

Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones
A Short Play adapted from Thank You, Ma'am by Langston Hughes
By Shona Rose and Shad Tyra

Scene One

Enter a large woman with a large purse "that [has] everything in it but hammer and nails" slung across her shoulder. She walks alone on a dark street. It's almost midnight.

A boy, about 14-15, frail and willow-wild, runs up behind her and tries to snatch her purse. He is wearing tennis shoes and blue jeans. The strap breaks as he pulls it, unbalancing him and changing his trajectory. He is unbalanced and falls to the sidewalk, legs flying upward. He begins to scramble and run away.

The woman turns around and kicks him in his "blue-jeaned sitter," reaches down to grab him up by the shirt front and shakes him "until his teeth [rattle]."

Woman: Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here. *(still holding onto him)* Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?

Boy: Yes'm

Woman: What did you want to do it for?

Boy: I didn't aim to.

Woman: You a lie!

(Two or three people pass, stop, and look, watching the interaction.)

Woman: If I turn you loose, will you run?

Boy: Yes'm

Woman: Then I won't turn you loose.

Boy: *(whispering)* I'm very sorry, lady, I'm sorry.

Woman: Um-hum! And your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?

Boy: No'm.

Woman: Then it will get washed this evening. *(The woman starts up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.)* You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is wash your face. Are you hungry?

Boy: No'm. I just want you to turn me loose.

Woman: Was I bothering *you* when I turned that corner?

Boy: No'm.

Woman: But you put yourself in contact with *me*. If you think that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones.

(The boy sweats and struggles. Mrs. Jones stops walking and jerks him in front of her, putting him in a half nelson, and continues on up the street.)

Scene Two:

The woman drags the boy into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of a house, turns on the light, leaving the door open. There is a daybed. In a corner of the room behind a screen is a gas plate and icebox. Other roomers can be heard laughing and talking in the other rooms. Their doors are open as well.

Mrs Jones: What is your name?

Boy: Roger

Mrs. Jones: Then Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face. *(she turns him loose and sits down on the daybed with her purse beside her; Roger looks between the woman and the door before going to the sink.)* Let the water run until it gets warm. Here is a clean towel.

Roger: *(bending over the sink)* You gonna take me to jail?

Mrs. Jones: Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere. Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe, you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?

Roger: There's nobody home at my house.

Mrs. Jones: Then we'll eat. I believe you're hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook.

Roger: I wanted a pair of blue suede shoes.

Mrs. Jones: Well, you didn't have to snatch my pocketbook to get some suede shoes. You could of asked me.

Roger: M'am?

(There is a long pause. Roger dries and redries his faces again. He looks at the door again. The woman is sitting on a daybed, watching him silently.)

Mrs. Jones: I were young once and I wanted things I could not get.

(There is another long pause. The boy opens his mouth to speak. Then he frowns, confused.)

Mrs. Jones: Um-hum! You thought I was going to say but, didn't you? You thought I was going to say, but I didn't snatch people's pocketbooks. Well, I wasn't going to say that. *(Pause. Silence.)* I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if he didn't already know. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable. *(The woman leaves her purse on the daybed and goes behind the screen, not looking at the boy. Roger sits purposefully where she can still see him.)*

Roger: Do you need somebody to go to the store? Maybe to get some milk or something?

Mrs. Jones: Don't believe I do unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here.

Roger: That will be fine.

(She heats some lima beans and ham from the icebox, makes cocoa, and sets the table. There's a ten cent cake for the table as well. They sit down to eat.)

Mrs. Jones: *(as they eat)* I was comin' home from the beauty shop where I work. It's in the hotel lobby down the street. You probably walked by it before. We stay open late so the folks going out can get gussied up before their parties. Oooh, you wouldn't believe the ladies that come in and out. Blondes, red, heads, and Spanish. Eat some more, son. *(cutting him half of her ten-cent cake.)*

Scene Three

Mrs. Jones: *(stands up and retrieves her purse.)* Now, here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto my pocketbook nor nobody else's—because shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But I wish you would behave yourself, son, from here on in.

Mrs. Jones: *(She leads him down the hall and to the front door, opening it)* Good-night! Behave yourself, boy! *(She looks into the street as he walks out.)*

Roger: *(Turns at the barren stoop, looks back)* Thank you.

Mrs. Jones: *(Shuts the door.)*