

Black Woman in the Car
By: Mary E. Weems, Ph.D.

*Inspired by Film The Lady in the Van, Starring Maggie Smith

Characters:

Miz Lady: Mysterious, ageless looking, beautiful, Black woman, actor, 40s

Forest: Black Man, 60s, Garage mechanic. He wears a shirt and tie under his jumpsuit. His yard is usually filled with cars needing repair.

Nita: Black woman, 30s, school teacher. She grew up on this street, a mix of working, and middle-class Black folks. Still lives in the family house.

Mister: Black man, Early 40s. He lives in the homeless shelter where he first met Miz Lady. Looks out for her and visits often.

Act I Scene I

Setting:

City side-street at midnight. An old black Studebaker appears in front of one of the houses. Its bad paint job covers decades of rust. It is packed with Miz Lady's world, with space in the middle for a single mattress, a pillow, and several blankets.

Miz Lady slowly crawls out of the back of the Station Wagon. She stretches, walks around her car, moving some of the plastic bottles and containers around on the side the audience can see. Satisfied, she walks to the driver side of her car

Miz Lady: “She walks in beauty like the night, Of cloudless climes and starry skies, And all that's best of dark and bright, Meets in her aspect and her eyes; Thus, mellow'd to that tender light, Which Heaven to gaudy day denies. One shade the more, one ray the less, had half impair'd the nameless grace, which waves in every raven tress, Or softly lightens o'er her face, Where thoughts serenely sweet express, How pure, how dear their dwelling place. And on that cheek and o'er that brow, so soft, so calm, yet eloquent, the smiles that win, the tints that glow, But tell of days in goodness spent, A mind at peace with all below, A heart whose love is innocent.” First time I read that poem in Miz Johnson's 10th grade English class, I thought Byron was writing about a Black woman. Got so excited, I still remember how the lines felt on my tongue when I practiced reciting it in front of granny's mirror. When it came time to share, I raised my hand like a flag in a storm. After I recited the poem I said ‘This could have been written about me.’ The whole class started laughing. Thank God the bell rang and everybody rushed out. Miz Johnson called me over to her desk. Apparently, I was the only one who hadn't read the footnote. The poem was really about Byron's aunt. He'd seen her walking through her garden in a black mourning dress. Mama always used to say I was so dramatic I belonged on the stage, right before she smacked me in the mouth for saying something I had no business saying. That day in Miz Johnson's class was the beginning of my dream.

She's interrupted by a man approaching whistling a tune

Miz Lady: Mister? Is that you?

Mister walks out of the dark and into the light cast by the streetlamp. He takes her hand and spins her around twice before pulling her close. She slaps him playfully

Mister: And who else would I be, late at night, Miz Lady?

Miz Lady: Nobody asked you to.

Mister: Now, how many times are you going to say stuff like that to me? Don't you know I don't have to be asked to care about you?

Miz Lady: Look man—

Mister: That's Mister Man to you.

Miz Lady: Look what ever, not sure why you keep coming around here, what you're waiting for, or what you want, but it's late and I'm here minding my own damn business, not bothering anybody. If you're staying find a seat, and tell me what's going on downtown.

Mister walks over and reaches under Miz Lady's car, finds a 3-legged stool, offers it to her as she moves to sit back down

Mister: Here, use this I can sit on the ground Miz Lady.

She waves his hand away

Miz Lady: My ass will do better on this concrete than yours. Plus, every time you come, you reach for that stool. I've started calling it "Mister's Stool" when you're not around, anyway.

Mister: Well you know what I always say about you.

Miz Lady: That I'm amazing and you're blessed to be in my company?

Mister: *(Laughing)* Naw, that you're the craziest, most beautiful, talented Black woman I don't really know.

Miz Lady: What do you mean "don't know?" I met you at least two years ago, don't you remember at the dumpster behind that frou frou restaurant downtown?

Mister: Of course, I remember, that's not what I mean.

Miz Lady: Well, time's moving, spit it out or get on to your next stop so I can enjoy what's left of damn near the only time this street's not busy.

Mister: *(Quietly)* I mean I don't even know your name Miz Lady. I've cared about you since the first time I saw you behind that restaurant. Not even sure why, but I swear I saw a glow around you that day, a glow that took my attention away from the sun. One minute I was standing there alone, the next there you were.

Miz Lady: Now who sounds crazy Mister? Glowing, appearing out of nowhere? Hell, I was there doing what the rest of our community does on Wednesdays right after closing, getting good food out of that dumpster. Good food thrown away because some stupid health law won't allow the restaurant owner to give it to us outright. Nice man too. Always used to let me come in and use the bathroom during the day.

Mister: You asked me what's going on downtown. You ready to listen?

Miz Lady: If you're ready to start talking about something besides me, yes.

Mister: Things are mostly going along the same as they were last week when I came to see you. Same game. Everybody gets up and gets out of the shelter by the time they make folks leave. The kids living in the Women's with their mamas, rush out looking as best they can in time to make the long walk to the various school buses they catch. Old Mr. Smith died.

Miz Lady: He did? When? Why didn't you let me know?

Mister: Because I just found out myself Miz Lady. He wasn't staying in the shelter with us when he died. His oldest daughter came by one morning to tell him his son was sick in Alabama and had sent her to find him.

Miz Lady: Didn't know he had any children.

Mister: Neither did I. Never heard him talk about anything but 'Nam and the government.

Miz Lady: Did he have a funeral or at least a memorial service?

Mister: He did, but they had it in Montgomery where he's from.

Miz Lady: How do you know?

Mister: Because his daughter was kind enough to send me a letter at the shelter address, to let me know.

Miz Lady: Can I read it?

Mister: Nope. Crazy Ralph got his hands on it while I was reading it at our weekly circle and peed all over it with his nasty ass.

Miz Lady: Goddamn. You mean his crazy ass. Only a crazy man would do something like that to somebody else's letter.

Mister: Yeah, you have a point there. Bottom line though, only thing I could do with the letter after that was use another piece of paper to pick it up and put in the garbage, after I chased him away for doing that. People wanted to beat his ass.

Miz Lady: That would have been wrong too. You don't kick a man when he's down—a woman either.

Mister: True. Anyway, it wasn't a real long letter. She wrote that he looked good and almost everybody in town turned out to pay their respects and—

Miz Lady: Wait a minute, hit pause—Did you say the whole town turned out?

Mister: Yep.

Miz Lady: For Old Mr. Smith?

Mister: Yep. Remember he wasn't born old, he was young like everybody else in this world once.

Miz Lady: So?

Mister: So, what?

Miz Lady: So why did the whole town turn out to say goodbye? What was he to them, what did he do?

Mister: He won the Purple Heart.

Miz Lady: Naw. Now who's lying. Can't be. And never said anything about it?

Mister: Yep.

Miz Lady: Lord. So, he was a hero. A real live hero.

Mister: He was Miz Lady. Tell you something else I didn't know.

Miz Lady: What?

Mister: Remember how he used to limp?

Miz Lady: Yes. Some of the other men used to call him "Imp the stimp the ladies' pimp" to tease him.

Mister: Yeah, me too when I'd had a shorty or two of Rose. He never seemed to mind and now I know why.

Miz Lady: Why?

Mister: Because he lost one of his legs in 'Nam. He walked point for two tours and almost made it home, but a week before he was due to get out, he stepped on a land mine and it took his right leg off at the thigh.

Miz Lady: That's terrible. I never had any idea.

Mister: According to his daughter's letter he saved the lives of everybody in his platoon that day like he'd done countless times without injury. That's why he was awarded a Purple Heart. It's only given to those wounded in battle that survive, and those who die.

Miz Lady: Yes, I know. Never met a Purple Heart winner. May God rest and keep him.

Mister: Amen. Will miss him.

Miz Lady: Me too.

Mister: Brought you something.

Miz Lady: You didn't have to, I wish you'd—

Mister: Woman—

Miz Lady: That's Miz Lady to you.

Mister: *(Laughing)* Miz Lady, I brought you something.

Miz Lady: What?

Mister reaches deep inside his pants pocket, pulls out two tangerines and a cigarette

Mister: Here. I know you love tangerines and I'm guessing you smoked your last loosie about an hour or so ago.

Miz Lady: Thank you Mister, thank you kindly. I appreciate this. I know I fuss at you at times, but don't think I'm not grateful for your kindness.

Mister: No problem Miz Lady.

He waits for her to put the fruit inside the car and light the loosie.

