

THE GOSPEL SINGER

by

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Registered, WGAw

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FADE IN:

INT. THE EDEN CLUB - EVENING

The setting is The Eden Club, where RUTHIE performs Thursday through Saturday nights. The club is a recreation, a mix of 1950s and 1960s clubs. The owner has mixed elements from different eras. The music is classic jazz, blues, and swing.

We follow a waiter at waist-level, from table to table delivering drinks. The booths are dark wood with red velour trimmed with brass upholstery tacks.

Mostly eaten dinners remain on some tables, left over from the pre-show dinner service. We follow a busboy, revealing a mix of those dressed for a night out, some in period dress, and a handful of others in "tourist" clothing appropriate to the hot, humid South. In the darkness, the tourists are barely noticeable. This is the first indication the time is not 1960.

From the rear of club we see the stage, raised slightly above table-height.

A jazz quartet, three strings and a clarinet, plays improv.

A spotlight rises on the center stage, where an old-fashioned 1950s metal microphone stands. In the shadows is a piano.

DONNIE enters. He is in a white tuxedo shirt, white jacket, and black bow tie. In his mid 20s, Donnie has emceed for three years and his confidence reflects this. He has only the most mild of Southern accents, which sounds refined.

DONNIE

Now the boys are going to take a
break. You know what that means --
let's hope the bar is well stocked.
Of course, it must be.

(motioning with arms)

This is Eden.

The audience laughs, the affects of alcohol lubricating the customers. Glasses can be heard clinking amidst the laughs.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

The only blues allowed are on
stage.

Music ends and quartet exits into the shadows. The soft murmur of chatter emanates from the audience. Clinking of dishes being cleared is also heard.

ERICA enters from backstage and sits at the piano. She is 21 years old with red hair. She wears a black tuxedo with tails, slightly oversized. Erica quietly plays a mellow tune.

Donnie (CONT'D)

Now, it's time to hold hands,
preferably with your lover, and
enjoy what makes The Eden Club the
best club in the South. Please
welcome the amazing, the seductive,
the absolutely lovely
(pause)
Ruthie.

Donnie claps, to cue the performer's entrance.

Lights dim, to assist in the illusions. Near silence, indicating a change in atmosphere. People have come to see this performer.

RUTHIE enters. Backlighting obscures Ruthie from the audience, just enough to make sure it is difficult for anyone in the audience to stare at her. Ruthie is in a glamorous 1960s dress, simple and elegant. She wears a boa and a string of pearls. She is a Southern black woman, the ideal of a popular singer of those times. She is in her mid 30s, a mature professional.

RUTHIE

Just between us, I think that
upright man was looking at me like
a fox eyeing the hen. Those bass
players... all think they're
Mingus. Well, now, Ruthie is not
about to be his chicken.

Ruthie takes the microphone stand in her hands and pulls it closer.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Men are nothing but heartache,
girls. Let him slide his own
trombone. They just break our
hearts. Oh, but it's not just men.
No sisters, there are things more
complex than men. Come to think of
it, men are pretty simple. Love is
complex.

Ruthie talks rhythmically, as Erica plays piano. Erica is trying to get the pacing. It's her first night as Ruthie's accompanist.

Erica is skilled, improvising to keep pace with Ruthie.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Everyone knows the story
of Romeo and Juliet,
how two lovers from families
from different parts of town
meet a tragic end.

Camera behind Ruthie, showing the crowd through both smoke and artificial haze. A hidden smoke machine is used to add to the atmosphere of the club.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

But sometimes,
it's a lot more than being
from the wrong side of town...
You know what I'm saying.
You love someone,
but you aren't allowed to love.

Piano plays quietly while Ruthie sways for a few beats.

Ruthie closes her eyes, talking from experience.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

You sneak about,
holding hands only in your hearts,
never talking in public.
It's a forbidden love.
It's the love I knew
growing up...

Note: Ruthie sings Fever, by Eddie Cooley and (Otis Blackwell) John Davenport. Copyright 1956.
The song should express forbidden loves.

Erica is gaining confidence. She's emphatic, but not overshadowing Ruthie.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(singing)

When I think about him, I want to
say...
You give me
You give me fever
Never know how much I love you
Never know how much I care
When you put your arms around me
I get a fever that's so hard to
bear
Listen to me baby, hear every word
I say

INT. BAPTIST CHURCH - MORNING THREE YEARS EARLIER

The all-African-American congregation is standing, preparing to sing.

ISAAC is in the choir, all clad in blue robes with gold accents. Isaac watches as the door to the nave opens and Donnie enters the main worship hall.

Donnie is in an ill-fitting suit, probably the best he owns. It's loose, handed down by an older and larger cousin. His hair is shoulder-length, parted in the middle and feathered. Donnie contrasts with the well-dressed congregation that seems distinctly middle-class.

While looking about, Donnie is more concerned with his appearance than color. He knows he is poor, even by local standards, and is embarrassed.

RUTHIE (V.O.)

(fading over scene)

No one can love you the way I do
 'Cause they don't know how to love
 you my way
 You give me fever, when you kiss me
 Fever when you hold me tight
 Fever in the morning
 Fever all through the night

Donnie is at a rear pew, but standing with the congregation.

REV. WALKER is traditional, enthusiastic.

REV. WALKER

I can hear the voice of our Lord. I
 know you all can, too. Let us raise
 our voices in praise to him. Sing
 it, Brother ISAAC, sing it loud!

Isaac step forward for an energetic, jazz-laced rendition of the spiritual Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes.

Isaac is occasionally noticing Donnie, but also looking around. Donnie is mesmerized, both by the singing and Isaac.

ISAAC

(singing)

Drink to me only with thine eyes,
 And I will pledge with mine;
 Or leave a kiss within the cup
 And I'll not ask for wine.
 The thirst that from the soul doth
 rise
 Doth ask a drink divine;

(MORE)

ISAAC (CONT'D)

But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
I would not change for thine.

Isaac and Donnie gaze at each other. They don't know each other, but sense something. Isaac looks away.

REV. WALKER

(talking over music, nearly shouting)

Sing it out! We need nothing but the love of our Lord, Jesus Christ, to nourish our souls. The love of Jesus fills us with Holy Spirit.

ISAAC

(with full choir)

I sent thee late a rosy wreath,
Not so much honoring thee
As giving it a hope that there
It could not withered be;
But thou thereon didst only
breathe,
And sent'st it back to me;
Since when it grows, and smells, I
swear,
Not of itself but thee!

REV. WALKER

Everybody sing to the glory of our Lord Jesus! Sing it brothers and sisters, from "Drink to me!"

The full congregation sings the main verse again. Donnie mouths the words, in a faint whisper. He's still watching Isaac.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB - PRESENT

RUTHIE

(singing)

Sun lights up the daytime
Moon lights up the night
My eyes light up when you call my
name
'Cause I know you're gonna treat me
right
Bless my soul I love you, take this
heart away
Take these arms I'll never use
And just believe in what my lips
have to say
You give me fever, when you kiss me
Fever when you hold me tight

(MORE)

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Fever in the morning
 Fever all through the night
 Everybody's got the fever

Donnie, standing off-stage, is staring at Ruthie as he did Isaac years ago at the church. It is nearly impossible to tell Ruthie and Isaac are one and the same.

ISAAC

(singing)

That is something you should know
 Fever isn't such a new scene
 Fever started long ago
 You give me fever, fever
 You give me, you give me fever
 You give me fever, when you kiss me
 Fever when you hold me tight
 Fever in the morning
 Fever all through the night
 Romeo loved Juliet
 Juliet, she felt the same
 When he put his arms around her
 He said Julie baby, you're my flame

Donnie looks to the back of the club. A low second story outcropping where the technical crew works is above the back booths. To the side of the tech crew is a wall with a small window. It is the owner's office. Motion can be detected as a figure looks out the window.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

He gave her fever
 Sun lights up the daytime
 Moon lights up the night
 My eyes light up when you call my name
 'Cause I know you're gonna treat me right
 You give me fever, when you kiss me
 Fever when you hold me tight
 Fever in the morning
 Fever all through the night
 Fever, with his kisses
 Fever when he holds me tight
 Everybody's got the fever
 That is something you should know
 Fever isn't such a new scene
 Fever started long ago
 Captain Smith and Pocahontas
 Had a very mad affair
 When her daddy tried to kill him
 She said, daddy oh don't you dare
 He gives me fever
 With his kisses

(MORE)

ISAAC (CONT'D)

Fever when he holds me tight
 Fever, I'm his Misses
 Daddy, won't you treat him right
 Fever, when you kiss them
 Fever, if you live and learn
 Fever, 'til you sizzle
 What a lovely way to burn
 What a lovely way to burn...

Erica plays quietly as Ruthie holds the last note.

RUTHIE

Bless you all. Good night.

Lights dim and Ruthie exits, to backstage. The audience responds with thunderous applause. The crowd loves Ruthie, especially the regulars.

For a moment, only Erica is on stage.

Donnie enters and walks to the mic.

DONNIE

The Eden Club's very own Ruthie!

Donnie claps and prompts the audience. Ruthie steps from behind the curtain, bows again, and departs.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

We want to thank you for spending a
 night with us at The Eden Club,
 where you're free to be who you
 are, or who wish you were.

Donnie exits.

EXT. BAPTIST CHURCH - THREE YEARS EARLIER

It is early fall, with leaves starting to change. Donnie exits the church and walks out of the shot. Seconds pass, two ushers open the doors. Rev. Walker stands by one as the congregation exits. Isaac is among the throng.

Isaac has left his robe behind and is in a perfectly tailored single-breasted suit, carrying a classic fedora. He looks about and places the fedora on his head. Isaac walks toward his car, a mint-condition red Mercedes 350SL convertible. ISAAC exudes class and confidence.

Donnie watches, from across the parking lot, as groups come up and shake Isaac's hand. Older women hug Isaac. Donnie turns to walk away, but changes his mind.

Isaac is opening the door when Donnie speaks.

DONNIE

Excuse me. I just--

Isaac turns to face Donnie. He studies the young man, silently. He tilts his head, trying to recall the face.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

That music. Your singing.

(shrugs)

It was somethin' else.

(turning away)

Sorry.

ISAAC

Donnie, isn't it?

Surprised, Donnie turns around. He looks at Isaac, shocked to be remembered.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

You worked on my Nina.

Donnie looks confused.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

The '71 350 here. You worked on her.

DONNIE

(nervously)

I love that car. Yeah, new plugs and belts a few months ago. Did you know that 350 was really a 4.5-liter? They changed the model number to 450 within a year. It's a collector's item.

ISAAC

I knew there was a reason I named her after Nina. A hidden power. Plus, Eunice was out of the question.

(shudders)

When you choose a name, it should mean something. Tell a story.

(offering hand)

Thank you for the compliment. I'm glad you enjoyed the service. Will we see you next week?

DONNIE

Next week?

Donnie shoves his hands into his pockets and rocks nervously.

ISAAC

It seems we do this every Sunday.
I'm sure Reverend Walker would like
to see you in the pews.

DONNIE

You really think so?

ISAAC

It's the Lord's house. Everyone is
welcome. We're all brothers and
sisters in His eyes.

DONNIE

Yeah. Okay.
(mainly to self)
Yeah. I'll come back.

Isaac sits in the convertible, placing his fedora in the
passenger seat. He looks up to Donnie.

ISAAC

I'm sure I'll see you. You are hard
to miss among the pews.

Isaac starts the engine, backs up, and drives away. Donnie is
watching as the 350SL fades into the distance.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - PRESENT

Ruthie sits on a stool, looking into her mirror. Ruthie is
singing a gospel tune, an old spiritual, quietly to her
herself. She's lost in thought, not yet removing her makeup
and costume. She is exhausted, but loves performing.

Erica knocks slowly.

RUTHIE

Come in. It's unlocked.

Erica opens the door slightly and peers into the room.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Come in all the way.

Erica closes the door.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

You're one talented young lady,
sugar.

(MORE)

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

I wouldn't have argued with Hank about hiring you if I didn't think your audition was good enough for Ruthie.

ERICA

Thank you. I can't tell you how much you saying that means to me.

RUTHIE

You like your first real show?

ERICA

I loved it. Especially wearing pants.

RUTHIE

Honey, it's a tuxedo.
(laughs gently)
We want to sound a bit more refined, now.

Ruthie motions and Erica sits on the lone extra chair. It's an old wooden chair without arms.

ERICA

Tuxedo. I really love the tail.

RUTHIE

Tails. It's plural, dear. The tailcoat has two tails, last time I checked.

ERICA

(sighs)
Well, it beats a dress any day.

An embarrassed pause. Ruthie looks at Erica.

RUTHIE

I know what you meant, dear.

Ruthie turns back to the mirror.

ERICA

I'm sorry. Dresses and gowns look wonderful on some people. You. I mean they look wonderful on you.

RUTHIE

Relax, girl. You're a nervous bundle of energy. It's cute.

ERICA

Cute? I don't want to be cute.

RUTHIE

And you've probably done a fine job of avoiding cuteness since the fifth or sixth grade.

ERICA

I never liked dresses.

RUTHIE

That's all right. Not everyone was meant to like dresses.

ERICA

Guess it always made me feel like a freak.

RUTHIE

Look at me and tell me about feeling like a freak.

Erica, stunned and embarrassed, looks nervously at Ruthie.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

I understand. And more. Oh, lordy, do I understand.

ERICA

How do you deal with it?

RUTHIE

Well, I usually tell people to get with the times. A black jazz singer has every right to love a white man. Times are changing, right?

Erica laughs and Ruthie smiles.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

What? Black and white not the issue?

(laughs)

Heck, where I'm from I might as well love a little green Martian. Or a Catholic. That might really shock 'em back home. Not that home is all that far away. South is South.

ERICA

A Catholic?

RUTHIE

Oh, honey, you don't know a thing about the South, do you?

