

TWILIGHT AT ST CECILIA'S

A Play By Emily McClain

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First Draft: 7/7/2023

First Reading: 7/21/2023

Second Draft: 7/23/2023

Third Draft: 8/8/2023

CHARACTERS

JANIE	17 year old Black girl
WENDY	14 year old white girl
LAURA	16 year old white girl
PATRICIA ANN	25 year old white woman
MARY HELENE	53 year old white woman

SETTINGS

St Cecilia's Home for Girls
New Orleans, LA

TIME

Summer 1970

SCENE ONE

July, 1970. New Orleans

Lights up on the back porch and patio of the St. Cecilia's Home. A wooden privacy fence blocks the yard from the view of the sidewalk and a latched gate is the only exit to the street. Two woven lawn chairs and a table with a bottle of Johnson's baby oil and a small portable radio face the audience. JANIE, 17 years old and 6 months pregnant, dozes comfortably in one of the chairs, oversized sunglasses obscuring her eyes. WENDY, 14 years old and 8 months pregnant, sits uncomfortably in another chair flipping listlessly through a magazine. The radio plays quietly in the background.

WENDY

Do you think I'd look good with my hair like this? Well? Janie?

(Holds up the magazine to JANIE, who doesn't respond.)

My sister said that I'd probably want to cut it short after the baby is born, because it'll be too much trouble to maintain.

JANIE

Mmm.

WENDY

I don't think I'd look good with short hair, I've always had long hair, you know? But Twiggy looks so chic... and I suppose it would be easier to wash...

JANIE

Hmm.

WENDY

Do you think you'll keep your hair the way it is after your baby is born?

JANIE

(Without lifting her sunglasses)

My hair won't do what Twiggy's hair does.

WENDY

No, but... Diana Ross has short hair, doesn't she?

JANIE

You think I got the money to keep up Diana Ross hair?

WENDY

You'd look good with short hair.

JANIE

Yeah, I would, but the upkeep on short hair is too much for me. God DAMN it's hot today!

(JANIE swings her legs around to reach for the radio to adjust the station. SISTER PATRICIA ANN, a cherubic faced 25 year old nun, exits from the house carrying a pitcher of water and two glasses.)

PATRICIA ANN

Teresa! Don't blaspheme and take the name of our Lord in vain.

JANIE

I'm sorry, Sister Patricia Ann. I don't know what came over me. Felt lightheaded in this heat.

PATRICIA ANN

Have some water. Margaret, would you like some water?

WENDY

Yes, Sister, thank you.

PATRICIA ANN

Mother Mary Helene is setting up in the front room for chapel after supper. You'll probably want to change clothes before that, don't you think? We want to make sure we're honoring the Lord-

JANIE

Please don't tell me you're going to make us put on panty hose. It's 110 in the shade today and that front room is the armpit of hell in the afternoon.

WENDY

Sister, I don't think... I don't think any of my panty hose will fit me anymore. They were splitting the last time I tried, and that was two weeks ago.

PATRICIA ANN

No, Margaret, you're not expected to- I mean, it's getting close, isn't it? Won't be much longer now.

WENDY

Yes, Sister.

JANIE

Ok, if Margaret doesn't have to wear panty hose than I don't either. That's only fair.

PATRICIA ANN

It's not about what's fair-

JANIE

Why does God care what we're wearing on our legs?

PATRICIA ANN

I'd have to ask Mother Mary Helene-

JANIE

(Overlapping)

Oh, come on!

PATRICIA ANN

You don't want to give her reason to think you're not taking chapel traditions seriously. Also, you don't have the same excuse yet.

WENDY

You've still got weeks to go!

(JANIE stands up, rubbing her protruding belly.)

JANIE

You tell me I've gotta squeeze all of this into a pair of cheap pantyhose? You can't be serious.

PATRICIA ANN

Your families sent you here with the expectation that you would wait out your *(Her voice dips to a whisper)* pregnancies *(Resumes normal volume)* while still receiving a normal high school education and quality religious instruction. That includes chapel three times a week.

WENDY

We know why our families sent us here.

JANIE

"How could you let this happen?"

WENDY

"Pray for forgiveness from our Lord and Savior!"

JANIE

"Don't you be telling people it was some white boy!"

(Both WENDY and SISTER PATRICIA ANN look at JANIE, who shrugs.)

Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. I ain't about to say.

PATRICIA ANN

You need to ask Mother Mary Helene about going to the church for confession with Father Anthony on Wednesday.

JANIE

I'm good, thanks.

PATRICIA ANN

When was the last time you went to confession?

JANIE

Don't recall.

(JANIE turns her attention back to the radio. WENDY shifts uncomfortably to get a glass of water from PATRICIA ANN, who is a bit at a loss for how to handle JANIE's lack of contrition. JANIE turns the radio volume up as a signal that she is done speaking to PATRICIA ANN.)

WENDY

Thanks for the water, Sister. It's really refreshing.

PATRICIA ANN

You're welcome. *(Beat.)* There's something else I need to speak with you two about.

JANIE

Let me guess: you're pregnant!

PATRICIA ANN

What? No, of course not! Teresa, why would you even say such a thing?

(WENDY swats at JANIE, scandalized.)

WENDY

Be nice!

JANIE

I'm just teasing, Sister, we know you'd never do anything like that. You're married to Jesus.

PATRICIA ANN

I guess that's one way of-

JANIE

Besides, you're not exactly the "fun girl" type, are you? Did you even kiss a boy before you took your vows?

WENDY

Janie!

PATRICIA ANN

(Overlapping)

That's not- I mean, of course I did-

JANIE

Ohhhhh!

WENDY

Really? What was his name?

PATRICIA ANN

That's not important right now, and it was years ago

JANIE

Couldn't have been that long ago, you're not that much older than us.

PATRICIA ANN

(Ignoring JANIE)

There's a new girl coming in today. Mother Mary Helene said that she would be rooming with you and you need to clear some space in your closet and drawers for her things.

JANIE

But Abigail's clothes are still there.

PATRICIA ANN

Her mother is coming to pick them up later this week. She said we can pack them.

WENDY

Did you hear from Abigail? How is her baby?

PATRICIA ANN

She's fine. Mother Mary Helene said it was an easy birth, praise God.

JANIE

What did she name the baby?

PATRICIA ANN

She... didn't. A very nice couple came to adopt the baby. I believe they were going to name him Christopher.

WENDY

Adoption? No, that can't be right. Abigail said she was keeping her baby.

JANIE

Yes. She most certainly did.

PATRICIA ANN

That was not my understanding of her family's wishes. But that's not any of our business, is it?

(WENDY and JANIE look at each other but don't speak.)

I can help with carrying the suitcase downstairs once you get it packed up. Mother Mary Helene said the new girl should get in by the evening bus. I believe she's coming to us from Mississippi.

WENDY

Oooo, where in Mississippi? Biloxi? That's where I'm from.

PATRICIA ANN

It's best if we don't discuss personal details, remember?

JANIE

You going to tell us her name at least?

PATRICIA ANN

She'll get to pick her St. Cecilia's name once she arrives, same as you two did.

JANIE

Yeah, "Margaret."

(WENDY grimaces at her "St. Cecilia's name.")

PATRICIA ANN

It's for your own privacy and protection- like Mother Superior says, for the duration of your time here we want you to feel the warmth of God's love and to devote yourself to the care of your womb. You don't need the distractions of the life you came from impeding that work, tempting you back into sin.

JANIE

Not to mention it'll save us from an awkward encounter years from now- "You look so familiar, I know you from somewhere, right? Oh of course! The unwed mothers' home in New Orleans!"

WENDY

I'm going to get married to Randall once I get home with my baby and he gets back from basic training. I don't mind people knowing I was here.

PATRICIA ANN

(Losing patience)

Well, your families mind! And that's who's paying for you to be able to stay here so that's who we'll be listening to, all right girls? *(Beat.)* Now. I'm taking the car to pick her up at the bus station. I expect the room to be tidy and set up to receive her and you both fresh-faced and ready to give her a warm St. Cecilia's welcome- or else Mother Mary Helene will hear about it.

JANIE

Yes, Sister.

(PATRICIA ANN shifts, her discomfort with having to be stern with them clearly showing.)

PATRICIA ANN

All right. Thank you.

(She exits with the pitcher of water. As soon as she is out of hearing, JANIE sinks back into the lawn chair and cranks up the radio, putting her sunglasses back on her face.)

JANIE

Sit down, Wendy. I'm not running up those stairs just because Sister Stick-Up-Her-Ass said so.

WENDY

(Sitting down with some effort)

She's not that bad. She's much nicer than the last one.

JANIE

That's a low bar.

(The girls sit in silence for a long moment. JANIE might doze off again.)

WENDY

I know Abigail said she was keeping her baby. I'm positive that's what she wanted to do.

