

ACT I

SETTING: *Listre, NC – March, 1984. Various locations in Mattie Rigsbee’s world. The stage is divided into four playing areas: Mattie’s House (center stage), the Church (on a raised platform directly upstage of Mattie’s House), the Prison Yard (stage right) and the Swanson’s Backyard (stage left). Mattie’s House is divided into three areas as well: the Dining Room, represented by a small table with four chairs, is center right, and the Living Room, represented by a rocking chair, is center left. Between the two rooms there is an archway and a pass thru window through which we catch a glimpse of the Kitchen. Between the Kitchen and Dining Room there is a wall mounted rotary dial phone with an extra-long phone cord that allows the receiver to travel a great distance. In the Living Room, a small table holding a television remote and a small Tiffany lamp sits next to the rocking chair. A hallway off up left leads to the rest of the house. A screen door leading to Mattie’s back yard is off up right of the Dining Room.*

AT RISE: *The lights come up on the Church as the Choir, including FINNER and ALORA, enters singing “Walking Across Egypt.”*

CHOIR

*Walking across Egypt no shelter from the sun
My journey has no stopping place
My journey’s far from done
Walking with Jesus I shall not stop to rest
My faith is set before me
And my journey shall be blest...*

(The Choir continues to hum under as REVEREND BASS enters carrying a Bible. He begins to preach.)

BASS

Bothers and sisters, when Moses led his people out of Egypt, they wandered *forty* years in the desert, facing all sorts of trials and tribulations. They were lost. Worse than lost, they felt alone, disconnected from the Lord their God. You and I know this desert. We have all been lost, all had times when we felt alone, abandoned and disconnected...

BASS (cont.)

But I promise you this – we are never alone. Jesus is with us always and if we trust Him to show us the way... we will not be lost. We will be walking across Egypt straight to the eternal salvation of the Promised Land.

CHOIR

I'm walking

BASS

Walking...

CHOIR

I'm walking

BASS

Walking...

CHOIR/BASS

*Walking across Egypt
Walking across Egypt
My heart shall see the way...*

(As BASS and the Choir exit, singing as they go, lights fade on the Church and come up on Mattie's House. MATTIE RIGSBEE enters from the hallway, walking with a slight limp. She crosses into the Kitchen and pulls a pan of cornbread out of the oven.)

*My stride will not be broken
There will be no delay
Walking with Jesus
To the brightest day*

(Lights out on the Church. MATTIE carries the pan to the table in the Dining Room. ALORA appears at the backdoor and knocks.)

ALORA

Mattie...?

MATTIE

Come on in, Alora.

(ALORA enters.)

ALORA

Mattie, I just got a call from Reverend Bass...

MATTIE

(Interrupting)

Is that dog still out there? The little tan fice?

(ALORA glances out the back door.)

ALORA

He's laying right where he has been for the last two days.

(MATTIE crosses to the door and looks for herself.)

Listen, Mattie, I just got off the phone with Reverend Bass. He's real worried about you.

MATTIE

I better give him a little something to eat, then.

(She grabs a knife off the counter and cuts a slice of cornbread.)

ALORA

Reverend Bass?

MATTIE

The dog.

(She exits out the door with a slice of cornbread. ALORA watches a moment then crosses to the table to nibble on some cornbread, then she cuts herself a slice and devours it.)

MATTIE (O.S.)

There you go, fella. That's a boy.

(We hear a dog whine. A moment later MATTIE reenters.)

ALORA

I can't believe you waste the best cornbread in the south on a dog.

MATTIE

He's got to eat something. He's just skin and bones, poor little fella.

ALORA

What you gonna name him?

I ain't. I ain't keeping him.

MATTIE

Then why are you feeding him?

ALORA

Because he won't leave.

MATTIE

He won't leave because you keep feeding him!

ALORA

(She glances out the back door at the dog.)

Seems like a right nice little dog. Been here two days and hasn't barked once. Might be real good company for you.

I can't keep a dog, Alora – wouldn't be fair.

MATTIE

Fair to who?

ALORA

The dog.

MATTIE

(ALORA starts to protest. MATTIE cuts her off.)

Already put in a call to the dogcatcher – he'll be by sometime this afternoon.

(She crosses to the Kitchen, and roots around in a drawer.)

Mattie, what's going on? I just talked to Reverend Bass on the phone. He said you called him this morning – told him you're giving up being vice-president of your Sunday school class!

ALORA

That's right.

MATTIE

(She exits from the Kitchen holding a screwdriver and crosses into the Living Room, still limping. ALORA is too distracted to notice.)

ALORA

And now you're saying you can't keep a dog – Mattie Rigsbee, the woman who adopts every stray what sleeps on her porch. What's next? You giving up the Lottie Moon?

(MATTIE doesn't answer. Instead she tilts the rocking chair on its side, kneels next to it and begins unscrewing the seat.)

Mattie Rigsbee, do *not* tell me you're giving up being in charge of the Lottie Moon Missionary Fund! Think about those poor missionaries in China who are depending on you! Think about all those poor heathen Chinese children!

MATTIE

I ain't giving up the Lottie Moon. I would *never* give up the Lottie Moon. I look forward to it all year long.

ALORA

Well, thank the Lord for that!

MATTIE

But I can't be in charge of the Lottie Moon *and* be vice-president of my Sunday school class *and* keep a dog.

ALORA

Why not?

MATTIE

Because I'm too old.

ALORA

You are not!

MATTIE

I'm seventy-eight years old, Alora. I'm slowing down.

