

DELOREECE. (*Walks up to Iola and Vernon.*) What ya'll doing out there?

IOLA. Nothing.

DELOREECE. Somebody took down the movie sheet.

IOLA. I hadn't noticed. (*To Vernon.*) Did you see anything different, Vernon?

VERNON. Same ol', same ol'. Puttin' up with this heat.

DELOREECE. (*Sighs.*) I am so tired!

NATHAN. Not too tired for the movie, I hope?

DELOREECE. Oh no. It's just that I don't like working Woolworth's. I just plain don't like it.

THE THREE GRACES

IOLA. You're legs are getting awfully skinny, Deloreece.

DELOREECE. I used to have big legs.

NATHAN. You look like you need a rest.

DELOREECE. I've just got to find another job before I take to drinking... You hear Aaron and Doc were in a poker game on the base and lost over a thousand dollars?

IOLA. Sure, I heard. What can you do about it?

DELOREECE. He lost a thousand shooting craps two weeks ago, and another thousand last month. If he keeps it up...

VERNON. What?

DELOREECE. The insecurity has me dreaming of D.C. every night. I'll go crazy thinking about it. Even if we move back after Emma's school lets out, it's still a long way's away.

IOLA. Don't tell Ayesha about Aaron, understand?

DELOREECE. She couldn't care less.

(Parker, who looks like he just got out of bed, enters combing his beard.)

PARKER. Greetings to the two most beautiful ladies in all of Charleston!

IOLA. There he is: the accomplice.

PARKER. When is the movie gonna start? *(Emma enters, carrying a basket of needlework, and moves to a side chair, and sits exhausted. She doesn't touch the needlework yet.)*

EMMA. I don't know if I have enough energy to stay awake through a movie. And it's just the start of the evening.

DELOREECE. It's gonna be cartoons.

PARKER. Good. I didn't miss a thing. Hey, boy... *(Addresses Nathan as he takes a newspaper out from his pocket and sits.)* Whatcha got there? Or is it some secret?

NATHAN. Just something my Daddy sent me. I picked it up on the way over here.

PARKER. What is it?

NATHAN. I haven't opened it yet.

DELOREECE. Open it. It might be fun.

NATHAN. From my father? *(Sets the package on the table and starts to unwrap it.)*

THE THREE GRACES

IOLA. Oh, this is exciting. That should tell somebody how dull it is around here. (*Suddenly, All stand back from Nathan as he turns around with an automatic weapon in one hand, and the enclosure note in the other.* **NATHAN.** (*Reading the note.*) “Nathan, boy... I hear tell that the revolvers they issue you officers only have six shots. You know my old friend Melvin Spivey, well he told me you can upgrade... if you buy the gun yourself. I thought I’d surprise you with this automatic. Might save your life, so’s you’ll be able to take over this business of ours when you return. Your momma sends hugs and kisses. Love, Daddy.” (*Puts the note on the table and looks at the gun like it was a dead animal.*) This is just great.

PARKER. Don’t you know how to shoot that thing?

NATHAN. I’m a sharpshooter, Doc ... This is just another one of his bribes.

PARKER. Who say bribery is bad, I muss ask?

NATHAN. I’d rather he sent me a fruitcake.

PARKER. When you gonna shoot that thing?

NATHAN. Never, I hope. (*Removes revolver from his holster and puts the automatic in its place. He wraps the revolver in the wrapper on the table and places it into the box, tossing the note on top.*)

PARKER. Well, I sure as hell would like to have an automatic instead o’ that six shooter if I wuz facin’ German soldiers. (*Turns away, reading, oblivious to the world.*)

IOLA. (*Quietly to Deloreece.*) Has he paid his rent, yet?

EMMA. Not in the last four months. Seems to have forgotten.

IOLA. Look at him -- how important he makes himself.

DELOREECE. Vernon, why are you so quiet all of a sudden?

VERNON. Oh, I don’t know. But I could use another beer. Maybe that’ll help.

PARKER. Deloreece Grace.

DELOREECE. What is it, Doc?

PARKER. Come ovah here, a minute, please. (*Deloreece moves to sit by table.*) Seems like I just can’t do without you, Chile.

VERNON. If I have another beer I juss know I’ll start to relax a bit.

IOLA. I’ll get you another beer. Do you want one, Nathan?