Mister: You sure I can't convince you to come back downtown with me? I worry about you out here in these streets so far from the people who care about you. Allie and them other crack hos—

Miz Lady: Watch your mouth now. They're not the only addicts among us. There's plenty crackheads at the men's shelter too. In fact, Crazy Ralph's one of them.

Mister: Sorry. You're right. But he doesn't steal from us. That's my problem with them ho—I mean young women. They'll steal the stank off shit and swear up and down they don't even know what shit is.

Miz Lady: Well, they've never stole anything from me. Fact is, they helped me a lot when I was downtown. Will never forget the ass whooping I almost got at the hands of Marie that time.

Mister: Marie who?

Miz Lady: You never met her. She was this big, pregnant woman who was in the shelter for just a few weeks before her family came from D.C. to get her.

Mister: But you don't bother nobody. Why did she want to fight you?

Miz Lady: Because she made a mistake one day and asked me what I thought she should do.

Mister: About what?

Miz Lady: About being foolish enough to cuss out her mama and daddy and run away from home after they found out she'd gotten pregnant by a white boy in her class.

Mister: Uh oh. What did you tell her?

Miz Lady: Told her I didn't give a damn who she was pregnant by, what color he was, or what her parents had to say about it. Told her she was focusing on the wrong person. She stopped being a priority as soon as she got pregnant.

Mister: I know she didn't want to hear that.

Miz Lady: And you also know I didn't give a damn. I said 'Since you asked me, I'm going to tell you what I think, what you do or don't do is your business, but remember this, I've been where you are, you still have to go through a lot of years to get to where I am.'

Mister: What did she say to that?

Miz Lady: She didn't say anything. All of sudden she jumped at me like I'd been talking about her mama. Before she could get to me, Allie and her crew had gotten between us. They grabbed her up, and took her out of there. Last, I heard, the shelter let her call home and her family came up here and got her.

Mister: I'm glad she didn't get to you. Hope she and her baby turn out okay.

Miz Lady: Me too. Listen, it's time for you to get on back downtown. The moon's high and pretty soon night will be leaving for day. Get on out of here so I can have my time.

Mister: Okay, baby—

Miz Lady: Who? What did you say?

Mister: Sorry, sorry. I mean goodnight. See you next week.

She gets up and heads for the back of the car while Mister watches her for a while after he walks back into the dark. After he disappears, she sits on the edge of the Studebaker. She lights a candle, then picks up a large framed picture and props it up behind the candle. It's not quite visible to the audience.

Miz Lady: I miss you so much honey. . .Miss you.

She continues to look at the picture as lights fade to black

End of Scene

Scene II

Weeks later. Early morning just before the street comes to life. Miz Lady exits the front seat of the station wagon. She's dressed in a short white t-shirt, black jeans and black footies. She begins modern dancing to a music no one else can hear for a few moments.

Miz Lady: Thank you God for waking me up this morning. I don't have much, but I have you, I have myself and I have my home.

She reaches inside the back of her car, pulls out a coffee travel mug

Miz Lady: *(Sings)* You deserve a break today, so get up and a get a way to *(Hums the rest of the song)*. Time for my morning cup. Hope that young girl Shirley's on the morning shift today or her boss Marsha. They never charge me.

She disappears offstage. After she's exited Nita enters from the opposite end carrying a bag filled with graded school papers, grade book, and thermos of coffee. She walks up to the station wagon and knocks soft, then loud on the back window

Nita: Miz Lady? Miz Lady? It's me Nita, are you in there? Miz Lady? You told me to come by this morning. I need to get our interview started. Miz Lady?

Forest walks up

Forest: Morning Nita. How you doin' this mornin'?

Nita: Just fine Mr. Forest.

Forest: Forest, Nita, my name is just plain Forest. When you call me Mr. I feel like my father.

Nita: No disrespect Mr. Forest, but mama raised me right and you're old enough to be my father.

Forest: How do you know?

Nita: I don't exactly. I just know every time I shape my mouth to call you "Forest" I hear my mother holler at me to show some respect to grown folks—can't help it. Have you seen Miz Lady?

Forest: Yep. You just missed her by a few minutes. Left to go to her favorite spot around the corner for coffee.

Nita: I've told her a thousand times that she can come to my place for coffee no matter how early it is.

Forest: And I'm sure she heard you. Don't get upset because she wants to do it her way. I know she's been around here long enough for you to understand that.

Nita: Speaking of how long she's been around here. Do you know someone named Florence Williams?

Forest: Nope, why?

Nita: The postman caught me as I was on the way to school yesterday. He had an envelope with your address on it, addressed to someone by that name.

Forest: That's strange. Seems to me if someone by that name had ever lived on this street, you'd be the person who'd know.

Nita: Exactly. That's why he asked me. I also know people will ask folks to have mail delivered to their address too, so since it was your exact street and house number, I thought I'd check.

Forest: Yeah, I know my cousin Stacy used to have his mail delivered to my old apartment while he was in the joint for a short vacation a while back.

Nita: Anyway, thanks, I'll let Mr. Riley know to mark it 'Return to Sender' when he delivers our mail tomorrow. Back to Miz Lady. How long has she been around here exactly?

Forest: What? You've lived here longer than anybody. If you don't know what makes you think I do.

Nita: That's what's crazy. I can tell you when everybody moved on this street including you, but not her.

Forest: Why is that?

Nita: I don't know. Seems as if, one minute she didn't live here, the next, I see this old station wagon parked three doors down from my house and then the next, she's knocking on my door to ask if she can use my bathroom.

Forest: What's her name? Everybody around here calls her Miz Lady.

Nita: Now, if I don't know when she moved here, what makes you think I know her name.

Forest: I wasn't trying to be smart.

Nita: Let me save you some time. I don't know it. Never have. She told me to call her Miz Lady—that's what I call her.

Forest: True talk.

Nita: What are you doing up and about so early?

Forest: Actually, I got up early because I thought I'd catch her before she started moving around. She wants me to check on her car.

Nita: What's wrong with it and while I'm asking questions, why doesn't she just drive her car to her coffee spot and anywhere else she needs to go? Every time I see her she's either walking or trying to get somebody to take her somewhere?

Forest: According to her this is a two-way car.

Nita: What does that mean?

Forest: It means it's old, the only car she has, and the less she drives it the better.

Nita: But I've always heard that you should drive old cars more than new ones.

Forest: And you're heard right, but since this ain't your car or my car, we don't have a say in when or why she drives.

Nita: Yes, you're right about that Forest.

Nita checks her watch

Nita: I'm running late for the train. See you later Mr. Forest. Tell Miz Lady I stopped by okay?

Forest: Soon as I see her I will. Have a good one Nita.

Nita: You too.

Nita rushes off stage as Forest checks to see if Miz Lady left the key in the ignition of her car. While he's inside she returns

Miz Lady: Hey, who's in my car? Help! Police! Police! Rape—

Forest rushes out to stop her from shouting

Forest: Miz Lady, come on now quit making all that noise, it's just me, don't nobody want this raggedy car but you.

She pops him upside the head playfully

Miz Lady: Oh shit, Forest, I'm sorry. You scared the mess out of me. I thought I'd make it back before you got here this morning. You're not usually up this early. By the time you finish working on cars it's usually after midnight. What are you doing here?

Forest: I was trying to take care of you first thing Miz Lady. When you came to the house last night, you sounded like it was an emergency.

Miz Lady: And it is.

Forest: But like me and Nita were just saying, you don't even drive it much so—

Miz Lady: So, it none of your business, it's none of Nita's business, it's no damn body's business. If I never drive it, I want it ready to go from point A to point B whenever I get ready. You understand what I'm saying?

Forest: I do. But while you gettin' all bent out of shape, remember I don't charge you 'ever' so in a way, it is my business too.

Miz Lady: No, you don't Forest and I really appreciate it. In a way I did pay you though.

Forest reaches inside both pants pockets, and pulls them inside out to show no money

Forest: What do you mean paid?

Miz Lady: Do you remember the time your knees were hurting you so bad you could hardly walk?

Forest: Yeah. Your knees would be bothering you too if you'd spent as much time under cars as I have. What about it?

She looks up to talk to God

Miz Lady: Funny, how folks forget once the pain stops. Hmph funny.

Forest: Funny, haha what Miz Lady?

Miz Lady: When's the last time your knees bothered you? Do you remember?

Forest: Matter of fact I don't. It's been at least a year.

Miz Lady: One year, fourteen days Forest.

