

EDWARD regains his balance.

EDWARD

I hope you'll excuse me, it's just, I never had absinthe before. If you had gin, I'd fare better.

CARL

Oh fine, fine! You never have to apologize for unencumbered emotion, not in this house. Gertrude Stein, years ago after a bash of mine, you'd have thought someone *slaughtered* her next of kin when—

COUNTEE

Carlo, perhaps a towel? A damp towel?

CARL

Yes, of course, and the coffee. I think I'd better.

(Just before exiting.)

Oh, I do hope this doesn't mean such an abrupt end to the night. There will be other opportunities, of course. But I did want to show the studio before you left.

EDWARD

I'm alright, Mr. Vetchen; I can manage.

COUNTEE

He'll be just fine, Carlo. The coffee will help.

CARL exits.

COUNTEE

(After a moment. He makes an attempt.)

Eddie?

EDWARD

Second audition of the day. And I'm all wet—

COUNTEE

(He fails.)

Oh, don't be foolish. "I'll manage, I'll manage." Come now, talk to me.

EDWARD  
Leave it, Countee.

COUNTEE  
You should be sleeping more. Resting—

EDWARD  
I'll manage.

COUNTEE  
Brother Martin—

EDWARD  
I SAID, I'LL MANAGE.

BLACKOUT

### **SCENE III: *FANTASIA FOR A POET***

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In darkness, COUNTEE emerges as the only figure in light. All traces of 101 Central Park are gone and we are completely in the mind space of the poet as CARL'S voice is heard repeating—

CARL (V.O.)  
Where are you Countee Cullen—?

COUNTEE  
I am somewhere safe. And alone.

CARL (V.O.)  
(An echo now.)

Where are you Countee Cullen—?

The question is posed again.

This time, COUNTEE finds words but not for CARL or  
EDWARD.

He has slipped into a state of reverie.

### COUNTEE

In Harlem, in my office, working late. Past 11 pm. It's the only time I am free to work on my own. Without the papers. Things to translate and send to post. Letters from Edward embossed with emerald ink, even here, tucked in spines of books. A game we play.

In Harlem, in my office, working late. I am pacing the floor. I am brushing bits of tobacco leaves from my desk. I am pacing the floor. I am attempting yet again to make my way through this poem, through this play.

One line at a time—

No—

One word at a time—

No—

One thought at a time—

No. No, no, no!

I snatch the paper out of the typewriter; draw a line through what I've written. I light a cigarette for comfort and shake the match dead. The window is open here. The breeze keeps me awake. Keeps me cool. The breeze and I converse over notes of Erik Satie and Debussy.

The breeze *keeps me here*.

The chugging sound of the greasy Underwood isn't so loud that I cannot hear the sound of the city outside; the sound of the chugging city at around midnight isn't so loud that I can't hear the sound of my own breath. I light a cigarette. And another. I stand at the window. As though the passers below will render something to aid my writing by and by.

But the boys outside that brick press down the pavement with—

“Them cats swung tonight.”

“Will we see you on Sunday?”

“Said stockings are too expensive nowadays for dancing.”

“When you expecting the draft?”

“Can’t afford to let them run, she said.”

And even after matinees, cocktail parties, and birthday dinners, men like me are always driven home; men of 39, men of 40. Boys like Edward, always walk. The walk, I envy. Not just that my legs can’t carry me as far anymore, but because the boys who walk home alone, have the time and space—to detach and to refocus from the experiences of the day. The sobering air keeps them from missing things too much. They walk in the glow of the street lights; held aloft by some invisible hand, by some god or other. Past the pulled curtains of Ms. Elaine’s, past the opposing barbershops on 147th, they walk until they get to apt. 3B at 70 Macomb’s Place and climb their 4-floor, 5-floor walk-up.

EDWARD appears in an amber light.