THE THREE GRACES

NATHAN. Yes, I'll have one, too. Please. (*Iola exits to kitchen.*)
So Colonel, what makes you so tense?

VERNON. Oh... I don't know... How 'bout we talk about life? Like it'll be a few hundred years from now.

NATHAN. Well, say, in two, three hundred years... because of interracial marriages... at least up North... no one is going to be just black, or just white. Just people of color. All be God's chilluns. Ha ha!
(*Iola returns with beers for all.*)

IOLA. Maybe this will help your deep thinking. (*Hands Men their beers, and has one herself. Emma gestures "none."*)

NATHAN. Most likely, life won't change at all.

PARKER. Same ol', same ol'.

NATHAN. And in a thousand years people will say how hard life is. And they'll be just as mean-hearted, mistrustful, and afraid to die as now.

IOLA. Amen! I'll drink to that.

VERNON. Ever'thing on God's green earth changes, little by little. And afta who knows how long, a new and happy society could start up. Free of prejudice. Maybe we won't see that day, but we'll wuh'k, and suffer now so that could happen.

DELOREECE. (*Yearning.*) If only ... (*Iola laughs, softly. Emma picks up some needlework and busies herself.*)

NATHAN. (*Notices Iola laughing.*) What's so funny?

EMMA. She's been doing that all day!

VERNON. Didn't go to college, but one thing I do know is there ain't no happiness for the colored man. We'll always be workin' our tails off. Just have to leave any thoughts of happiness for peoples comin' after.

NATHAN. According to you, a person shouldn't even bother to try and be happy. Now, me for instance. Suppose I'm happy? Now.

VERNON. Nuh-uh. Cain be.

NATHAN. Why not?

VERNON. You just can't.

NATHAN. (*Frustrated.*) We just don't seem to understand each other. How can I convince you?

DELOREECE. I hope the movie is more fun than this conversation.

THE THREE GRACES

(Iola continues to laugh. Deloreece moves to the side table where she sits down with a deck of cards and begins to play solitaire.)

NATHAN. Go ahead and laugh! Not in a million years are things going to change. So why not just say to hell with it all, and have a positive attitude about what is.

IOLA. There must be some meaning to all of this.

NATHAN. The rain falls, the sun shines. What does that mean?

IOLA. Shouldn't we have some kind of hope? To live and not know why everything is...

VERNON. Hope... That's a word for the young.

IOLA. Albert Einstein said, "The man who regards life as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for it."

PARKER. Must've had me in mind. *(Returns to his reading while Deloreece sings softly and continues to play solitaire.)*

NATHAN. I've been thinking about getting out of this man's army.

IOLA. And give up your commission?

PARKER. Son, you just don't git outta the army. 'Specially during a war! A world war at that!

NATHAN. I'll go AWOL. Hideout in the Smokies.

PARKER. You talkin' cou't marshall stuff now! An', what about yo' Daddy? Throw 'way a commission after W.E.B. DuBois fought to see to it we got 'em.

NATHAN. Of course, he wouldn't like it. He'd disown me... But for once in my life I could stand up for myself. *(Exits into dining room.)*
(Zahrita arrives with a pitcher of lemonade, Ayesha follows a few seconds later, carrying a tray of glasses, and wears a tasteless-looking outfit. Luther arrives, and, after greetings, sits at the table.)

AYESHA. You're all outta drink this here lemonade. Best thing in this humidity.

LUTHER. And cheaper than beer.

AYESHA. *(Turns on Luther.)* What you say?

LUTHER. *(Feigning innocence.)* I said, "Can I have a glass, here?"

AYESHA. *(Hands Luther a glass after Zahreti pours.)* Here. *(Mutters.)* Joker.

LUTHER. *(Loudly.)* Hey, Doc, how old you is?

THE THREE GRACES

PARKER. Thirty-two.

VERNON. All this rain we've been having.

IOLA. I'm tired of it, too. The humidity. (*Iola fans herself. Deloreece rises and moves to the kitchen with her empty glass, taking empty bottles of beer.*)

DELOREECE. (*Sighs.*) It never rains like this in Washington. I should go visit Auntie Mabel. (*Luther flicks open his straight razor, and spins it on the table. It stops in a certain way.*)

LUTHER. Maybe not. Lookit, the blade's pointin' North. (*Laughs*) Cuts you outta Washin'ton. (*Puts the knife away after Nathan gives him a sharp look.*)

PARKER. (*Reading newspaper, aloud.*) They got malaria in Atlanta.