Forest: Huh?

Miz Lady: Exactly one year, fourteen days and about ten hours.

Forest: Okay, so what?

Miz Lady: So when you came here damn near on your knees crying about how you wouldn't be able to fix my car at the time because you couldn't stay on your knees. Do you remember what happened?

Forest: I recall you asking me exactly where it hurt. You sat me down on the back of your car and—

Miz Lady: I gave you that leather pouch you still wear around your neck.

Forest: How'd you know that?

Miz Lady: I rubbed your legs down slow and careful, but I didn't touch them—remember?

Forest: Oh yeah, that's right. Shit, but you never even touched me. What did you call it Ricky, Raky, what was it you said?

Miz Lady: Reiki Forest, R-e-i-k-i. I used my energy to heal your knees. I touched you with my spiritual energy, that's what I mean. How much is not having your knees hurt worth to you?

Forest: Can't put a price on that Miz Lady. Not being in pain, being able to do the work I love means a whole lot to me. In case, I didn't say it back then, 'cause I didn't

know what the hell was going on—thank you. By the way, are you ready to tell me what's in that pouch yet?

Miz Lady: You're welcome. Now will you take this key and see what's wrong with my Eggbeater please?

Forest: My pleasure Miz Lady. I'll have it running for you in no time.

Miz Lady: Okay, I think I'll go by Nita's house and leave her a note. She'll see it when she gets home from school.

She walks off in the direction of Nita's house as Forest pops the hood of her car

End of scene

Scene III

Later the same day. Nita approaches Miz Lady's car. Miz Lady is seated at back of car reading the newspaper

Nita: Afternoon Miz Lady. How are you doing?

Miz Lady: I'm okay Nita. What can I do for you?

Nita: Nothing right now. I heard you came by my house. Anything I can do for you?

Miz Lady: Yes, there is. I've been thinking about this street a lot lately. I've always been curious about how a street gets its name. There's usually a fascinating story behind it. I already know Marcus Garvey Lane is an historical landmark, but who named it and when?

Nita: You're right Miz Lady, there is a story and it's a long one. Short of it is, my great-great-great grandfather Earle (*pronounced Earl-ie*) Lacy named this street. He escaped from South Carolina back in 1915 after doing something our family still can't talk about. Pa Earle as folks used to call him, didn't take no mess off white folks and back then mostly all they had for Black people was one kind of mess or another. This kept his wife, Ma Jenny up most nights worrying herself sick. After what happened, happened, they made their way up North and stayed with a Black family that belonged to We Three Kings Baptist church, connected them with until Pa Earle could begin making his living as a carpenter. Back then, like now, everybody who lives here gets along. We're like a family, adapting to change as it comes, supporting each other in times of trouble. Most of the homes here are still owned by descendants of the original owners, the few rentals, always nice people because the new owners of the homes given up by the original families put me in charge, and I choose carefully. Pa Earle and Ma Jenny had left almost everything behind, including a house that sat on land he owned, but he still had his tools, Ma Jenny brought the family bible, their wedding bands, and a few clothes. Took them five years to save enough money to buy the little piece of land my house sits on. He built it and they lived in it until he died. He set it up in his Will so that no one in our family can ever sell it. Also, as stated in his Will, who gets it is determined each time by a family meeting. Everybody who wants to live in it, gets a chance to make an argument for why, then we vote. I've always been the best in this generation of our family at making an argument.

Miz Lady: That's amazing Nita. You must be so proud to know so much of your family's history, of its contribution to the history of this street.

Nita: I am. Especially since most of the people I know can't even go back that far.

Miz Lady: No Lie Nita. Why'd Pa Earle, name the street after Garvey?

Nita: Marcus Garvey was one of his heroes. As soon as Pa Earle heard about his plan for returning Black people scattered all over the world thanks to slavery to our African homeland, something Garvey called the Pan African movement, he was dedicated to help him all he could. Pa Earle believed going back home was our best chance for getting away from the effects of race hatred. He never made it back himself, but he helped dozens of Black families who used to live on this street go back. He was a Pan Africanist until he died.

Miz Lady: Wow. I'm impressed. Sounds like your great-great-great was an activist before the word existed.

Nita: You're right about that Miz Lady. We could use more Black men like him around here right about now.

Miz Lady: Thanks for sharing this with me Nita. Maybe that's what I've been feeling—Pa Earle's spirit coming back now and then to check on you.

Nita: I hope that's true Miz Lady. Next time he comes, if he does, I pray he gives me a sign. Anything else I can do for you?

Miz Lady: No. Not right now. Think I'll sit here a while and see if I can get Pa Earle to visit.

Nita begins walking toward home

Nita: Okay, See you later Miz Lady.

Miz Lady: You will, Nita. Take it easy.

End of Scene

Scene IV

Weeks later. Midnight. Miz Lady exits her car wearing a dirty white t-shirt, with 'Secrets Out' printed in bold black letters, no shoes, jeans. She walks to the streetlamp

Miz Lady: Life has a way of happening while you're busy making other plans. After I realized my life as an actor would be far from Broadway, local but consistent, I worked two jobs so I could pick and choose my roles. One of the hardest was this play called "Grandpa's Hands" written by September Watson. It's a powerful one-act, about incest. These lines hit a little too close to home for me.

Can't keep nothing that ain't clean forever

men in the family supposed to love me

giving me candy, fillin' me up with white stuff

every time mama's gone.

When she come back

I always tell her, she listens

like it's a fairy tale

tells me to quit talkin' foolish

buys me my favorite food

keeps lettin' them eat and drink

on me.

End of Scene

Scene V

(Days later. Early evening. Street is quiet—most having dinner, doing homework etc. The sound of a radio playing funk music is heard in the background. Miz Lady is sitting on the edge of her car reading the newspaper. She puts the paper down, gets down on the ground and reaches under her car for a bucket. She goes to the back where she can't be seen and the sound of pee can be heard. She returns, puts the bucket back under the car and pulls out a gallon jug of clean water. She reaches inside the back of the car and pulls out a bag. She takes out the hand sanitizer and cleans under her arms with a cloth inside the bag. (Nita approaches but hides and watches) She takes out another cloth, wets it with the water and wipes her face. She takes out a box of baking soda and a toothbrush, dips the brush in water, then in baking soda and brushes her teeth. Miz Lady takes a long drink of water, swishes it around and spits it out, twice. She puts everything back and disappears inside her car. Exits momentarily, wearing the same bottoms and shoes but a fresh white shirt and a fresh wrap covering her hair. She reaches under the car and takes out the bucket of pee. Exits the stage from the opposite side of where Nita is hiding, to dump it.)

End of Scene

Scene VI

Setting:

Afternoon day after Halloween. Nita approaches Miz Lady's car and notices it's covered with eggs. Just before she knocks on the car window, she hears Miz Lady coming, laughing

Nita: What happened to your car Miz Lady? We don't have any little kids around here. And what are you laughing at?

Miz Lady: I'm laughing to keep from, Nita. And don't you know little kids aren't the only ones who act like fools on All Hallows Eve?

Nita: You mean Halloween?

Miz Lady: I can call it whatever I want to young woman. I'm the person who's been vandalized.

Nita: Did you see anything?

Miz Lady: No. Didn't you see me just walk up? I didn't spend the night here.

Nita: Oh? Since when? I've never known you not to sleep here.

Miz Lady: Now you're sounding crazy. You don't even know how long I've been here, do you?

Nita: No, I don't. Where did you spend the night?

Miz Lady: While you're getting inside my business like you don't have any, I spent the night downtown at the Women's shelter, among friends.

Nita: How'd you get there?

Miz Lady: Forest gave me a ride after he fixed the Eggbeater for me.

Nita: So she's back on the road huh?

Miz Lady: Yes, thank God. Don't know what I'd do without her. Do you know how to get eggs off of car paint?

Nita: Nope, but I'm sure Forest will.

Miz Lady: I'll ask him when I see him tomorrow or the next. No hurry. Fact, that's what I was laughing at when I walked up.

Nita: Yeah? What?

Miz Lady: Think about it, eggs? Beater? Now my car looks like her name. Get it?

Nita: Do you feel like starting today?

Miz Lady: Starting what?

Nita: My interview with you. Have you forgotten already?

Miz Lady: Of course not, I'm just messing with you. I'm ready. Come and have a seat.

She reaches under her car to get the 3-legged stool. Nita positions it beside her, takes out her recorder and turns it on.