JANIE

I know.

WENDY

What happened?

JANIE

How would I know? Maybe she got sick. Maybe she got scared and changed her mind. Maybe her parents forced her to sign the papers. Who the hell cares?

WENDY

She was our friend.

JANIE

You don't even know her real name. She wasn't your friend, she was just some St. Cecilia's girl.

(Beat.)

WENDY

Her name was Betty. She was from Jackson Parish. She was on the pep squad at Jackson County High for two years. Her favorite color was turquoise. She was going to name her baby Genevive if it was a girl, or Dwight if it was a boy, because those were her grandparents names. She-

JANIE

Fine! She was our friend! Will you stop?

(Before WENDY can respond, LAURA, 16 years old and 5 months pregnant, enters carrying her suitcase. She is bedraggled and sweaty. We can just see the top of her head over the privacy fence.)

LAURA

Is this North Bellevue? I'm a little turned around...

JANIE

Good Lord, girl, did you walk from the bus station?

LAURA

I didn't mind, it was a nice day-

WENDY

Here, let me help you!

(Both JANIE and WENDY struggle to get out of their lawn chairs, standing to reveal their substantial pregnant bellies. LAURA chuckles.)

LAURA

I don't need to ask if I'm at the right place now.

(WENDY tries the latch on the gate to let LAURA in.)

WENDY

Mother Superior forgot to lock the gate again.

(Both JANIE and WENDY make the same "drinking booze" motion and laugh as LAURA makes her way inside the fenced yard.)

JANIE

Sister told us to expect someone but not until later. I'm Janie *(WENDY gives a little squeak)* sorry, if there's any nuns around you need to make sure and call me Teresa. We aren't supposed to use our real names.

WENDY

I'm "Margaret."

JANIE

Call her Wendy when it's safe.

LAURA

We don't use our real names? Why on earth not?

JANIE

Some baloney about keeping our privacy or something. They don't want us to be able to contact each other after the fact, I guess? But you'll have to pick a saint name for them to call you.

WENDY

They wouldn't let me just use my confirmation name so I'm constantly forgetting. Sister Patricia Ann will say "Margaret, pass the salt" at supper and I'll sit there, looking like a big dumb cow, wondering who she's talking to!

LAURA

Goodness.

JANIE

Here, sit! Do your feet hurt? How long was the walk? I'd be dead making that journey in this heat!

LAURA

Not that long. Honestly, I couldn't tell you how long I've been walking. I probably passed the turn onto Bellevue twice. I needed to clear my head.

WENDY

How far along are you?

LAURA

Just got to 5 months.

JANIE

Not too bad. I'm about 6, and Wendy's at 8 months.

WENDY

I'm due at the end of the month, but I don't see how I could possibly make it until then. I feel ready to pop!

LAURA

How old are you?

WENDY

14. I'll be 15 in August.

LAURA

Goodness!

JANIE

How old are you?

LAURA

16.

JANIE

I'm 17.

WENDY

She thinks she's grown. You should hear how she sasses the sisters.

JANIE

Watch out for the head one. Mother Mary Helene. She's a right old bitch.

WENDY

(Scandalized)

Janie!

(LAURA laughs.)

LAURA

Aren't all nuns very old? They sure are at my school.

WENDY

No. Sister Patricia Ann is brand new. This is her first position since taking her vows.

JANIE

She's not that bad, considering some of the alternatives.

LAURA

Never known a young nun. Thought they only came as old crones.
(JANIE laughs.)

WENDY

You're in the room with us.

LAURA

We have to share a room?

JANIE

Yes?

LAURA

I've never shared a room before.

JANIE

Really? I've got 4 younger siblings, I've always shared a room.

WENDY

Me too.

LAURA

I'm an only child.

(JANIE and WENDY are genuinely confused.)

JANIE

You sure your family's Catholic?

LAURA

Yes. But my Mama couldn't have kids very easily. She spent the entire time she was pregnant with me laid up in bed, so... I guess she didn't want to risk that again.

JANIE

Rough time for your daddy either way.

LAURA

Yeah, I guess.

WENDY

I've got two younger brothers and three younger sisters!

JANIE

Good God, I forgot there were six of you.

WENDY

I know my Mama is missing having me to help with all the little ones. But, well...

LAURA

Yeah. You had to go "visit relatives" for a few months, right?

WENDY

You got a boyfriend?

JANIE

Christ, don't get going with that stuff, will ya? (To LAURA) She thinks she's fancy because her boyfriend is in basic training and he's promised he'll marry her when he comes home.

(JANIE makes the "crazy" gesture just out of WENDY's sightline.)

WENDY

We're getting married! He told me the night he left. He wanted to get through basic and also let me turn 15.

LAURA

Is there some rule about being married while in basic training?

WENDY

No... I don't think so.

LAURA

Oh. I don't understand why he would want to wait... I mean, that way you'd already be married when the baby is born, right?

WENDY

I- I don't know.

JANIE

He would have told you any old thing to keep you from getting upset. That's just the way boys are. Cowards.

WENDY

No, he wouldn't have said it if he didn't mean it. He said he loved me and the baby and he's going to come back after the baby is born and we'll get married. He promised!

(JANIE and LAURA exchange a quick glance.)

LAURA

I'm sure that's what's going to happen then. You know him better than we do.

(WENDY grabs her magazine and the bottle of baby oil angrily, heading towards the house.)

WENDY

He's a good man. You two don't know him!

JANIE

Wendy, c'mon, we were just messing with you-
(WENDY exits, slamming the door behind her.)

LAURA

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset her.

JANIE

She'll be okay. She's got to know what's really going on- she's a little naive but she's not an idiot.

LAURA

You can't blame her for wanting a happy ending for herself.

JANIE

Saddling yourself with some man for the rest of your life just because he said he loved you and knocked you up? What kind of happy ending is that?

(LAURA doesn't respond. JANIE picks up the radio, switching it off.)

C'mon. Let's get out of this heat.

(As they exit)

Do you like gumbo? *(LAURA shakes her head no)* Aw, that's too bad. Mother Mary Helene is a nightmare but she can cook. I lie awake at night dreaming about it!

(The girls exit into the house, the screen door of the porch slamming happily behind them.)

END OF SCENE

SCENE TWO

August, 1970. New Orleans

Lights up on the back porch, patio and fenced yard of St. Cecilia's Home. WENDY is hanging laundry on the clothesline strung between the porch railing and the side fence: various garments belonging to all the girls. She moves very slowly due to her extremely pregnant state. JANIE and LAURA are seated in the lawn chairs, working on algebra. JANIE's frustration with LAURA's inability to understand the concepts is reaching a fever pitch.

JANIE

Oh for chrissake, you have to use the graph to figure out the slope of the line!

LAURA

The slope?

JANIE

The angle. The tilt. Look, see? *(She shows her paper.)* You're solving for x on the sideways line and y on the up and down one.

LAURA

I've never had to do anything like this before in my life.

JANIE

Really? What kind of math were you doing at your old school?

LAURA

I don't know. Normal math? The kind that didn't need graphs.

WENDY

Janie, did you get the stamps I asked for? I have another letter I want to get in the mail tonight.

(JANIE pulls a small sheet of stamps from the back of her math textbook and hands them to WENDY, who pockets them eagerly.)

JANIE

My sister put them in the last letter she sent me but I had to promise to pay her back. That's the 3rd book of stamps in two months. You're going through 'em like crazy!

LAURA

Why don't you just ask to buy them from the sisters? That's what the other girls do.

WENDY

Well... if I asked them for stamps, they'd ask who I was writing to-

LAURA

Oh. I see.

WENDY

This way, I can write to anyone I want without the nuns prying. Janie puts the envelope in the mailbox when she goes to get the mail in the evenings. Mother Mary Helene trusted her with that job when she first got here and she's done it every evening since.

JANIE

(Sarcastically)

It's a perfect system. I'm the Harriet Tubman of Illicit Letters.

WENDY

They're not illicit! I'd never write anything naughty!

JANIE

That's explicit. Illicit means it's against the rules.

WENDY

Oh.

LAURA

How many more of these do we have to do?

JANIE

All five problems at the end of the lesson. The nuns at St Cecilia's don't mess around. You gotta shape up fast.

LAURA

I won't need this! How does this help me in life?

JANIE

You don't want your baby to be stupid, do you? Or to think his momma's stupid?

LAURA

No, of course not.

JANIE

Okay then. You don't be stupid. Learn algebra.

WENDY

Mother Mary Helene says the least we can do to show our commitment to self-improvement during our time here is complete our high school studies.

JANIE

I'd have more time to complete my high school studies if I wasn't having to waste 6 hours a week listening to her drone on during her awful chapel lectures.

LAURA

Yeah. It's harder to stay awake during those than in Mass.