ERICA

I am from Chicago.

RUTHIE

Oh, let me guess. That natural red hair of yours... Irish Catholic?

ERICA

That's how I was raised, at least.

RUTHIE

Oh, I hope you have that legendary Irish redhead spunk. I love a little passion in my music.

ERICA

Fiery red-hot temper, sometimes. Just like my father.

(pause)

So why couldn't you love a Catholic?

RUTHIE

Southern Baptists are about all we had when I was child. Oh, I was told stories about Catholics and the Pope. Catholics had it all wrong. But we forgave some of them. At least Momma forgave the Kennedy brothers. They were okay, even if they followed that anti-Christ in Rome. I think she adored Jackie more than the boys, though. She had the real class of the family. Still, I think she would have tried to get Jackie into a real church if she had met her.

ERICA

So much for bringing a nice Catholic boy home.

RUTHIE

Excuse me?

ERICA

Well, if you weren't supposed to like Catholics--

RUTHIE

I wasn't about to bring a nice
 (long, with emphasis)
 boy
 (staccato)
 home, dear. Catholic, Jewish,
 Protestant, or the nicest Baptist
 young man you ever did meet.

ERICA

Dammit. I fucked up again.

RUTHIE

Spunk is one thing, but you need to
 watch those words, young lady. You
 won't ever hear Ruthie talking like
 that and I don't expect it of you.
 Hank, I expect it of. You, I don't.
 Understand?

ERICA

I messed up?

Ruthie nods approvingly.

ERICA (CONT'D)

(smiling)
 Yes, ma'am. I messed up.

RUTHIE

Good. You'll be treated with a lot
 more respect if you treat
 everything, even words, with
 respect.

ERICA

You mean talk and act like a proper
 lady.

RUTHIE

No. I mean talk and act like a
 proper
 (emphasis)
 person.
 (sad, from personal
 experience)
 People will use any excuse to
 support their prejudices, though.

ERICA

I forget I'm in the backwoods of
 the Deep South.

RUTHIE

Some things, you don't forget. You need to be aware of prejudices, for your own sake.

ERICA

It's better now. A lot better, right?

RUTHIE

Young idealism. Yes, in some ways. But I do seem to go for the risky things in life. Like hiring a green piano player.

(laughs)

ERICA

I did pretty good, though.

RUTHIE

You did quite well, young lady. Quite well.

Ruthie starts to remove her makeup.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Even if the guests don't speak it here... people who take every opportunity to say they are tolerant aren't always. And the crudest people? Some are like Hank. He's an honest self-loathing bigot, more tolerant than even he realizes, or he wouldn't own Eden.

ERICA

Ruthie?

RUTHIE

Yes?

ERICA

I know it is a lot to ask of the star...

RUTHIE

Speak up.

ERICA

Can I change in here? I brought my jeans and shirt in a gym bag.

RUTHIE

What's wrong with the band's room?

ERICA
They're all guys. I wasn't real comfortable.

RUTHIE
(removing wig)
Did you forget something?

ERICA
No. They're men. Straight male musicians.

RUTHIE
Musicians.
(pause, thinking)
Oh, yes. That says it all. Toss in some cheap whiskey or even cheaper beer and I can see how that might be a problem.

ERICA
I was going to use the bathroom. There's barely room to...

RUTHIE
Yes, I know. Hank never cared to remodel the bathrooms. Cheapskate. Sure. You get your bag.

ERICA
Thank you.

Erica goes to get her bag.

Ruthie/Isaac begins to sing.

Note: Classic Joshua Fit (Fought) the Battle.

RUTHIE
(deeper than stage voice)
Joshua fought the battle of
Jericho,
Jericho, Jericho!
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,
And the walls came a tumblin' down.
You may talk about your kings of
Gideon,
You may talk about your men of
Saul,
But there's none like good ol'
Joshua
At the battle of Jericho.

Erica reenters the room, quietly, listening intently to a partially-altered Ruthie sing.

Erica places a gym bag on the floor, and then removes the tuxedo jacket and places it on a bookcase that's against the wall opposite Ruthie's table and mirror.

Erica sits on the chair. She removes the black dress shoes, clearly relieved.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(singing)

Joshua fought the battle of
Jericho,
Jericho, Jericho!
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,
And the walls came a tumblin' down.
Now the Lord commanded Joshua;
"I command you and obey you must;
You just march straight to those
city walls
And the walls will turn to dust."

Erica stands, unzips the dress pants and sits to continue changing.

ERICA

What's that you're singing?

Erica folds the pants neatly and places them on top of the tuxedo jacket.

RUTHIE

What's in my heart. What I really
want to sing. More than anything, I
want to stand on that stage and
sing the songs in my heart.

ERICA

Don't you sing what's in your heart
now?

Ruthie steps behind an art deco trifold screen to change clothes.

Erica removes the tuxedo's pre-tied bow-tie and the white dress shirt. She wasn't wearing anything under the dress shirt, both for comfort and rebellion.

RUTHIE

(silhouette)

Do you know who Ruthie is?

ERICA

You?

RUTHIE

Ruthie is me, on stage, singing
about things I could never say or
admit any other way.

Ruthie places her dress and other items over the screen. She reaches out to a stand that has a hanger with slacks and a nice button-down Oxford. She fumbles a bit, in silhouette.

ERICA

A sweet transvestite, I thought.

RUTHIE

No, no. Not at all.

Erica

You're not sweet?

RUTHIE

I'm not a transvestite. Oh, I am surprised at you. I'm a performer in costume on the stage. I am a female impersonator.

Erica begins changing into old jeans and a T-shirt. She is not the model of style.

ERICA

Drag--

Ruthie is changing into Isaac, a man in stylish casual dress. The voice is changing subtly. The silhouette also indicates the transformation is nearly complete.

RUTHIE

No, not a drag queen. I'm an impersonator. Just not of anyone in particular, I suppose.

ERICA

I keep saying stupid things.

Erica's T-shirt features an artistic line-drawing of a cat and in an art deco font and reads, "Pussy Power!"

ISAAC

(voice has changed)

Ruthie lets me sing about that secret love. All those secrets. I have too many to count, I suppose.

ERICA

How many?

Isaac steps out from behind the screen. He clearly knows current style, circa 1987.

Indicating a change in manner, and even tone, Ruthie is now Isaac, a well-bred Southern man.

Isaac studies Erica, just as he did Donnie years ago. He observes people, which is why he is a good performer. Noticing the T-shirt, Isaac shakes his head, and shrugs.

ISAAC

Scrappy-Do, it isn't.

ERICA

"Puppy power" wasn't quite me. Jessie wishes it were, but she still tolerates me.

ISAAC

Why am I not surprised?

ERICA

You're not like anyone else here. Something is different. You really are high-class, while the rest of us are just faking it.

Isaac sits and looks into the mirror.

ISAAC

I was born to a well-off black family. Believe it or not, there were middle-class black families in the South even before you were born.

EXT. TOWN STREET - 1967

A middle-aged African-American is standing in front of Dumont's General Store. Next door, in the same building, is the Venus Salon.

YOUNG ISAAC, about 12, is running up the street towards the store. Isaac has a bookbag over his shoulder.

MR. DUMONT

Isaac, you're late. You ever gonna' own this store, you better learn to be on time.

Isaac is respectful, realizing his parents are special members of the community.

ISAAC

Yes, sir. I was just--

MR. DUMONT

No excuses, young man. Your mother wants you to sweep her floor before you stock shelves. You get in there and make yourself useful.

Isaac heads into the salon.

Mr. Dumont smiles and laughs. He loves his family and works long hours to make sure Isaac has every opportunity.

INT. DUMONT HOUSE - EVENING

Mr. Dumont is listening to classical music on the radio. He's reading the evening newspaper. MRS. DUMONT, a beautiful woman barely over 30, is reading a magazine. The magazine features only white women, performing household duties.

The phone rings. Mr. Dumont answers. A brief discussion, but the words are unclear. Mrs. Dumont looks to her husband and we can hear his side of the call.

MR. DUMONT

Yes Pastor James, I think that's a grand idea. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Dumont hangs up the phone.

MR. DUMONT (CONT'D)

Children? Come on in here.

Isaac and his younger sister come running into the room, both having been working on homework. Isaac's sister is about four years younger than him.

MR. DUMONT (CONT'D)

(to Mrs. Dumont)

Beccah? You know how you've always wanted a bigger audience?

Mrs. Dumont lowers her magazine and nods.

MRS. DUMONT

Of course, Henry. You know how much I love singing. My customers joke that I'm better than the radio shows.

MR. DUMONT

Well, we are goin' to the big church this Sunday. You've been asked to sing by that new pastor from up north.

MRS. DUMONT

My Lord, things really are changing. Glory be.

Mrs. Dumont looks over the children.

MRS. DUMONT (CONT'D)

I never dared dream of this.

EXT. NEW CHURCH - SUNDAY MORNING

The parking lot is full, so the Dumont family has had to walk a ways. Mr. Dumont starts to head into the church with his wife, holding her hand and smiling. The children trailing behind, are not yet to the church steps.

Mrs. Dumont, in a beautiful dress with pearls, is obviously the inspiration for Ruthie. Isaac has created a role that is a tribute to the mother he adored.

A younger PASTOR JAMES walks out with Mr. Dumont. They are talking. Mrs. Dumont is confused. She starts to cry. Mr. Dumont comforts her and talks to Pastor James.

Mrs. Dumont heads into the church again, alone, and Pastor James follows. The rest of the Dumont family is left outside. Mr. Dumont sits on the top stair. His daughter sits on his knee and leans into his shoulder, crying.

We can hear Mrs. Dumont, singing. The sounds of music carry outside the church. Isaac stands at the base of the stairs, angry. He kicks the stairs and Mr. Dumont shakes his head, silently reminding his son that this is still a church.

Isaac sits, with his head in his hands. He is visibly angry, a tear running down his cheek.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - PRESENT

An awkward silence. Isaac is recalling the memory, with a mix of pride and pain.

ISAAC

So Mama went in there and sang. She sang and I sat on those steps listening to her.

(MORE)

ISAAC (CONT'D)

And I heard my father crying.
(voice slowing, containing
anger)

I hated them. All of them. Most of
all, I hated Gospel music from that
day on.

ERICA

But you were just singing it.

ISAAC

Yes, I was. I sang at my Mother's
funeral. Amazing Grace. That was
six years ago, now. That song is in
my heart. All her songs are, now.

Erica and Isaac finish changing. Erica stands. Isaac sits at
his table, again and looks in the mirror.

ERICA

If your mother sang anything like
you, I wish I had heard her.

ISAAC

My father wanted to be in there,
with the other business owners. For
him, it wasn't about faith. It was
about standing in the community.
Middle class doesn't mean much when
you're still treated like that.

Isaac is controlling his pain and anger, but it is obvious.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

By comparison, Donnie is...
(trails off, searching for
words.)

ERICA

Not so middle-class?

ISAAC

Hmmmm. I'd say his father was a Jim
Bob. Donnie never was, despite
trying to be, but he was never
quite something else, either.

ERICA

A Jim Bob?

ISAAC

Bubba. The kind of man you see sitting on the porch of a shack, drinking moonshine and singing twangy country tunes. Or, heaven forbid, even enjoying square dancing.

ERICA

Just the good ol' boys, never meanin' no harm.

ISAAC

(shaking head)

You watched too much Dukes of Hazard. Thank God they cancelled that show.

ERICA

I liked Daisy.

ISAAC

Why am I not surprised? I'll see you tomorrow night, Erica.

Erica grabs her things and exits the dressing room.

Isaac sings in a deeper, slower voice.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

Joshua fought the battle of
Jericho,
Jericho, Jericho!
Joshua fought the battle of
Jericho,
And the walls came a tumblin' down.
Straight up to the walls of Jericho
He marched with spear in hand,
"Go blow that ram's horn," Joshua
cried,
"For the battle is in my hand."
The lamb ram sheep horns began to
blow,
And the trumpets began to sound,
And Joshua commanded, "Now
children, shout!"
And the walls came tumbling down.
Joshua fought the battle of
Jericho,
Jericho, Jericho!
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho
And the walls came a tumblin' down.

Isaac stands.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
Some walls do need to come down.

INT. HANK'S OFFICE - LATER

The office is small, with a large wooden desk and two additional chairs that barely fit the space. Little more than a safe and filing cabinet, and they barely fit the room. A photo of HANK hangs on the wall behind the desk. He's smiling with a fish. It's an old photo.

The office is upstairs, though the building it not quite two stories. It is adjacent to the tech area, where lights and sound are controlled. A small sliding window looks out towards the stage so Hank can observe the club without mingling.

HANK enters the office, walks to his desk and sits. Hank is a large man. He's always nervous, bordering on anxiety. Hank is an alcoholic, using the alcohol to cope with a life of hiding his own nature. Hank has opted for a life alone, assuming he must to be in business.

Hank opens a desk drawer and withdraws a bottle. He pours a drink for himself and reclines. He is exhausted after every show. He is not running The Eden Club for social reasons, he likes the money. The lack of extravagances in the office reflect his frugality.

Isaac enters the office.

ISAAC
What'd you think?

HANK
(exhausted, half-hearted)
Great show as always, my dear.
Ruthie leaves 'em wanting more.

ISAAC
I meant about Erica.

HANK
(thinking)
Erica...

Isaac has great compassion for Hank. They've been friends for at least a decade. Isaac has given up trying to tell Hank he has a drinking problem.

ISAAC
(gently)
The new pianist.

HANK

Oh, yeah, right. The lesbian kid.
She's pretty good. You were right.
Can't believe it.

ISAAC

That I was right?

HANK

No, that we'd have a pair of real
tits on stage, someday.

ISAAC

Good thing you possess so much
class.

HANK

(taking a drink)
First real pussy on the stage and
she's titless.
(shaking head)
I have bigger boobs.

ISAAC

You are a bigger boob.