Nita: This is the first session of my interview with Miz Lady, who lives in her car on our street. She's graciously agreed to help with my research project on the plight of homeless people in the city. I've known Miz Lady for a while and I'm honored she's agreed to talk to me. Before we begin do you have any questions?

Miz Lady: How many questions do you have?

Nita: I'm not sure Miz Lady. I've written the first five, and think the rest will come from your responses.

Miz Lady: Okay, let's go. What's your first question?

Nita: What's your name?

Miz Lady: Next question.

Nita: Wait a minute, I thought you agreed to let me interview you?

Miz Lady: Yes, I agreed to let you ask me questions, didn't guarantee I'd answer all of them. Take this one for example, I'm not going to answer it. So we can move on, or I can go back to what I was doing before I agreed to let you do this.

Nita: How old are you?

Miz Lady pretends like she can't hear her

Nita: Where are you from?

Miz Lady: Earth.

Nita: Okay, let's try this. How long have you lived on this street in your car?

Miz Lady: Nita, so far you're not doing well. Didn't you tell me that you're in college? Pursuing a Masters in social work?

Nita: Yes, I am.

Miz Lady: But you're a school teacher.

Nita: Yes, I am, but I'm also tired. Also, wait a minute this is not about me, it's about—you. Will you please help me out and start answering my questions?

Miz Lady: I will, but ask me something I want to answer.

Nita: Who are you?

Miz Lady: I'm a Black woman, daughter, lover of God, squatter on this street, friend to few, unknown to most. I'm me, breathing, raging against the light.

Nita: What light?

Miz Lady: The kind that comes right after you die.

Nita: Why? Do you know something I don't?

Miz Lady: I know I want to live as long as I can and some time that takes a rage—for living.

Nita: What do you love about God?

Miz Lady: Everything, but I'm in no hurry to meet God any time soon.

Nita: Miz Lady, that works for me. I love God too, but I rejected organized religion a long time ago in favor of "I believe and I don't know," meaning I surrender to God, don't have to have a sign, or somebody to tell me what the Bible or any other religious text means. I'm spiritual, so if you're raging against that light that's fine, let's move on.

Miz Lady is surprised to suddenly see Mister who walks up on her other side and pokes her to get her attention. She turns

Miz Lady: What the Fuck?

Mister starts laughing and steps around in front of her. Miz Lady notices he looks like he hasn't showered in a while or changed his clothes

Miz Lady: Mister? What are you doing here at this time of day?

Mister: Just had you on my mind Miz Lady, that's all. Just had you on my mind.

Mister looks at Nita

Mister: Who's this?

Nita: I was just about to ask you that.

Miz Lady: Nita, this is Mister, a friend of mine from downtown. Mister, this is my neighbor Nita. She teaches at George Washington Carver elementary.

Mister: Nice to meet you Miss Nita.

Nita: Nice to meet you too.

Mister: My pleasure.

Miz Lady: So, what's going on? Do you need something? You okay?

Mister: Just to talk to you Miz Lady. Just want to talk to you for a few minutes. Can we?

Nita takes her cue, turns off the recorder, puts it in her bag and picks up the stool

Miz Lady: Thanks for understanding Nita. Sorry about the interruption. Leave the stool where it is, Mister can use it.

Nita: No problem. Let's try this again at the same time tomorrow, okay?

Miz Lady: See you then.

Mister takes a seat as they watch Nita exit

Mister: Thanks, Miz Lady. I'm sorry to bother you but I just had to see you, right now, right this minute.

Miz Lady: What are you talking about? What's the big rush all of sudden? You've been coming to see me every week almost like it's your job for months, at midnight or so. Now here you are in the middle of the day, interfering with my business. What's going on with you?

Mister reaches into his pocket.

Mister: Brought you some more tangerines and two loosies this time.

She holds out both hands cupped together, puts the tangerines in one pocket, one loosie in the other and lights one

Miz Lady: Thanks Mister. I appreciate your thinking about me. You're always bringing me something I need.

Mister: Which brings me to why I'm here.

Miz Lady: Either I'm getting older faster than I think, or I missed something I said. Spit it out.

Mister: You, Miz Lady. I need you.

Miz Lady stands up and makes some space between them

Miz Lady: You're joking, right?

Mister's insulted

Mister: Joking? Woman do I look like I'm laughing to you. What do you mean joking? Have you really been thinking that I've been going out of my way to come all the way out here, sometimes even hitchhiking, when I can't get a ride and don't have the bus fare, to see you? Huh? Is that what you think?

Miz Lady: I'm sorry brother—

Mister: I'm not your brother.

Miz Lady: You know I don't mean it that way.

Mister: I need you woman. You understand what I mean? I miss you, think about you all the time, even when I try not to. Are you blind? Can't you feel me?

Miz Lady: No, I can't Mister. I'm sorry.

Mister: Don't be. It's not your fault. Look at me. What do I think I'm even doing, talking to a beautiful woman like you, I don't even have a place to lay my head, I can call my own.

Miz Lady walks closer to him and looks around

Miz Lady: And I have what? A beat-up car, and a shitload of stuff nobody wants but me. I'm damn near homeless too. Fact, most people including Nita don't even count a car as a home.

Mister: But you haven't always been almost homeless.

Miz Lady: And what in the world does that mean. Who has?

Mister: That's not what I mean. I may not have a window or a pot, but years in the streets, you get to know people.

Miz Lady: You don't know me any better than Eve's mama, brother. I'm not interested in anybody really knowing me. Not now.

Mister: Meaning?

Miz Lady: Meaning, mind your business. I can't help you Mister. I mean, I'm flattered that you care about me beyond what I thought, and I know what it feels like to be attracted to somebody who's not attracted to you, but I can't make up what I don't feel and I won't. I want you to stop needing me and I mean right now.

Mister: Miz Lady wait a minute won't you at least give me a chance to get to know you better?

Miz Lady: Will you stop your mouth, put your ears on hold for a minute, and hold on to what I'm trying to tell you?

Mister: I hear you just fine, you don't think you need me—I got that, but like you just said you don't even—

They're interrupted by Forest

Forest: Afternoon Miz Lady, everything alright here?

Mister: Alright, what you mean, I'll whoop your ass—

Before he can get ass out of his mouth, Forest, reaches out to try to grab him, but Mister dodges and punches him in the face, Forest swings, but Mister dodges his punch and before Forest can regroup, Miz Lady steps between the two of them

Miz Lady: Cut this shit out! Nobody's whooping anybody's ass. Come one now, this makes no damn sense.

Forest: He started it, Miz Lady, I don't know who in the hell he thinks he is coming up here—

Miz Lady: He thinks he's my friend, same as you are Forest, and he's just as welcome here.

Mister: Fuck him.

Forest, tries to get to Mister again but Miz Lady won't budge

Miz Lady: Forest, quit it now, stop! Now all of this is just a misunderstanding. Mister, give me some time to think about what you said, okay?

Mister: You will?

Forest: Did you hear what the woman said?

Miz Lady: That's Miz Lady to you Forest. Anyway, I don't need you putting your two cents in here. Mister, why don't you come back next week or so at the usual time and we'll talk okay?

Mister: Okay, then, see you next time I come this way. If you decide you wanta talk before then, you know where I'll be.

Mister exits, taking his time.

Miz Lady: Wonder why he wasn't whistling? Mister always whistles when he comes to see me.

End of Act 1

INTERMISSION

Act II Scene I

Setting:

Tuesday, Midnight of the following week. Miz Lady exits her car. She's dressed in all black and wears a newsboy cap. She walks towards the streetlamp

Miz Lady: Miz Johnson recommended I join the Drama Club and I auditioned for every role, no matter how small. Learned a lot about acting, including how much I loved it. My first grown up role was in this crazy piece with a tiny cast called "Party Line," about a bunch of people living in a run- down rooming house in the 30s.

Miz Lady picks up receiver on an old-fashioned telephone.