WENDY

I don't mind chapel. I wish sometimes Sister Angelica would lead the singing instead of the Reverend Mother.

JANIE

That woman couldn't carry a tune with a basket and two hands.

LAURA

You don't have anything nice to say about her, do you?

JANIE

That's not true. I said she was a good cook. And as far as I'm concerned, that's way more important than how many Bible verses she can recite.

WENDY

Janie's not really Catholic.

LAURA

You're not? Why did your family send you here?

JANIE

I'm not really supposed to talk about it. It could make things messy for my folks. I go to Beale Street Baptist back home. I'd never been to a Catholic service or anything before coming here.

WENDY

She didn't even know how to say a Hail Mary or anything.

LAURA

I suppose it was a bit of a culture shock. Catholic services are a little less... exuberant than Baptist ones.

(The girls chuckle at this understatement.)

JANIE

Ooooooh yes! You can say that again. But honestly I didn't mind having to go when I first got here. I would take the best naps in Mass-

WENDY

Janie!

JANIE

What? Mass and chapel, all of this, it's a waste of my time. I'm gonna go to college. *(At their surprised looks.)* What? You think I couldn't go to college?

LAURA

I didn't say that.

JANIE

I think your face did.

(She shuts the textbook.)

WENDY

I'm not worrying about school or anything. Once Randall and I are married, we'll live on the base and I'll get to be a homemaker. I won't need math.

JANIE

You won't, huh? You're not going to need to budget for your groceries, or figure out meal portions and measure ingredients, determine when you need to start cooking so the meal is ready by the time Private First-Class Jackass shows up? Because news flash, that's all math.

WENDY

Don't call him that. I hate it when you call him that!

JANIE

You heard from him lately? Or at all?

WENDY

He's been at basic training!

JANIE

(Overlapping)

You write him letters twice a week and he hasn't written you back one single time!

WENDY

That's not fair! We can't receive letters from anyone but family while we're here.

JANIE

Girl, if he wanted to write to you, he'd figure out a way to get it to you. Wake up!

LAURA

Take it easy, will you?

JANIE

Ugh! I'm sick of her going on about him!

LAURA

What's the big deal if she wants to write him? If it makes her happy, I don't see the harm in it.

JANIE

She'd be better off using that time and energy on herself.

LAURA

If he was her, you know, first? You get attached sometimes-

JANIE

All the more reason to wash her hands and move on!

(WENDY has been crying, swallowing her tears but her shoulders shake. LAURA gets up from her chair and crosses to WENDY.)

LAURA

We don't want to see you get hurt if he turns out not to be the type of man you think he is. Sometimes they hide who they truly are.

JANIE

They're all the same and the sooner you realize that, the better off you and your baby will be.

WENDY

No! It's going to be different for me!

LAURA

You know Janie cares about you.

WENDY

She's got a funny way of showing it.

JANIE

You need some tough love.

(WENDY yanks down several of the pieces of clothing she has hung on the line.)

WENDY

Here's some tough love! Hang up your own damn laundry!

JANIE

Watch it! That's the only dress that still fits me!

LAURA

Wendy, come on, don't be like this. Please, can y'all stop fighting?

(LAURA picks up the clothing from the ground, shaking off the dirt and proceeding to hang it back on the line. WENDY and JANIE glare at each other.)

WENDY

I can't help it if my happiness makes her jealous!

JANIE

No one is jealous of you! You know what? I'm not taking your letters anymore. Figure out how to secretly get them in the mailbox yourself!

(WENDY goes on a rampage, ripping all the clothing down off the line. JANIE and LAURA are both up now, scrambling to pick up the clothes from the ground. There's a good bit of shouting.)

Gimme back the stamps, Wendy! Give them to me!

WENDY

No! You can't have them!

(WENDY and JANIE proceed to take part in the most awkward version of tag as JANIE attempts to grab the stamps from WENDY's pocket. LAURA is trying to pacify them when SISTER PATRICIA ANN exits from the house just as JANIE rips the stamps from WENDY's possession.)

PATRICIA ANN

Girls! *(They all freeze and instantly fall silent.)* What in the world is going on back here? I could hear you shouting all the way in the kitchen!

(No one speaks for a long moment.)

LAURA

It's nothing, Sister. We just had a little disagreement but it's fine now. We apologize for disturbing you.

PATRICIA ANN

Thank you, Beatrice. What was the disagreement about? Hmm?

JANIE

Nothing important, Sister.

(PATRICIA ANN looks at the pile of clothing scattered around the yard.)

PATRICIA ANN

I see. How's the algebra work coming along?

LAURA

Almost finished.

PATRICIA ANN

The Reverend Mother asked me to remind you both that this evening's chapel is mandatory. No excuses.

(The girls nod but no one speaks. JANIE and LAURA goes back to their work. PATRICIA ANN crosses to WENDY, touching her arm.)

Are you all right?

WENDY

Yes, thank you Sister. I'm fine.

(PATRICIA ANN begins to gather up the laundry and help WENDY start to re-hang it. JANIE waits for a moment when she can slip the stamps back into her math book but PATRICIA ANN happens to see her.)

PATRICIA ANN

What's that, Teresa?

JANIE

Sorry, Sister?

PATRICIA ANN

You put something in the back of that book. What was it?

JANIE

I didn't.

PATRICIA ANN

You did. I saw you.

LAURA

It was some notes from class, Sister. I borrowed them...

PATRICIA ANN

Are you cheating on your math work, girls? You know Sister Angelica would not approve of you sharing answers.

(She crosses to JANIE and holds out her hand.)

Give me the paper, please.

(JANIE considers refusing, but PATRICIA ANN holds her gaze steady.)

Now, Teresa.

JANIE

Here.

(She shoves the torn page of stamps into PATRICIA ANN's outstretched hand.)

PATRICIA ANN

Stamps? Where did you get these?

JANIE

My sister sent them to me.

PATRICIA ANN

Why is your sister sending you stamps? You know we prefer you buy them from us.

JANIE

I... I just would rather get them from her.

PATRICIA ANN

Teresa, are you writing letters to someone outside of your family?

(WENDY holds her breath and LAURA doesn't dare look up from her math work.)

JANIE

Who would I be writing to outside of my family, Sister? That would be against the house rules.

PATRICIA ANN

It would. And it would result in consequences and loss of privileges. So I'll ask again, are you writing letters to someone you're not supposed to be writing to?

JANIE

No.

PATRICIA ANN

Teresa, I don't think you're telling me the truth. I'll have to confiscate these and say something to Mother Mary Helene.

JANIE

No! Sister, please don't, I'm sorry, it was just a mistake, it won't happen again! She's going to put me on food restriction!

PATRICIA ANN

I'm sorry, but that was the risk you took, you know the consequences for breaking the rules.

JANIE

I wasn't trying to write to anyone outside of my family, I swear!

PATRICIA ANN

It doesn't make sense why you were sneaking in stamps otherwise, does it? Try to see things from my perspective. It's extremely suspicious and I'm doing my best to protect you from yourself. Do you want to come with me when I talk with Mother Mary Helene right now? Maybe explain yourself and show contrition and see what she says?

JANIE

There's no point. She's not going to believe me either way.

WENDY

No! Please, Sister. They were for me. I asked for them, but I didn't realize it would cause trouble. I'm sorry.

(JANIE looks surprised but relieved.)

PATRICIA ANN

Who were you wanting to write a letter to outside of your family?

WENDY

Um, my friend. From home. Her name is Alice-

PATRICIA ANN

You weren't trying to write a boy?

WENDY

No, Sister.

LAURA

Sister, why shouldn't we be able to communicate with people outside of our family? It's so isolating and it doesn't make sense. Especially in our case... there's at least one other person outside of our family that might be interested to hear how we're doing.

PATRICIA ANN

That is precisely the last person in the world you should want to contact! The boy who tempted you to sin and got you in this predicament in the first place doesn't need to be in your life anymore. The rules are there for your protection, to guide you back from sin into righteousness in God's eyes. *(To WENDY)* Margaret, if what you're saying is true, you know Mother Mary Helene is going to need to hear about it. I imagine there will be consequences for you and you'll have to make amends to atone for the sin of deception.

WENDY

Yes, Sister.

LAURA

She shouldn't have to be deceptive! In Wendy- I mean, in Margaret's situation, she should be able to write to whomever

she pleases. She's due any day now and will probably be home with her baby before the letter is even delivered to Randall!

PATRICIA ANN

I thought she was writing to Alice?

LAURA

Alice! I meant Alice.

PATRICIA ANN

I would have thought you girls knew me well enough by now to know that I value honesty above all else.

LAURA

You're keeping us from being honest with people that are important to us! It doesn't make any sense.

PATRICIA ANN

It doesn't have to make sense to you, Beatrice. You need to trust that we have your best interests and the interests of your parents in mind when we make the policies for St. Cecilia's. And they must be followed. (To WENDY) Answer me yes or no: were you going to send a letter to someone outside of your family?