The two are accustomed to needling each other.

HANK

What do you call that? You know,
sort of the opposite...

ISAAC

Irony. Like you being my boss.

HANK

We had enough penises on stage in
dresses, time for a vagina in a
tux. You were absolutely right, my
dear.

The two know that stereotypes have shaped their lives. They
resist being "typical" without always realizing it.

ISAAC

Either you shatter the stereotypes
or you are one. I'm never sure.

HANK

(laughing)
Ouch. That hurts. They're all
bullshit anyway.

ISAAC

She was good, especially for a first night. Right?

HANK

Yeah, the kid was, at that. She's on. Tell her she won't be renting a tux anymore after tomorrow night's show. I'll... the Eden...

(looks down)

Just tell her.

ISAAC

(imitates Rochester)

Pains you to say it, Jack Benny.

HANK

Hey, it is money. Yeah. I'll pay for the tux. But only because you're making me. I wouldn't do it for just anyone.

ISAAC

Ah, the power of the diva!

HANK

Don't let it go to your head. She's young and college kids work for peanuts. I'll save money in the long run. Doesn't hurt that she's damn good on the ivories, I'll give you that.

ISAAC

At least you admit when I'm right, which I usually am.

HANK

There ain't nothing right about you.

(drinks)

But you do know music better than anyone I've ever met.

EXT. ISAAC'S HOUSE - MORNING TWO YEARS EARLIER

The Dumont house, now owned by Isaac. The house is an old two-story house, carefully maintained with a perfect yard and covered porch. The porch includes a bench swing and a small table where Isaac often sits with a tea, reading in the mornings. The house is near the center of town.

A "lift-kit" black truck with too much chrome and giant wheels pulls up, aligning the tailgate with the walkway to the house. The truck bed is loaded with a small amount of personal items, mostly clothing in grocery and garbage bags.

Isaac comes out and stands on the porch, watching curiously. He is in linen slacks and a short-sleeved shirt. As always, he is stylish without trying.

ISAAC

That's it? Everything?

Donnie climbs, literally, out of the truck. He is in old jeans and a Georgia Tech T-shirt. Donnie walks to the tailgate. Donnie has a strong Southern accent.

DONNIE

How much does a man need?

Isaac walks towards the truck to help.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

(lowering tailgate)

I've got clothes, a few personal things, a handful of mixtapes. Not much, I suppose.

INT. ISAAC'S HOUSE

The pair enter Isaac's house. The interior features hardwood floors and wood trim throughout. It is little changed from Isaac's childhood. Books line the walls in the main room. It's a small house, made smaller by the sheer number of books and an extensive album collection, supplemented by a handful of CDs.

DONNIE

Momma doesn't believe I'm just rentin' a room.

ISAAC

And yet, they refuse to admit you're who you are.

DONNIE

It's easier that way.

ISAAC

Hank has informed me that Charles has finally been cast in a play.

DONNIE

That's good, I guess.

Isaac leads Donnie up the stairs, toward the bedroom. The house is small, with only the two rooms and an elaborate bathroom upstairs. A third bedroom is downstairs, now an office space.

ISAAC

The Eden Club will need a new emcee. I told Hank you'd be perfect.

DONNIE

Me? I'm an out-of-work mechanic.

ISAAC

You are charming and great with people. I can teach you how to play the role.

DONNIE

I ain't no actor.

ISAAC

(bristling at grammar)

I would suggest we're all actors, but in your case -- maybe not a skilled one. At least not yet.

Isaac gets romantic when talking about the club.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

But an emcee is much more than an actor. He is a tour guide through the fantasy that is The Eden Club.

Isaac and Donnie place bags down on the floor of the bedroom. Isaac looks out the window.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

I know you've tried to fit in, especially with your family. But is that who you want to be or who you were trying to be?

DONNIE

Don't know. Not yet. I need to get my mind around what's all happenin' right now. You gotta get that.

ISAAC

Yes. It's a journey.

DONNIE

I've sorta takin' that trip out of town, if you know what I mean.

Isaac heads back to the stairs.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
 (following, looking at the
 bookcases)
 I do know this much.

ISAAC
 What would that be?

DONNIE
 I ain't never readin' as much as
 you do.

ISAAC
 Oh, you might surprise yourself.

DONNIE
 Shit, I just noticed something.
 (looking around as they
 exit the house)
 There ain't no TV. I've been here
 how many times and ain't never
 noticed you got no TV.

ISAAC
 And you never missed it.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - SUNSET PRESENT, EARLY EVENING

It is a traditional Southern town square, with a park and gazebo-style bandstand. The park has several benches, where couples are sitting and talking.

Donnie and Isaac are walking to the park after a dinner out. Donnie has attempted to dress more stylishly than Isaac, though it seems forced. Donnie is imitating style, without having his own. Isaac, by his nature, is casually cool.

Donnie contrasts sharply with the Donnie of the past, in both language and manner.

DONNIE
 Can't you please relax? Tuesday
 night is supposed to be ours, not
 the club's. A Hank-free night.
 Please?

ISAAC
 I just don't get it. What's wrong
 with him?

DONNIE
He's thinking like a businessman.

ISAAC
Exactly. See how wrong that is?

DONNIE
(exasperated)
I was defending him.

ISAAC
Defending him? How could you?

DONNIE
Because I like having a job. No
Eden, no job. Seems simple to me. I
happen to think a paycheck is a
good thing, Isaac. A great thing.

Donnie coughs. He's not feeling well. Isaac stops at a bench
and gestures. Donnie nods. They both know something is wrong,
but do not comment.

Donnie sits.

ISAAC
No Eden? Don't tell me you buy into
his fears that the local powers
that be would close The Eden Club.
They love the tourists too much for
that.
(pause)
Well?

Donnie looks quietly ahead.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
Well? Do you?

DONNIE
Not exactly.

Isaac sits on the park bench, next to Donnie. They do not
indicate any intimacy, though. It is only through their
manner that we can tell they are in love.

ISAAC
Then what is it?

DONNIE
Do you know who keeps Eden
thriving? Who keeps you on that
stage you love so much? You don't
honestly believe it's tourism.

ISAAC

A tour group a day keeps the
council at bay.

DONNIE

Tourism helps, but it's not enough.
(hushed)
It's people like us.

ISAAC

(loudly)
Fans of the great old tunes. I am
glad there are so many people with
class.

DONNIE

A lot of them love show tunes,
that's for sure. Though I still
prefer -- wait. Darn it, Isaac,
listen to me.
(quietly, passionately)
Fags, queers, gays. Maybe a lesbian
or two. People like us created
Eden. That's who keeps Eden
thriving. In the cold of winter, on
the hottest summer weekend, when
the tourists are comfortably
somewhere else, who do you think
fills the seats? Family.

ISAAC

So a lot of
(emphasis)
those people love great music. And
that's what I want to sing. Great,
meaningful, music.

DONNIE

Enough kidding. You want to sing
gospel music, Isaac. Spirituals?
Are you nuts? Of course you are.
You have to be nuts.
(shaking head)
Gospel music.

ISAAC

It is The Eden Club.

Donnie notices Isaac isn't laughing. Isaac is serious about
the idea.

DONNIE

What? And you're one of the Sisters
of Perpetual Indulgence?
(MORE)

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Don't you get it? We mock religion.
That's why it's The Eden Club.

ISAAC

We? You had better be talking about
you and Hank. Not some larger
community.

DONNIE

You know exactly what I mean.
Organized religion isn't for us.
They don't want us.

ISAAC

Tell that to Gene Robinson.

DONNIE

Who?

ISAAC

A gay priest or whatever
Episcopalians have. Someday he's
going to be a bishop.

DONNIE

(rambling nervously)
Great, an Episcopal priest. He
certainly isn't Catholic. Well, he
could be... if he remained quiet
about it. Priests can be anything,
except active, right? I never
understood the whole thing. I was
Baptist.

ISAAC

I think everyone here is or was
Baptist.

Donnie laughs, and then coughs again.

DONNIE

I'm a was.

INT. DINER IN TOWN - BREAKFAST

It is a year earlier.

Rev. Walker is sitting in a window booth, drinking coffee.

PASTOR JAMES enters. He is now late middle-aged, reserved. We
last saw him rejecting the Dumont family on behalf of the
"white" church. Various people greet the pastor as he walks
to the booth. He nods to each appreciatively.

Pastor James slides into the booth.

PASTOR JAMES
Willie.

REV. WALKER
(nods)
Brother Lloyd.

SALLY, a waitress, walks up to the booth.

PASTOR JAMES
Afternoon, Sally. The usual,
please.

SALLY
Heaven forbid you two try something
new.

PASTOR JAMES
Few things better than a slice of
ham, some eggs, and biscuits
drowning in gravy.

REV. WALKER
Explains our fine physiques, young
lady. The nourishment provided by
this establishment is divine.

SALLY
You ain't never looked into the
kitchen.

Sally walks away to post the kitchen ticket.

PASTOR JAMES
It seems we must want to talk about
something of concern to God.

Sally returns to pour coffee for Pastor James, then walks
away again.

REV. WALKER
We don't talk business often.

PASTOR JAMES
(ominously)
This is different.

REV. WALKER
You're more serious than usual.
Smile, brother. Every day's a gift
from God.

PASTOR JAMES
You know of Eden?

REV. WALKER
(laughs)
Be a lousy messenger of His word if
I didn't.

PASTOR JAMES
The Eden Club. Past the Johnson
house, on the edge of downtown.

REV. WALKER
I know of it. Everyone does.

Pastor James hadn't considered that "everyone" might know of the club. This revelation bothers him. He shakes his head in disgust.

Sally delivers two identical plates to the men.

SALLY
You all need anything else?

REV. WALKER
We're good, thank you.

Sally goes to wait on other customers.

REV. WALKER (CONT'D)
How does The Eden Club concern us?

PASTOR JAMES
Other than being a den of sin and
frivolity?
(shaking head)
One of your congregation is
employed there.

REV. WALKER
A few people in town work there.
The tourists seem to like it, so
the town council isn't going close
it. People gotta work. It's
harmless.

PASTOR JAMES
Such places are never harmless!

Rev. Walker has never considered The Eden Club seriously.
It's outside his world and not of much interest to him.

PASTOR JAMES (CONT'D)
 One of your congregation.
 (deep disgust, almost ill)
 He sings there. As a woman.

REV. WALKER
 Oh, Brother Isaac. What a voice he has. Yes, I've been told he sings there. I don't pay it much mind. Actors do all sorts of things. Why in Shakespeare's time--

PASTOR JAMES
 He's an abomination.

REV. WALKER
 Shakespeare?
 (pause)
 You mean Brother Isaac. Oh, my you're confused. No one loves God more, I dare admit, not even us.

PASTOR JAMES
 (emphatically)
 If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.

Rev. Walker takes a drink of coffee. He's not making the connection to Isaac. If anything, he's annoyed with his colleague, but trying not to let it show.

REV. WALKER
 Leviticus 20:13. Yes, sir. Say what's on your mind, Brother Lloyd.

PASTOR JAMES
 He's not an actor. He's taken up with a man. One we shunned for his evil ways.
 (hushed)
 Donald Jackson.

REV. WALKER
 Donnie? That explains a lot. But we should never gossip. That's not the way of Jesus.

PASTOR JAMES
 We must never listen to gossip.

Rev. Walker decides to fight scripture with scripture.

REV. WALKER

(preaching voice)

They get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to.

PASTOR JAMES

First Timothy, chapter five, verse thirteen.

(drinks coffee)

I agree. But when I asked Donnie if he was... well... different.

(can't say it, shrugs)

He left our church.

REV. WALKER

And now he's moved in with Isaac.

Pastor James nods, then takes a bite of breakfast. The men eat in silence.

Sally tops off their coffees.

REV. WALKER (CONT'D)

I'll talk to Isaac. I'll tell him what the Good Book tells us. I'll tell him.

PASTOR JAMES

You should ask if--

REV. WALKER

It's up to the sinner to confess what's in his heart. I'm just a simple teacher of the Word. If Isaac believes he's done wrong--

PASTOR JAMES

Your congregation might have some opinions on the matter. I might have to talk to some of the businessmen. You know, to remind them of God's dictates.

Rev. Walker takes the threat seriously. This is a conservative area. The region changed Pastor James, almost immediately.

PASTOR JAMES (CONT'D)

He at least shouldn't be singing the praises in a house of God.

Rev. Walker eats a few bites, and then looks out the window.

REV. WALKER

Yes, I'm sure the congregation is talking. Lips flap and tongues click, even in a church.

PASTOR JAMES

I knew you'd do the right thing.

EXT. ISAAC'S HOUSE - SUNSET

Rev. Walker exits the house. He stands on the porch, pausing. He seems torn, pained. Rev. Walker continues down the steps, shaking his head.

INT. ISAAC'S HOUSE

Isaac is sitting in his chair, with a closed Bible on his lap and reading glasses on the Bible. He is breathing long, deep breaths. Closes his eyes.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - PRESENT AGAIN

The couple talk quickly, clipped. They sometimes overlap and often interrupt each other. The pace of the exchange is fast, reflection their passions.

DONNIE

I recovered. Don't know why you didn't. You're why I gave up. Yet you keep believing. You really think change is coming. The only time they want us in church is for our funerals. Maybe not even then.

ISAAC

Robinson came out earlier this year. It's 1987 and things are finally changing. Poor man even tried to have himself cured while in seminary.

DONNIE

Oh, a cure. Run away and become a priest. That makes sure you at least don't have any fun being human. Nothing like praying not to fall in love. You should know that better than anyone.

ISAAC

It isn't easy. Faith never is.
Actually, I think that's the point.
Faith is supposed be an effort.
There is even talk about forming
support groups for--

DONNIE

Talk about a group of people in
need of a support group. Gay
Christians. You plan to have
interfaith alliances with all the
gay Jews? Gay Muslims? Isaac, have
you ever heard of self-loathing?