Miz Lady: Operator? Operator? Yes, give me 287R. Never mind who it is Lucy, please connect me I'm in a hurry. Hello Popps? Yeah, I got the money—thanks for sending it right away...yeah,I know you told me to stay away from Snake, naw he still don't give extra time to pay---hell naw he don't give a shit what your problems are he's a no long-story, I don't play that person...Huh? No, I don't know where I'm gettin' next week's payment. Okay, I know you've heard this story one time to many...the real deal is I'm in way more trouble. No, wait pops, don't hang up. Let me explain. Truth is, I'm trying to buy my freedom. No, it's not that. Snake doesn't own me exactly. Will you please let me talk? You know I've had this gambling thing, okay, this gambling 'problem' for a long time. Have tried to kick it, but even the years I spent with Gamblers Anonymous didn't seem to work. Yeah, you're right it worked off and on. Like a drunk, I'd fall off the wagon, then get back on, fall off then get back on until. That's right pops, just like you always said, until one day I got in too deep to just ask for more time. So, I started providing a service. What kind of service? That's what I'm trying to tell you. Snake started sending me the names and pictures of men he wanted me to handle for him. Prostitute? No, pops. Not that kind of handling. I'm mean the permanent kind. Wait! Please pops I need to say this to somebody. Would you please just let me finish? Okay, spit it out? Here it is: I lure the men Snake wants me to handle to my place by pretending like I like them, then I use knock out drops, shoot them in the head and call Snake to have his boys pick up the---

Strange man interrupts call on party line. He's been listening

Strange Man's Voice: Oh yeah, pick up the what? You snitchin' bitch.

Miz Lady quickly hangs up the phone.

End of Scene

Scene II

Setting:

Early evening a few weeks later. Mister approaches whistling his usual tune

Miz Lady: Hey Mister. Good to hear you whistling again. How are you this evening?

Mister approaches, hand behind his back. He offers Miz Lady one red rose

Mister: I'm sorry is how I'm doing. Brought you a rose to put a period on my apology. What I was trying to say came out all wrong last time. You forgive me?

Miz Lady takes the flower, holds it in front of her

Miz Lady: Mister?

Mister: Yes?

Miz Lady: Why did you bring me this flower?

Mister: I just told you. I'm trying to apologize. Didn't you tell me one time that you liked roses?

Miz Lady: I did, but.

Mister: But what?

Miz Lady: But I didn't mean to suggest I wanted you to give me any. Mister, I'm not sure what else to say. I care about you, as a friend, but not like that.

Mister: How can you be so sure though? You don't even really know me.

Miz Lady: *(Silence)*

Mister: Now that I think about it, you've never even asked me any questions about my life. Won't you at least get to know me better before you make up your mind?

Miz Lady: You're right, I haven't asked you any questions about your life. Mister, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but to tell you the truth, I've never even thought about asking you. I've been me a long time. People are always telling me how young I look for whatever age they think I am, but my spirit is old—sometimes I feel older than time.

Mister: Well, you damn sho' don't look it. I don't even think about age when I look at you.

Miz Lady: My point is I know when I'm attracted to a man.

Mister: Okay, alright, I get what you're saying, but what if this time is different? What if I have enough feeling for both of us for a while?

Miz Lady: Mister—listen to yourself, that doesn't even make sense to you.

Mister: Guess you're right. That's the thing about love though.

Miz Lady: Love?

Mister: Yes, love.

Miz Lady: Mister, don't say that, I mean, I'm so sorry.

Mister: Don't be. Not your fault. I'd rather you be honest, than lie to me.

Miz Lady: Mister, I don't want you to think—

Mister: Think what? Never mind. Got to get back downtown. See you when I see you

As Mister begins to walk away, Miz Lady offers him the rose. Mister refuses, stops to look at her before he turns and exits

End of Scene

Scene III

Setting:

Night.

Miz Lady's silently reciting lines and making the gestures of an actor.

Miz Lady: Sometimes I wish my life was a play—and I could put it in reverse.

She starts walking backwards around the streetlamp counting out loud

Miz Lady: Nine, ten, eleven, twelve (*She slows down*)

Miz Lady: Thirteen.

Forest walks up.

Forest: Evening Miz Lady. What are you doing?

Miz Lady: Trying as hard as I can, putting all my concentration, and all the strength God gave me to minding my own business. What are you doing?

Forest: I see you have jokes this evening huh? Very funny.

Miz Lady: Doing my best. Actually, I'm glad you stopped by. Could use some company right about now.

Forest: Damn. Something must be seriously wrong cause I've never heard you say, you wanted anybody's company. What's up?

Miz Lady: Nothing in particular. Was just headed for a bad memory.

They sit quietly for a few moments

Forest: Well, I have enough of those to understand that.

Forest: I heard you counting as I was walking up. You stop at thirteen or did I interrupt you?

Miz Lady: I stopped.

Forest: I'll tell you something Miz Lady.

Miz Lady: What?

Forest: This is not the first time I've seen you walk backwards around that lamp post, then count to thirteen, or standing under it reciting lines like you're on stage.

Miz Lady: Have you been spying on me?

Forest: No, not spying, but I do live right across the street. Ever notice that I don't have curtains in my windows?

Miz Lady: Of course, I have.

Forest: Ever been curious enough to try and look in my windows.

Miz Lady: No.

Forest: Ever think about doing it?

Miz Lady: Ye—yes, I have, several times. But I never did though.

Forest: Then point made. It's not like I was spying, but you are my neighbor and sometimes I see you, that's all. It's not like I'm recording you or bothering you or anything.

Miz Lady: Until now. I'll never be comfortable again.

Forest: Now, you're lying. You don't have an uncomfortable bone in your whole body and you damn sure don't give a damn who's watching you. If you did, you'd spend a lot more time inside your car and a lot less time treating the outside like your living room.

Miz Lady: All I can do is be quiet in front of that kind of truth. You're right. I don't care what other people think. Used to, but don't any more.

Forest: I don't if you care what 'all' other people think, but I bet there's one or two people you do.

Miz Lady: Okay, have it your way. That's why everybody has an opinion. Forest?

Forest: What?

Miz Lady: I have a confession.

Forest: Confession? The kind a priest needs to hear?

Miz Lady: Hell naw, Forest. I'm talking about a few minutes ago when I said I've thought about looking in your window?

Forest: So, did you do more than think about it?

Miz Lady: Yes. I saw you in the lamplight one night.

Forest: You did?

Miz Lady: Yes.

Forest: What did you see?

Miz Lady walks over to him and places her hands on her chest

Miz Lady: I saw your breasts. They're bigger than mine. Not like man-boobs either—a womans.

Forest: *(Silence)*

He stands and puts some distance between them

Miz Lady: Forest?

Forest: When did this happen? Why didn't you say anything?

Miz Lady: Why are you hiding the fact that you're a woman?

Forest: I'm not hiding. For once, I'm not hiding. Do you know why I don't have curtains to my windows?

Miz Lady: Not really, but why?

Forest: Because back home, once I got grown and was able to move far away from our neighborhood, I was still so terrified of being seen, I kept heavy curtains and vertical blinds to my windows. Couldn't even have plants, no sunlight.

Miz Lady: Forest, what's wrong?

Forest: You mean what's finally right. Fact is, I've always been a boy. From as young as I can remember.

Miz Lady: Damn, so you're trans—

Forest: I was the first born, and when my mother had another son, I used to take his extra clothes when I was alone in my room and put them on. They'd be tight, but felt so right on me, so much better than all that pink and ruffle and ribbon mama used to like to dress me in. As I got older, I used to use my allowance, or any money I earned to go to the thrift stores and buy boys clothing that fit. I'd sneak them into my room, and wear them any time my parents weren't around. Me and my brother had separate rooms—till this day he doesn't know.

Miz Lady: Damn. Did you ever tell your parents?

Forest: Never. Me, Florence Williams, the pastor's only daughter, a boy? I used to practice what I would say to them, but nothing ever came out even remotely close to something I thought they'd listen to. So I just suffered in silence and waited.

Miz Lady: For what?

Forest: Waited until I could get away, make a fresh start. Finally, do me. When I moved here, this street felt like home. You all were so welcoming and damn near everybody had at least one secondhand car in need of some kind of repair.

Miz Lady: Sorry, Forest. I can't imagine what it would feel like to be a stranger to my own body.

Forest: Not my whole body. Just, my breasts. Hate them. Always have. It's why I keep them strapped down, except when I shower or bathe, even when I'm at home.

You caught me on one of the rare occasions, I have to give my skin a break—let them get some air. Must have been real late at night too—I’m always so careful to keep myself covered.

Miz Lady: It was. I usually sleep like the dead, but for some reason, something woke me up and when I stepped out the back of Eggbeater to look around, I saw you standing in the window. Ever consider having your breasts removed?

Forest: Of course. Used to think about it all the time, until I had a chance to talk to a transsexual man. Found out you still feel your breasts—like all amputated body parts. Decided to keep living with them. Not sure what else to say Miz Lady. Do you feel differently about me now?

