

*(Act One.)*

*(Lights up on HATTIE, a black maid of indeterminate age, and M., a white woman who is 82. They are on a gleaming white tile floor. Also in the space is a gigantic set of piano bench legs that reach up into the above. We cannot even see the bottom of the seat of the piano bench. The legs seem like beautiful, shiny black tapering columns, as though HATTIE and M. were by a lovely colonnade. Only the enormous piano pedals in the corner of the stage give it away.)*

*(HATTIE is kneeling on a rolled up towel, using a brush, rag and bucket to clean the floor.)*

M.

Life would be different if I could play the piano.

HATTIE

Yes'm?

M.

Yes, it would. For instance, my name might be Lavinia!

HATTIE

How you s'pose that?

M.

Women named Lavinia can always play the piano, and they throw the most tasteful and scrumptious tea parties, and they wear gloves, and their hair is always just so, and they were born knowing how to dance. The merengue, even. Backwards in heels, like...like that woman...

*(A moment as M. drifts off and HATTIE cleans. HATTIE scratches her nose with her forearm.)*

HATTIE

But how that change yo' name? If'n you know how to play the piano?

M.

I presume the sequence is immaterial. The puzzle can be assembled in whatever order, and the picture will emerge.

HATTIE

Dat so?

M.

I presume.

HATTIE

Hm.

M.

But I am content, for though my name is not Lavinia, still am I a glorious creature in my own right!

HATTIE

Yes'm.

M.

As are you, dear Hattie.

HATTIE

Kinda you to say so, ma'am.

M.

I have asked you so many times to call me by my given name. Won't you? Please?

HATTIE

Cain't do that, ma'am.

M.

Of course you can! It's just us!

HATTIE

*(stops cleaning, looks at M.)* Ma'am. I cannot call you by yo' given name.

*(HATTIE raises her eyebrows, waits.)*

M.

Oh! I've never told you my given name, have I?

HATTIE

*(resuming her cleaning)* No, ma'am.

M.

Gracious, what a ninny you must think me. My name is –

*(She says her name, but it cannot be heard because loud piano music from the back of the house begins just at that moment. It's probably Rachmaninoff, but it might be some spiky Prokofiev, played expertly. But loudly. The ladies are still, looking out. After a bit, the music stops at the end of a phrase as suddenly as it started.)*

HATTIE

Right mess over there, mm! *(returns to her own cleaning)*

M.

That was... *(she sighs wistfully)*

HATTIE

Yes'm.

*(M. begins to dance or move around the piano legs, all around the space, while attempting to shout the tune that just played. She tries to get HATTIE to join her.)*

HATTIE (cont.)

Got work to do, ma'am.

M.

Yes...

*(M. begins dancing again, but taking dainty steps, and humming softly. She stops.)*

M. (cont.)

Oh, Hattie, just stop a moment, won't you? Doesn't my ring look beautiful today?

HATTIE

Sure do, ma'am.

M.

Just last week he gave it to me, on my birthday.

HATTIE

Yes'm.

M.

Mind you, it wasn't for my birthday. This is no birthday present.

HATTIE

No, ma'am.

M. & HATTIE

*(simultaneously)* It's a promise of wedlock to come.

M.

Yes, that's what it is, all right. Although I could be lenient and say that since he gave it to me on my birthday, it was a kind of birthday present. But it wasn't merely a birthday present is what I meant to say.

HATTIE

It's a promise of wedlock to come.

M.

It's a promise of wedlock to come, dear Hattie, that's what it is. Woke up to find it on a ribbon around my neck!

HATTIE

Dat so?

M.

A ribbon! Around my neck! How very romantic!

HATTIE

*(stops cleaning, looks at M.)* Funny how we don't mention the glamorous lieutenant.

M.

I – I don't see – Why would we mention him? That was a lifetime ago, when I had yellow hair and red lips and teeth like a brilliant enameled picket fence!

HATTIE

I 'member you said his eyes was torchfire at midnight.

M.

And he called me Godiva, because he yearned to see me riding nude on horseback!

HATTIE

You was gonna marry that fella!

M.

And my breasts were full moons, shunning the eclipse! It's been...He went off to war!

HATTIE

I'm just sayin', is all.

M.

Saying what?

HATTIE

*(senses something, looks above her)* Uh-oh. Heads up, ma'am!

*(A giant pair of legs and feet appears at the pedals, and music, the loudest yet by a substantial margin, is heard. The feet press the pedals expertly as the music plays effortlessly. But loudly. The music falls on them like heavy rain. M. scampers around, somewhat distraught. We cannot hear her say, "My hair! My hair!" HATTIE grabs her bucket, brush, rag and towel and stows them under the*

*piano bench. Then she runs out into the musical storm and ushers M. back with her to relative safety, the shelter of the piano bench. They watch the storm of falling music, which is very loud, beautiful but frightening. Then the music stops. The giant legs walk off. The stage is now a mess after the music storm.)*

M.

Oh, Hattie...you have quite a day ahead of you, haven't you?

HATTIE

I want to run away and die in the bushes like an old family dog.

*(Act Two.)*

*(Night, cloudy. The floor is black and very shiny; it might be mistaken for water. HATTIE stands. M. stands apart, unfocused but mostly still.)*

M.

How do I look? Hattie? How do I look?

HATTIE

*(not talking to M.)* "How do I look?" is the first question most of us ask the mirror: the how being measured on the shared, communal scales of beauty and age.

M.

My bald spot's not too noticeable in this light, is it? *(inspects herself in the shiny floor)*

HATTIE

But the peril of the question is that its answer will never change, though we might wish it to with every inch of us. Better to try to stop the seas' ebb and flow, the earth's rotation and revolution, than to try to change the answer to "How do I look?" For the latter is just as unalterable.

M.

Fool liver spots! Where's my cream? Hattie? My special cream?

HATTIE

"How do I look?" There is only one true answer.

M.

...My cream?

HATTIE

"I look just exactly like myself."