WENDY

Yes, Sister.

PATRICIA ANN

To someone named Alice?

(WENDY looks past PATRICIA ANN to JANIE and LAURA. JANIE shakes her head subtly "yes" and LAURA mouths "I'm sorry.")

WENDY

I... I was writing a letter to Randall.

PATRICIA ANN

I see. Teresa, Beatrice, go inside please. I would like to speak with Margaret alone.

LAURA

She didn't mean to break the rules, Sister.

JANIE

I should at least share the blame! I'm the one who helped her get the stamps in the first place.

PATRICIA ANN

That's not how this works. Go inside, girls. Now.

(Both LAURA and JANIE gather up their books and make their way inside the house. WENDY watches them with a miserable look on her face. PATRICIA ANN's expression is blank.)

JANIE

(Quietly as she passes WENDY)

Don't admit to anything you don't have to- she's a nun, not a cop.

PATRICIA ANN

Teresa. Go inside.

JANIE

Yes, Sister.

(LAURA and JANIE exit inside the house. WENDY waits for the onslaught of scolding to begin but instead PATRICIA ANN walks over to the lawn chairs and sits down, gesturing for WENDY to sit and join her.)

PATRICIA ANN

I understand why you broke the rules. I know you might not believe me, but nuns are people too. We have families and friends and some of us were even in love before we took our vows.

WENDY

I can't imagine the Reverend Mother as a teenager in love.

PATRICIA ANN

I said some of us. Not all.

(WENDY smiles weakly and sits down in the lawn chair. PATRICIA ANN smiles at her but doesn't say anything. She waits for WENDY to speak.)

WENDY

Do you think what Jan- I mean, Teresa was saying is true? That Randall didn't mean it when he said we were going to get married?

PATRICIA ANN

I couldn't say what's in another person's heart.

WENDY

Oh.

(Beat.)

Sister... why are you a nun? You're so young and... nice.

PATRICIA ANN

My mother was a very complicated woman. Growing up in her home was a labyrinth of rules, most of which were constantly changing. Sometimes, dinner was served on fine china and you were expected to dress in your Sunday best and she would critique your every move, other nights Mother couldn't leave her bed much less manage to make a meal for her children and husband. We never knew which version of my mother we would encounter on any given day.

WENDY

That sounds horrible.

PATRICIA ANN

It could be. But strangely enough, I think it's what led me to find the home I found at the church. There was... predictability. Stability. Everyone knew where they stood, and there was so much comfort in that knowledge.

WENDY

I always loved going to Mass. Some of the other girls complain about chapel, but I'm so glad that we have it. I- I don't mind not having to wear panty hose, though

PATRICIA ANN

No, I don't blame you.

WENDY

Do you feel angry at your mother?

PATRICIA ANN

Sometimes. But sometimes I just feel sorry for her. And as cruel as she could be, she was capable of just as much warmth and kindness too. My siblings and I got very good at getting a sense of her mood the moment we stepped through the door after school. I thought of myself like a cat with long whiskers that could pick up the vibrations of her emotional state in the air.

WENDY

My father is like that when he was angry, but I'm not very good at picking up on it until it's too late to get out of his way.

PATRICIA ANN

What did he say when you told him about the baby?

WENDY

He wanted to know who the father was. Kept yelling at me to tell him. But I wouldn't, so he smacked me around a little bit until my mother started crying for him to stop. She told him that she was sending me here so that he wouldn't have to see me like this.

PATRICIA ANN

Does Randall know you did that?

WENDY

No.

PATRICIA ANN

I see.

(Long silence.)

You're going through an awful lot for this boy.

WENDY

I love him.

PATRICIA ANN

I know. You want to make sure he's worthy of your love. You've got more than just yourself to consider now.

WENDY

I promise, I am. I prayed for this baby, Sister.

PATRICIA ANN

Of course you pray for your baby.

WENDY

No, before I even met Randall. I was on my knees begging for a reason to get out of my house and to move on with my life-

PATRICIA ANN

You're 14 years old. Don't you think that's a little young to be "moving on with your life?"

WENDY

I asked God for a sign. And the very next day, the very next day, Sister! I met Randall.

PATRICIA ANN

Why did you need to leave your house so badly? *(Pause.)* Your father?

WENDY

He was always finding a reason to be mad about me. Every little thing, it was like this big explosive argument. He wasn't like that with the rest of my siblings. I don't know why he hated me as much as he did.

PATRICIA ANN

And he never knew about Randall?

WENDY

No. No one knew. It was a wonderful secret.

PATRICIA ANN

I see.

WENDY

He's going to get through with basic training and then we can get married and raise our baby together. And attend Mass every Sunday.

(Her voice wavers, but she puts a big smile on her face.)
I'm going to get my happily ever after, Sister. Even when I have moments of doubt, I just tell myself that this is the plan God has for me. Isn't that what you said I should do?

PATRICIA ANN

We can't always be sure we know what God's plan is, or that it necessarily will line up with our plans for ourselves, Margaret. You should be suspicious of those who presume to speak with too much knowledge about God's plans.

WENDY

But Father Anthony says that we can feel the Holy Ghost moving in our lives, and that should be evidence that we're on the right path?

PATRICIA ANN

No, I mean, yes, that's true, but we have to be cautious of ascribing too much of our own desires to the Lord. That's all I'm saying.

WENDY

I understand, Sister.

PATRICIA ANN

Your heart may be telling you that this boy is God's choice for you, but you need to trust that God's true plan will be revealed for you in the fullness of time. Until then, listen to your... whiskers and follow the rules of St. Cecilia's.

WENDY

Are you going to say anything to Mother Mary Helene?

PATRICIA ANN

Are you going to try to write any more letters to people other than your mother?

(WENDY doesn't answer right away.)
I need to hear your answer, Margaret.

WENDY

No, Sister.

PATRICIA ANN

Then perhaps I won't have to mention anything about this to Mother Mary Helene. She seems very busy with house business at the moment.

WENDY

Really?

(PATRICIA ANN squeezes WENDY's hand gently, then stands up.)

PATRICIA ANN

What are you hungry for? It's my night to make dinner for the house and I haven't even started yet. I'm sorely limited in my cooking repertoire.

WENDY

Honestly, Sister? I could eat a dozen peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. That's all that sounds good to me right now.

PATRICIA ANN

Praise God for small miracles. That's something I actually know how to make!

(PATRICIA ANN helps WENDY stand from the lawn chair and they exit into the house.)

END OF SCENE

SCENE THREE

August, 1970. New Orleans.

Lights up on the back porch and patio of the St. Cecilia's Home. SISTER PATRICIA ANN is sweeping the porch. MOTHER MARY HELENE, 53 but looking much older, enters through the gate carrying a bag of groceries.

PATRICIA ANN

Sister! I didn't see you, here let me help-

MARY HELENE

Thank you.

(PATRICIA ANN takes the bag from her and turns to take it inside.)

Why are you sweeping the porch? Surely one of the girls should be doing that.

PATRICIA ANN

They were all working so hard on their school work, I thought it would be better to let them-

MARY HELENE

Were they actually working or were they just pretending to work so that you would do their chores for them?

PATRICIA ANN

I-

MARY HELENE

You have to be very careful with these girls, Sister Patricia. After all, at the end of the day, they are fallen women. It's in their nature to be deceitful.

PATRICIA ANN

I disagree *(MARY HELENE shoots her a look)* respectfully disagree, Reverend Mother. They aren't deceitful but after everything they've been through they don't always trust-

MARY HELENE

You're still new. You'll learn. Now go put the groceries in the kitchen and tell one of the girls to put them away.

(PATRICIA ANN nods and goes inside to set the groceries down. MARY HELENE takes a moment to inspect her work sweeping the porch. Her sweeping job fails to pass her rigorous inspection. As PATRICIA ANN re-enters.)

How are you 25 years old and still don't know how to properly use a broom?

PATRICIA ANN

My apologies, Reverend Mother.

(PATRICIA ANN takes the broom from MARY HELENE and starts to sweep again under her instruction.)

MARY HELENE

Use short, quick strokes. Push towards the center. Yes, that's better. Look, you've missed some there-

PATRICIA ANN

Reverend Mother, I was wondering if you had a moment to talk about Margaret.

MARY HELENE

What about her?

PATRICIA ANN

She's quite convinced that she and the father of her baby are going to get married. I... I haven't known what to say to her about those statements. And Father Anthony doesn't seem to be dissuading her from this belief either. In fact, just today she told me that he said that if she feels the Holy Ghost moving in her life, then that's a sign she's on the correct path.

MARY HELENE

Do you not agree? What would you have him tell her?

PATRICIA ANN

Perhaps the truth?