Miz Lady: Hell naw, of course not. None of my business. You’ve been nothing but kind and helpful to me, since the first time we met. You’re a good man, Forest. There’s a lot I don’t know, including about transgender women and men, but I do know people, and if you tell me you’ve always been a man, that’s good enough for me.

Walks over to try to hug Miz Lady

Miz Lady: Let’s not get all emotional now. Your secret’s safe with me. Don’t worry about it. Glad you’re finally somewhere you feel welcome.

Forest: Thank you, wish I could do something to let you know how much this means to me.

Miz Lady: Just keep Eggbeater running Forest, let’s just keep going like we’ve been going, neighbors helping each other.

Forest: That’s a deal Miz Lady. Happy to, any time. So, tell me. What’s the number thirteen about and why are you always so low to the ground sad, every time you do this?

Miz Lady: My grandmother was a Christian all of her life. Even though she stopped going to church because grandpa, didn’t believe in Jesus, she taught me to pray, she took me to be baptized even though I didn’t know what I was doing.

Forest: Sounds like you loved her.

Miz Lady: Still do. It’s been almost 20 years since she’s been gone and I still put her in my prayers every night.

Forest: What makes you think about her right now?

Miz Lady: Your question. Everything about my life is connected in some way to my grandmother and what she taught me. Without her influence, I’d probably be an atheist. Her favorite gospel song was “His Eye is on the Sparrow.” Every time I sing it in my head or out loud, it’s like she’s here with me. You know it?

Forest: Shoot, a Black child of a Baptist preacher living right outside Montgomery Alabama? Are you kidding? That's one of the first songs I learned in the choir.

Miz Lady begins singing

Lyrics

Why should I feel discouraged,
Why should the shadows come,
Why should my heart be lonely,
And long for heaven, heaven and home,
When, when Jesus is my portion,
My constant Friend is He;
Oh, oh-oh, his eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches, watches it over me.

I sing because I'm happy (happy)
I sing because I'm free (free free free)
For His eye, his eye is on the sparrow,
And I know, I know He watches over me

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Forest reaches out to put his arm around her shoulder, but she waves him away and moves to get the stoop from under her car. She takes a seat a few feet away from Forest

Miz Lady: My daughter was my only child. Day she was born, I couldn't believe someone so small, perfect and beautiful came out of me. I grew up being a second mother and I didn't want children. Then I met a man, fell in love, and all I wanted was a little boy.

Forest: Boy?

Miz Lady: Yes. I didn't want to bring another girl into this world.

Forest: Why?

Miz Lady: When I had a girl, I was so happy, I didn't think about the fact that I wanted a son until the next day when I asked her father to go shopping for baby clothes.

Forest: *(Chuckling)* That's funny. What did he buy?

Miz Lady: As things turned out, I wish I could say I don't remember. He brought a beautiful, soft white blanket, a white, one-piece jumpsuit, with white booties with heart shaped pom poms on the toes.

Forest: How'd you like being a new mother?

Miz Lady: Loved it. Thanks to being a part-time mama to my siblings, I already knew how to do a lot of stuff. You ever heard someone talk about the best laid plans and how in the end, God decides how your life's going to work out?

Forest: Have I? that applies to damn near everybody I know. Matter of fact, I—
She continues speaking as if she didn't hear him.

Miz Lady: All I ever wanted to be was on somebody's stage. Mama used to say I was so dramatic—I should be getting paid for it.

Forest: Did she mean it as a compliment?

Miz Lady: No. She meant I had too much mouth and loved to be the center of attention.

Forest: Sorry Miz Lady.

Miz Lady: Don't be. Mama was right. It's always been both a blessing and a curse.

Forest: Meaning?

Miz Lady: Becoming a professional actor was my whole life plan. It's all I talked about and nobody could talk me out of it.

Forest: Did you get a chance to go to college?

Miz Lady: Yes. My grandmother would have killed me dead if I didn't. Graduated from Spelman. My plan was to go back for my MFA then you know like I said—God had another plan.

Forest: You just told me that a minute ago. You fell in love and got pregnant.

Miz Lady: That's right. I did. With my agent.

Forest: Agent? Hold on. We were just talking about school. How did you already have an agent that fast?

Miz Lady: That's the point. I thought he was an agent. What he was, was a much-older-than-me man who liked to hang out on college campuses to prey on people.

Forest: Sorry Miz Lady, don't meant to sound cold, it's just that if I had a nickel for every time I've heard this story, I wouldn't have to fix cars in my yard.

Miz Lady: He used me. I was bragging to my friends back home and acting a fool over him. He treated me well. He made me feel like a woman. He told me he was going to make me a star. Yes, I fell for that corny line—straight from a Black and white movie.

Forest: What did you do?

Miz Lady: I graduated on time and came home.

Forest: What happened when you got back?

Miz Lady: Nothing but love and support. My grandparents let me move in with them because they had a third floor I could use, paid my bills until I could find a job. Took me a long time to adjust, but the moment I heard her cry—I became a mother first.

Forest: Did you ever hear from him again?

Miz Lady: On her thirteenth birthday. Not in person, by Express Mail.

Forest: Express Mail? After all those years he couldn't pick up the phone and call you?

Miz Lady: There was a note in the envelope along with a cashier's check for \$10,000.

Forest: Ten thousand dollars! That's a lot of money.

Miz Lady: Ten thousand, 10 years ago. At first, I wasn't going to read his letter, then I changed my mind.

She reaches in her pocket and pulls out a tattered piece of paper

Dear Beth:

I was already married. Hope one day you and your daughter can forgive me. The attached should help her get into college once she turns 18.

Don't try to contact me. Josh is not my real name.

Best always,

Josh

Forest: Damn, that's cold. How did you feel about what he did?

Miz Lady: I felt absolutely nothing. He fucked me, forgot about me and probably talked about me to his friends. I went through my pregnancy with my family and after 20 hours of labor, bore a beautiful baby and raised her.

Forest: Why'd you keep the letter?

Miz Lady: To show her on the day she turned 21.

Forest: Where is she now?

Miz Lady: Just a minute.

She crawls into the back of her car and brings out the framed picture of her daughter and an old newspaper

Miz Lady: This is what my sweetie pie looked like the year she turned thirteen.

Forest: She was beautiful, looks just like you.

Miz Lady: Except her hair, she had her father's hair.

Forest: What happened to her?

Miz Lady unfolds the newspaper and reads the headline

Young girl killed by a hit and run driver. Police find him at a local Amusement Park.

Forest: What?!

Miz Lady: I was at work waiting for her to call me to pick her up from school. She decided to surprise me by catching the bus to pick me up. When the phone rang in my office, I thought it was her, but it was my boss asking me to come to her office. Two police officers were waiting and I soon as I saw them, I knew my daughter was dead. The older officer told me a young man who'd been drinking since early that morning, hit her with his pickup truck and never stopped. Left her in the middle of the busy intersection, a couple of blocks away. By the time I got to her, they had her body on a gurney in a Black plastic bag. Before they could stop me, I'd pulled the bag off the gurney, tried to get it into my car. I was thinking so crazy I thought if I could just get her home she'd wake up.

Forest tries to give her a hug, but she pushes him away

Miz Lady: No, don't. I'm as alright as I'm ever going to be and all the hugs in the world won't help. I don't mean to hurt your feelings. I know you mean well but I'll never get over it. When they caught him, I refused to let his name pass my lips. He was only 19, out celebrating his birthday. Apparently, he continued to drive drunk, entered the amusement park even though her blood was still on the front grill of his truck. I walked around for days pretending I was okay, getting the memorial service planned, obituary written, all the shit people who love you want to help you with. Don't remember the service, other than the singing and all the hugs. After we buried my baby, I went to see my other grandmother. The one I've only seen a few times in my life, because mama didn't want me to get too close to her. When she opened the door, she knew everything before I said a word. I asked her what I should do. Told her I just couldn't let this man get away with killing my baby. She told me to cut his name out of the newspaper and bring it to her, with a lock of my daughter's hair.

Forest: Now wait a minute, I don't mess with that kind of stuff now. Mama used to say don't mess around with things you don't understand, so I don't need to know anything else. Just tell me, did it work?

Miz Lady: There was a trial. Judge sentenced him to 2 years in jail and 5 years of probation. Some garbage about it being his first offense, it was his birthday, boys will be boys. As I was listening to the verdict my body stayed, but the rest of me left town before she finished speaking. I rushed home before everybody got there.

