CHARACTERS

Goldie.
Bertha.
Lena.
Girl.

Hello from Bertha

Scene: A bedroom in "the valley"—a notorious red-light section along the river-flats of East St. Louis. In the center is a massive brass bed with tumbled pillows and covers on which Bertha, a large blonde prostitute, is lying restlessly. A heavy old-fashioned dresser with gilt knobs, gaudy silk cover and two large kewpie dolls stands against the right wall. Beside the bed is a low table with empty gin bottles. An assortment of lurid magazines is scattered carelessly about the floor. The wall-paper is grotesquely brilliant—covered with vivid magnified roses—and is torn and peeling in some places. On the ceiling are large yellow stains. An old-fashioned chandelier, fringed with red glass pendants, hangs from the center. Goldie comes in at the door in the left wall. She wears a soiled double-piece dress of white and black satin, fitted closely to her almost fleshless body. She stands in the doorway, smoking a cigarette, and stares impatiently at Bertha's prostrate figure.

Goldie: Well, Bertha, what are you going to do? (For a moment there is no answer.)
Bertha: (with faint groan) I dunno.
Goldie: You've got to decide, Bertha.
Bertha: I can't decide nothing.
Goldie: Why can't you?
Bertha: I'm too tired.
Goldie: That's no answer.
Bertha: (tossing fretfully) Well, it's the only answer I know. I just want to lay here and think things over.

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Goldie: You been layin' here thinkin' or somethin' for the past two weeks. (Bertha makes an indistinguishable reply.) You got to come to some decision. The girls need this room.

Bertha: (with hoarse laugh) Let 'em have it!

Goldie: They can't with you layin' here.

Bertha: (slapping her hand on bed) Oh, God!

Goldie: Pull yourself together, now, Bertha. (Bertha tosses again and groans.)

Bertha: What's the matter with me?

Goldie: You're sick.

Bertha: I got a sick headache. Who slipped me that Mickey Finn last night?

Goldie: Nobody give you no Mickey Finn. You been layin' here two solid weeks talkin' out of your head. Now, the sensible thing for you to do, Bertha, is to go back home or—

Bertha: Go back nowhere!—I'm stayin' right here till I get on my feet. (She stubbornly averts her face.)

Goldie: The valley's no place for a girl in your condition. Besides we need this room.

Bertha: Leave me be, Goldie. I wanta get in some rest before I start workin'.

Goldie: Bertha, you've got to decide! (The command hangs heavily upon the room's florid atmosphere for several long moments. Bertha slowly turns her head to Goldie.)

Bertha: (faintly) What is it I got to decide?

Goldie: Where you're going from here? (Bertha looks at her silently for a few seconds.)

Bertha: Nowhere. Now leave me be, Goldie. I've got to get in my rest.

Goldie: If I let you be, you'd just lay here doin' nothin' from now till the crack of doom! (Bertha's reply is indistinguishable.) Lissen here! If you don't make up your mind right away, I'm gonna call the ambulance squad to come get you! So you better decide right this minute.

Bertha: (Her body has stiffened slightly at this threat.) I can't decide nothing. I'm too tired—worn out.

Goldie: All right! (She snaps her purse open.) I'll take this nickel and I'll make the call right now. I'll tell 'em we got a sick girl over here who can't talk sense.

Bertha: (thickly) Go ahead. I don't care what happens to me now.

Goldie: (changing her tactics) Why don't you write another letter, Bertha, to that man who sells... hardware or something in Memphis?

Bertha: (with sudden alertness) Charlie? You leave his name off your dirty tongue!

Goldie: That's a fine way for you to be talking, me keeping you here just out of kindness and you not bringing in a red, white or blue cent for the last two weeks! Where do you—

Bertha: Charlie's a real... sweet. Charlie's a... (Her voice trails into a sobbing mumble.)

Goldie: What if he is? All the better reason for you to write him to get you out of this here tight spot you're in, Bertha.

Bertha: (aroused) I'll never ask him for another dime! Get that? He's forgotten all about me, my name and everything else. (She runs her hand slowly down her body.) Somebody's cut me up with a knife while I been sleeping.

Goldie: Pull yourself together, Bertha. If this man's got money, maybe he'll send you some to help you git back on your feet.

Bertha: Sure he's got money. He owns a hardware store. I reckon I ought to know, I used to work there! He used to say to me, Girlie, any time you need something just let Charlie know... We had good times together in that back room!

Goldie: I bet he ain't forgotten it neither.