ZAHRITA. Iola Dear, have some lemonade. (*To Vernon.*) Do have some. (*Vernon indicates his beer and waves off the lemonade.*)

IOLA. Bring some here, Zahrita, 'cause I'm not going over there.

ZAHRITA. Her hearing is getting so bad.

DELOREECE. ZAHRITA!

ZAHRITA. What you want, Baby Girl? (*Ayesha saunters over to Luther who has been ogling her.*)

LUTHER. You look too fine to be fussin' about some dumb ol' baby.

AYESHA. (*To Luther.*) Chil'ren at the breast unnerstan' perfect. Like, I say, "good moanin', Oliver; good moanin', Baby Dear!" He look at me like you know he thinkin' somethin'. An I ain't sayin' that 'cause I his Momma either... Nuh-huh! He a blessed baby chile.

LUTHER. If he was mine I'd roast him in a fry-pan and eat him with cone bread. (*Exits to the kitchen laughing and taking his lemonade, and sits in a corner.*)

AYESHA. Low-life, egg-sucking piece o' trash.

IOLA. I'm sick of this place. I miss the mall in the spring. Why can't I be back home?

VERNON. (*Looking out at the far horizon.*) I read about this fella who had been in prison. He told 'bout the birds he sees through the prison windows, but now he's out in the world he don't notice them. An' same way, you go to the Capitol, you won't notice how great it is after a while. Folks can't be happy.

THE THREE GRACES

NATHAN. I might suggest we partake of the desserts before we show the movie. (*Deloreece re-enters and stands with her hands on her hips.*)

EMMA. Sweet potato pie, and banana pudding.

DELOREECE. Maybe another time.

EMMA. What's that?

DELOREECE. Luther ate all the desserts.

NATHAN. All? (*All look around at each other and share looks of disgust. Zahrita moves about filling empty glasses with lemonade. Deloreece sits down and resumes playing solitaire.*)

ZAHRITA. Oh Lordy, I 'most forgot! (*Removes a note from a pocket.*) It a note for Colonel Vernon.

VERNON. For me? (*Takes the message, reads.*) Damn! Excuse me, Iola. Everyone. I'm sorry, I must leave right now. (*Rises, upset, and mutters under his breath.*) Same old story...

IOLA. What is it? Can you tell me?

VERNON. (*Quietly to Iola.*) Family matters. I must go now. (*Touches Iola's hand, looking deep into her eyes.*) I'm sorry. (*Quickly exits. Iola stares after him.*)

ZAHRITA. Why that man leavin' out so quick? I had him mo' lemonade.

IOLA. (*Angry.*) Why'd you have to bring that note in here now, Zahrita? (*Moves to table and picks up her bottle of beer.*) Damn!

ZAHRITA. What you say, Dear?

AARON. (*Offstage.*) ZAHRITA! I'll have some lemonade.

ZAHRITA. Honey chile, you doan have to yell at me. (*Pours a glass of lemonade and heads offstage to Aaron. Deloreece loudly shuffles the deck.*)

IOLA. You and that solitaire.

DELOREECE. You are angry, Iola Grace... It's tough on all of us. (*Moves to put an arm around Iola.*)

IOLA. Then don't talk to me! Don't even touch me!

PARKER. "Don't touch me! Don't touch me!"

IOLA. (*To Parker.*) You too, you old fool. Especially you... you trifling old fool!

AYESHA. An' I thought y'all had class when I married yo' brother.

THE THREE GRACES

IOLA. Like I care what you think.

EMMA. Come on, children. Play nice.

NATHAN. (*Trying to restrain his laughter.*) Give... give me some of that whiskey. (*Hear baby crying.*)

AYESHA. Oh, mah baby up. Hear him Fussin'? I gots to go take care o' mah chile... I'm coming, Baby Dear. (*Looks at Everyone with disdain, then exits. Iola moves to leave.*)

DELOREECE. Iola, where are you going? (*Looks in Ayesha's direction, repeats much more quietly.*) Where are you going?

IOLA. Home.