There are secrets they carry in their bosom, some in their thighs. The secrets Edward carries are behind his thoughtful eyes, if you’re *sharp* enough to read such heavy lash wonder. I imagine him sitting in the silence; nocturnal, devoid of his usual verve. In candlelight, he once told me, it comforts him—

*Observe.*

(Motions to EDWARD.)

Reminds him of something I have yet to deduce. The window is open there; the breeze drifting through is his friend as well. The breeze and he, constant as the moon, share glances in the twilight. The breeze keeps him cool, *keeps him there*. A light spills into his room from the busy street below 70 Macomb’s Place, where youth like him have yet to find their last thrills of the night. Every step he takes ruffles the clothes, the playing cards and the playscripts haphazardly settled at his feet. On his bed are papers too, blue letters from me, and no doubt, half-read, a stalemate in a game of chess. My letters sent more and more these days and answered less and less. I try not to mind with a heart ever-ailing; one must learn to be blind. He flips through his records, one by one, chooses his favorite and leaves the rest. He already knows the notes on the sleeve, but he studies it as though it is new.

He puts it on and—

Unbuttons his shirt—

He lights another cigarette as the record begins.

EDWARD begins to peel off his shirt and grabs a cigarette during the following. A recording of Duke Ellington's "Home" begins under—

Now, the air is swirling with Ellington and smoke. Sitting there perched on his bed, half-dressed, bathing his golden body in the golden light. He looks to me, a gleaming statue in a Hindu temple; his cigarette, the burnt offering.

The music blocks out the inner turmoil his eyes betray; keeps him blissful and blind to the terror that could be his. I have a question only Edward can answer. Why it seems I can only graze on the stubble at my feet when, beyond city limits, there are valleys and fields of greenery? And so, I file my nails on the rusty gate, only able to weep for where I long to be.

CARL

Where are you Countee Cullen—?

The question is posed again. This time as a mantra.  
Still echoing around us.  
With this, he slips further into his fantasy.

COUNTEE

I am somewhere between there and here. Lit, open windows at night are the closest to stars we can get. And if Negroes can fly, we can also travel and let each other know that we are not alone. The breeze drifting through windows is *our* railroad. The breeze kisses his moist, golden skin. He likes it that way, on a humid night. Keeps him calm; keeps him *here*. He lights another cigarette.

The lights dim as they light cigarettes in unison. The flames of the matches are only visible for a moment.

The atmosphere shifts and the stage rotates.  
COUNTEE, in an imagined act of **bilocation**, has traveled from his window to EDWARD'S.

COUNTEE

Dearest.

(They shake hands.)

EDWARD

Yes.

COUNTEE

Will you do something for me?

EDWARD

What is it?

COUNTEE

Try not to live your entire life during this decade. I admit that my reasons for asking are, to a large extent, selfish. I want to feel like you will be here for a long time to come.

EDWARD

(...)

COUNTEE

*Hmmm.* Sometimes, the thought of another press release, another gallery opening, another premiere party makes me nauseous. I feel, at times, so oversaturated with all the lives of my friends and colleagues, and it is relentless, still. Yet another recital, another review; I wish it would stop and I could be left alone with you.

EDWARD

With me only?

COUNTEE

And with Harold, of course. And sweet Ida, I couldn't do without her care. Not for long. She knows how to soothe my headaches; another cup of steaming tea appears before me, without even a word between us. She's an angel. She would love you too, Edward. She would do for you like a mother. She does for me like a mother, or a sister—

EDWARD

She does for you like a *wife*.

COUNTEE

Don't say it so harshly.

EDWARD

What?

COUNTEE

That word, "wife." You said it just now with sharpness, child. Now, I know exactly how you feel; trust me, I do. But boys like you shouldn't hang around an old man's neck. I want you to be free of my fatigue, my headaches. Free as a butterfly—a bluebird. You never speak of your prospects. Do you ever think of marriage, Edward?

EDWARD

(Attention drawn away.)

W—who would I marry?

COUNTEE

Someone as young and as mouthy as you.