ALORA

Since when? Just three days ago you was outside digging up your flower bed and when Finner asked if he could help you, you said no thank you.

MATTIE

That was three days ago.

(She continues unscrewing the seat bottom.)

ALORA

Mattie, what on earth are you doing down there?

MATTIE

Taking off the seat bottom to this rocking chair.

ALORA

Why?

MATTIE

Because it's broke. I don't want folks sitting in it and hurting themselves. Here...

(MATTIE hands ALORA the seat from the rocking chair. We can see the cane weaving has broken through. ALORA takes it. MATTIE gets to her feet and rights the rocking chair.)

ALORA

Lordy! That's a big ol' hole. How did it break?

(MATTIE takes the seat bottom from ALORA, crosses into the Dining Room and leans it against a table leg.)

Mattie, why are you limping?

MATTIE

I twisted my foot a bit.

ALORA

When did that happen?

MATTIE

When I stepped through the rocking chair.

ALORA

You were *standing* on your rocking chair?

MATTIE

The light bulb in the hallway needed changing.

ALORA

Why didn't you use your stepladder?

MATTIE

You want another piece of cornbread?

ALORA

Mattie.

MATTIE

My stepladder got too heavy for me to carry. So I stood on my rocking chair. And now it's broke.

*(MATTIE crosses back to the rocking chair and pushes it gently.
It rocks to and fro sadly. Beat.)*

ALORA

Is that why you say you're slowing down, because your seat bottom's broke? It's just a rocking chair, Mattie.

MATTIE

No, it ain't. This rocking chair's been in my family over a hundred years. My grandma rocked my mama in this chair, my mama rocked me in this chair, and I rocked my Robert in this chair.

ALORA

Still...

MATTIE

Alora, you recall that sermon Reverend Bass preached a few weeks back about Moses and all them crossing the desert?

ALORA

Sure do. We sang *Walking Across Egypt* and Finner kept going flat on the harmony.

MATTIE

Do you recall what Reverend Bass said about feeling all alone in the desert?

ALORA

Mattie, you ain't alone! Me and Finner live right next door!

MATTIE

That ain't what I'm talking about... Ever since I was nine years old and my daddy died of the typhoid I've had somebody to cook for, to tend to. First it was my brothers and sisters, then when I got married it was my husband, then Robert come along and I had him too. And all that time I cooked and tended, I felt a river of love pouring out of me and up to heaven, pouring out of the top of my head like an upside-down waterfall. Even after Robert grew up, even after my husband died, I still felt it. My waterfall to God. My connection. All I had to do was sit in this chair and imagine rocking my grandchild...

(She gives the chair another gentle push.)

MATTIE (cont.)

Soon as I put my foot through that seat bottom I felt that waterfall dry up, felt myself slowing down.

ALORA

You might still have grandchildren some day.

MATTIE

Robert's fifty-three years old.

ALORA

Men can father children at fifty-three.

MATTIE

Not if they spend all their time collecting antique lamps.

ALORA

Well, if it's any consolation, Mona is having the same problem with Erica.

MATTIE

Who?

ALORA

Erica Kane, on *All My Children*. She doesn't have any children either and her mother Mona is fit to be tied. And now Erica is fixing to marry that Adam Chandler who's twenty years older than her which means his sperm can't be trusted...

MATTIE

Oh, Alora – you and your stories.

ALORA

Make fun of me all you want but the things that happen on that show happen in real life, too. Rapes, murders, birth control ... *All My Children* is the reason Finner makes me carry a gun on my daily walk.

MATTIE

Listen, Alora – I don't want you calling Robert and telling him I stepped through my rocker.

ALORA

I won't...

I don't want him worrying.

MATTIE

Okay...

ALORA

I mean it, now. You know how you like to interfere sometimes.

MATTIE

Mattie Rigsbee, I do not! You name me one time when I put my nose in other folks' business.

ALORA

Last week you went through Finner's billfold when he won't looking.

MATTIE

Finner don't count. He's my husband. Besides, every woman knows if you really want to know a man, you got to go through this billfold. Be a fool not to.

ALORA

I never went through my husband's.

MATTIE

Maybe you should of.

ALORA

All I'm saying is, don't call Robert.

MATTIE

I ain't gonna call Robert. I ain't gonna call Robert. I promise I ain't gonna call Robert!

ALORA

(ROBERT *opens the back door.*)

Mama?

ROBERT

Hey, Robert.

MATTIE

Mama, you know you got a dog sitting on your back step?

ROBERT

ALORA

He's been there two days now. Just showed up.

ROBERT

Oh – hey, Alora. Mama, you gonna keep that dog?

MATTIE

No. I can't keep a dog.

ROBERT

Why not? He'd be good company.

ALORA

He don't ever bark...

MATTIE

I can't keep a dog because I'm slowing down.

ROBERT

That's ridiculous.

ALORA

That's what I said! If anybody's slowing down, it's Mona.

ROBERT

Who?

ALORA

Mona Tyler. She ain't looking so hot these days. But what can you expect with her daughter Erica marrying that no-good, snake-in-the-grass Adam Chandler?

ROBERT

Is this Mona a friend of yours, Mama?

ALORA

Mona Tyler is on *All My Children*, the first in ABC's "Lineup of Love." There's *All My Children* at one o'clock, *One Life to Live* at two and *General Hospital* at three.

ROBERT

Mama, don't tell me you started watching soap operas.

ALORA

Oh no! Mattie's way too high-falutin' for that.