NATHAN. (*Moves to Luther with his drink.*) You don't have to sit by yourself, thinking of who knows what. Come on, let's have a drink. (*Nathan and Luther pour drinks.*)

LUTHER. Why you actin' so uppity lately? Who you tryin' to impress?

NATHAN. I dunno...

LUTHER. You know I'm fine wi' my homeboys. But when they city folk 'round, they make me feel like I ain't good enough to slop they hogs.

NATHAN. They just don't understand you kidding around, Luther. I guess that's just the way you are. Let's get plastered.

LUTHER. Here some mud in yo' eye! (*Nathan and Luther sip their drinks.*) You know, Rich Boy, I may be a comedian but I ain't anybody's fool. Anybody crosses me... (*Puts his drink down and flips out his straight razor.*) I cross him right back. (*Gestures slicing someone's throat.*)

NATHAN. I'm glad I don't have to worry about that happening. Right now, I'm more concerned about how split I feel.

LUTHER. Split?

NATHAN. I want to just leave this war and be with it now. I hate fighting. The other part of me wants to continue to please my daddy. That's how I got here in the first place.

LUTHER. Ah, I always aim to please mah self.

NATHAN. I'll give you that. (*Luther and Aaron click their glasses in a toasting gesture and drink up. Aaron, unnoticed, quietly enters with his nose in a book and sits down at table. Parker and Deloreece enter*

THE THREE GRACES

dining room.)

PARKER. It wuz real soul food. An' some fried-green tomatoes. Tomatoes... my favorite fruit.

LUTHER. Tomatoes a vegetable.

PARKER. Don't listen to him. Tomatoes is a fruit.

LUTHER. And I tell you, tomatoes is a vegetable.

PARKER. And I tell you, tomatoes is a fruit.

LUTHER. Vegetable!

PARKER. Ain't no use in arguin'! Anyway, what would you know about them?

LUTHER. My own two hands. Pickin' them damn things is how I came up. I hate 'em. Fried-green tomatoes smell jus' like...

AARON. Please, please! I ask you!

NATHAN. Are we about ready to see the movie?

DELOREECE. It is nearly nine. *(Ayesha enters and moves to Aaron. Luther exits to offstage bathroom, reaching towards his fly.)*

AYESHA. *(Whispers something to AARON.)* Aaron. *(Exits.)*

DELOREECE. What is it?

AARON. Time to close up shop. Good night, everyone.

DELOREECE. But the cartoons?

EMMA. I stayed up to watch them.

AARON. There won't be any. There won't be any Crazy Cat or Betty Boop. There won't be any tonight. Ayesha says that Oliver isn't feeling well, and so... *(Shrugs his shoulders.)* I don't care, I really don't.

DELOREECE. Oliver's ill?

IOLA. What is the matter with that woman? *(To Deloreece.)*

Oliver's all right, it's Ayesha who has the problem. *(Aaron exits to his office, followed by Parker and Others. The Others say goodbye in the dining room, looking confused and muttering their disappointment.)*

EMMA. What a shame!

IOLA. Let's get out of here. Let's go outside and talk.

EMMA. I've had it. I'm all in. Good night. *(Hear "Good-byes" and Good Nights.)* Nathan lugs the projector case and movie reels out.

Guests exits house. Zahrita enters and clears table, and puts out the lights. Hear Ayesha singing a lullaby to Oliver. Aaron and Parker enter

THE THREE GRACES

from Aaron's office, and close the door. Parker sits at table, sleeves rolled up.)

PARKER. You know, the main reason I never married? 'Cause I wuz in love with y'all's Momma.

AARON. A man should never get married ... My life was dull before -- but now...

PARKER. Yeah? Well, I never married, and here I am, a content ol' fool. Heh heh. But, not much you can do about it now, is there, Boy?

AARON. We'd better hurry!

PARKER. What fo'? We be there in time.

AARON. You want Ayesha to stop me?

PARKER. *(Shakes his head.)* Tsk! Tsk!

AARON. And I can't play tonight. Only sit and watch. Lost too much already.

PARKER. Let's go out through the kitchen. *(Aaron and Parker exit. Deloreece and Zahrita move around the room tidying things. Luther returns from the bathroom, hitching up his pants.)*

LUTHER. Where the hail is ever'body?

DELOREECE. Sudden illness. The party's over. Everyone's gone.