EDWARD

I'm not mouthy, it's my *souçons* of wit.

COUNTEE

I wouldn't be hurt if you married. That's what men do; men marry. Really, I wouldn't be hurt if one day you phoned and said you were engaged to be married. A Nora, or an Augustine, Geraldine—

EDWARD

Is marriage so wonderful?

COUNTEE

*HA!* No, I much prefer friendships like ours. Like Harold and mine, at one point.

EDWARD

A Mr. and Mrs. Edward Atkinson.

COUNTEE

Someday. When you want to settle down, and you decide the party is over for now. You'll phone, or I'll hear it through the grapevine and gladly invite you and your wife to dinner with me and mine. And we can have proper introductions then. You never ask about her. Does the thought of her hurt you, Edward? It's ok if you say yes. I won't be cross, I promise.

EDWARD

Would you like it best if I said yes? Or is it better for you if I said no?

COUNTEE

I'm not sure.

EDWARD

Then I won't answer. I do, however, want to know how she snagged the gayest Negro in Harlem.

COUNTEE

The gayest Negro in Harlem is Alain Locke. The gayest Negro in Harlem is Richard Nugent. My God, I could tell you stories. Shall I keep them all to myself and leave you to wonder? I love watching your eyes glaze over in excitement; you gawk. But I had my fun too, believe it or not. I wasn't always so black and wrinkled. My hair was once smooth and slicked back and I dressed up and down at great cost. I had my hair slicked back like Paul Meeres.

EDWARD

Hard to slick back what you lost.

COUNTEE

Watch out, mouthy boy. The Uranians of Harlem didn't let the Depression check their ways, tucked-in handkerchiefs and all. I'm glad you don't fall into that sort, Edward. I'm glad that one day you'll happen upon a woman and you'll stop her search. If you'd like to know, I'll tell you. Ida and I met the way any eligible bachelor would meet a single woman.

Church, or a party. Rent parties—

And her eyes would chase mine, over wine, our hand of bridge, and I knew something was there, when with her, came those trails; jasmine, carnation and rose. When on me, her eyes chose; it seems the scent grew stronger. Growling with sivet, jasmine, carnation and rose. The times were recorded on her face, concealing



where silken cloth clung to the lips of the moth. But I knew she chose the perfumes she wore for the taste of a man like me; to bring me closer to her. The odor would linger as we parted, intoxicating, stimulating. And I was left with the thought that in the proposition I pose, I could spend the rest of my life smelling sivet, jasmine, carnation and rose.

COUNTEE begins to pat himself for a cigarette.

EDWARD pulls one out and tries to light it for him. COUNTEE chooses to light it for himself while—

I could have chosen to live a life smelling only leather, ink and musk. But I chose her, and I'm so relieved I did. And I could come home to her, whether in bliss or haze. My head she'd raise; my work she'd praise. And I could cry in her arms and she didn't know what made me weep so. She could ask and I could find the courage to say, I could, but we both know it is best this way. The company is distant, yet her presence is required.

Her hair is black as sin is black,  
And ringed about with fire.  
Her eyes are black as night is black,  
When the moon and stars conspire.  
Her mouth one cherry Clint;  
In twain, her voice a lyre—

EDWARD

That's real nice, Countee. I always loved your poetry.

COUNTEE

What is it, Edward? Did you not want to hear?

EDWARD

Hear. No I did. I thought I did.

COUNTEE

Then what?

EDWARD

(A moment.)

Hear. I'm still wondering. I sat in that church and wondered, no doves in sight. Your father in the front row, Harold as best man and I sat on the balcony, willing myself to content while deafening bells sounded above. Outside, in a sea of jovial screeching, I tried to push myself to the front, but the car rolled away. Harold saw me in the crowd, the only man there without a smile, brushing rice out of my hair. He took me home. All I said was I want to go home. He took me back to my apartment, but I meant back South. I was alone in this apartment with the sound of that pipe organ still ringing in my ears. *I didn't want to hear anymore*, but I had no choice.