ISAAC

It's not like we can't be
Christian, Donnie. You watch.
Someday Robinson will be a bishop.

DONNIE

A gay bishop. Sure, and someday
he'll be made Pope.

ISAAC

Episcopalians don't have a pope.

DONNIE

Whatever.
(frustrated)
I don't care. It's insane, anyway.
Where do you read this stuff?

ISAAC

Your subscription to The Advocate.
Don't you read it?

DONNIE

I do. Sometimes.

ISAAC

It's usually buried under your
Automotive News and Sports
Illustrated. You don't read
anything but the sports section of
the newspaper.

DONNIE

Not true. The news is depressing,
so I read the lifestyle and
entertainment sections.

ISAAC

I stand corrected. Sports and
entertainment.

DONNIE

And the comics.

INT. "WHITE" CHURCH - SAME TIME

Pastor James is seated on metal folding chair in front of the pews. Men are seated in the pews and some on folding chairs.

PASTOR JAMES

Fred, are you telling us there is
nothing you or the council will do?

MAYOR

The Eden hasn't broken any laws. As
far as I know, they never had so
much as a bar fight.

CITIZEN

They don't fight. Pansies.

PASTOR JAMES

(ignores citizen)

Are you positive? There are so many
laws, they must've broken one or
two.

MAYOR

Short of serving minors or being
open on a Sunday, it would be nigh
impossible t' close Eden. Hank's
too smart to make those kinds of
mistakes. Hell--

Pastor James scowls at the mayor.

MAYOR (CONT'D)

Sorry, Pastor.

(resuming thought)

I don't even know if Hank is one
them or not. He's won the country
fishing derby four times. Ain't no
man here who can tie a fly like he
can, neither. He's a good
businessman.

Pastor James looks around the room. He stands for effect.

PASTOR JAMES
 (pointing at the pews)
 Do you want those abominations in
 our town? Do you want the perverts
 and pedophiles from the city coming
 here because of that place?

The men in the pews talk to each other, there are murmurs of agreement.

PASTOR JAMES (CONT'D)
 We must protect the children of
 this community. We must protect our
 children. Our young boys.

More nods of agreement. Come louder "yeahs" from the pews.

PASTOR JAMES (CONT'D)
 (to mayor)
 What if we make it so no one would
 want to visit the club?

MAYOR
 (worried)
 You ain't talking no violence, are
 you?

Pastor James stops pacing. He takes a deep breath and grabs his chest.

PASTOR JAMES
 (offended)
 Fred, I am deeply hurt you'd even
 suggest such a thing. I am a man of
 God. A man of peace.

ANOTHER CITIZEN (O.S.)
 What d'ya suggest, Pastor?

PASTOR JAMES
 (raising hands, Bible in
 right)
 We raise our voices. We stand
 outside that club and let the
 sinners know that God is watching
 them, waiting to judge them all.

EXT. ISAAC'S HOUSE - MIDNIGHT

ISAAC

You have to struggle to find yourself, sometimes. We all make mistakes. That's life.

DONNIE

Hello? Life? It's a nightmare. Can you live in reality for a bit?

ISAAC

Your reality?

DONNIE

Our reality. We avoid any and all conflict, especially that religion thing. Our nice, quiet, simple, reality. You perform, I emcee, we get paid, you buy books... We did the religion thing. It's over. They didn't want us. That's reality. Our lives are good, so why upset things?

ISAAC

What about the other reality?

DONNIE

What other reality?

ISAAC

Whispering in public, never holding hands, avoiding your family--

DONNIE

I'd do that if I were straight. I'm me. Deal with it. I'm not about to rush to my family gatherings. Not unless you want me to start chewing tobacco and spitting on the sidewalk.

ISAAC

-- trying to hide who we are. That reality.

DONNIE

Reagan will love us and wish us well, too. And someday Arizona will elect a gay Republican to Congress, right in Goldwater's backyard.

ISAAC

Some think they have.

DONNIE

They did what? Who?

ISAAC

There are rumors about Jim Kolbe, Republican from Arizona... elected in '85. And yes, he worked for Goldwater at one time. He was even in the Navy. Someday, I bet he'll be out.

(thinking)

Pretty sure Barney Frank will come out, too. He reminds me of an angry Truman Capote.

DONNIE

You have got to be kidding me. Gay history 101. Too bad we don't have Trivial Pursuit, Gay Pride Edition. What is it with you? Are you becoming some sort of crusader? Are you going to march in Pride parades, holding a Bible while dressed as Ruthie?

ISAAC

There are gays in religion. Gays in Congress. Why not a gay gospel singer? It's not good to lie about who you are.

DONNIE

I'm not lying. Hank's not lying. We're just not buying time on television or sending out mailers to announce how we live in private. I like my privacy. It's destructive, counterproductive, to be in everyone's face.

ISAAC

Self-destruction is better?

DONNIE

Hell, we're the masters of self-destructive behaviors. Society hates us, we hate us. The entire club scene was like racing towards a brick wall. Drugs, alcohol, more drugs. Have you forgotten disco entirely?

ISAAC

I tried to.

DONNIE

Things change slowly. But they do change. Be patient. You're just obstinate because people can't tell you're gay. When is the last time anyone who didn't know you thought you were gay?

ISAAC

Try being black. I can't exactly "whiten up" the same way you habitually "straighten up" around strangers. As if getting pulled over for a D.W.B. isn't bad enough. The benefit is that some part of me finds police uniforms sexy. Do you know how troubling that is? I get so conflicted.

DONNIE

D... W...

ISAAC

Driving While Black.

DONNIE

Sorry. I forget.

ISAAC

I don't. Things change too slowly. Much too slowly.

DONNIE

So you decide, "Let's piss everyone off with gospel music." Some of us don't want to be noticed. I don't want to attract attention. I want to be left alone. I don't want to be political, I don't want to be an activist, and I certainly don't want to be unemployed.

Isaac sighs.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Do you think everyone is going to join hands and sing, "What the world needs now, is love sweet love?"

ISAAC

Maybe not the world, but Eden would be a start.

(MORE)

ISAAC (CONT'D)

And that's not a gospel song. I want to sing about the ultimate love.

DONNIE

You're an idealist.

ISAAC

That's why you love me.

Donnie shakes his head.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

What's wrong?

(sing-song poetry)

I long to see you once again,
and so I try avoiding sin
I pray at night that I'll be strong
So in Heaven I'll belong
And be with you forever more
Where my angel now does soar...

Donnie coughs, struggling to breathe.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

It is great music. I bet--

Isaac reaches out to Donnie. Donnie avoids the contact.

DONNIE

Not the best choice. I don't want to hear it.

ISAAC

Fine. I'll shut up.

DONNIE

I don't want to hear the songs.

(pause)

They remind me of growing up.

ISAAC

Your family listened to gospel music? I know that's not the case. At least not real gospel.

DONNIE

Country gospel Christian stuff. Same songs, sung worse.

ISAAC

I wouldn't want to think about country music either. Christian or not, that's musical Hell to me.

DONNIE

Not just country music. I hate the Christian stuff. That whole Christian thing. Don't you get it? I don't like anything about it. Nothing.

ISAAC

You and Hank are bigots. I can't believe this.

DONNIE

I am not a bigot. I dislike Christians. I doubt I'd like Muslims much, either. I bet the gay nightlife in Tehran leaves a lot to be desired. Monotheism is overflowing with love and acceptance. You of all people should understand.

Donnie rises slowly, deliberately, and takes on a tent revival tone, despite his wheezing, weak voice.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

God created Adam and Eve, I remind you brothers and sisters, not Adam and

(rising tone)

Steve. It is an abomination, yes, an abomination I tell you, for a man to lie with another as he would a woman.

(slapping the back of his right hand against his left palm in rhythm.)

Right here in this book it tells us that man belongs first to God, then to woman. Right here... somewhere... I'm sure of it.

ISAAC

Usually they cite Leviticus chapter 18, verse 22. But, if you ask me, chapter 20 is more exiting.

DONNIE

A man shouldn't lie with a man. Something about dogs and fleas!

ISAAC

(quoting scripture)

If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.

DONNIE

Oh, that's charming. I know it makes me want to shout "Hallelujah, brother!" And you still believe? That book is nothing but hate and God smacking people.

ISAAC

Smiting. He smites people.

DONNIE

(sitting)

Smite. Smack. God has people whacked, like an omnipotent Don Vito Corleone.

ISAAC

You don't take it all literally.

DONNIE

Don't most of the people around here? This is the Bible Belt.

ISAAC

Yeah, well you tell a Southerner that same part of the Good Book says bacon is a sin.

DONNIE

(flippantly)

Sausage certainly is.

ISAAC

Must you be crude? What is wrong with you?

DONNIE

With me? Wrong with me? I'm not the one in love with songs about seeing Jesus in Heaven. Oh, let's sing to this God who hates us, to Hell with the fact He created us. You're right. Glory to God in the highest! Hallelujah, brother!

(standing slowly)

(MORE)

DONNIE (CONT'D)

If there is a Heaven, I'm in no
hurry to see it. This is where I
want to be.

Donnie storms off, leaving Isaac sitting alone.

ISAAC

(looking up)

He didn't mean it.

(pause)

Well, he did, but You've got to
understand. Of course You
understand. Donnie doesn't always
like being who he is.

(sighs)

I guess, sometimes, I don't either.
I have to believe You made me the
way I was meant to be.

Isaac rises and walks in the darkness. He's headed in no
particular direction.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - LATER

Isaac is sitting alone, in the large gazebo bandstand area.
He's sitting on the railing, depressed.

Note: Sings We've Come a Long Way, classic spiritual.

ISAAC

We've come a long way, Lord, a
mighty long way
We've borne our burdens in the heat
of the day
But we know the Lord has made the
way
We've come a long way, Lord, a
mighty long way

Erica walks up.

Isaac stands, continuing to sing within the covered space.
Erica walks around to the stairs of the bandstand and sits,
in awe of Isaac's range and earnest emotion.

Isaac is facing away from the steps, oblivious to Erica or
anyone else.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

I've been in the valley and prayed
night and day
And I know the Lord has made the
way
I've had trials each and every day
(MORE)

ISAAC (CONT'D)

But I know the Lord has made the
way
Wish I was in Heaven sitting down
Wish I was in Heaven sitting down
Wouldn't get tired no more, tired
no more
Wouldn't have nothing to do,
nothing to do
We've come a long way, Lord, a
mighty long way
We've borne our burdens in the heat
of the day
But we know the Lord has made the
way
We've come a long way, Lord,
A mighty long way

ERICA

That was beautiful.

Isaac turns to Erica, surprised.

ISAAC

I'm glad someone thinks so.

ERICA

Who wouldn't?

ISAAC

I can think of a couple of people.

Isaac sits next to Erica.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

What are you doing here?

ERICA

Waiting for Jessie to show up.
She's late, as usual. Closes the
diner during the week.
(out of character giggles)
Sometimes she drives me nuts. But,
what's a girl to do, right? Love's
like that, I'm told.

ISAAC

I keep waiting for it to get
easier. It doesn't.

ERICA

You seem to have a pretty great
relationship.

ISAAC

Better than most. Just remember, it will always take an effort on your part. Sort of like music. You work hard to make it look easy.

ERICA

What you were singing... Do you plan to sing that some night at the club?

ISAAC

I hope so. Actually, I pray so, I suppose. Sort of how I became Ruthie.

ERICA

What do you mean? Your name is from a song?

ISAAC

No. Faith. I happened to be at Ruth's name when I needed a new identity. My mother's Bible.

Note: Sings If He Changed My Name

ISAAC (CONT'D)

I told Jesus it would be all right
If He changed my name
Jesus told me I would have to live
humble
If He changed my name
Jesus told me that the world would
be 'gainst me
If He changed my name
But I told Jesus it would be all
right
If He changed my name...

ERICA

I don't think I've heard songs quite like that before. I mean, I know what it is, but I haven't really heard much of it. I'll need the sheet music. If Ruthie is going to add songs, you need to give me two or three weeks, plus rehearsal time with you.

ISAAC

Ruthie will probably never perform those. I might. I haven't decided.

ERICA

Oh, I bet Ruthie would be amazing.
No one could hear that and not feel
something.

ISAAC

You liked it that much?

ERICA

Sure. You'd have to raise it a bit.
A whole octave, if you ask me,
unless Ruthie's a tenor now.

Isaac ponders rebelling. It won't take much to push him to
take a stand. He senses something might change.

ISAAC

(thinking)

Then we don't have two weeks.

Isaac hugs Erica.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

You're wonderful.

ERICA

I am?

Isaac rises from the steps of the bandstand.

ISAAC

Sheet music. I assume that's at any
music store. I've never purchased
sheet music -- just sing what I
know.

ERICA

You don't read music?

ISAAC

I listen to a tape or CD and go
from there. It's not like I'm
singing new material.

ERICA

I can play whatever you put in
front of me.

ISAAC

Tomorrow morning I'm going
shopping, then. First thing, too.
I'm buying you a stack of sheet
music. Or maybe they have a good
book of songs. I am so excited.

ERICA

Third and Peach, Music Central. Ask for Walt. He knows the sheet music collection better than anyone.

ISAAC

They might not have what I want to sing. It's old.

ERICA

If it's on paper, Walt can get it. He's a real miracle worker at times.

ISAAC

That's good to hear. I could use one.

(pause)

I'd better go check on Donnie. He's not feeling well lately.

Isaac walks away, heading home.

JESSICA approaches. She's in a light blue and white waitress uniform. It's the same design SALLY wore.

ERICA

Jessie. What took you so long?

INT. THE EDEN CLUB - NOON

The club is empty, the main lights are on. The club is not shabby, but it is definitely best experienced in dim light with the smoke machine running.

Erica enters, dressed in jeans and sassy "Jazz Dyke" T-shirt featuring a line-art piano. She carries a stack of sheet music. She places the music on the piano and sits at the bench. Erica begins to play.