Grabbed my checkbooks, ID, my daughter's picture, and a few clothes and shoes—got in my car and started driving.

Forest: Where were you going?

Miz Lady: Away. I got on the freeway and drove until I got tired, checked into a nice hotel, stayed until I got tired of the room and kept going to the next place. No phone calls, no letters, nothing.

Forest: What happened to the man who killed your daughter. Did it work?

Miz Lady: You know it did. You felt it in your gut before the question left your mouth. Didn't you?

Forest: I—okay, yes. Tell me.

Miz Lady: I'd been gone for a few weeks by then, plus he was in jail, but from what I heard, he just died. He went to bed in his cell one night after the count, and stopped breathing sometime during the night. By the time cells were opened for the count before breakfast, he was beginning to get cold and change color. That's all I know.

Forest: Did you call your father's mother to tell her?

Miz Lady: She called me before I could get to the phone.

Forest looks at his watch

Forest: Where did the time go? Feels like I just sat down and we've been sitting here for a good while. I have to go. This guy's coming over right now, so I can listen to his car. We'll talk more later okay?

He rushes off before she can answer

End of Scene

Scene IV

It's Midnight. A few weeks later. Mister enters in disguise

Street's quiet and the streetlamp dims as a man whose face is obscured by a hoodie, walks under the streetlamp quickly. He looks around to make certain no one's watching from their windows and enters Miz Lady's car through the back door. Audience hears a muffled shout and a brief struggle followed by the sound of fists delivering a beat-down. A few minutes later the man exits from the front of the car, shoves some bills in his pocket, then steps back inside coming out with the large, framed picture of Miz Lady's daughter. He sets the framed picture down, leaning it against his leg, takes a crack pipe out of his jacket pocket, lights it and takes a hit. The sound of a dog barking scares him and he drops his crack pipe, grabs the picture and runs off without revealing his identity.

End of Scene

Scene V

Setting:

Next morning early. Forest approaches Miz Lady's car

Forest: Miz Lady! Miz Lady! You up yet?

Looks up and notices how light it is. Reaches to bang on the backdoor window, but notices it's not locked and carefully opens it. It's dark inside and it takes a few moments to see.

Forest: Miz Lady! Lord, what happened to you? What the hell—(*Begins shouting*)

Forest: Somebody call the po-lice. Nita? Nita? Somebody, help!

Forest carefully brings Miz Lady out of the car. Her clothing's disheveled, she has a piece of duct tape hanging off her top where it stuck after Forest removed it from her mouth and she's been beaten

Nita comes running up with her cell phone

Nita: Yes, her car's parked right down from my house, yep, that's the right address. Okay, please hurry, she's been hurt.

She moves over to Miz Lady, holds her hand while Forest holds her up on the edge of the car while they wait

Forest: Miz Lady, can you talk?

Miz Lady looks at him in silence

Nita: Miz Lady, maybe you can't talk but shake your head if you don't want to right now.

Miz Lady shakes her head slowly and lifts her right arm to point back inside her car

Forest: Miz Lady, what are you pointing to, what happened to you? Goddamn it don't you know we're just trying to help you?

Nita: Forest, Forest, will you be quiet for a minute. Can't you see she's messed up. Somebody's whooped her bad. Let me try something.

Forest: Anything, Nita if it'll help. Here come around and hold on to her while I go to the end of the street and wait for the police.

Nita puts her arms around Miz Lady and hugs her close.

Nita: Now, I know you don't have words right now for what happened, so let's try this. I'll ask you a question, turn your head right to left for no, and nod up and down for yes, okay? Will you try it?

Miz Lady nods her head

Nita: Okay, now did somebody beat you up?

Miz Lady nods her head yes

Nita: Do you know why?

Miz Lady nods her head yes

Nita: Was it because you were trying to stop them from doing something?

Miz Lady nods her head yes

Nita: From doing what?

Miz Lady slowly points to the inside of her car

Nita: Miz Lady I can't read that gesture. Is somebody still in the car?

Miz Lady shakes her head no

Nita: Is there something in the car I should see?

Miz Lady nods her head yes

Nita: Okay, Miz Lady, let me go look around.

Nita crawls in the back of the car as Forest and the po-lice and one emergency aide approach with a gurney (these can be stage hands). The police officer begins walking around the car and taking notes. As the emergency aid begins preparing Miz Lady for the trip to the hospital

Forest: Miz Lady. I know you can't talk right now, but me and Nita will look out for your car while you're in the hospital and I'll come to see you later this evening okay?

Miz Lady looks at him and begins to point back to her car until Forest gives her a hug

Forest: That's okay, Miz Lady. Don't worry about anything right now except getting better. We'll have time to talk once you get back home. Until then Forest will be looking out for you like always, okay? Me and Nita.

Miz Lady nods her head, closes her eyes and Nita and Forest watch as she's wheeled offstage.

End of Scene

Scene VI

Setting:

Late afternoon. Forest's house. (Comfortable chair, downstage, spot)

Forest gets his reading glasses, opens letter, reads out loud

Forest: Dear Flo: Mama's dead. She had a stroke a few months ago. Took her ability to use her left side, and for a while—her speech. First thing she said when it came back was your name. After her funeral, I moved back home for a while. I'm writing this from your old bedroom because right after I left for college, they turned my old room into a work out space they never used,. If you're reading this, I'm guessing you're wondering how in the world I found you. Remember what happened when I started that aluminum can recycling business when I was ten years old? I put together a crew of five ten-year-old friends. The first day, not one of them showed up for work. I fired all of them, then ran the business by myself for weeks until you finally felt sorry for me and offered to help until I could find other boys to help me. Dad always used to say I was tenacious. I've been writing you every week since you left. I've used the online white pages to send one letter to every person in the country, with the last name of Williams.

Flo, this is Forest Williams is the last Williams I could find. Mama and dad never stopped praying for you, wondering where you were, how you were doing, almost grieving because they didn't understand why you left without even a conversation and stayed gone.

For a while, I'd include each previous letter when I mailed a new one. When that got too expensive, I started stacking them in boxes unopened, Return to Sender stamp and date intact. I hope one day I'll get a chance to give them to you.

Flo, I know.

Forest stops reading and puts the letter down for a moment

I started wondering what was going on one day when I was looking for my favorite khakis for school. I went in your room to see if maybe mama made a mistake and put them in one of your drawers. Didn't find them, so I opened your closet to see if they were in there. I found the garbage bag with some of my old clothes I thought mama had taken for the goodwill. As soon as I opened the bag, I could smell that they hadn't been washed, and that you'd been wearing them.

After that, I paid more attention to what you were doing when we were at home alone. Used to wonder why you spent so much time in your room. Always thought you just enjoyed your privacy, were reading, or doing homework, or playing chess with yourself. Remember how short the doors were to our bedrooms? I used to lie flat on my stomach and watch you through the gap.

I saw you Flo, wearing my clothes, walking different, standing in the mirror, tying you're your breasts, pulling your long hair back into a knot, trying on some of dad's old caps and hats. At first, I thought you were playing pretend, but the more I paid attention, I noticed the look on your face every time mama bought you a new dress, saw you tugging at your skirt hems trying to pull them down over your knees, as if you were trying to get the cloth to grow—cover your legs.

Bet you're wondering why I never said anything. Don't know. Never occurred to me really. You were always so private, you were older than me and I didn't even have words for what I thought was going on back then. It wasn't until I took this class in college that I learned the meaning of transgender, what it means to be born in the wrong biological body, a girl's when you're a boy.

I think I understand why you left without saying anything, but I'm still your brother. I love you unconditionally, always have. All I've ever wanted is for you to be happy. If, God willing, you get this letter, please contact me any time. I miss you brother.

My cell phone # is: 555-555-1234.

Love,

Jeff

End of Scene

Scene VII

Setting:

Morning, a few weeks later

Miz Lady's pulling things from underneath her car, buckets, bags, etc. and stacking them to one side, checking the ground with her hands as if she's looking for something. Nita walks up bag slung across one arm

Miz Lady: What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be on your way to teach?

Nita: Not today. Taking the day off. Miz Lady, I have to get this interview finished. It's due Monday two weeks from now, and I still have to get everything transcribed and edited before I turn it in to my professor. Can we please finish now?

Miz Lady: Right now?

Nita: Yes, ma'am. I know you're busy, but I won't keep you long. Can you give me just a few minutes?

Miz Lady: Okay, what's your next question?

Nita: Wait a minute, can I use the stool?