LUTHER. I slept 'til noon' so's I could party all night. Damn!

DELOREECE. You need to leave, too.

LUTHER. I step out to use the facilities, and look what happens... Uh, you here by yourself?

DELOREECE. That's none of your business, Luther... Good night.

LUTHER. I know you doan lahk me being the fool. But, I bet you unnerstan' me... *(Looks uneasy, and mops his balding forehead.)*

And, well, I ... I trying to tell yah ... after all these weeks, being 'round yah ... Ah loves yah... More 'n' any woman ah evah came to know.

DELOREECE. *(Looks irritate.)* Please leave. Now.

LUTHER. I can't live without you, Deloreece. *(Deloreece turns to leave, and Luther follows.)* Do you hear what I' tellin' yah? I love ya! Dammit, I love ya!

THE THREE GRACES

DELOREECE. Stop it, Luther!

LUTHER. (*Wiping his forehead, looks stressed as he gives Deloreece's a cold stare.*) That all you got to say? "Stop it?" I finally qit up enough nerve to tell you how I feel, an' you say "stop it"!... All right. Fine.

(*Warning.*) So, I cain make you love me, but, there ain't goin' to be no other man. I the one... And, any other one's a dead one.

(*Ayesha enters and turns off a lamp. She looks in through one door, turns off another lamp, then looks through another door, and moves past the door leading to her Aaron's office. She hunches by the door listening, but is startled by Luther. Ayesha jumps back, embarrassed.*)

AYESHA. S'cuse me. Ah didn't know anybody's still here...

LUTHER. (*Looks with contempt at Ayesha and slams his fist into the palm of his other hand.*) There ain't! (*Exits.*)

AYESHA. (*Moves to Deloreece.*) You look tired, Sister. You oughtta go ta bed way early.

DELOREECE. Is Oliver asleep?

AYESHA. Chile's restless... By the way, ah been meanin' ta talk 'bout sumthin wit ya. I think Oliver room's too hot n' sweaty fo' a baby, and yo' room would be so nice for the child. You won't mind sharing Emma's room with her ... for a while, will ya?

DELOREECE. What? You must be kidding. (*Sits stunned, hear offstage car horn.*)

AYESHA. You and Emma can share a room, it's just for the time being Oliver can have yours. He's such a darling.

(*Zahrta enters and hands a note to Ayesha, pausing afterward to spit in her small container.*)

ZAHRITA. It from that Pastor Hairston fella.

AYESHA. (*Reads the note.*) The Good Pastor want me to go for a ride. (*Hear Car Horn again.*) He says he needs to discuss important church business with somebody. I s'pose I could go for an hour. (*To Zahrta.*) Tell him, I won't be long.

(*Ayesha runs out. Zahrta looks puzzled.*)

THE THREE GRACES

ZAHRITA. *Wha' she say? (Zahrta ambles into the next room spitting into her small container, shakes her head, and chuckles to herself. Deloreece watches Zahrta exit, laughing, too. Cecil enters looking reluctant, followed by Vernon.)*

CECIL. We're here.

VERNON. What happened?

DELOREECE. Everybody's gone.

CECIL. What about Iola? She's gone too?

DELOREECE. Ask me no questions and I'll tell ya no lies... Besides, I'm tired.

CECIL. I think you are all a bunch of crab apples.

VERNON. They's always somethin' to keep ya riled. How 'bout we leave out of here, an' go have a drink? I can't go home yet anyhow.

CECIL. Sorry, Man. I'm just too tired. Has my wife gone home yet?

DELOREECE. Yeah. Far as I know.

CECIL. I wasn't really looking forward to watching a movie anyway. Now I can finish reading Caesar's Commentaries. *(Moves to Deloreece and kisses her on the forehead, then starts to exit.)*

VERNON. Guess I'll go somewhere by myself. *(Vernon exits one way, Cecil, whistles to himself, and exits another way.)*

DELOREECE. They all gone. Nobody's left.

AYESHA. *(Wearing hat and gloves, and a hang bag on her arm, enters the dining room, and glances at Deloreece.)* Deloreece, Dear, would you keep an eye on Oliver while I'm gone? I'll be back in a bit. *(Exits.)*

DELOREECE. To Washington. Please God, to Washington. *(Lights fade.)*

END OF ACT 1

THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS –

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