Erica plays portions of a few classic spirituals, selecting various ones and sorting the stacks. A minute or two elapses, with Erica gaining confidence and playing more emotionally.

Donnie enters as Erica is practicing. He listens, swaying slightly. He is impressed, nodding.

Donnie walks to the piano, stands opposite Erica.

Erica finishes a piece, ending it with a flourish followed by a gently fade.

DONNIE

Damn, Isaac was right about you.

ERICA

(modestly)

Thank you. I know Isaac was used to his last accompanist.

DONNIE

Jimmy was almost a collaborator. He played for Ruthie... I don't know. I think it was for five years. Maybe more. At least two before I met Isaac. Still, you can only remain here for so long, I suppose.

ERICA

At The Eden Club?

DONNIE

No. In the South. Unless you count Nashville as part of the South. Jimmy went to play in the studios. He has a gift.

One of club's other performers walks in and heads for the back.

ERICA

I don't think I'd want to be a studio musician. I used to play keyboard in a couple of alternative bands. That's what I want to do. I want to be on stage. There's something special about a live audience. I love a loud, crowded club with people dancing to the music and screaming.

DONNIE

Not gonna happen here. Our audiences don't generally scream. I don't even recall the last time they got out of their seats during a song.

ERICA

Isaac was at Retro 84 when I was playing with a friend's band. I guess he liked what he saw.

DONNIE

Isaac, clubbing with the kids. I knew he didn't sit at home when I went to the city. I didn't realize Eden appealed to anyone under 25.

ERICA

Isaac offered something the bands couldn't. Rent money.

DONNIE

Rent has a way of making you pragmatic.

ERICA

Still, I wasn't sure I wanted to do it. I mean, I came to see Ruthie because I was sort of worried I couldn't hack it. A drag queen. You know...

DONNIE

You thought he might be a flaming drag queen? A farce?

ERICA

They tend to be jokes.

DONNIE

Yeah, they do. A lot of performers do it for the easy laughs or the shock value. They don't sing particularly well and don't care. Lazy humor is a sure bet with club crowds, especially if the drinks are flowing. A few drag queens are a step up. They do it because they idolize Marilyn or Liza. Then you have Ruthie. Ruthie's not a joke. That's the shock.

A second performer comes out from the back. He's a garish, over-done version of Cher.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

(watching the Cher)

Hank's other performers are over the top.

(leans toward Erica)

The Wednesday shows still are camp, obviously. Isaac won't come to watch Wednesday shows. He hates them. He thinks it insults everything Ruthie is.

ERICA

I only play for Ruthie. That was one of the reasons I agreed to the job. Music matters to me.

DONNIE

Isaac is a music historian. He cares more about the music than anyone I've met.

ERICA

A historian? Really?

DONNIE

He's written books and magazine articles on this stuff. After his mother died, he went to Paris to research Nina Simone.

(pause)

Did you know he calls his car Nina? Weird, huh?

Erica laughs.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

(coughs into a kerchief)

While those other shows are pure farce, Ruthie is something else. Ruthie is a voice. Not a high-pitched whiny voice, and not a deep smoky voice. I'm not sure how to describe her to anyone who hasn't seen the show and listened to her. Isaac hates drag queens who lip-sync, can't sing, or make fun of the music.

ERICA

Then why perform in drag at all?

DONNIE

I can't explain it. I'm not sure Isaac can. But he is serious about Ruthie and the quality of her show.

ERICA

I didn't care for the idea. But there was this guy, in drag, singing. I didn't even recognize who it was. Isaac had just asked me about auditioning for him here. He didn't tell me he was Ruthie.

DONNIE

So you thought Ruthie would be...

ERICA

Yeah. I generally don't like flames, on stage or off. A man shouldn't be calling other men "girlfriend" or "sugar." It's just wrong. I don't know why. And that whole girly sing-song voice thing. No man is born talking like that.

DONNIE

No one is born talking. You think it's an act or something?

(thinking)

I guess it is with Isaac when he's Ruthie. It's part of the show.

ERICA

Yet, I don't mind Ruthie.

(struggling to explain)

It's when someone isn't acting, but they are acting. You get it? It's phony -- and I don't care for fakes. It's like screaming, "I'm gay, I'm gay, I'm gay!"

DONNIE

I'm gay. I'm gay!

Erica glares.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Kidding. But I have been called effeminate, sissy, and worse. We all have our prejudices, though.

Both laugh. Donnie coughs again.

ERICA

Are you okay? Why don't you sit down?

Donnie sits on the bench, next to Erica.

DONNIE

Thanks. I'm just fighting a cold or something.

Silence. Erica is thinking about Ruthie's show.

ERICA

Ruthie is--

DONNIE

Amazing, isn't she?

ERICA

And Isaac is nothing like that. No lisp, no "you girlfriend." Isaac would blend in at a Blackhawks game back home in Chicago.

DONNIE

There aren't many black hockey fans, are there?

ERICA

See what I mean? He's really good at blending in.

Donnie laughs, coughs a little, and laughs some more. Erica laughs, too.

DONNIE

I can't hide it no matter how hard I try. And I hate that.

(pause)

I want to hide. I want to blend in to society. I don't want to be noticed for who I love. I don't want to be noticed for anything that private. Leave me alone, I'll leave you alone.

Silence

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Ruthie is an act. Isaac... he's a man. He'll deny it, but no one assumes he's a fag. No, that's my lot in life. I am the stereotype, no matter how hard I fight it. I can work on cars, shoot a gun, but I might as well have a neon sign over my head.

ERICA

I wasn't bothered by anyone until my last two years of high school. Called names, teased, taunted. Crank calls. I suppose threatened, but nothing ever happened. I don't think people cared about me until I turned into a rebel.

DONNIE

No one hassled Isaac, either. He doesn't get it. He can't. He never even came out. He's just Isaac. He doesn't worry about what people say or think. Not like I do.

ERICA

You were that one kid everyone torments.

Donnie nods.

ERICA (CONT'D)

That had to be tough. I wasn't a target until I decided to be one. I knew who I was by then. And it only lasted two years. College was entirely different.

DONNIE

Don't let anyone tell you the '70s were all about flower children, free love, and disco. I was being called "fairy boy" and "fruit." You grew up in different times. Better times, too.

ERICA

And places. I wasn't here. Chicago's large enough you can be invisible.

Donnie looks at the sheet music.

DONNIE

So what exactly was that you were playing?

ERICA

Some things from this Doc Watts guy. Isaac explained it to me. Dr. Watts was named Isaac. Did you know that? He wrote hymns three hundred years ago. Seems ironic that slaves brought those dusty tunes to life.

DONNIE

I'm not much for spirituals or hymns.

ERICA

You don't like the music? I love the energy.

(MORE)

ERICA (CONT'D)

Taking slow, solemn tunes and making them something you have to sing. Something that almost rocks. That's cool.

DONNIE

You can't play that music here. Not in the Eden Club. Hank will toss your little young butt out the door and Ruthie's much older and bigger one, too.

ERICA

It's really great music.

DONNIE

Do you like working?

ERICA

(nodding)

Yes.

DONNIE

Then don't ever, ever let Hank hear you playing that music.

ERICA

That's silly. It's just music.

DONNIE

I need to explain things to you. Why don't we go get something to eat?

ERICA

You paying?

DONNIE

Why not? You need an education on small Southern towns, and I'm hungry. Let's get out of here.

Erica rises, leaving the music on the piano.

Erica and Donnie exit The Eden Club.

Hank enters and walks to the piano. He sits and plays a few notes, looks about the club, and then notices the sheet music Erica left behind.

HANK

What the hell is this crap? Oh, Ruthie, you have gone way too far.

(MORE)

HANK (CONT'D)

I warned you. Damn. Why can't you just sing what you've always sung? I can't have you singing this. No way.

Hank exits, music in hand.

EXT. THE EDEN CLUB - AFTERNOON

As Donnie and Erica depart, protesters are arriving, led by Pastor James. Their intention is not yet clear.

ERICA

I wonder what that's all about?

DONNIE

I don't know, but it can't be good if Pastor James is involved.

(angrily)

That jackass is capable of anything.

Donnie walks faster.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Let's get out of here before I do something stupid.

ERICA

I thought you hated confrontation.

DONNIE

There's one man I'd love to punch in the face.

INT. HANK'S OFFICE

Hank enters, carrying the music he found on the piano. He opens a desk drawer and retrieves his Scotch whisky bottle and small glass. He pours a drink, looks at the music, and shakes his head.

HANK

Almost ten years. I suppose that's a good run for a club. Almost survived the Reagan years. That's something. Hell didn't even freeze over. Ten years. Not bad.

(drinks from his glass)

Fire Ruthie. How hard can that be?

(drinks twice, emptying the small glass)

(MORE)

HANK (CONT'D)

Sure. She's only the star. Just my main attraction. How much business could I lose?

(drinks from the bottle)

There must be a better way. Yes, there must be. Think!

(drinks)

Sound of knock at the door.

HANK (CONT'D)

What?

DONNIE

Hank?

(entering office)

You okay?

HANK

Couldn't be more--

DONNIE

Sloshed?

HANK

(nodding)

That might be it. Good friend Jack helps. A little.

(puts bottle down, stares at it)

Your partner is driving me to drink. How can you always be sober? Do you know what he's trying to get away with?

DONNIE

I'm dealing with it.

Donnie sits.

HANK

Really? You are? Did you see those assholes outside with signs? They already hate us. Ruthie sings those songs--

DONNIE

I told Erica that Isaac is a bit confused.

HANK

Confused is one word for it. So you explained things to that piano player?

Donnie takes the bottle from Hank and drops it into a trash can.

HANK (CONT'D)
I went to church as a child.

Donnie is puzzled.

HANK (CONT'D)
Church. You know... religion.
Heaven is a perfect place, I was
taught.

DONNIE
You and religion. It depresses me
even more to ponder you and
religion together.

Donnie places face in hands, looking downward.

HANK
Heaven didn't seem perfect to me.

DONNIE
(lifting head, sarcastic)
But the afterlife is perfect. The
man preaching -- no, screaming --
from his box on the street corner
tells me that eternal salvation and
a perfect kingdom await me if I
accept Jesus.
(pause)
And if I stop being me.

HANK
Damn bastard James. He could ruin
business. You see that crowd?
(drinks)
I can't talk to Ruthie. Can't you?
She won't listen to reason... but
she might listen to you. Tell her,
him... tell Isaac to drop this once
and for all. Tell him I respect all
that Christian bullshit, just not
here. Not right now. I'm sure God
understands.

Donnie shakes his head.

HANK (CONT'D)
(wistfully)
Ah, to be a deity.

Donnie sits quietly, pondering the situation.

HANK (CONT'D)

You need to talk to her.

DONNIE

And say what? I need to think about it. It isn't like I haven't tried. This requires careful planning.

HANK

You think too much. We got a mob outside and you're thinking how to be nice to Ruthie? When'd you start thinkin' so much?

DONNIE

I can't explain it. Never used to.

HANK

I can.

(still inebriated)

Too many books. You read and think too much. That's a problem for someone like you.

DONNIE

Like me? I never read a book before Isaac.

HANK

Yeah. Exactly. You weren't meant to be readin' all that new age hokem. Isaac got ya' all interspective.

DONNIE

Introspective.

(pause)

When is the last time you read a book?

HANK

A whole book?

Donnie nods.

HANK (CONT'D)

You own more self-help books than anyone I know. I wait for you to tell me about what you've read. Much easier.

DONNIE

What? I'm your Reader's Digest?

Donnie starts coughing. He tries to hide his handkerchief.

HANK

You need to see a doctor, boy.

DONNIE

I have. It's bronchitis or something.

Hank is swaying in his chair, almost falling.

HANK

No, no. Not the doctors here. I know a place in Atlanta. You got somethin' serious. Ain't gettin' better and I can't have you keelin' over on stage. One problem at a time.

DONNIE

Okay. We'll talk about it.

HANK

(slurring)

You talk to Isaruthiec and I'll give ya' some days off. Tell him ya' vistin' friends.

(pause)

I'm dizzy.

DONNIE

It's the--

(looks in trash can)

Oh, my god. Scotch?

HANK

As long as I don't bow down before the porcelain god, I haven't had too much. No begging God for the spinning to stop -- I must be okay.

DONNIE

It is all about faith, after all.

HANK

We have none! And Ruthie should keep hers out of here.

DONNIE

Why don't I walk you home?

HANK

I need to be here. This is home, isn't it?

DONNIE
 (standing)
 Come on, Hank.

Hank stands, leans on Donnie briefly, and wobbles before standing on his own.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
 That wasn't your only drink of the day, was it?

HANK
 Just that one.

DONNIE
 That one?

HANK
 Bottle. That stuff's expensive, Donnie. Not about to drink more than one bottle.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - BEFORE SHOW

Sounds of live jazz can be heard from the stage.

Isaac enters the dressing room and begins preparing for the night's show.

Erica enters with her wardrobe on a hanger. The tails are wrapped in dry-cleaner cellophane. Erica seems depressed, moving slowly and unenthusiastically.

Isaac notices her in his mirror.

ISAAC
 What's wrong? That crowd of rednecks outside? Don't worry. The place is still packed.

Erica shakes her head. She feels she failed Ruthie somehow.

ERICA
 Donnie heard the music. Now it's missing.

ISAAC
 Missing?

ERICA
 The music was on the piano. It's gone, now. Donnie must've taken it when he came back.

ISAAC

He might not like the music, but it wasn't his to take.

ERICA

He says you can't sing those songs.

ISAAC

Donnie doesn't own the club.

Erica drapes her wardrobe over the back of a chair.

ERICA

You saw the protestors. Donnie said Hank would fire you for inciting them with that music. Blasphemy and all that.

ISAAC

Donnie knows Hank couldn't fire me.