MARY HELENE

Margaret is quite close to her delivery date. Father Anthony is wise to placate her rather than give her reason fret about her situation.

PATRICIA ANN

So you believe that this boy is going to return and marry her?

MARY HELENE

Good heavens, no. If he had been willing to marry her, she wouldn't have any reason to have been sent to us, would she?

PATRICIA ANN

Then what possible good are we doing her by allowing this fantasy to continue?

MARY HELENE

That's not any of our business. These girls convince themselves of any fool thing, but she'll snap out of it soon enough.

PATRICIA ANN

Reverend Mother... I need your counsel. May I share something with you, a concern I have, without the girls that are involved getting in trouble?

MARY HELENE

That depends. What have they done?

PATRICIA ANN

I think Margaret has been writing to the father of her baby-

MARY HELENE

What? How has that been allowed to happen?

PATRICIA ANN

I- I don't know, Sister. She told me about it this afternoon, but she promised that she would stop. She understands it's against the rules.

MARY HELENE

Did you punish her?

PATRICIA ANN

We talked.

MARY HELENE

While some might consider that an adequate consequence, I'm afraid it doesn't rise to the level of penance for the sin of deception.

PATRICIA ANN

If we were realistic but kind about the likelihood of this boy coming back for her, she wouldn't have the desire to break the rules and write to him.

MARY HELENE

Convincing a teenage girl that a boy won't solve all of her problems, despite the obvious fact that he's the cause of at least one of her current problems, is a herculean task. She'll understand soon enough when the harsh reality sets in.

PATRICIA ANN

When she's raising a baby on her own?

MARY HELENE

What on earth are you talking about? *(Pointing to the porch floor)* Get between the slats on the railing now. These girls don't raise their babies. They give them up for adoption.

PATRICIA ANN

I know some of the girls choose to do that, of course, but I thought some of them-

MARY HELENE

They aren't allowed to come here unless they, or their families, have agreed to place the babies up for adoption when they are born.

(PATRICIA ANN stops her sweeping.)

PATRICIA ANN

Do all the girls know this?

MARY HELENE

The diocese is of the opinion that it would be easier if the girls were allowed to operate under whatever version of truth that makes them most compliant. There are some St. Cecilia's

homes in other places that take a more... open approach. But that's not the policy here. All babies are given up for adoption within 24 hours of being born.

PATRICIA ANN

I don't understand- you see these girls every day, you know some of them believe they will be able to give birth to their child and take it home to raise!

MARY HELENE

Keep your voice down, Sister Patricia.

PATRICIA ANN

They need to be told the truth.

MARY HELENE

Not by you. As the head of this order, I am instructing you to follow procedure and not to speak about this to any of the girls. Think of what you're suggesting! They were sent here by their families with the express understanding that the baby would be adopted by a Catholic family and their daughter would be returned to them. A teenage girl is not in a position to make these kinds of decisions about what is in the best interest of her unborn child.

PATRICIA ANN

We shouldn't be taking part in deception either! Especially for such a selfish reason-

MARY HELENE

How is it selfish?

PATRICIA ANN

You said so yourself! It makes it easier on us because they are compliant- it's easier on us to lie to them.

MARY HELENE

There is a very good reason for it. You don't understand how difficult this job would be if these girls were fighting you every step of the way. I don't wish to discuss this anymore,

Sister Patricia. You do as you are told or I will report you to the bishop and you'll find yourself reassigned. Are we clear?

(Long moment of silence. MARY HELENE and PATRICIA keep their gaze.)

PATRICIA ANN

Yes Reverend Mother.

MARY HELENE

Make sure that Margaret comes to see me before dinner for her punishment for this letter nonsense. And anyone else that was involved in it, or knew about it and didn't say anything. Lies of omission are still lies.

PATRICIA ANN

Yes Reverend Mother.

MARY HELENE

Obedience is not just my expectation. It's the expectation of God.

(PATRICIA ANN returns to her sweeping. She doesn't make eye contact with MARY HELENE.)

Did you hear me?

PATRICIA ANN

Yes, Mother Superior. I heard you.

(MARY HELENE exits into the house. PATRICIA ANN continues sweeping. Lights fade.)

END OF SCENE

SCENE FOUR

August, 1970. New Orleans.

Lights up on the back porch and patio of the St. Cecilia's Home. Late night and the house is dark and quiet. The back door of the house opens and JANIE emerges in her nightgown. She carefully shuts the door, trying to close it without making a sound. Satisfied, she goes to the edge of the porch and leans against the post, staring up at the moon. She rubs her belly absentmindedly.

A light flickers on inside the house. JANIE starts, taking a few steps down into the yard. The door opens and LAURA, also in her nightgown, comes out.

LAURA

(Whispering)

Janie? You all right? What are you doing out here?

JANIE

What are you doing? You trying to wake the whole house up? Shut that light off!

(LAURA steps back inside, switches off the light, and as she is coming back on the porch-)

Be careful shutting that door. Her bedroom's right over there.

LAURA

I know.

(LAURA shuts the door, not as carefully as JANIE did and it makes a sound as it closes. Both girls wince and hold their collective breath, waiting to hear if someone stirs inside the house. Nothing happens and they relax. JANIE turns her attention back up to the moon.)

Everything all right?

JANIE

Mmm.

LAURA

It's late.

JANIE

You don't gotta be up with me. Go back to bed.

LAURA

I'm not tired.

JANIE

You're only just 6 months pregnant. Let's see if you say that in three months.

LAURA

Aren't you tired?

JANIE

Never could sleep when the moon's full like this.

(JANIE inhales deeply, touching her hands to her stomach as if she's trying to absorb something from the air around her. LAURA settles herself onto the porch steps. After a long moment of silence, JANIE turns to her.)

What do you think your baby's daddy is doing right now?

LAURA

Right this second?

JANIE

Yeah.

LAURA

I don't know. I guess he's sleeping like most other normal people at 2 in the morning.

JANIE

You gonna marry him?

LAURA

I hope not.

JANIE

Hmm.

LAURA

You getting married to the father of your baby?

JANIE

Lord no. His family is the one that's paying for me to be here. They want to erase any trace of evidence that he ever laid eyes on me much less anything else. Besides, he's going to Vanderbilt in the fall. Can't ruin that trajectory.

LAURA

Oh. I'm sorry.

JANIE

Don't be. I'm not.

LAURA

You're not sorry you got pregnant?

(JANIE doesn't answer immediately.)

JANIE

I think my baby likes the moon. Whenever the moon is full like this, she squirms and wiggles- not so much now, because she's so big and can't move around as easily, but I can still feel her wanting to dance around. She's a wolf baby.

LAURA

Wolf baby?

JANIE

She wants to howl at the moon. *(To her belly)* Don't ya?

LAURA

You think it's a girl?

JANIE

I know it. Did the needle trick a few months back. No doubt about it. Besides, I can feel her energy and it's definitely a girl.

LAURA

You're making all that up.

JANIE

I swear I'm not! Do you want me to do it for you?

LAURA

I don't like needles, I can barely stand getting blood drawn at the doctor-

JANIE

I don't have to stick you! Look, I'll show you. Go get a needle and thread from the sewing basket. Go on!

LAURA

Just a regular sewing needle?

JANIE

Yes. And white thread.

LAURA

If I agree to do this, will you come back inside and go to bed when we're done?

JANIE

Why do you care what I do?

LAURA

I can't sleep knowing you're out here by yourself. Since Wendy's been at the hospital, the room is too quiet.

JANIE

Says the girl who never had to share a room before! My, how the tides have shifted.

LAURA

It's not just that- I don't want you to get in trouble being out here, if any of the sisters wake up and see you-

JANIE

All right, go get the needle and thread and after we do the trick, I'll go inside. Deal?

LAURA

Deal.

(JANIE rolls her eyes and LAURA goes back into the house. JANIE shifts her weight back and forth, straining to find a comfortable position as she waits. In a few moments, LAURA returns holding a spool of white thread and a needle. She shuts the door carefully behind her.)

JANIE

That was quick.

LAURA

I could hear Mother Mary Helene snoring when I went into the sitting room. Her bedroom door must be open- I could smell the whiskey from the hall. We need to be careful, being outside after curfew is-

JANIE

I'm already on food restriction because of that stamp business, what else are they gonna do to me?

LAURA

(As she threads the needle)

It's got to be against some law to withhold food from a pregnant woman.

JANIE

You think any police officer or social worker is going to say boo to the Sisters of St. Cecilia's? They could string us up by our thumbs in the front yard and no one would give it a second thought.

LAURA

I guess not. Doesn't make it right.

JANIE

Got it threaded? Here, hand it over. Okay, lay down on the steps here-

LAURA

Lay down?

JANIE

On your back, it'll just take a second. Don't you want to know what you're having?

LAURA

What difference does it make either way?

JANIE

What do you mean?

