

SCENE 4

Later that day, outside of the school. Sunny sits strumming chords on a guitar to "Cruel War". A guitar chord book lays open in front of her. Kaleb enters with books and listens.

KALEB. You play any Motown on that thing?

SUNNY. *(She plays three chords over and over.)* Shhhh. Listen. I heard it on the radio--down at the end of the dial. It's a love-song.

KALEB. So?

SUNNY. It's an anti-war song too.

KALEB. Anti-war song? You a hippie now?

SUNNY. King's against the war.

KALEB. I'm sick of King. He's lost his mind. He has no business talking about the war.

SUNNY. Shhh, just listen. *(She sings a little, we see Kaleb. Is moved in spite of himself.)* "The cruel war is raging and Johnny has to fight and I want to be with him from morning 'til night". It's so beautiful. Who sings it? That woman-- Joan Baez? Am I saying it right? What kind of name is that? *(NB: It's not Joan Baez, but Peter Paul and Mary.)*

KALEB. What do I care? I keep my tuner on the opposite end of the dial. W.V.O. N. The Voice of the Negro.

SUNNY. What do you think of her?

KALEB. I just said I don't care.

SUNNY. I mean Mrs. Hedges.

KALEB. I give her points for daring to show her face in this school. But I take them all away for thinking she's qualified to teach us history.

SUNNY. She uses the mimeograph, Kaleb. We've never had anybody mimeo tests for us.

KALEB. Tests aren't exactly a favor.

SUNNY. You're just mad. She embarrassed you in class today.

KALEB. She should be embarrassed because everybody cut her stupid class.

SUNNY. She's smart Kaleb. She's got guts. She's gone through something. I can feel it.

KALEB. All she's gone through is your imagination Sunny. Wake up. She's a blond, blue-eyed devil.

SUNNY. Woman.

KALEB. White woman. I go through more walking to school and back everyday than she will in a lifetime.

SUNNY. Like you're so oppressed.

KALEB. I never thought I'd live to see the day when Sunny Wilson's mind was taken by the man.

SUNNY. I just like the new history teacher! It's not voodoo. White people don't just walk up to you and snatch your mind. What about choice, Kaleb?

KALEB. Is your nose just naturally stuck up the new teacher's backside or is that a choice?

(Steven enters)

KALEB. Hey Steven, what's happenin' man?

STEVEN. What it is, Kaleb?

KALEB. It's your world man. I'm just a squirrel tryin' to get a nut. *(Sunny strums a chord loudly.)* Oh. Steven this is Sunny. Sunny--Steven. *(pause.)* Well, I'll catch you on the rebound, man. Sunny. *(Kaleb exits.)*

SUNNY. I don't know why he does that.

STEVEN. What?

SUNNY. Gets around other people and talks like that.

STEVEN. It's just a thang.

SUNNY. Yeah, just a thang.

STEVEN. You play that?

SUNNY. Yeah. Well, no. Well sort of.

STEVEN. Wanna show me?

SUNNY. Show you? Oh. How I play. Uh, sure.

STEVEN. *(He leafs through her music books.)* These yours?

SUNNY. Yeah. I bought this guitar a few months ago. I want to take lessons at the music school up the street from my house, but I haven't got up my nerve. I figure I need to know how to play a little before I take lessons.

STEVEN. *(He stares at her.)* Unhunh.

SUNNY. I know, "Wouldn't you take lessons 'cause you don't know how play?" Most people would. But I've got a research complex. I just made that up. I like to make stuff up.

STEVEN. Songs?

SUNNY. Yeah. Sometimes.

STEVEN. Show me.

SUNNY. Well--the only thing I've made up so far is a love song.

STEVEN. Okay

SUNNY. But-

STEVEN. I won't take it personal.

SUNNY. Okay. *(Sunny nervously sings a naive but heartfelt upbeat pop/folk song. Her voice shakes.)*

"Baby it's unusual the way I never looked at you like this before

Dah dah dah dah dah

And I hope it's mutual,

The feelings I get 'cause it's you boy I adore.

Dah dah dah dah dah

There's more but I'll skip to the chorus:

It's the special kind of way you walk

And the special kind of talk you talk

The feelings are inside me I don't know how to take

It's those special kind of feelings I don't know how to shake

But it's all right. Everything's all right.

(She stops.)

SUNNY. I'm too nervous I can't anymore. I sound like Buffy St. Marie. *(They sit quietly.)*

STEVEN. I liked it.