Bertha: He's found out about all the bad things I done since I quit him and... come to St. Louie. (She slaps the bed twice with her palm.)
Goldie: Naw, he ain’t, Bertha. I bet he don’t know a thing.

(Bertha laughs weakly.)

Bertha: It’s you that’s been writing him things. All the dirt you could think of about me! Your filthy tongue’s been clacking so fast that—

Goldie: Bertha! (Bertha mutters an indistinguishable vulgarity.) I been a good friend to you, Bertha.

Bertha: Anyhow he’s married now.

Goldie: Just write him a little note on a post-card and tell him you’ve had some tough breaks. Remind him of how he said he would help you if ever you needed it, huh?

Bertha: Leave me alone a while, Goldie. I got an awful feeling inside of me now.

Goldie: (advancing a few steps and regarding Bertha more critically) You want to see a doctor?

Bertha: No. (There is a pause.)

Goldie: A priest? (Bertha’s fingers claw the sheet forward.)

Bertha: No!

Goldie: What religion are you, Bertha?

Bertha: None.

Goldie: I thought you said you was Catholic once.

Bertha: Maybe I did. What of it?

Goldie: If you could remember, maybe we could get some sisters or something to give you a room like they did for Rose Kramer for you to rest in, and get your strength back—huh, Bertha?

Bertha: I don’t want no sisters to give me nothing! Just leave me be in here till I get through resting.

Goldie: Bertha, you’re . . . bad sick, Bertha!

Bertha: (after a slight pause) Bad?

Goldie: Yes, Bertha. I don’t want to scare you but . . .

Bertha: (hoarsely) You mean I’m dying?

Goldie: (after a moment’s consideration) I didn’t say that.

(There is another pause.)

Bertha: No, but you meant it.

Goldie: We got to provide for the future, Bertha. We can’t just let things slide.

Bertha: (attempting to sit up) If I’m dying I want to write Charlie. I want to—tell him some things.

Goldie: If you mean a confession, honey, I think a priest would be—

Bertha: No, no priest! I want Charlie!

Goldie: Father Callahan would—

Bertha: No! No! I want Charlie!

Goldie: Charlie’s in Memphis. He’s running his hardware business.

Bertha: Yeah. On Central Avenue. The address is 563.

Goldie: I’ll write him and tell what condition you’re in, huh, Bertha?

Bertha: (after a reflective pause) No . . . Just tell him I said hello. (She turns her face to the wall.)

Goldie: I gotta say more than that, Bertha.

Bertha: That’s all I want you to say. Hello from—Bertha.

Goldie: That wouldn’t make sense, you know that.

Bertha: Sure it would. Hello from Bertha to Charlie with all her love. Don’t that make sense?

Goldie: No!

Bertha: Sure it does.

Goldie: (turning to the door) I better call up the hospital and get them to send out the ambulance squad.

Bertha: No, you don’t! I’d rather just die than that.

Goldie: You’re in no condition to stay in the valley, Bertha. A girl in your shape’s got to be looked out for proper or anything’s likely to happen. (Outside, in the reception room, someone has started the nickel phonograph. It is playing “The St. Louis Blues.” A hoarse male voice joins in the refrain and there is a burst of laughter and the slamming of a door.)

Bertha: (after a slight pause) You’re telling me, sister. (She
elevates her shoulders.) I know the rules of this game! (She
stares at Goldie with brilliant, faraway eyes.) When you're
out you're out and there's no comeback for you neither! (She
shakes her head and then slowly reclines again. She knots her
fingers and pounds the bed several times; then her hand re-
laxes and slips over the side of the bed.)

Goldie: Now, pull yourself together, Bertha, and I'll have you
moved to a nice, clean ward where you'll get good meals and
a comfortable bed to sleep in.

Bertha: Die in, you mean! Help me outa this bed! (She strug-
gles to rise.)

Goldie: (going to her) Don't get excited, now, Bertha.

Bertha: Help me up. Yes! Where's my kimono?

Goldie: Bertha, you're not in any shape to go crawling around
out of bed!

Bertha: Shut up, you damned crepe-hanger! Get Lena in here.

She'll help me out with my things.

Goldie: What've you decided on, Bertha?

Bertha: To go.

Goldie: Where?

Bertha: That's my business.

Goldie: (after a pause) Well, I'll call Lena. (Bertha has risen
painfully and now she totters toward the dresser.)

Bertha: Wait a minute, you! Look under that tray. The comb
and brush tray. (She sinks, panting, into a rocker.) You'll find
five bucks stuck under there.