LAURA

My parents are still going to want me to give it up for adoption, whether it's a boy or a girl. My mother said as much when she took me to the bus station.

JANIE

Is that what you're going to do?

LAURA

I don't feel like I've got much of a choice.

JANIE

It's your baby! Of course you've got a choice!

LAURA

If I'd had a choice in the matter, it wouldn't have happened at all. Any of it. But he wasn't real interested in my opinion at the time.

(JANIE realizes what LAURA means. She stands silently, holding the needle and thread.)

JANIE

Would you- would you rather not know? We don't have to do this.

LAURA

No, it's fine. I want to see what happens. Really, Janie. It's fine. I'm fine.

(She carefully maneuvers herself onto the top step where she can lay flat on her back. JANIE holds the end of the thread so the needle points straight down at LAURA's belly.)

JANIE

Okay, you just need to breathe in and out slowly while the needle settles. Try to let your mind go blank.

LAURA

That's a tall order since there's a person with a needle ready to stab into my stomach-

JANIE

Will you hush, nobody's getting stabbed! Be still.

(Both girls watch the needle intently as it slowly stops moving around.)

Now. Ask your baby: "are you a boy or a girl?"

LAURA

Like out loud? Or in my head?

JANIE

Out loud. Your baby can't read your thoughts- well, at least I don't think your baby can read your thoughts... I hope not, anyway.

LAURA

Fine. Hi, hello baby. I... um, how are you?

JANIE

You don't need to hold a whole conversation, just ask the question.

LAURA

I don't ever do stuff like this, I don't know how it works!

JANIE

Hold still! You made it start up again!

(JANIE runs her fingers down the length of the thread to make the needle stop moving.)

So once you ask the question, if the needle moves in a circular motion that means you're having a girl, and if it moves back and forth you're having a boy. It's 100% certain.

LAURA

This seems like complete baloney, Janie, did you really do this?

JANIE

Yes. All the women in my family do this and it's never wrong. I did it for Wendy too. Needle said she was having a boy, and when she gets back from the hospital you'll see she'll be carrying a little blue-wrapped bundle. I'll bet you anything you want. The needle never lies.

LAURA

Well, baby... are you boy or a girl?

(Both girls stare at the still needle with urgent intensity. For a moment, nothing happens. Just as LAURA is about to express her doubts, the needle begins to twitch slightly and then move in a clear back-and-forth pendulum motion over LAURA's belly.)

Don't lie, Janie, you're moving it!

JANIE

I swear I'm not! Look, back-and-forth! It's going as clear as a grandfather clock! You're having a boy!

(LAURA sits up abruptly, effected by this news in a way she definitely did not expect. She struggles to get to her feet and JANIE drops the needle and thread to help her stand.)

Hey! Hey, it's okay, you don't need to be upset- did you want to be having a girl?

LAURA

No, I didn't- I didn't want to be having anything! I don't want to have this baby!

JANIE

I know.

LAURA

I don't want to be constantly reminded of- I thought maybe if I found out it was a girl, it would be different. But a boy? No. I don't want that. I want to go back to how I was before. I could pretend that this wasn't happening to me.

JANIE

That what wasn't happening to you?

LAURA

(She gestures to her belly and then to the general space around her.)

All of this! This! Everything- everyone telling me to "trust God's plan" and this is all part of "God's will for my life." Every single person that said that to me, I wanted to scratch their faces off!

JANIE

Whoa, Laura-

LAURA

How is this God's plan? If him being on top of me, dripping sweat and panting like some feral hog, telling me to stop crying-

JANIE

I know, they're horrible, but just keep it down, you don't want to wake-

LAURA

You know what I think? I think God needs a new plan! Because this one is shit!

(JANIE pulls LAURA into an awkward side embrace, their protruding bellies preventing her from holding her in a normal hug. LAURA presses her face into JANIE's shoulder and screams through gritted teeth.)

JANIE

There... that's it. Howl it out. It's going to be all right. The sisters will find a good home for him, a nice couple will adopt him and it'll be fine. You'll see. This isn't gonna be the thing that defines you.

(From inside the house, the telephone rings. JANIE and LAURA freeze.)

Quick. Go inside now and get back to our room before anyone gets up. Go, damn it!

(A light goes on in an upstairs room, spilling onto a small

section of the backyard. The telephone ringing has stopped and a muffled voice can be heard.)

LAURA

Who's calling at this hour? You don't think-

JANIE

I don't care, you're gonna get caught if you don't go back now!

LAURA

It's the hospital, it's gotta be- oh my goodness, do you think something's happened with Wendy? Or her baby?

(The lights in the downstairs have come on and PATRICIA ANN throws open the porch door, trying to put on her coat over her night gown and put on her shoes at the same time.)

PATRICIA ANN

Holy Mother of-! What in the world are you two doing out here at this time of night? Get inside this house at once!

LAURA

Sister- is everything all right? We heard the phone and-

PATRICIA ANN

I don't have time to deal with either of you right now. Go back inside immediately. I've got to be at the hospital right away.

JANIE

What's happened to Wendy?

PATRICIA ANN

I don't know! And the more time I waste talking to you to, the longer it'll be until I get there to find out. Just go back inside and we'll never mention this obvious rule violation again. Oh, damn it!

(PATRICIA ANN gives a sudden growl of frustration and turns back into the house, then returns a few moments later holding her pocketbook and car keys.)

Go back inside. Heaven help you if you're not in bed when I return.

JANIE

Please, Sister. Call us when you know something. She's our friend.

(Beat.)

PATRICIA ANN

Yes. I promise. I'll call as soon as I know something, Janie.

(PATRICIA ANN unlocks the gate and exits, leaving both LAURA and JANIE standing shellshocked in the yard.)

LAURA

She called you Janie.

BLACKOUT

SCENE FIVE

August, 1970. New Orleans.

Lights up on the back porch and patio of the St. Cecilia's Home. Midmorning, one day after Scene Four. PATRICIA ANN is seated on the porch, smoking a cigarette. This isn't something she does often, but it's desperately needed right now. She looks as though she hasn't slept or showered in days. JANIE exits from the house carrying a bundle of letters heading to the mailbox. She moves slowly. PATRICIA ANN has an impulse to hide the cigarette but she's too slow and she knows she's been spotted.

JANIE

Good morning Sister. We missed you at breakfast.

PATRICIA ANN

I couldn't find the energy to come down this morning. How was it?

JANIE

Somber.

(PATRICIA ANN doesn't respond and JANIE goes to take the letters to the mailbox. She holds them out to PATRICIA ANN)
Did you need to look at the addresses on these? No one's trying to pull anything but I don't want to break any rules-

PATRICIA ANN

They're fine. Thank you, Teresa.

JANIE

Oh, I'm Teresa again?

PATRICIA ANN

What are you talking about?

JANIE

The other night when you were rushing to the hospital for Wendy- I mean, Margaret. You called me Janie.

PATRICIA ANN

I'm sorry. I was upset and not thinking straight.

JANIE

It's all right. I wasn't asking you for an apology.

(Beat.)

PATRICIA ANN

How are you?

JANIE

Sad.

PATRICIA ANN

Me too.

JANIE

Was she- was she still alive when you got to the hospital? Did you get a chance to talk to her at all?

PATRICIA ANN

She was unconscious. I held her hand but she didn't- her eyes never opened.

JANIE

Was anyone else with her before you arrived? Nurses or a doctor or- hospital priest? Anyone?

PATRICIA ANN

Yes. She wasn't ever alone, if that's what you're asking.

JANIE

And the baby?

PATRICIA ANN

The baby was born. A healthy baby girl.

JANIE

A girl? You're sure?

PATRICIA ANN

Yes. She was adopted by a couple from Texas. They named her Eva.

JANIE

She never got to hold her baby. Not even once.

PATRICIA ANN

No. *(Pause)* I'm sorry.

JANIE

Why did this happen?

PATRICIA ANN

It's not our place to question the will of the Lord, Teresa.

JANIE

You don't really believe that.

PATRICIA ANN

I do. I have to believe it or nothing else makes sense.

JANIE

That could have been me. It still could-

PATRICIA ANN

There's no reason to think like that. You're going to be perfectly fine.

JANIE

You don't know that.

PATRICIA ANN

It's normal to be afraid. You just have to put your trust in God and in the doctors at St. Bernard's. They will do what's best and take care of you and your baby.

JANIE

Like they took care of Wendy?

(JANIE stares at PATRICIA ANN, who looks down at her hands which are shaking. She snuffs out the cigarette and stands up, turning to go inside.)

Sister, I need you to tell me what happened to her. Because I don't believe that she just slipped quietly away.

PATRICIA ANN

It was an unfortunate tragedy but there wasn't anything anyone could have done differently to save both the baby and her mother. It was in God's hands and we have to accept the decision He made-

JANIE

Stop it! Stop giving me these empty words! You knew her, you cared about her. It's not a betrayal of your faith to admit that you're angry that she was taken away!