SUNNY. You did?

STEVEN. Yeah. You meant those words.

SUNNY. Kaleb says it sounds white.

STEVEN. You play colors on that thing or music?

SUNNY. You know what he means. I just gravitate to the wrong sound I guess. I'm an inadvertent sell-out. I even like the Righteous Brothers. Kaleb says they stole our sound.

STEVEN. Motown and Stax sell that sound--to anybody who'll buy it.

SUNNY. I never thought of that.

STEVEN. Music's bigger than that. It's for sharing. Ideas are like bubbles anyway.

SUNNY. Bubbles?

STEVEN. Floating up from the bottom. Black folks are on the bottom right now, so we have most of the ideas. *(beat)*

"An inadvertent sell out". That's funny. Give me that thing.

(He plays the first verse and chorus to Sonny Boy Williamson's "Keep it to Yourself" with ease.) You like it?

SUNNY. *(Enchanted)* Yeah. You write it?

STEVEN. Nope. But it's by somebody named Sonny.

SUNNY. You're teasing me.

STEVEN. Nope. And you know what color that song was?

SUNNY. Black?

STEVEN. Nope. Blue. That was Chicago blues.
(*They laugh.*)

SCENE 5

*Night, 4AM. The Sleeping Car of a train rolls on stage. We see slashes of light through the window as the train moves. Kaleb sleeps. The **BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS CONDUCTOR** enters.*

CONDUCTOR. This is Chicago! Chiiiiicaaaaagooooo! All Aboaaaarrrd!
Alll Tickets--all tickets, please. (*Kaleb wakes sleepily from his berth*)
Your ticket sir.

KALEB. Who are you?

CONDUCTOR. A proud member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters!
Just like your grandpa. Your ticket please.

KALEB. Where am I?

CONDUCTOR. You're sleeping. Don't you love the way the light hits these windows and just for a moment everything seems clear. Your ticket?

KALEB. Where am I going?

CONDUCTOR. Well, that depends on you.

KALEB. What time is it?

CONDUCTOR. Almost dawn.

KALEB. Oh brother. This is really out. How did I get here?

CONDUCTOR. Well, like most young colored folks your family come up here from Alabama 'round 'bout the 1930's.

KALEB. No. Here.

CONDUCTOR. I'm tellin' ya. They was trying to escape lynching and some downright viscous conditions. Take them Scottsboro boys, sharp fellas, though you'd never know it from the way they got treated. Things like that make a family move up north--

KALEB. Where are we going with all this? I have school in the morning.

CONDUCTOR. Good for you, 'cause you won't be goin' nowhere you don't stay in school. Every colored body know it's hard work and a diploma that separates the wheat from the chaff. It's that education what makes the difference between selling newspapers on the corner or writing for one.

KALEB. What else would I do? I'm just a kid.

CONDUCTOR. If you bright enough, and you prob'ly are, you'll get yourself a high school diploma then go on to a good college.

KALEB. Like Morehouse.

CONDUCTOR. Morehouse? You could go to a good college.

KALEB. Morehouse is a good college.

CONDUCTOR. You ain't got to go to colored schools no more. Set your eye on Harvard, Yale--one o' them Ivy league schools. They lettin' colored in there now. Pull yourself up and never look back, son. Do something important.

KALEB. Something white.

CONDUCTOR. Something that contributes to society.

KALEB. I was thinking about joining the Fruit of Islam. Or the Black Panther Party.

CONDUCTOR. Fruits and Animals? I don't know. What colored folks need is to show white folks that they can give something to the whole society. You can make more out yourself boy. You don't have to settle.

KALEB. Oh, man, wake me up. Oreo farts like you give me indigestion. Pretending you're a 'race man'. Talkin' 'bout how far we've come. I say two words about somethin' black folks can do for each other and you preach about proving yourself to the man. The truth is you hate black people.

CONDUCTOR. Well, I don't much like that word "black" so, I guess you probably right.

KALEB. You agree with me?

CONDUCTOR. This is your dream, son, you play every part.

KALEB. You're saying I hate myself?

CONDUCTOR. Don't take it so serious. You wouldn't be a young fella, you didn't hate yourself and everybody else. Colored folks is all like that right now--adolescent.

KALEB. I want to wake up now.

CONDUCTOR. (*Continuing.*) The whole damn race. Everybody trying to figure out who they are--where they going--what it mean to be a man, what it mean to be a woman--

KALEB. I don't know where I'm going. (*pause*) Or what it means to be a man.