Goldie: Bertha, you ain't got no money under that tray.

Bertha: You trying to tell me I'm broke?

Goldie: You been broke for ten days, Bertha. Ever since you
took sick you been out of money.

Bertha: You're a liar!

Goldie: (angrily) Don't call me names, Bertha! (They glare
at each other. A Girl, in what looks like a satin gymnasium

outfit, appears in doorway and glances in curiously. She grins
and disappears.)

Bertha: (finally) Get Lena in here. She won't cheat me.

Goldie: (going to the dresser) Look, Bertha. Just to satisfy
you. See under the tray! Nothing there but an old post-card
you once got from Charlie.

Bertha: (slowly) I been robbed. Yes, I been robbed. (with in-
creasing velocity) Just because I'm too sick an' tired an' done
in to look out for myself, I get robbed! If I was in my
strength, you know what I'd do? I'd bust this place wide
open! I'd get back my money you stole or take it out of your
hide, you old—

Goldie: Bertha, you spent your last dime. You bought gin
with it.

Bertha: No!

Goldie: It was Tuesday night, the night you got sick, you
bought yourself a quart of dry gin that night. I swear you
did, Bertha!

Bertha: I wouldn't believe your dying word on a Bible! Get
Lena in here! It's a frame-up! (She rises and staggers toward
the door.) Lena! Lena! Get me police headquarters!

Goldie: (alarmed) No, Bertha!

Bertha: (still louder) GET ME POLICE HEADQUAR-
TERS! (Collapsing with weakness against the side of the
door, she sobs bitterly and covers her eyes with one hand. The
electric phonograph starts again. There is the shuffling of
dancers outside.)

Goldie: Bertha, be calm. Settle down here now.

Bertha: (turning on her) Don't tell me to be calm, you old
slut. Get me police headquarters quick or I'll—! (Goldie
catches her arm and they struggle but Bertha wrenches free.)
I'll report this robbery to the police if it's the last thing I do!
You'd steal the pennies off a dead nigger's eyes, that's how
big-hearted you are! You come in here and try to soft-soap
me about priests and confessions and—GET ME POLICE HEADQUARTERS! (She pounds the wall, and sobs.) GOLDIE: (helplessly) Bertha, you need a good bromide. Get back in bed, honey, and I'll bring you a double bromide and a box of aspirin.

BERTHA: (rapidly, with eyes shut, head thrown back and hands clenched) You'll bring me back my twenty-five dollars you stole from under that comb and brush tray!

GOLDIE: Now, Bertha—

BERTHA: (without changing her position) You'll bring it back or I'll have you prosecuted! (Her tense lips quiver; a shining thread of saliva dribbles down her chin. She stands like a person in a cataleptic trance.) I've got friends in this town. Big shots! (exultantly) Lawyers, politicians! I can beat any God damn rap you try to hang on me! (Her eyes flare open.) Vagrancy, huh? (She laughs wildly.) That's a laugh, ain't it? I got my constitutional rights!

(Her laughter dies out and she staggers to the rocker and sinks into it. Goldie watches her with extreme awe. Then she edges cautiously past Bertha and out the door with a frightened gasp.)

BERTHA: Oh, Charlie, Charlie, you were such a sweet, sweet! (Her head rocks and she smiles in agony.) You done me dirt more times than I could count, Charlie—stood up, married a little choir-singer—Oh, God! I love you so much it makes my guts ache to look at your blessed face in the picture! (Her ecstasy fades and the look of schizophrenic suspicion returns.) Where's that hell-cat gone to? Where's my ten dollars? Hey, YOU!! Come back in here with that money! I'll brain you if ever I catch you monkeying around with any money belonging to me!... Oh, Charlie... I got a sick headache, Charlie. No, honey. Don't go out tonight. (She gets up from the rocker.) Hey, you! Bring me a cold ice-pack—my head's aching. I got one hell of a hang-over, baby! (She laughs.) Vagrancy, huh? Vagrancy your Aunt Fanny! Get me my lawyer. I got influence in this town. Yeah. My folks own half the oil wells in the state of—of—Nevada. (She laughs.) Yeah, that's a laugh, ain't it? (Lena, a dark Jewish girl in pink satin trunks and blouse, comes in the door. Bertha looks at her with half-opened eyes.) Who're you?

LENA: It's me, Lena.