PATRICIA ANN

Standing out here and screaming at the heavens isn't going to bring her back. All we can do is pray for her soul and- and for forgiveness from the sin of questioning God's judgment.

JANIE

What happened to Wendy? Please tell me.

PATRICIA ANN

I don't understand why you want to know so badly. It won't bring you any peace of mind, especially as close to your due date as you are.

JANIE

I want to know the truth! You think that you're protecting us in this place and you act like you have all this secret knowledge so I'm asking you to have enough respect for me to tell me what happened.

(JANIE holds her gaze steady. Again, PATRICIA ANN is the first to break, and she drifts off of the porch steps into the yard away from JANIE.)

PATRICIA ANN

Margaret went into labor and was taken to the hospital Friday evening.

JANIE

I know that part. What happened when she went to the hospital?

PATRICIA ANN

She was put into twilight sleep to alleviate the pain of childbirth. This can slow the process down. Sometimes. And in this case, labor was further complicated because she was-

JANIE

So young?

PATRICIA ANN

Yes.

JANIE

Did she ask for twilight sleep?

PATRICIA ANN

It's the standard practice at St. Bernards because it keeps you calm. It's very safe. Queen Elizabeth used it when she had Prince Andrew, did you know that? (*JANIE shrugs.*) You don't feel anything and when you wake up you have a nice clean baby. Doctors say it's the best for everyone.

JANIE

Sounds like it didn't work that way this time.

PATRICIA ANN

The medicine they had used to put her in this twilight state started to wear off. She was very distressed, according to the nurses. So they used more to prolong the effect, but this also had an impact on the baby. That's when they decided to call me- well, really they were trying to reach Mother Mary Helene but I was the one who answered the phone.

JANIE

What kind of impact? Like it made the baby sleep too?

PATRICIA ANN

Yes, that's what I gathered.

JANIE

So she couldn't wake up?

PATRICIA ANN

Not exactly. She was- her heart rate was dropping, and the baby was not coming easily, so the doctors had to make a decision.

JANIE

What does that mean?

PATRICIA ANN

You know what that means.

JANIE

They saved the baby instead of her?

PATRICIA ANN

They had to make a choice. They chose in accordance with our principles.

JANIE

Could they have tried to wake her up? Couldn't they have, I don't know, given her something to raise her heart rate and saved them both?

PATRICIA ANN

Are you presuming to know more than the doctors now?

JANIE

What would you have done in their place?

PATRICIA ANN

I'm not a doctor. I'm a nun.

JANIE

You think they should have tried harder to save her!

PATRICIA ANN

I'm not questioning their actions or-

JANIE

You should!

PATRICIA ANN

That's enough. I know you're upset and this can't be easy for you be going through, but there's no point in wallowing in it, all right?

JANIE

I'm not wallowing!

PATRICIA ANN

I'm going to get you some water. You need to calm down before Mother Mary Helene hears you.

JANIE

I don't give a shit if Mother Mary Helene or Father Anthony or Pope Paul himself hears me! Wendy deserved better!

PATRICIA ANN

It's a tragedy, and we have to- we must look to God for-
(Emotion catches in her voice, and she sinks back down onto the porch steps.)

JANIE

Sister!

PATRICIA ANN

I'm sorry. I'm not in a right state to counsel you right now. My mind is... disordered.

(PATRICIA ANN starts to cry, quietly at first but then great heaving sobs. JANIE watches her cry, but doesn't move to comfort her.)

JANIE

Why were there people at the hospital to adopt Wendy's baby so quickly?

(PATRICIA ANN doesn't look at JANIE.)

Wendy had no intention of giving her baby up for adoption and there was no reason to think anything like this could possibly happen- so why was there already a couple there, expecting to get a baby? It doesn't make any sense to me.

PATRICIA ANN

I... I really couldn't say, Teresa. It was providence? All part of God's divine plan.

JANIE

I don't believe you. There's something else going on, isn't there?

(PATRICIA ANN struggles, wanting desperately to tell JANIE the truth. JANIE shakes her head fiercely with sudden understanding.)

When I go to the hospital- Sister, listen to me! When it's my time, don't you let them put me in twilight sleep. I don't want it! I'm telling you right now, I don't want it. I want to be wide awake the whole time. I know it's going to hurt, but I'd rather hurt than go to sleep and never wake up.

PATRICIA ANN

(Trying to compose herself)

I'll do my best to make sure that doesn't happen.

JANIE

You'll do your best? That's all?

PATRICIA ANN

I don't want to promise something I can't do. I don't have that kind of authority, especially at the hospital.

JANIE

(Flatly)

I see.

PATRICIA ANN

It's for the best... I'm sure it's all for the best...

JANIE

Please don't.

(Beat.)

PATRICIA ANN

Mother Mary Helene asked if you girls would like to hold a service for Margaret in place of chapel this evening. I said I would talk to you about it and let her know.

(Long silence. JANIE rubs her belly and stares out toward the horizon, listening for something.)

Teresa? Did you hear me?

JANIE

I don't know who Margaret is, but I will be celebrating the life of my friend Wendy tonight instead of chapel. How does that sound to you, Sister?

(PATRICIA ANN wipes her eyes and stands up.)

PATRICIA ANN

That sounds... right.

JANIE

I'll make sure the other girls know. You going to handle Mother Mary Helene?

PATRICIA ANN

I- yes. Yes, I will make sure she understands.

(JANIE makes her way up the porch steps and back inside, shutting the door behind her. PATRICIA ANN wraps her arms around herself, torn and silently grieving.)

BLACKOUT

SCENE SIX

September, 1970. New Orleans.

Lights up on the back porch and patio of the St. Cecilia's Home. It's the middle of the night and the yard is still and silent. After a long moment, the porch door slowly creaks open and JANIE enters carrying a small suitcase. She closes the porch door with painstaking care to do so quietly. She makes her way down the steps and is heading towards the gate when LAURA comes out the porch door after her.

LAURA

(Whispering loudly)

Janie! What are you up to now?

JANIE

Go back inside- this ain't none of your concern.

LAURA

Are you running away? You're due any day now, this is not the time to be taking off.

JANIE

You think I'm gonna let them drug me and take my baby away? Give her to some white family to raise?

LAURA

They're not going to do that-

JANIE

The hell they won't!

LAURA

Where are you going?

JANIE

My sister's been sending me money for the past month and I've got enough for a bus ticket to Memphis.

LAURA

So you can get to Memphis? Then what?

JANIE

I'll figure it out when I get there. I just know I'm not staying here and ending up like Wendy!

LAURA

Oh, you won't end up like Wendy, you'll end up giving birth in some back alley in Memphis!

JANIE

Go back inside. I didn't ask you to come out here.

LAURA

If you run off, I'm going to get in massive trouble for it, you know that don't you?

(Beat.)

JANIE

I can't be worried about that right now.

LAURA

It's so selfish. You're putting yourself and your baby in danger, getting me in trouble, probably going to drive your parents sick with worry about you-

JANIE

Go back inside and pretend to be asleep. You didn't know anything about what I was planning before five minutes ago, so just keep your trap shut and it'll stay that way.

LAURA

Mary Helene's never going to buy that, not in a million years. Please, Janie, come back inside. You need to talk to Sister Patricia Ann, she can calm you down-

JANIE

No! She's no better than any of the rest of them.

LAURA

That's not true! She really cares about us, she's been so kind to everyone since Wendy-

JANIE

Wake up, Laura! They've been lying to us! And she knows all about it!

LAURA

What are they lying about?

JANIE

It wouldn't matter to you because you didn't want to keep your baby in the first place, but they don't let you even if you want to. That's the lie they've been telling-

(PATRICIA ANN bursts out of the doorway onto the porch.

LAURA yelps in surprise and scrambles down the steps into the yard with JANIE.)

PATRICIA ANN

Girls!

JANIE

Damn it, Laura!

PATRICIA ANN

(Overlapping)

What are you doing out here?

LAURA

(Overlapping)

I'm sorry!

(JANIE turns to the open the gate and leave but the latch is locked despite her attempts to force it open. PATRICIA ANN goes to JANIE but LAURA blocks her way)

PATRICIA ANN

Teresa, let's go back inside and we can talk about this, please, before anyone else wakes up. You're just having a rough night, it's totally normal- Step aside, Beatrice.

JANIE

I'm not going back inside that place! You can't make me!

(PATRICIA ANN maneuvers around LAURA and manages to get a hand on JANIE's suitcase, pulling her away from the gate. The girls are both attempting to free the suitcase from PATRICIA ANN when MARY HELENE is visible in the doorway. JANIE abruptly releases her hold on the suitcase and PATRICIA ANN falls to the ground, crying out. JANIE turns and frantically attempts to open the gate.)