ERICA

Are you sure about that?

ISAAC

No. But I have to tell myself something.

(starting makeup)

Don't worry. We'll just do the standards tonight. Play it safe.

ERICA

That's probably best.

(moving towards door)

I'm going to take a walk before getting ready. I don't have to do nearly as much as you do before a show.

ISAAC

I'll get this all settled. Just play the piano and let me worry about Hank and Donnie. They're stuck in the past.

ERICA

I liked the music a lot. It was fun. Sorry we're going to Hell, apparently.

ISAAC

Yes, the music is great. There's history behind that music, especially for me.

(MORE)

ISAAC (CONT'D)

But, if we need to ease into it, so be it. Take your walk and clear your mind.

(concerned)

Take the side exit. Just in case.

Erica nods and exits the dressing room.

Isaac continues working on his makeup for the show. He is transforming into Ruthie with great skill.

Donnie enters the dressing room.

DONNIE

What the hell are you thinking?

ISAAC

Hello to you, too.

DONNIE

You're still thinking about singing that music, aren't you?

ISAAC

Reggae? Opera? I always thought The Eden wasn't ready for opera yet. Do you think they might appreciate Carmen?

DONNIE

This isn't funny. You're getting out of hand, and Hank won't tolerate it much longer.

ISAAC

He already told me how he feels, and so have you.

DONNIE

Doesn't mean you'll listen. And then what about the club? Those people with Pastor James will probably burn it to the ground.

ISAAC

The club won't close, Donnie. You know Hank's being paranoid when he says things like that.

DONNIE

Maybe it wouldn't close, but Hank can't take that chance. And think about what that means.

(MORE)

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Not just to you, but to me, the
cast -- even Erica.

ISAAC

What do the two of you have to do
with this? It's Ruthie singing, not
you.

DONNIE

And Erica playing the piano. Me?
I'm involved no matter what. Erica
was practicing today. Your music.

Isaac feels guilty, realizing there is a protest outside,
even though the protest includes fewer than a dozen people.

ISAAC

It's not her fault. It was all my
doing.

DONNIE

I'm sure it was. I put her straight
though. I told her Hank would never
tolerate those songs in his club.

ISAAC

I already told Erica we'll do our
regular show. No surprises.

DONNIE

You promise?

ISAAC

Yes. I saw how upset she was. I
wouldn't risk her career merely to
sing a song or two. I'm not that
self-absorbed, not even as Ruthie.

DONNIE

That's a relief to hear. I worry
about you trying to take a stand
without thinking about the rest of
us.

ISAAC

It might be the right stand, just
not the right time.

DONNIE

You want to give me an ulcer, don't
you? No wonder I had to spend two
hours getting Hank sober.

ISAAC

Go be Mr. Emcee. I have a transformation to complete and you don't get to see all the magic involved.

DONNIE

Just don't do anything stupid.
(opening door)
Please.

Donnie exits and closes the door.

Isaac is changing into Ruthie. He steps behind the changing screen to put on a dress.

ISAAC

Oh, to be a smaller size again!
Ouch. This used to be a lot more fun.

Sounds of struggle with clothing.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

Lord, give me the strength to suck
in this gut of mine!

More sounds of dressing.

Isaac returns to complete his makeup and prepare his wig.

Erica enters, closes the door, starts to change. The two do not speak. Erica has seen the protesters and is visibly affected.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB

The main stage is brightly lit, compared to when Ruthie sings. A larger band, eight men, most in their later years, plays classic jazz. The band represents the WWII swing era.

Donnie enters in his white tux. He walks to center stage and takes the microphone.

DONNIE

Ladies and gentleman, welcome to The Eden Club on this beautiful spring evening. Your troubles are all outside, now, left in the past and somewhere in the future. It's 1942 and President Roosevelt assures me, we have nothing to fear but a lack of great music.

AUDIENCE MEMBER (O.S.)
Who's afraid of rednecks with
cardboard signs?

The audience cheers. Some make snide comments about the
protestors. Donnie smiles. The audience is supportive.

DONNIE
Ladies and gentlemen, relax and
enjoy the sounds of our very own
Eden Orchestra while you chat with
your special someone. You won't be
saying a word once our very own
Ruthie takes the stage.

The band plays music from Glenn Miller.

INT. DRESSING ROOM

Isaac hesitates with Ruthie's wig.

ERICA
Your heart not in it tonight?

ISAAC
Is yours? I wonder, sometimes.

Isaac puts on the wig and takes on the persona of Ruthie.

RUTHIE
You hear that?

They can hear cheering and the band, but the pair are unaware
of the audience's support against the protestors.

ERICA
(nodding)
Yeah. It's really something.

RUTHIE
Some of those men are older than my
father would be, yet they play like
they're 21-year-old kids on stage
for the first time. They're
thrilled every night they get to
play.

ERICA
Because they love keeping the music
alive.

RUTHIE

No, no. They're glad to still be alive to play the music. A few are young men, a couple are middle-aged men, but most are so old we check them nightly for a pulse. But no matter the age, another night of music is another night worth living.

ERICA

But you don't enjoy it as much as you did. Is it the protestors?

Ruthie is bothered by the thought of protestors, who represent all bigotry and hatred.

RUTHIE

I'm not sure what it is. I need to relax to enjoy it again. Maybe if I wasn't fighting something in me so much, I'd learn to hear the music again. It's hard to relax, for some reason. Something's not right.

ERICA

Well, yeah. A dozen idiots marching in front of the club.

Ruthie listens to the music, while she and Erica continue to prepare for the nightly performance.

RUTHIE

No, it's Donnie. I don't know what's wrong, but it is serious. He looks like Mama did at the end.

Ruthie looks in her mirror, seeing Erica.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

You are beautiful, young lady.

Erica looks over Ruthie's shoulder, admiring herself in the tuxedo.

ERICA

I think I like dressing up. I am... dare I say... attractive in tails?

Both laugh as Erica models.

Isaac removes the wig. He's conflicted.

ISAAC

It's not dressing up that I wonder about. It's dresses. Donnie needs me, not Ruthie.

Erica misses the larger point.

ERICA

You want to sing as you? Not Ruthie?

ISAAC

(recalling church choir)
I used to sing those songs -- before I met Donnie.
(to Erica)
Just some bad memories, kid. Best to let go of them, I suppose. It was easy to choose love over the music.

The music stops.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

It was the right choice.

Isaac puts the wig back on and adjusts his makeup. Ruthie has returned.

RUTHIE

That's your cue.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB

Erica enters from backstage. She sits, without acknowledging the audience, and begins to play the piano quietly.

Donnie walks to the microphone.

DONNIE

It's time to slow things down a bit. The band will return, but our star likes to ease into things.

Lights dim.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

For the last eight years it has been our honor to host the South's best female jazz vocalist. From the saddest of blues to the hottest swing, no one can match her.

(MORE)

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Look into your lover's eyes and
listen to the magical voice of
Ruthie.

Ruthie enters, walks to the microphone and sways gently to the music.

Donnie claps, to encourage the audience, but there is already a deafening round of applause.

RUTHIE

Hello, all you beautiful people. I hope all of you are sitting at a table with someone special. If not, maybe you should look around and consider switching with someone.

Ruthie moves closer to the microphone. She begins her monologue.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Always be true to yourself. Find that person and that thing that matters most to you. In this world, it is never easy to be true to yourself. It's even harder to be true to what matters. I want to tell you what matters most to me. It's the one thing that makes life bearable. It's the meaning of life, if you ask me.

Donnie looks worried, wondering what Ruthie might say next.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

There's a man. He is everything to me. Everything.

Donnie, shocked, looks like he might cry. He goes backstage to compose himself.

Erica plays, while Ruthie makes the audience anticipate her words. Seconds pass with only piano music.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

It's all about love. Yes, love is the thing that matters most. Unfortunately, just when you think you have it, just when it's there to help you be true -- you find out it wasn't. He doesn't want you to be yourself. That's not love.

Erica improvises a bit. Ruthie sways, lost in thought.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Send him on his way. And if he
comes back, and ladies, the men
always try to come back, tell him
he can cry you a river. You have to
be you.

Note: Ruthie sings Cry Me a River, words and music by Arthur
Hamilton. Copyright 1953.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(singing)

Now you say you're lonely
You cry the whole night through
Well you can cry me a river,
Cry me a river, I cried a river
over you.
Now you say you're sorry
For being so untrue
Well you can cry me a river
Cry me a river, I cried a river
over you.

Donnie is coughing off stage, while listening.

You drove me mad and drove me out
of my head
While you never shed a tear
Remember, I remember all that you
said,
Told me love was true for me an...
Told me you was... you an... me
an...

Hank looks out the office window to watch Ruthie. He smiles,
counting drinks and plates of food on the tables below.

Now you say you loved me
Well, just to prove you do
Go on an
Cry me a river
Cry me a river
I cried a river over you...

Donnie manages to stop coughing and wheezing. He walks onto
the edge of stage.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Thank you all, and goodnight.

Ruthie exits to her dressing room.

Donnie walks to the microphone.

Erica looks at Donnie, concerned. She is starting to realize Donnie isn't recovering from whatever he has.

DONNIE

Ruthie will return again,
accompanied by The Eden Orchestra,
so you can dance with the special
someone. But right now, we're all
going to take a short break and
enjoy some Southern hospitality.
Let your waitress know if there's
anything at all we can do for you.

INT. HANK'S OFFICE - LATE AFTERNOON

Hank is sitting at his desk and drinking. He drinks to deal with any stress. Lately, there's a lot of stress.

Isaac knocks and enters the office.

ISAAC

Donnie said you wanted to see me.

HANK

(suspicious)

You bought music for the new kid.
Why? You don't do things like that.

ISAAC

I've been thinking about the song
list.

HANK

I'm going to need another drink,
aren't I?

Hank drinks from the bottle.

ISAAC

It means a lot to me.

HANK

And you know my answer. With the
pricks in front of this place two
or three nights a week? No. Never.
Not in my lifetime. No way, no how.
Nyet. Nein. All those no's. If
there's another way to say no, add
it to the list.

ISAAC

One night. It's a Thursday. The audience is small.

HANK

It ain't never small enough for what you want to do to me. My customers would never come back once word spread that we're surrounded by rednecks with pitchforks and torches.

ISAAC

How do you know? The audiences love Ruthie. They love Eden.

HANK

'Cuz a gay drag queen singing those songs is just plain... what's that word?

ISAAC

Sacrilege.

Isaac approaches the desk and lifts Hank's bottle. The bottle is nearly empty, and it's only late afternoon.

Hank takes back the bottle.

HANK

That's it. Sacrilege. Heresy. Definite heresy. That's a word for it. Gay gospel singer. That'll get me closed down and run out of town. Oh, sure, dress in drag and sing all about Jesus. I can see the villagers marching up the street rady to get all Joan of Arc on your ass. Burned at the stake! Do you forget where we are? It's still the twentieth century, in case you forgot.

ISAAC

The Atlanta Gay Men's Choir sings Christmas music and even did Messiah one year.

HANK

That's a couple hundred long miles away -- in a real city. Not here. No way they'd do that here.

ISAAC

You have no faith in people.

HANK

I know exactly what to expect. I have faith in human nature. Humans are naturally wicked, vile, disgusting creatures. I know. I'm one of them.

ISAAC

We fill this place, in case you forget.

HANK

If we didn't draw tourists, The Eden wouldn't exist in this town. It's all about money, Isaac. Money. We bring it in, so the city leaves us alone. Eden is no place for religion!

Silence.

ISAAC

Eden is the place for anything. Anything at all.

HANK

I will fire you.

ISAAC

You wouldn't dare. I am The Eden Club.

(deliberately)

One hundred and fifty shows a year. Thursday through Saturday.

HANK

I own Eden. I own your microphone. Hell Isaac, I own your dresses and wigs. For all I know, I own your bras and panties.

ISAAC

This is bigger than ownership. It's bigger than money.

HANK

Dream on. It's always about money.

ISAAC

This is about peace and love and--

HANK

Money can buy a lot of peace and something close enough to love for a lot of us.

ISAAC

Do you really believe that? That's your faith?

HANK

Yes, I do. Hell, enough money buys peace even for a fag like me in the South. It don't get much better than that if you ask me.

ISAAC

You're disgraceful.

HANK

For now. But I can't be disgraced if I don't give a damn. I get enough money in the bank, I won't give a damn. See? That's my goal. Goals are important. It should be yours, too.

ISAAC

So until you have enough money, you have no spine?

HANK

Spines cost a lot.

ISAAC

And you think I don't bring in enough to get away with one or two songs? One or two?

HANK

Look at yourself. Well, not at the moment. Do you understand what you are? What Eden is to this community? We are the sideshow, sweetheart, nothing more, nothing less. You just happen to be the main attraction of the moment. But you cross a line, then you're Satan's progawhatsit.

ISAAC

(exasperated)
Progeny.

HANK

Yeah. That. You're special for one reason, and only one reason.

ISAAC

Ruthie is sexier than most of the local women?

HANK

Dammit, Ruthie, this is serious.

ISAAC

In costume, I am Ruthie. Do I look like I'm in costume to you? Ruthie brings people in, but she sleeps in that dressing room. Never forget that. Never.

HANK

Got your attention, huh?

(drinks)

You listen carefully, diva. You're special because you are Ruthie. You don't lip-sync. You ain't a fraud-- at least not as a singer. No one I've seen can do what you do. Not in New York, not in San Francisco, not in Paris. I've been there, saw the shows, and know the meaning of burlesque. It's one two-bit word I do know.

(tilting back and looking at the ceiling)

When you sing, people close their eyes, hold hands, and hear Ruthie. As long as you're singing about men and women in love, broken hearts, and pain, the illusion works. You do anything else, it's all fucked up and the magic dies.

Hank looks at Isaac, both pleading and threatening.