COUNTEE

I'm here with you now Edward. Yes?

EDWARD

Here. I get letters from you saying you've been to a recital, an exhibit. French modernist paintings—not your taste, but I would enjoy it if I went. With a folded guide covered with your annotations, Picasso, Laurencin, Matisse, I follow your footsteps, using your scribblings as a guide. Imagining your presence and what you'd say if you were here with me. *But you are not*. I look up, the lone Negro walking through a white hall of paintings, again, and the folks around don't know I am following an echo.

I think you think of me as a vessel of vice; other times, I think you see me as your Black Christ. In either perspective, you give me too much credit. I'm not much, I don't think I'm much at all. Please don't say otherwise, not right now. I need you to hear me. Countee, I am *plain*. I know you don't like me to talk that way, but I am. Evidence of it is all around me.

COUNTEE

You are not plain.

EDWARD

Yes, I am. I am plain, and skinny, and alone sometimes. I'm not all that special; I'm no saint.

CARL appears upstage in front of a microphone on a stand.

The title track from *Cabin in the Sky* is heard and CARL lipsyncs to the voice of Ethel Waters mingling with the smoke in the air.

COUNTEE

You are. You're my saint. Don't laugh; I don't know how much I can take in the world of heartaches. I feel sharp pain now, in my side, numbness in my legs when I sit, my fingers will sometimes tingle after writing. But when I'm with you, I feel like I can live for you. Just for the moment, all of it goes away. That's why I want to keep you close to me.

EDWARD

I only get to see you once or twice a week, for an hour. Hour and a half, at most.

COUNTEE

I know, Eddie. I can fix that. Look at me, I can. We can really love each other. I believe that, I do. The world says it can't be done.

EDWARD

The world? Unholy.

COUNTEE

(Uncharacteristically a bit coy.)  
Unnatural. Forbidden—

EDWARD

None of that can exist here, if you don't want. Do you really believe in *Heaven*, Countee?

COUNTEE

Of course I do, I must. I believe there is a place where we can all be free. Where we can leave even art behind.

EDWARD

Why would we leave behind art?

COUNTEE

The making of it, at least. The art in Heaven, the plays and galleries are just there for enjoyment. Art is the closest I've ever gotten to telling the world what is on my heart. In poetry I can weave the world as I would

like it to be. There's no need for it in Heaven; in Heaven there is no need to hide behind games of wordplay and allusion, illusion, dissimulation—

EDWARD

What's it look like?

COUNTEE

I believe Heaven is catered to the people there. Each mansion in the sky has the perfect decor, outfits and—

EDWARD

What does Harold's Heaven look like?

COUNTEE

Books. Covered wall to wall with books, I would reckon. Same with Arna, floor to ceiling bookcases.

EDWARD

And Mr. Vechten?

COUNTEE

Carl's Heaven is filled with painted faces and marionettes, gloves and feathers. Our Heaven is a bed to lie down, at peace, at last. With you in my arms and a favorite book in yours.

EDWARD

That'll be real nice. What happens when I've read all the books there?

COUNTEE

Then, I'll keep your interest.

EDWARD

*Hmmm.* I want to talk like this all the time. With you alone.

COUNTEE

You'd only have to invite me up.

EDWARD

You'd never come.

COUNTEE

No I wouldn't.

EDWARD

Too risky, right? Let me try another wish. I wish, I could have been here in the 20s. Before all of this mess. Before the War, before the hard times. Could you imagine if we met then, both young?

COUNTEE

Do you think it would be much different? I would still be in love, and miserable in it. The past is no place for us either.

EDWARD

Then where can we go? Where it's just us and we are free?

In the final bars of the song underneath, COUNTEE presents his hand for EDWARD to shake. EDWARD takes the hand and places it on his cheek instead. CARL finishes his performance. The music rises high above us as the atmosphere shifts again and COUNTEE has left this dreamscape.

BLACKOUT