

## FRANCIS + ANITA

*The setting is a parlor in the house. There are a couple of couches, chairs, a table, a window, a bookkeeping desk and a small bar. S.R. is an opening which leads to the front door of the house and to the stairs which lead to the second floor. There is an exit S.L. which leads to the kitchen.*

*Lights come up to reveal two women, Anita and Frances. Anita is reading a book. Frances looks out the window.*

Frances: Cowboys. That's all you can see for miles in this Godforsaken town. Stupid, dusty, sweaty, ill-mannered, sex-starved, drunken, tabbacca-chawin', bow-legged, unshaven, greasy-haired, smellin' of horseshit cowboys.

Anita: Frances, have you got the monthlies?

Frances: No, Anita, I don't have the monthlies. I'm just sick to death of cowboy stink.

Anita: Well, you should do what I do.

Frances: What's that?

Anita: When I get them up to my room, I spray them with perfume when they're not looking.

Frances: You what?

Anita: I spray them with perfume.

Frances: Wouldn't that be like doin' it with a deep-voiced, fat-bellied woman?

Anita: Yeah, but at least she smells good.

Frances: Well, I just hope it's a slow day today. Ya' ever have those days where ya' just don't feel like givin' it?

Anita: Sure I do.

Frances: Well, I'm havin' one of those days. I just don't wanna be touched ya' know?

Anita: Well, think of something else then.

Frances: Hmm?

Anita: When you're lying there, just think of something else.

Frances: Is that what you do?

Anita: Sometimes. Or sometimes I read.

Frances: You read?

Anita: Yeah.

Frances: While the man's up there doin' his business, you read?

Anita: Well, it depends on the man of course. Some men don't care what you're doing so long as they're getting what they paid for. Or you get some who do the whole thing with their eyes closed and they don't know what's going on underneath them anyway.

Frances: Yeah, I've had a few of those. I had a man last week who prayed through the whole thing.

Anita: He prayed?

Frances: It was like he was sinnin' and bein' saved all at once. He was callin' on the father, the son, the holy ghost, the virgin Mary. I didn't know whether to drop my drawers or bow my head.

Anita: Well, if you want to take your mind off of it, you should try reading.

Frances: What book are you readin' now?

Anita: It's called Dead Souls. It was written by some Russian fella.

Frances: Dead Souls, huh? Did you get it from Roland Keets?

Anita: Uh-huh.

Frances: Figured. Does Roland's wife know that he comes around to see you?

Anita: I don't know whether she does or not. Besides he doesn't come around to lie with me. He just brings me books. He says he wants to give me his tutelage.

Frances: Well, I've heard it called a lot of things but never a tutelage.

Anita: I'm serious, Frances. Roland says I show promise intellectually and he wants to give me his guidance. He says books can teach me about the world outside of Baxter Springs.

Frances: Anita honey, there ain't no world outside of Baxter Springs. Not for women like us anyway. Jenny's House Of Joy is the only world we're ever gonna know.

Anita: Not for me it isn't. No, I'm savin' my money so I can travel. So I can move myself up in society.

## CLARA + JENNY

*(Clara Casey enters. She is around fifty years old..)*

Clara: Hello?

Jenny: Yes? Can I help you?

Clara: Uh..yes, I believe you can. You're Miss Starbuck, correct? The proprietor?

Jenny: Yes, ma'am. And this here is Frances.

Clara: Frances. Yes.

Jenny: What's on your mind, Mrs. Casey?

Clara: Ah. You know who I am then.

Jenny: Yes, ma'am I do. I make it a point to know my town. It's not bein' nosy. It's just bein' a good businesswoman.

Clara: Businesswoman? That's what you call yourself, is it?

Jenny: I call myself a lot of things. And I expect you're about to add to that list.

Clara: No. No, I'm merely here to ask for a turn of kindness. I didn't come here to pass judgment.

Frances: Woman, I'm sure you passed judgment long before now.

Jenny: Frances. *(To Clara.)* Would you like some coffee, Mrs. Casey? Or a cup of tea?

Clara: No, thank you. I don't plan on stayin' long.

Jenny: Well, what can I do for you?

Clara: It's about my husband Henry Lee.

Jenny: Yes?

Clara: May I sit? I don't know if I can do this on unsteady legs.

Jenny: Of course. Sit.

Clara: Thank you.

*(Clara sits.)*

I'm afraid bein' inside an establishment such as this has left my knees a little watery.

Frances: You get used to it.

Clara: No, I don't believe I will.

Jenny: Frances, maybe I should talk to Mrs. Casey alone.

Clara: No. Please. She has a part in this as well and I would like you both to hear what I have to say.

Jenny: All right. We're listenin'.

Clara: Yes. Well, where to begin? Uh..My husband and I found out recently that he has only a few months to live. A half dozen at best.

Jenny: Yes, ma'am. And we're sorry to hear that.

Clara: Thank you.

Jenny: I've had dealings with Henry Lee at the telegraph office and he seems like a decent man. He's always been a gentleman to me and that's somethin' I truly appreciate.

Clara: Yes, Henry Lee is a kind soul. Believe me I've had no complaints about our life together. He's been a lovin' husband and a good father to our two boys. He's lived a very dependable existence, and that is no small feat with the distractions and temptations that abound in today's world. Last night however, he came home late, which is somethin' he rarely does. I swear I could set the mantle clock by Henry Lee's comins and goins. That's how reliable he is. But not last night. And when I pressed him for an explanation, he came forth with the news that he had stopped in here before comin' home.