Miz Lady gets the stool for her, she takes a seat, takes out two recorders in case one stops

Nita: How long have you been homeless?

Miz Lady: I'm not homeless. Eggbeater's my home.

Nita: But that's a vehicle, not a place to live.

Miz Lady: Ask somebody who's sleeping under a bridge if they agree. It's home to me. I own it, it shelters me from the heat and cold, I have my belongings in it.

Nita: I get what you mean. How about this? For the purposes of this interview can we agree to my professor's definition of homeless?

Miz Lady: That's fine with me. I don't know your professor and don't care how she defines homeless. If it will help you ace this assignment, I agree.

Nita: Then how long have you lived in a structure that's not consider a house, apartment or trailer?

Miz Lady: For almost 10 years.

Nita: What happened to you?

Miz Lady: Life.

Nita: What part of your life?

Miz Lady: The part that killed me.

Nita turns off her recorder

Nita: Okay, Miz Lady. Come on now. I'm not sure what's wrong, but obviously, you're not interested in having me record what you have to say, so how about if I just listen carefully and take notes?

Miz Lady: Now you're talking Nita. What do you want to know?

Nita: What made you leave wherever you're from to live in this car?

Miz Lady: A drunk driver killed my thirteen-year-old daughter and I lost myself. Have been riding around, looking for me.

Miz Lady: Ran over her like a dog-hater would a stray dog, never looked back. Went to an amusement park, celebrated turning 19 like nothing happened.

Nita reaches in her pocket takes out a small Black and white photo. Looks at it, shows it to Miz Lady

Miz Lady: Who's this?

Nita: My mother. She died the year I turned 10, my oldest sister Kisha turned 13, my brother John turned 12 and my baby brother Lawrence turned 9.

Miz Lady: Damn, sorry Nita. She was a beautiful woman. You look just like her.

Nita: Thanks, everybody used to say that.

Miz Lady: What happened to her?

Nita puts the picture carefully back in her pocket

Nita: Mama's mother, my grandma Bonnie was her best friend. When she got sick with cancer, her husband George did his best to take care of her, but mama would go see about her and do what she could at least 3 days out of the week when she got off work, because George was ten years older than grandma and could barely take care of himself. Then she'd catch the bus home. The bus stop was right up under my grandma's house. One evening just before dark, a drunk came rushing down the street, jumped the curb, and hit mama so hard the car cut off her legs.

Miz Lady: What?

Nita: I think the only reason he didn't run off is because he couldn't. His car was wrapped around my mother's body. Police took him straight to jail and months later when he went to trial he got 10-20 for vehicular homicide. Something we kids didn't find out until years later, when we were old enough to tell us. They rushed my mother to the hospital and Grandpa George came and got us. The hospital broke all the rules and let us all sleep in her room overnight in intensive

care after they operated to sew up what was left of her legs. They only let us stay the first night, but we were allowed to visit every day.

Miz Lady: What happened? Why'd she die? People live with amputations.

Nita: Doctors told us she would live and we were so happy, I don't think we slept a wink, but a few days later when she woke up and realized her legs were gone, she closed her eyes, and didn't wake up. Least that's what Grandma told us when she came and got us to take us to her house that night.

Miz Lady reaches out and takes both of Nita's hands in her own

Miz Lady: Sounds like you have an idea of how I feel.

Nita: I do. Took me years to forgive myself.

Miz Lady: Forgive yourself? For what? You were only a child.

Nita: I was supposed to go with my mother that day. Her job wasn't far from our school and she told me to walk there when school let out so we could catch the bus together, but I didn't.

Miz Lady: Why?

Nita: I wish I had a better excuse, some kind of emergency, but the truth is, I forgot. I had so much fun in school that day, I couldn't wait to get home and tell my sister Kisha. I didn't even think about it, till Grandpa George called.

Miz Lady: Well, I'm sure if your mother was here she'd tell you she understood, that there's nothing you could have done to stop it.

Nita: I know. Nobody blamed me back the either, but somehow that just made it worse.

Miz Lady: Why?

Nita: Because my mother had a habit of not paying attention to her surroundings while she waited for the bus. She'd be thinking about us, work, how she was going to get new shoes for one or another of us, what she'd be teaching at Bible school, anything to pass the time, and I used to think that if I'd been with her, I'd have seen the car coming and been able to save us.

Miz Lady: I understand Nita, but you realize now that you were using a child's reasoning, that even if you'd seen the car, the two of you wouldn't have been able to get out of the way in time. Both of you might have been killed that day.

Nita: I know. You're the first person I've ever told how I was really feeling back then. Kept to myself a lot after she passed and we were split up among family members. Mama's sisters and brothers each took one of us and this way we were able to stay connected even though we all never lived together again. Changed me

Miz Lady. I spent years drinking too much, dating the wrong men, eating the wrong foods, acting what mama would have called 'a fool,' punishing me.

Miz Lady: Me too. Never thought about it quite like that, but I've been punishing myself too.

Nita: But why?

Miz Lady: Because I was her mother. It was my responsibility to look out for her, keep her safe from harm. I was supposed to not let that happen to my baby. I have nightmares damn near every night. My daughter dead in the street, with yellow tape outlining her body.

Nita: Isn't it time for you to forgive yourself?

Miz Lady: Last night my daughter came to visit me.

Nita: Huh? Didn't you just tell me she's been dead over ten years?

Miz Lady: I woke up and there she was lying quietly beside me like she used to when she was little girl, except she was grown.

Nita: So, you were dreaming, hallucinating, what?

Miz Lady: I was so glad to see her, water started running down my face like rain. She started talking to me in a low voice, sounded almost like music. I laid there and listened, not making a move afraid she'd disappear. Told me she loved me, that she was in a safe place—that it was time to move on with my life.

Nita: Did she say anything else?

Miz Lady: Told me she saw Mister rob me of my last money, and beat me up. To stop looking for her picture because Mister took it.

Nita: Mister? He did that to you? I'm shocked, why? I thought he cared about you, what in the world happened to him?

Miz Lady: Misery happened to him Nita. Kind that takes years to creep up on a man, like old age. Mister lost the one thing nobody can go on without.

Nita: And that's?

Miz Lady: Hope. When I told Mister I didn't want him, maybe that was the last no he could stand. I never knew it, but according to my daughter, Mister had been quietly on crack for years, just was too shamed for anybody to know, so he never did it around the shelter or around me.

Nita: Regardless of his problems, he had no right to rob you and beat you like that. I'm calling the police right now.

Miz Lady: No. You're not. I've always known it was him. Do you really think a man could beat me like that and I wouldn't look at his face?

Nita: Huh?

Miz Lady: That's right I knew it was him. Only thing I've been fooling myself about is I didn't believe he'd take Darcy's picture. Kept thinking I put it somewhere—but I didn't. He took it to send me a message.

Nita: You think he was thinking about sending you a message while he was beating your behind and robbing you?

Miz Lady: Yes. My daughter told me.

Nita: So? What was it?

Miz Lady: That that picture is not my daughter, that life, even when we don't want it to, goes on and it's time for me to get on with mine, go back home and get back on stage where I belong.

Nita: I'm so glad for you Miz Lady. I'm going to miss you, but I'm happy you're going back home to the people who love you and back to the work you love. When are you leaving?

Miz Lady: In a few days. It will take me some time to get packed. I'll need to get Forest to check out Eggbeater to make sure she'll make the trip. Don't worry I'll come and say goodbye before I go.

Nita: Promise?

Miz Lady: Yes, I promise.

Nita reaches over to give Miz Lady a hug

Nita: See you tomorrow Miz Lady. Let me know if I can help you get everything together.

Miz Lady: I will. Do me a favor. Stop by Forest's house on your way home, and ask him to come and see me this evening. I know he's been working on that engine job for the last few days.

Nita: Okay, Miz Lady. See you tomorrow.

Miz Lady watches Nita until she can't see her any more

Miz Lady: People always want answers. When things end, they want them tied up like a neat bow. I like Nita. Did the first time I met her. Just gave her a hard time because I needed to hold her at a certain distance. She's the kind of person that cares and when she does she worries, and in this life, I'm the one who does all the worrying about me. Truth is, I hate goodbyes.

She walks to the driver's side, gets into her car, and she and the car disappear

Later that night. Forest walks over to where Miz Lady's car's been parked for months. There's no sign of her. It's as if she was never there

Forest: Miz Lady? Miz Lady! Miz Lady!

Stage to black

End of Play