Isaac nods, not in agreement, but because he understands the effect of performing.

HANK (CONT'D)

I'd rather go back to lip-syncing comedians than kill the magic. I don't mind people laughing at us, but I won't be lynched because they realize I've been laughing at them.

ISAAC

Fine. Maybe it's too early for the walls to come down, but that time will come.

HANK

What the hell are you talking about?

ISAAC

Paul Robeson.

Hank is distracted. He's drunk and confused. It's likely the inebriation is helping Isaac's argument. Hank is losing focus.

HANK

Shit, I love Robeson. And we know what happened to him. Damn pinko leftist. Still, what a voice. Hell, probably the best damn voice--
(drinks)
Fine. Next Sunday.

ISAAC

What?

HANK

Sundays. We ain't got no church of our own. The damn protestors and that bastard James got me plenty angry. Fine. I'll give you Sunday afternoons.

ISAAC

You're serious?

HANK

No advertising. No posters, flyers, nothing. Not even here. Understand?

ISAAC

Then how--?

HANK

I don't know. Don't care. But no promoting it. You can sing whatever the hell you want Sunday afternoon. I'm here checking the books and shit anyway most Sundays. Two. No earlier, dammit.

(drinks)

Normal show tonight. Okay?

ISAAC

But I get Sundays? To prove that
you're wrong.

HANK

Yeah, whatever. Don't mention it.
Literally, don't mention it.

Isaac exits.

Hank is getting tired, falling asleep in his chair.

HANK (CONT'D)

Damn nightmare, dealing with
singers. Thinks he's so damn
important I wouldn't fire...
(drunkenly singing to self)
And the walls came a tumblin' down.

Hank snorts, then begins to snore.

INT. DONNIE'S AND ISAAC'S ROOM - NIGHT

Donnie is reading a self-help book on meditation and pain.
Isaac was talking, Donnie barely paying attention.

DONNIE

(absently)
He offered you Sundays.

ISAAC

That's a day the club isn't even
open. You know the laws here.

Donnie realizes what Isaac is saying. Donnie puts the book
down and turns to Isaac. He's stunned.

DONNIE

So he's letting you--

ISAAC

Perform for free to a few friends.
It's a glorified rehearsal.

Isaac is trying to talk himself into the offer to use the
club on Sundays. Donnie knows that Isaac really does want to
sing, even if it is for free and only for a few friends.

DONNIE

Take it.

ISAAC

I know. I plan to. He'll see that we'd have an audience. We'll just get the word out quietly. Maybe we can call it Bible Study in Eden.

DONNIE

(laughs)
That's good.

Donnie goes back to reading. Isaac turns off the lights. They laugh.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB - SUNDAY ALMOST 2 P.M.

Isaac is sitting in a chair, on stage, with Erica at the piano. Donnie is sitting in the back of the club, with Hank.

DONNIE

You sure about this?

HANK

Look around. No one is here except us. A few weeks of this and the whole notion that anyone wants to hear Ruthie or Isaac or Aretha Franklin sing spirituals at The Eden Club will sink into his stubborn skull.

Hank stands, confidently. Stretches.

HANK (CONT'D)

Yeah, might as well get those books done and orders ready to fax. Been selling a lot of booze, it seems.

DONNIE

Selling or you've been drinking?

Hank ignores the comment and heads for his office.

On stage, Isaac turns to Erica and shrugs.

ISAAC

I guess it's just us, kid. Go ahead and play a bit and we'll treat it like a rehearsal.

ERICA

(playing softly)
Rehearsal for what?

ISAAC
Who knows? The future.

Isaac listens to the piano. Erica starts to play Down by the Riverside. Isaac stands, no microphone, and starts to sing with stunning power.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(singing)
Gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Ain't gonna study war no more.

Donnie, stunned, recalls seeing Isaac singing in church. He smiles, without realizing it.

Two Eden Club employees enter, quietly. They sit in the middle of the club and listen.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(continuing song)
I ain't gonna study war no more,
I ain't gonna study war no more,
Study war no more.
I ain't gonna study war no more,
I ain't gonna study war no more,
Study war no more.

JESSICA enters, with two young male friends. They sit in the front, to watch Erica play.

Isaac continues the song, Erica plays with an edge, almost a Southern Rock influence. The small audience claps to the beat towards the last refrain.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
(ending song)
Gonna shake hands around the world
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Gonna shake hands around the world
Down by the riverside
Ain't gonna study war no more.

As Isaac holds the final notes, Erica improvises with a flourish. The audience cheers and stands.

Isaac bows. He looks to Erica and motions for her to bow, too.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

Well. I guess this is welcome to the first Sunday in Eden concert. I'll admit, it isn't much. No techs, no band, and no food.

(sits in chair)

The Eden is closed Sundays, so we can't serve food or drinks. Sorry about that. But we can serve some great songs. If you know anyone who might--

(reconsiders, speaks slowly)

It would be great to fill the seats on Sundays. I'm going to do this every Sunday. And if you want to sing, join in.

Erica starts playing again. Isaac stands and they run through a number of classical spirituals.

Hank looks out the office window and watches for a moment. He shakes his head and goes back to work, which always includes a bottle of something within reach.

INT. ISAAC'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Two or three days have passed. Donnie accepted Hank's offer for a few nights off to go to Atlanta. He's had to make a return trip.

Isaac is sitting in a wing-back chair, reading Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil with a Paul Robeson CD playing in the background. Isaac wears reading glasses and appears professorial.

Donnie enters, exhausted, with an overnight bag.

ISAAC

How was the city?

DONNIE

It was a long drive.

Donnie sits on the sofa and looks down. Donnie has lied to Isaac about the nature of his trip.

Donnie (CONT'D)

Isaac, we need to talk.

Isaac looks up from his book. He removes his glasses and places them in a shirt pocket.

Donnie (CONT'D)
I didn't just see friends.
(struggling)
The have this clinic in Atlanta.
You know, for--
(pauses)
They did some tests.

ISAAC
(looking away)
That's where you went last month,
too.

DONNIE
Yeah.

Isaac sits silently. He is trying to prepare himself to deal with the anticipated bad news.

Donnie (CONT'D)
I'm not well. We both knew things
weren't right.

ISAAC
(damp eyes, not yet crying)
You don't need to say it.

DONNIE
I did a lot of stupid things before
meeting you. Really stupid things.

ISAAC
People make mistakes.

DONNIE
My mistakes--

Isaac stands, places his book in the chair, and walks to Donnie. Isaac kneels before Donnie and pulls Donnie's head against him.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
I never loved anyone before you,
Isaac. I thought it would last
forever.

ISAAC
Don't you dare talk that way. I'm
not letting go of you. Whatever it
takes.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - AFTER MIDNIGHT

It is almost an hour after the last set. The club is closing. Isaac has already changed, Erica has left.

Donnie enters the dressing room. He has changed from his white suit and is looking tired.

DONNIE

Care to walk home? It's a nice night. We can drive the car home tomorrow afternoon.

ISAAC

(concerned, but not about to suggest otherwise)
It would be a pleasure, sir.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE

Isaac and Donnie are crossing the Town Square under a full moon, on their way home.

ISAAC

It is a nice night.

DONNIE

I told you it was.

Donnie starts coughing. He's weak, barely able to stand.

ISAAC

Why don't we sit and enjoy the moonlight? God, it's so beautiful.

Donnie and Isaac sit on a park bench, in the dim light of late evening.

DONNIE

Why do insist on believing?

ISAAC

I can't help but believe. It's a part of me. God's a part of me.

DONNIE

I don't understand. Especially now.

ISAAC

God is with us. Yes, even now. Especially now. Just look for him.

DONNIE

I haven't seen him. Of course, it's after midnight. I can't see a lot. What I can see is the filth. The suffering. The disease. The murder--

ISAAC

Man created those things.

DONNIE

Right. The apple. That fall of man nonsense. You think God knows everything. Right?

ISAAC

Yes.

DONNIE

And you're telling me He didn't know Adam would listen to Little Adam when Eve offered the apple?

ISAAC

We don't know it was an apple.

DONNIE

Whatever. Adam wanted the cherry, I'll tell you that. If God didn't see that coming, then I suppose He must be a man. All-knowing?

ISAAC

He is.

DONNIE

Then Adam was set up? Yep, man needs a companion to fuck up the garden.

ISAAC

Lucifer did that, not woman.

DONNIE

You have no clue what the serpent is then.

ISAAC

You shouldn't talk that way.

DONNIE

Oh, that's right, He's everywhere. Then why do I feel so damned alone at times?

(MORE)

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Where was He when I was in high school, getting the shit kicked out of me every week? Where was He when my own father couldn't look at me without wanting to punch me in the face?

ISAAC

You don't let Him in to your heart.

Donnie coughs, but is breathing better.

DONNIE

I only want people to accept me for who I am. God seems picky.

ISAAC

We're all imperfect. If we followed that book literally, who wouldn't be getting stoned to death? But the anger and punishments are from a different time. That's why there's a New Testament. Things changed.

DONNIE

Even God?

ISAAC

Trust me, He's allowed to change His mind.

DONNIE

So in your faith, God's okay with us. I'm just a little ill. It'll pass. No judgment at all...

Isaac looks into Donnie's eyes. He looks around to make sure they are alone and takes Donnie's hands.

ISAAC

Let's go home.

Isaac and Donnie stand.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB - SUNDAY AFTERNOON

Several weeks have passed. The Eden Club is half-full, mainly with employees, their partners, friends, and various people outside the mainstream. Their clothes, though their personal best, are not "Church clothes" so much as a mix of Elton John and Miami Vice.

Isaac and Erica are on stage, Isaac sitting in a chair on stage as he has done each Sunday.

Hank, angry, storms into the club and runs, as best he can, up to the stage. Isaac stands and walks to the edge.

HANK
(fuming)
Have you seen the crowd outside?

ISAAC
I take you don't mean a crowd
waiting for the show.

EXT. THE EDEN CLUB

A crowd has gathered, led by the two local church leaders.

Pastor James has a bullhorn.

PASTOR JAMES
How dare these people desecrate the
Lord's day? Sunday is not Sin Day!

The crowd is chanting and carrying anti-gay signs.

Rev. Walker is nearby, but looks uncomfortable. As the crowd is being worked into a frenzy, Rev. Walker leaves the masses.

A police car arrives.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB

Rev. Walker sneaks into the club and slides into one of the empty booths. He looks about nervously.

Isaac is sitting again.

EXT. THE EDEN CLUB

The POLICEMAN walks up to the front door, where Hank is standing, nervous.

POLICEMAN
Hank, what's goin' on here?

HANK
Nothing, nothing at all. Just an
open rehearsal.

POLICEMAN

You ain't open, now, are ya'll?

HANK

No, no. The Eden is closed on Sundays. We ain't servin' and ain't no one gettin' paid for nuthin' inside. Just a rehearsal. I swear.

Pastor James is leading the crowd in a chant. He stops, lowers the bullhorn, and walks over to the policeman.

PASTOR JAMES

I demand you close this club. They're violating city, county, and state laws by operatin' on a Sunday.

POLICEMAN

Ticket window there seems closed to me. Look closed to you?

PASTOR JAMES

Then why are people goin' inside?

POLICEMAN

Far as I can tell, gatherin' ain't illegal. I'll go take a look, though.

(to HANK)

Let's go inside Hank. I need to take a look.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB

Erica is playing a tune and Isaac is talking.

ISAAC

My momma sang at the Baptist over on Oak. It was 1967, twenty years ago, now. I had to sit on the steps with my father.

Policeman and Hank enter. The policeman wanders about, uncomfortable among the crowd. There are no drinks, no food, and everyone is staring intently at Isaac.

Policeman is now watching and listening, too.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

Now, the church that wouldn't let me in is trying to stop the singing here at The Eden on Sundays.

Policeman shakes his head and exits. It's unclear how he feels about Isaac or the audience.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
 God told Moses, go tell Pharaoh to
 set My people free. Well, I believe
 that God wants us all to be free.

Erica plays Go Down, Moses in her unique, Southern Rock manner. It is modern, yet still spiritual.

ISAAC (CONT'D)
 (singing)
 Go down Moses
 Way down in Egypt land
 Tell ole Pharaoh
 To let my people go
 When Israel was in Egypt land
 Let my people go
 Oppressed so hard the could not
 stand
 Let my people go
 "Thus spoke the Lord," bold Moses
 said
 "If not, I'll smite your first born
 dead
 Let my people go."

The audience goes wild, standing and cheering.

Rev. Walker looks dazed, confused. He sneaks out of The Eden Club while the audience is cheering Isaac.

INT. DRESSING ROOM

Erica's tux hangs on the outside of the changing screen. The two performers now share the room, several months having elapsed. The decor has posters and art reflecting Erica's tastes, as well as Isaac's.

Jazz music is playing, the nightly show having already started.

Erica enters the dressing room. She is wearing black jeans and a light pink T-shirt with the slogan "Jazz Dyke" across the front. The lowercase "d" is a musical note. Erica is carrying a dress and a bag. Goes behind the dressing screen and hangs up the dress.

As Erica sits on her chair to begin changing into her tuxedo, Isaac enters, a bit rushed.

ISAAC
Good evening, kid.

ERICA
You're running late.

ISAAC
I suppose I am. I... uh...

ERICA
Donnie was late, too. Something's wrong. Really wrong.

ISAAC
(changing the subject)
What in the world are you thinking?
Did you go around town wearing that?

ERICA
(sarcastically)
Under a leather jacket while riding my hog.

(laughing)
Actually, I save the really good shirts for wearing under the tux, now. Jessie said I should wear something underneath. It's my own discreet rebellion.

(retrieves her tux and starts to change)
Some I wear in public, some I don't. It all depends on how I feel. Someday, maybe I won't be so discreet. I'll wear whatever the hell I want.

ISAAC
I do get sick of being discreet.

ERICA
People think a lot of strange things, especially around here.