MARY HELENE

What is going on out here? Girls! Stop this at once.

JANIE

The hell I will! I'm getting out of here! What's wrong with this gate?

(LAURA is torn between helping JANIE with the latch and helping PATRICIA ANN, and MARY HELENE takes advantage of her pause to come down into the yard and grab her by the wrist.)

MARY HELENE

Get back in the house this instant, Beatrice. Sister, are you all right?

(JANIE pounds her fist on the gate in frustration.)

JANIE

Let me out of here! Help! Someone help me!

(MARY HELENE yanks LAURA roughly towards the house.)

MARY HELENE

I said go inside! Now! Teresa, if you don't stop that yelling I will call the police!

PATRICIA ANN

Sister, that's not necessary-

MARY HELENE

She attacked you and she's attempting to run away-

PATRICIA ANN

She didn't attack me, I fell!

LAURA
(*Overlapping*)

That's not true!

JANIE
(*Overlapping*)

Go ahead and call them! Keeping people against their will is illegal!

MARY HELENE
Your parents signed you into our care. You are a child.
Beatrice, I'm not going to tell you again to go into the house.
(*LAURA looks to JANIE who shakes her head.*)

LAURA
Sister, is it true that we can't keep our babies? We have to give them up for adoption?

PATRICIA ANN
(*Quietly*)
Janie, please. Just come inside. We can talk about this in the morning, it's going to be all right-

JANIE
Don't touch me!

MARY HELENE
I'm not having this discussion in the middle of the night. You're upsetting everyone with your nonsense, Teresa, and there will be serious consequences for this behavior.

JANIE
(*To PATRICIA ANN*)
Tell her the truth!

PATRICIA ANN
I don't know what you want me to say- please just do what Mother Mary Helene says-

LAURA

Why won't you tell us? Sister! Look at me!

(There's a long, painful silence. MARY HELENE stares at PATRICIA ANN, who finally sighs defeatedly.)

PATRICIA ANN

Yes. It's true. You can't keep your babies. Any of you.

JANIE

I told you!

MARY HELENE

What are you trying to prove to these girls, Patricia?

JANIE

Unlock the gate, please. I want to go to Memphis and I want to keep my baby. I don't want her to go to some other family, I want her to stay with me. She needs to stay with me.

MARY HELENE

Don't be ridiculous, you know that's not possible.

PATRICIA ANN

Why shouldn't it be possible? If that's what she wants-

MARY HELENE

She's a child! She's unwed! And in Teresa's particular case, there are other outside circumstances that are far beyond our control.

(JANIE rushes at MARY HELENE and PATRICIA ANN intercepts her, preventing her from attacking the older woman.)

JANIE

His family doesn't get to say what happens to my baby!

PATRICIA ANN

Janie, stop!

LAURA

(Overlapping)

Don't hurt her!

PATRICIA ANN

Think about what you're doing!

MARY HELENE

I'm calling the police. They can deal with her.

(MARY HELENE releases her grip on LAURA and exits back into the house. JANIE howls into PATRICIA ANN's arms, struggling against her.)

PATRICIA ANN

Shhhh... it's going to be all right, it's going to be all right.

LAURA

Sister, you've got to help her. You can't stand by and let this happen!

PATRICIA ANN

Hush, Beatrice, please! Let me think-

JANIE

I want to keep my baby, don't let them take her, I'm begging-

LAURA

(Overlapping)

Sister! This isn't right! How many girls have come through this horrible place, thinking they were going to get to keep their babies- you lied to all of them!

PATRICIA ANN

What am I supposed to do? Fight the bishop himself? I'm a novice nun, what you're asking me to do... it's impossible.

JANIE

Unlock the gate. That's all I need you to do.

LAURA

Sister, please let her go. Please do this one thing. For her. For Wendy.

(PATRICIA ANN looks into JANIE's eyes.)

PATRICIA ANN

I'm sorry, Janie. I can't.

(JANIE collapses to the ground with a guttural moan and LAURA rushes to her side. PATRICIA ANN steps back, horrified at what's happening. The distant wail of police sirens can be heard.)

BLACKOUT

SCENE SEVEN

September, 1970. New Orleans.

Lights up on a small office area isolated from the rest of the stage. Mother Mary HELENE is working at the desk. PATRICIA ANN enters carrying a small suitcase.

MARY HELENE

Is that the last of your things?

PATRICIA ANN

Yes. (*MARY HELENE gives her a sharp look.*) As I understand it, I don't have to call you Reverend Mother anymore.

MARY HELENE

No. Not technically, but I would have thought a modicum of respect would remain. Clearly not.

PATRICIA ANN

I've sent my official letter of resignation to Bishop Lance, but I wanted to speak with you myself so you to know my reasons for leaving.

MARY HELENE

I know your reasons. We don't need to have this conversation.

PATRICIA ANN

You do?

MARY HELENE

The demands of the life of a nun were too much for you, I'm afraid. I had my doubts about your ability to grow into your role here from the beginning. You confirmed my suspicions faster than I could have imagined.

PATRICIA ANN

What the Church is doing here is monstrous, Sister.

MARY HELENE

We're doing the Lord's work. Providing loving, God-fearing homes for children conceived in sin. There is nothing more holy I could be doing.

PATRICIA ANN

Letting them think they will bring home the baby they have loved and cared for before it takes its first breath, only to rip it from them before they shake off the effects of some drug you put them under?

MARY HELENE

The doctors put them in twilight sleep for their own safety, you couldn't possibly understand-

PATRICIA ANN

What happened to Janie?

MARY HELENE

(Meaningfully)

Teresa. Teresa was moved to another St. Cecelia's Home. She gave birth there, I believe it was a standard birth, and her child was adopted by a family that did not mind having a mulatto. Not easy to find, as I'm sure you can imagine.

PATRICIA ANN

She wanted to keep her child.

MARY HELENE

Her family agreed to the terms when they sent her here.

PATRICIA ANN

You know they were pressured by the boy's family!

MARY HELENE

I don't know that those were the circumstances at all. But clearly someone with your pride and willfulness could not be made to see that there are factors far beyond the shortsighted desires of a child.

PATRICIA ANN

I know I'm beating my head against a wall even speaking to you-

MARY HELENE

Yes. So why do you continue to do it?

PATRICIA ANN

(Overlapping)

-Foolishly thinking that you will actually hear me! That anyone in this whole damn building or church or diocese will hear what I'm saying!

MARY HELENE

You're as bad as those girls, letting your emotions dictate your response rather than obedience to God. You let a kinship with them blind you to the truth. I tried to tell you and you wouldn't listen to me.

PATRICIA ANN

(Quietly)

I will never forgive myself for not unlocking that gate.

MARY HELENE

What good would that have done to anyone? She would have been scooped up by the police in ten minutes and brought back to us anyway, and you would have been defrocked that evening. This way, she was kept safe until she had her baby and the proper methods could be taken for her return to her family. This whole unfortunate enterprise could have been put behind us, but then you decided you needed to tender your resignation.

PATRICIA ANN

Where is your heart? Would Jesus have turned a blind eye to Janie's cries? To Wendy's?

MARY HELENE

Don't speak to me as if you know God's will. Have you been to visit an unwed mother who can barely keep her baby alive because she selfishly insisted on keeping it, but had no way to feed herself or the baby? Have you counseled a girl who found herself living on the streets when her parents turned her out after she fell pregnant? I have. More times than I can count. The best thing that anyone can do for these children- ALL these children-

is to provide the babies with loving homes and return the mothers to their own families to restart their lives, hopefully with the hard-earned wisdom of going through this experience. That is our mission and our purpose, and that is how we best show Christ's love.

PATRICIA ANN

But the lying-

MARY HELENE

The shepherd doesn't need to explain all the dangers of the world to his flock. (*MARY HELENE sighs, standing up from her desk and coming around to PATRICIA ANN's side.*) I wish you would've listened to me. When you've been doing this as long as I have, when you've seen what I've seen over the years, you'd know this is the best option for these girls and their babies.

PATRICIA ANN

I can't bear to be a part of this any longer.

MARY HELENE

That is between you and God.

PATRICIA ANN

How do you live with yourself?

MARY HELENE

I know in my heart what I'm doing is right. I am validated every time I receive a letter from a grateful woman who was not able to conceive a child of her own but now, through adoption, can have a family she desperately wanted. It makes all the frustration of managing this household worth it to know that these babies will be raised by two devout parents.

PATRICIA ANN

It's wrong to make everyone walk the same path, Sister.

MARY HELENE

No. There's only one correct path. When you stray from that path, you should pray for forgiveness.

PATRICIA ANN

As should you.

(PATRICIA ANN exits. MARY HELENE watches her go, shakes her head and returns to her work. Lights fade.)

END OF PLAY