CONDUCTOR. Oh. That's why you're such a hard knot little radical. You confused.

KALEB. (*Kaleb looks out the window*) I'm not confused! There are just things nobody tells you about.

CONDUCTOR. You know son, you can say anything here.

KALEB. You're a conductor. You're old enough to be my grandfather.

CONDUCTOR. Talk to your subconscious about that.

KALEB. Well, I have these thoughts. All the time.

CONDUCTOR. You startin' to get a little hot and bothered are you?

KALEB. What do I do about it?

CONDUCTOR. Maybe you'd better keep your business to yourself.

KALEB. But you said I could talk about anything here!

CONDUCTOR. Yeah, but it's almost daylight. You might not be able to cope.

KALEB. If I can't talk about these things in here, where can I talk about them?

(Conductor becomes uncomfortable.)

CONDUCTOR. You got that ticket?

KALEB. You kicking me out?

CONDUCTOR. Out your own dream? Even an old oreo fart like me got more sense than that. I know when somebody need they sleep. Allll Tickets please!!!

(Kaleb returns, frustrated, to the berth as the train rolls off.)

SCENE 6

Same Night and Time. Sunny's Room. Sunny sits on her bed trying to write a song on her guitar. There's a lyric sheet beside her. She strums simple chords and sings.

SUNNY. Everybody's got somewhere they're goin'// Everybody's got somewhere they've been// I'm standin on the border at the station// Nose pressed against the window lookin' in. Ugh! Geez Louise! Now I've written a country song! I worked all night on a country song! Kaleb's right I'm hopeless.

The conductor as her DAD enters. He has a stethoscope and medical bag. Sunny is implacable.

DAD. Sunny, you've been up all this time?

SUNNY. Yeah daddy. I was trying to write a song. You comin' in or going out?

DAD. Well, Pumpkin, I'm headed out to bring a baby in.

SUNNY. I won't keep you.

DAD. The mom just started labor, I've got a little time. Can I hear the song?

SUNNY. *(fussy)* No. It's all wrong.

DAD. Oh. Then nevermind.

SUNNY. Well, I don't know. Maybe you could just read it.

DAD. Okay. I'll just read it. *(He reaches for the lyric sheet.)*

SUNNY. But don't say anything about the words.

DAD. (*Dad stares at her.*) Read it, but don't mention the words?

SUNNY. Daddy! (*He reads it.*)

DAD. This is sad. Is this how you feel? "Nose pressed against the window looking in"

SUNNY. This is why I didn't want to show you. It's not the words. I don't want to talk about the words.

DAD. Is this about that questionnaire at school? Is that "paper" why you feel like this again?

SUNNY. No daddy, it's not about that stupid paper! It's the music. It's sounds country.

DAD. Well, play it for me.

SUNNY. No! (*pause*) Somebody told me to try a different rhythm, so I tried to find a different rhythm.

DAD. That's good, right?

SUNNY. No, because then the beat's not right for the words. The beat's too confident and the words - the words are...

DAD. Can we talk about the words?

SUNNY. I don't want to talk about the words! The words are the words. I shouldn't be writing about me anyway.

DAD. What should you be writing about?

SUNNY. About revolution or those poor misunderstood Viet Cong or something. (*she gets teary*) There's a war going on outside.

DAD. Well, not directly outside. It's in Southeast Asia. What do you know about revolution or the Viet Cong?

SUNNY. Nothing! But it's important.

DAD. Important to you?

SUNNY. I need to write a song and this one doesn't sound right.

DAD. Okay. Let's back up. *Why* do you need to write this song? Is it for a class?

SUNNY. No.

DAD. Then it's for somebody?

SUNNY. Sort of.

DAD. And this person is really important to you...

SUNNY. Yeah. And if I don't learn how to write a really good song-- he'll never... (*Dad smiles.*) Don't smile at me like that.

DAD. Why not? It's very sweet to write a song for somebody. (*He thinks a moment, then wryly.*) Are they Vietnamese? A revolutionary?

SUNNY. Don't you have to go deliver that baby?

DAD. Yeah. I'm just a conductor on life's miraculous railroad.

(Sunny smiles, he's made her happy.)

SUNNY. I love you, Daddy.

DAD. I love you too, Cupcake. Get some sleep. Don't let the sun catch you crying.