Jenny: Yes, I was aware of that.

Clara: And that he had been with a woman named Frances. That he had decided that the one thing he needed before he crossed over, was to satisfy himself with a harlot. Now, I don't know if you can understand how that would make me feel, Miss Starbuck. To think that I have spent thirty-one years of my life with this man. That I have looked to no other man but him for my happiness, for my solace and for my very heartbeat. And that I have faithfully and joyfully offered him the same in return. To think that at his darkest moment, he doesn't turn to me for comfort, so that I can hold him in my arms and cry my tears with his, but that he turns instead to a woman who would view him as nothing more than a payin' customer. Do you know how that would make me feel? Well, let me tell you. It nullified my existence, and tore down a dwelling which had taken thirty-one years to build.

Jenny: Mrs. Casey, I don't think it's as bad as all that.

Clara: No, it is exactly as bad as all that. It is precisely as bad.

Frances: Actually it's not, because Henry Lee didn't do anything. He couldn't complete the endeavor.

Clara: The fact remains that he turned to you. Whether he completed the endeavor or not, he came to you with intentions. And the intentions carry just as much weight as the deed itself.

Jenny: Is this what you came here for, Mrs. Casey? To tell us how upset you are? Because if every woman whose husband patronized this establishment came a callin' to submit their complaints, why they'd be lined up back to the River House. Now, I'm sorry if that seems insensitive on my part but it's the God's honest truth. And if Henry Lee wants to come here to add one more chapter to his life's book before he writes 'The End', then I'm obliged to let him do just that.

Clara: I came here for a turn of kindness, Miss Starbuck. I came to ask you as one woman to another. If Henry Lee comes back here, I would like you to turn him away. You see, I expect that once my husband is gone from this earth, I will spend the rest of my days alone. The memory of the man is all I will have, and I would like that memory to be untainted. I would like my self-respect to be untainted. At least leave me that much.

## NATALIE + JENNY

Jenny: Oh, that. Right. Well, let's settle the accounts first. Now what have you got for me, ladies?

Jenny: Three dollars from Anita. Excellent. Natalie?

Natalie: Eight dollars.

*(Natalie holds out her money. The other three stare at Natalie.)*

What?

Jenny: Eight dollars?

Natalie: Yes.

Jenny: No dear, you're only supposed to give me one dollar from each customer. Not two.

Natalie: But I am giving you one dollar from each customer.

Jenny: And you made it downstairs this mornin' under your own power?

Natalie: What's wrong?

Jenny: Nothin's wrong, darlin'. I just.....you.....Eight?

Natalie: Yes.

Jenny: Damn.

Natalie: I'm sorry. Is there a limit? I'm not lyin'. Why would I give back eight dollars if I didn't make that much?

Jenny: I believe you, Natalie. But, do me a favour, will ya'? Taper it off a speck tonight. You've got to pace yourself.

Natalie: All right.

Jenny: Good girl.

Natalie: I had a couple of thoughts though if you don't mind my offering them to you.

Jenny: What kind of thoughts?

Natalie: On how to improve business.

Jenny: Well, I don't know how you can improve on eight gents in one night but you go right ahead and try. What's on your mind?

Natalie: Well, I was thinking that we should offer the customers their first drink for free.

Jenny: Free?

Natalie: Yes. That would get more men in the door and you would make up the lost revenue on the free drinks by havin' more customers inside drinkin' subsequent drinks.

*(Jenny, Frances and Anita stare blankly.)*

Second drinks.

Jenny: I know what subsequent means. I was just thinkin' on the idea.

## NATALIE + FRANCIS

Frances: You wanna know what we do? All right I'll tell ya'. But I will give you the benefit of my experience this one time and this one time only.

*(Frances moves in close behind Natalie.)*

Here it is. We sidle up to the men and talk soft in their ear and let em' feel our hot breath on their sweaty skin and the rub of our hand on the inner side of their fat legs. And if the piano player shows up and he hasn't got the shakes so bad that he can't still play a song or two, then we dance with the customers. Let them get their hairy arms around our waists. Let them feel our mid-section up against theirs so's they can get a samplin' of what's to come. And then we move in real close. So close that we can taste the smell of black teeth. And we look them straight in their half drunk eyes and tell em' how damned wonderful we think they are and would they please do us the kindness of takin' us upstairs and layin' us good and proper. That's what we do. Does that help ya' at all, Natalie?

Natalie: You're tryin' to scare me off, aren't you?

Frances: I'm just tellin' ya' how it is in here.

Natalie: No, you're tryin' to scare me off. Well, it won't work, Frances. The world I've come from is just as frightening and distasteful as anything you can conjure up. And I don't believe it'll be all that bad anyway. I believe I'll manage just fine. And don't bother helpin' me with my things, thank you very much. I can manage that just fine as well. *(She struggles to gather up her things.)*

Frances: Did I look like I was about to pitch in?

Natalie: No, you didn't, and I don't expect you to. Like you said, you would help me this one time and this one time only. I will expect no kindness from you in the future.

Frances: And you won't be disappointed.

Natalie: I'm not here to steal money out of your pocketbook, Frances. I just want to make my way in this world, that's all. And I would prefer to do that by working along side of you. But if you don't want that, then fine. I'll stay out of your way.

Frances: That's how I'd prefer it.

Natalie: Understood. And you can do me the favour of stayin' out of my way as well.