BERTHA: Oh, Lena, huh? Set down an' take a load off yer feet. Have a cigarette, honey. I ain't feeling good. There ain't any cigarettes here. Goldie took 'em. She takes everything I got. Set down an'—take a—

LENA: (in doorway) Goldie told me you weren't feelin' so good this evening so I thought I'd just look in on you, honey.

BERTHA: Yeah, that's a laugh, ain't it? I'm all right. I'll be on the job again tonight. You bet. I always come through, don't I, kid? Ever known me to quit? I may be a little down on my luck right now but—that's all! (She pauses, as if for agreement.) That's all, ain't it, Lena? I ain't old. I still got my looks. Ain't I?

LENA: Sure you have, Bertha. (There is a pause.)

BERTHA: Well, what're you grinning about?

LENA: I ain't grinning, Bertha.

BERTHA: (herself slightly smiling) I thought maybe you thought there was something funny about me saying I still had my looks.

LENA: (after a pause) No, Bertha, you got me wrong.

BERTHA: (hoarsely) Listen, sweetheart, I know the Mayor of this God damn little burg. Him and me are like that. See? I can beat any rap you try to hang on me and I don't give a damn what. Vagrancy, huh? That's a sweet laugh to me! Get me my traveling bag, will you, Lena? Where is it? I been thrown out of better places than this. (She rises and drags herself vaguely about the room and then collapses on bed. Lena moves toward the bed.) God, I'm too tired. I'll just lay

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down till my head stops swimming. . . . (Goldie appears in the doorway. She and Lena exchange significant glances.)

**Goldie:** Well, Bertha, have you decided yet?

**Bertha:** Decided what?

**Goldie:** What you’re gonna do?

**Bertha:** Leave me be. I’m too tired.

**Goldie:** *(casually)* Well, I’ve called up the hospital, Bertha. They’re sending an ambulance around to get you. They’re going to put you up in a nice clean ward.

**Bertha:** Tell ‘em to throw me in the river and save the state some money. Or maybe they’re scared I’d pollute the water. I guess they’ll have to cremate me to keep from spreadin’ infection. Only safe way of disposing of Bertha’s remains. That’s a sweet laugh, ain’t it? Look at her, Lena, that slut that calls herself Goldie. She thinks she’s big-hearted. Ain’t that a laugh? The only thing big about her is the thing that she sits on. Yeah, the old horse! She comes in here talking soft about callin’ a priest an’ havin’ me stuck in the charity ward. Not me. None a that stuff for me, I’ll tell you!

**Goldie:** *(with controlled fury)* You better watch how you talk. They’ll have you in the strait-jacket, that’s what.

**Bertha:** *(suddenly rising)* Get the hell out! *(She throws a glass at Goldie, who screams and runs out. Bertha then turns to Lena.)* Set down and take a letter for me. There’s paper under that kewpie.

**Lena:** *(looking on the dresser)* No, there ain’t, Bertha.

**Bertha:** Ain’t? I been robbed a that, too! *(Lena walks to the table by the bed and picks up a tablet.)*

**Lena:** Here’s a piece, Bertha.

**Bertha:** All right. Take a letter. To Mr. Charlie Aldrich, owner of the biggest hardware store in the City of Memphis. Got that?

**Lena:** What’s the address, Bertha?

**Bertha:** It’s 563 Central Avenue. Got it? Yeah, that’s right.

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Mr. Charlie Aldrich. Dear Charlie. They’re fixing to lock me up in the city bug-house. On a charge of criminal responsibility without due process of law. Got that? *(Lena stops writing.)* And I’m as sane as you are right this minute, Charlie. There’s nothing wrong with my upper-story and there never will be. Got that? *(Lena looks down and pretends to write.)* So come on down here, Charlie, and bail me out of here, honey, for old times’ sake. Love and kisses, your old sweetheart, Bertha. . . . Wait a minute. Put a P.S. and say how’s the wife and your—No! Scratch it out! That don’t belong in there. Scratch it all out, the whole damn thing! *(There is a painful silence. Bertha sighs and turns slowly on the bed, pushing her damp hair back.)* Get you a clean sheet of paper. *(Lena rises and tears another sheet from the tablet. A young Girl sticks her head in the door.)*

**Girl:** Lena!

**Lena:** Coming.

**Bertha:** Got it?

**Lena:** Yes.

**Bertha:** That’s right. Now just say this. Hello from Bertha—to Charlie—with all her love. Got that? Hello from Bertha—to Charlie . . .

**Lena:** *(rising and straightening her blouse)* Yes.

**Bertha:** With all . . . her love . . . *(The music in the outer room recommences.)*

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**Curtain**