(They kiss. He exits.)

SCENE 7

Same night and time. The El train of "the caring conductor". Steven sits strumming his guitar and staring out the window. The conductor enters from another car.

CONDUCTOR. I thought that was you. Where you been?

STEVEN. Nowhere.

CONDUCTOR. Haven't seen you in almost two weeks. You been on a different train?

STEVEN. What's it to you?

CONDUCTOR. It's 4am, most young folks are at home dreaming.

STEVEN. I don't dream.

CONDUCTOR. You got folks? They know you out the house? There's a curfew, you know, if you're under 16.

STEVEN. You gonna tell the police on me?

CONDUCTOR. Would you care if I did? *(Steven shrugs.)* Then you might as well stay. *(pause)* Besides it's nice to have a little music. You write that one?

STEVEN. Yeah.

CONDUCTOR. It about anyone special?

STEVEN. Maybe.

CONDUCTOR. Well, son, nobody could accuse you of draining the world of words. 'scuse me. *(Conductor goes to microphone.)* This is Adams and Wabash--The Chicago Loop.

(Train rolls off.)

SCENE 8

*A few weeks later. The Art Institute, Chicago. There hang prominently four Edward Hopper paintings: Railroad Sunset, Approaching a City, The El Station, Hotel by a Railroad and a Hopper etching - Night on the El train. The Conductor is a **TOUR GUIDE** at the museum. During the conductor's speech Mrs. Hedges makes notes and glances at Steven who quietly, intently studies the El train paintings. He makes notes in a composition book. In the gallery, Kaleb and Sunny*

sit on a wooden bench, listening. Steven moves to the bench and Sunny offers him the seat next to her. He takes the seat. Kaleb is visibly upset by this.

GUIDE. Edward Hopper-- An American painter whose work is known for its bare manner and contrasts of light and shadow. His work evokes feelings of loneliness and isolation. (*He points to Approaching A City.*) This railroad painting lacks even one human figure. The viewer is the train, the unseen traveller in a curious limbo, neither completely inside nor outside the city. Hopper's somber palette and simple form suggests a future both predictable and unknown. Follow me to the next gallery. (*Conductor leaves. Kaleb starts out. Sunny looks back for Steven*)

KALEB. You heard the man Sunny, let's go.

SUNNY. Just a minute. (*turns to Steven*) Hey, Steven. I wrote another song, but it doesn't sound right.

STEVEN. Wrong color?

SUNNY. Yeah, like red-neck. I want it to be blue. Good thing I'm not a painter. I tried to fix it, but I think there's something wrong with me. Probably "identification with the oppressor" or something. The melody's country and even though I kind of like the words they don't go right. Every time I--

STEVEN. --whoa, Sunny. It's just chords.

SUNNY. Chords?

STEVEN. You need to learn blues chords.

SUNNY. That's all?

STEVEN. Pretty much.

SUNNY. Well, maybe you can show me sometime?

STEVEN. Sure.

KALEB. Sunny, come on.

SUNNY. Okay. (*To Steven.*) Thanks. (*Sunny and Kaleb exit.*)

MRS. HEDGES. You like these paintings don't you? They're quiet.

STEVEN. Like me?

MRS. HEDGES. Maybe.

STEVEN. And you want to draw me out.

MRS. HEDGES. That would make learning easier.

STEVEN. For who?

MRS. HEDGES. Well. Both of us.

(They are both silent a moment.)

STEVEN. (*Referring to Approaching a City*) You don't like these paintings. This one especially.

MRS. HEDGES. To me it's like the train just disappeared.

STEVEN. There's light in it. Maybe the train's just around the corner. (*He looks right into her.*) You don't like the trains.

MRS. HEDGES. How did you know that?

STEVEN. I see you. In class. When the El goes by. I see you don't like it.

MRS. HEDGES. They are noisy.

STEVEN. It's not the noise. (*beat*) I like the trains. You can see things. But not too much. Just enough. Just for moments. (*He recites:*)

"Night from a railroad car window

Is a great, dark, soft thing.

Broken across with slashes of light."

MRS. HEDGES. That's Carl Sandberg!

STEVEN. Yeah.

(He turns to exit.)

MRS. HEDGES. Steven. Why don't you say things like that in class?

STEVEN. (*He shrugs and starts to walk away. Stops. Turns and looks fully at her.*)
Nice Legs. (*He exits. Mrs. Hedges looks after him, stunned.*)