ISAAC
But love brought you here, anyway.

ERICA
Yes, it did.
(teasing)
It seems to keep you here.

ISAAC

For now. Actually, I just like being the best female vocalist in the county. Big fish in a small pond.

Isaac goes behind screen to change.

ISAAC (CONT'D)

What are these?

ERICA

I went thrifting. That dress is even your size.

ISAAC

How do you know that?

(stunned)

My, my, so it is. You peaked at my tags, didn't you?

Sounds of Isaac looking in the bag

ISAAC (CONT'D)

What on God's green earth is this?

ERICA

You needed a T-shirt of your own.

ISAAC

You are incredible.

ERICA

You of all people should know words are deeds. If they call us fags, homos, queers, dykes -- it matters. The words hurt until I took ownership of them. So what if I'm a lez, a dyke, or a queer? Let the people outside shout.

Isaac comes from behind the blind in a floor-length dress. It lightly drags the floor, hiding his shoes. The sleeves are three-quarter, and with the dress Isaac will add gloves and a scarf as Ruthie.

ISAAC

(admires dress in mirror)

I love it.

ERICA

What about the protesters?

ISAAC
I'll sing all the louder, to drown
them out. God is on our side. I
know it deep down in my heart.

Isaac sits and puts on his makeup

ERICA
(teasing)
I hope you've been praying a lot,
then.

ISAAC
I have, but for other reasons.

ERICA
I'm proud of who I am. I shout it
when I have to. This time, I'll
take my cue from you.

ISAAC
(surprised)
Really?

ERICA
If you ever do need to shout, I'll
be your accompaniment.

Erica quickly finishes dressing, with her shirt underneath
her white tux shirt. She bows to Isaac.

ERICA (CONT'D)
I'm going out early. Donnie said I
could solo for a few minutes to
warm up. Someday, I'll earn an
introduction.

Erica exits the dressing room.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB

Erica walks to the piano. She begins to play. This gives
Isaac time to change into Ruthie, while also showcasing Erica
as a separate performer.

As Erica finishes a short piece, Donnie enters and walks to
the microphone.

DONNIE
Ladies and gentleman, on the
ivories, Eden's very own... Erica!

Donnie claps, as do some in audience.

Erica remains seated, stunned.

Donnie motions to Erica, but she doesn't respond.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
 (hushed, to Erica)
 Stand up and bow.

Erica stands, bows politely to the audience.

JESSICA
 Way to go, beautiful!

Erica, embarrassed, sits and begins to play quietly.

DONNIE
 And now, the reason people can't
 wait to get into Eden.

Lights dim.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
 Close your eyes and hold the hand
 of that someone special. You are
 about to hear the angel of our
 private heaven, The Eden Club
 presents... Ruthie!

Donnie claps and Ruthie enters and walks to the microphone.

RUTHIE
 Donnie, I am thrilled to be your
 angel. Good evening, all you
 beautiful people. Sometimes, you
 have to express what is in your
 heart, no matter the price. Right
 now, I feel the need to sing
 something I have wanted to for
 years.

Erica stops playing, unsure of what is about to happen.

Note: Ruthie sings As Long as He Needs Me; Lionel Bart, 1960.

Ruthie begins sing-song, speaking, to give Erica the cue.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)
 (sing-song)
 As long as he needs me,
 Oh yes, he does need me.
 In spite of what you see,
 I'm sure that he needs me.

Ruthie and Donnie locks eyes. The audience is silent.

Erica joins in, playing the torch song restrained yet passionately.

Donnie walks up to Ruthie and stands slightly off to her side. They don't touch, but Donnie is swaying in sync with Ruthie.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)
 (singing to Donnie)
 Who else would love him still,
 When they've been used so ill?
 He knows I always will,
 As long as he needs me.

Ruthie steps away from Donnie, singing to the audience.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)
 (emotional)
 I miss him so much,
 When he is gone.
 But when he's near me,
 I don't let on.
 The way I feel inside,
 The love I have to hide,
 The hell, I've got my pride,
 As long as he needs me.

For the first time in years, Donnie takes the mic from Ruthie, surprising everyone including himself.

DONNIE
 (singing, softly but with
 unmistakable talent)
 He doesn't say the things he
 should.
 He acts the way he thinks he
 should.
 But all the same,
 I'll play this game his way.

Erica adjusts to the slower, softer style of Donnie, made necessary by his illness.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
 (singing)
 As long as he needs me,
 I know where I must be.
 I'll cling on steadfastly,
 As long as he needs me.
 As long as life is long,
 I'll love him, right or wrong.
 And somehow I'll be strong,
 As long as he needs me.

Ruthie puts an arm around Donnie and they close the song together.

RUTHIE & DONNIE

(singing)

I won't betray your trust,
Thought people say I must.
I've got to stay true, just
As long as you need me.

As the song fades, the audience applauds, lights rise slightly and the couple steps forward to bow, holding hands.

Donnie steps back. Isaac bows, simultaneously removing his wig. He looks into the spotlight and begins to sing.

Note: Isaac now sings Somewhere (There's a Place for Us) from West Side Story; 1957, by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim.

RUTHIE

(singing)

There's a place for us,
Somewhere a place for us.
Peace and quiet and open air
Wait for us
Somewhere.

From Erica's perspective, we see Jessica.

Donnie is watching Isaac.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(singing)

There's a time for us,
Some day a time for us,
Time together with time spare,
Time to learn, time to care,
Some day!

Isaac manages to let Ruthie's dress drop to the floor. Isaac is wearing a tight T-shirt and dance pants, which were under the dress. The front of the shirt reads, "God made me!"

Erica's music rises, increases in energy and passion.

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

(singing)

Somewhere.
We'll find a new way of living,
We'll find a way of forgiving
Somewhere...
There's a place for us,
A time and place for us.

(MORE)

RUTHIE (CONT'D)

Hold my hand and we're halfway
there.
Hold my hand and I'll take you
there
Somehow,
Some day,
Somewhere!

Hank looks out his window. He walks to the desk and pounds his head. He gets out the latest half-empty bottle and a shot glass.

Isaac and Donnie kiss on stage. The audience goes wild with applause and cheers.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB - A SUNDAY

The Eden Club is packed. Every seat is taken.

Hank looks down from his office. He shakes his head.

INT. HANK'S OFFICE

HANK

Damn, I don't need this. Every seat
filled and I'm not making a red
cent. Shit, I need to clear my
head.

Hank lifts a bottle that he was holding below the window. He drinks.

Donnie enters.

HANK (CONT'D)

You're not doing well, Donnie.

DONNIE

(tired, slumping)
I know. I can't keep this up.

HANK

Take a seat.

Donnie sits across from Hank.

HANK (CONT'D)

I've decided Ruthie can sing this
stuff on Thursdays. If Isaac is
this damned good, Ruthie must be
great.

DONNIE
Can I tell him?

HANK
Of course. That'd be right.

DONNIE
Hank?

HANK
Yeah, Donnie?

DONNIE
Let Erica emcee. For me?

HANK
Sure. 'Til you get better.

DONNIE
I have something I need to do.

Donnie rises slowly, coughing. He's in a great deal of pain.

INT. THE EDEN CLUB - 2 P.M.

Donnie walks up the steps to the stage and stands before Isaac and Erica.

DONNIE
(struggling, speaking
quietly without the mic)
God made me.

The audience goes silent.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
God made me.

Isaac stands and walks up behind Donnie. Donnie continues talking.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
I thought if there was a God, why
is He punishing me? Why? What did I
do?
(coughing)
Turns out, I did a lot. My
bitterness, my shame, my fear--
(coughing)
God doesn't hate me. I hated
myself. I hated other people.

Donnie starts to sing, weakly, but well.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
 Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
 That saved a wretch like me!
 I once was lost but now am found
 Was blind, but now I see.

Donnie wobbles.

Hank looks out his office window.

Isaac reaches out, but Donnie collapses on stage.

Donnie looks out to see Rev. Walker, sitting in a booth.

INT. DONNIE'S AND ISAAC'S ROOM - MIDDAY

Donnie is in bed, with a hospice nurse nearby. He's on an I.V. with painkiller.

Rev. Walker is sitting in a chair at Donnie's side.

Isaac is standing, anxious.

NURSE
 He'll be asleep, soon.

ISAAC
 The pain?

NURSE
 The morphine is taking care of that. He's tired, and painkillers make you drowsy.

DONNIE
 (softly)
 Isaac, I'm okay. Relax.
 (to Rev. Walker)
 Thank you for coming.

REV. WALKER
 I know I disappointed God with the way I treated you.

DONNIE
 You're here, now.

Isaac turns away, looking out a window.

DONNIE (CONT'D)
 Even if a certain man didn't want to let you in.
 (laughs weakly)

REV. WALKER

Isaac has a right to be angry.

DONNIE

I have a request. Two. Two requests.

REV. WALKER

Whatever I can do for you, Brother Donald. I didn't follow the example of Jesus, and for that I'm sorry.

DONNIE

Church service. I want a church--
 (coughs into handkerchief,
 bloody)
 --service. A real service.

Isaac, turns, walks to bed, and looks at Donnie. Tears are forming in Isaac's eyes.

ISAAC

Donnie, we have The Eden Club. It's ours. Your friends.

DONNIE

Our friends belong--
 (struggling)
 --God doesn't close doors.
 (to ISAAC)
 Not the God you've shown to me.

REV. WALKER

You will have a church service. And the doors will be open to everyone. I promise, Jesus. I promise.

DONNIE

(reaching out)
 The other thing.

Isaac takes Donnie's hand. He is crying, silently.

Donnie (CONT'D)

Ruthie sings.

ISAAC

I'll sing. You know I will.

DONNIE

No. Ruthie sings.

Donnie coughs, blood on his lips, running slightly. He collapses. Nurse runs to the bed.

NURSE

Back up! Back up!

Nurse pushes Isaac out of the way. Rev. Walker stands and backs up, as well. Nurse tries to revive Donnie, wiping his mouth and lifting his limp body forward. She stops, though, and rests Donnie on the pillow.

Nurse places her hand over Donnie's eyes, closing the lids.

Isaac rushes forward, falls to his knees, and sobs on the bed.

Rev. Walker is standing in front of the window. The resulting shadows create a cross on the bed.

REV. WALKER

Jesus, please take this soul into
Your arms.

Rev. Walker is crying, feeling unworthy of his post.

Isaac's hands are trembling as he takes Donnie's hand and kisses it.

ISAAC

I love you, Donnie. I always will.

INT. BAPTIST CHURCH - SUNDAY MORNING

Shot of casket, flowers, and the choir assembling. The organist is playing softly.

EXT. BAPTIST CHURCH

Various people are parking cars. The lot is full, so people are parking on the grass.

Erica and Jessica are shown, walking to the entrance. Erica is in a simple light blue dress. Jessica is in a skirt and blouse. They are holding hands as they walk.

Hank is standing next to his car. He's uncomfortable entering a church. Hank shakes his head, stands straight, and moves ahead. For the first time in many years, Hank is sober.

INT. BAPTIST CHURCH

Rev. Walker is standing in the small foyer between the main doors and the doors to the nave. As the crowd moves by, Rev. Walker nods and shakes hands.

Hank enters.

REV. WALKER

Hank?

HANK

Yeah, Willie, it's really me. I'm here. In a church.

REV. WALKER

Jesus be praised.

Hank shakes his head and enters the nave.

The church is so full people are standing. It's noisy, with people chatting. There are people we've seen at The Eden Club, as well as members of the congregation.

Rev. Walker makes his way to the front of the church. The choir begins singing Down by the Riverside. As the choir fades to silence Rev. Walker begins.

REV. WALKER (CONT'D)

A year ago, I thought I knew Jesus.
I thought I was a man of God, doing
His work from this very spot.

(pause)

I was mistaken.

(looks at pews)

My mind was closed. My heart was
closed. And when your heart is
closed, you're keeping Jesus out.

Rev. Walker opens a Bible on the lectern, begins reading.

REV. WALKER (CONT'D)

All whom I love, I rebuke and
chastise; therefore be earnest and
repent. I am now standing at the
door and am knocking.

Rev. Walker picks up the Bible and walks to the aisle between pews. He is excited, happy.

REV. WALKER (CONT'D)

If anyone listens to My voice and
opens the door, I will go in to be
with him and will feast with him,
and he shall feast with Me.

(closing the Bible)

Donald Ethan Jackson heard that
voice. Brother Donald opened that
door. And he did it after many of
us, and I, closed a door to him.

People in the pews are crying. Hank is stoic, standing at the rear of the church.

REV. WALKER (CONT'D)
 Donnie, as his friends called him,
 had one request. I ask you to stand
 for our choir
 (pause, invoking Donnie's
 style)
 and the absolutely lovely--

Ruthie enters from the side, stands before casket.

REV. WALKER (CONT'D)
 Ruthie.

Organist starts the familiar intro to Amazing Grace.

RUTHIE
 (singing)
 Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
 That saved a wretch like me!
 I once was lost but now am found
 Was blind, but now I see.

The choir joins in, harmonizing.

CHOIR + RUTHIE
 'Twas grace that taught my heart to
 fear,
 And grace my fears relieved;
 How precious did that grace appear
 The hour I first believed!
 Through many dangers, toils, and
 snares,
 We have already come;
 'Tis grace hath brought me safe
 thus far,
 And grace will lead me home.

Congregation is joining in song. They all know the words by heart.

The Lord has promised good to me,
 His word my hope secures;
 He will my shield and portion be
 As long as life endures.
 Yes, when this flesh and heart
 shall fail,
 And mortal life shall cease,
 I shall possess, within the veil,
 A life of joy and peace.

Hank is now singing along.

(MORE)

CHOIR + RUTHIE (CONT'D)

The earth shall soon dissolve like
snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.

There is a pause, the choir sits while the organ plays.

RUTHIE

(singing)

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.

FADE OUT.

THE END