

ACT ONE

CHARACTERS

MAMA NADI A madam, a businesswoman, attractive, early forties
JOSEPHINE One of Mama's girls, early twenties
SOPHIE One of Mama's girls, eighteen
SALIMA One of Mama's girls, nineteen
CHRISTIAN A traveling salesman, early forties
MR. HARARI A Lebanese diamond merchant, early forties
JEROME KISEMBE A rebel leader
COMMANDER
OSEMBENGA A military leader for the current government
FORTUNE A Government Soldier, Salima's husband
SIMON A Government Soldier, Fortune's cousin
LAURENT A Government Soldier, Osembenga's assistant
REBEL SOLDIERS
GOVERNMENT SOLDIERS
AID WORKER

SETTING

A small mining town. The Democratic Republic of Congo.

Scene 1

A small mining town. The sounds of the tropical Ituri rain forest. The Democratic Republic of Congo.

A bar, makeshift furniture and a rundown pool table. A lot of effort has gone into making the worn bar cheerful. A stack of plastic washtubs rests in the corner. An old car battery powers the audio system, a covered birdcage sits conspicuously in the corner of the room.

Mama Nadi, early forties, an attractive woman with an arrogant stride and majestic air, watches Christian, early forties, a perpetually cheerful traveling salesman, knock back a Fanta. His good looks have been worn down by hard living on the road. He wears a suit that might have been considered stylish when new, but it's now nearly ten years old, and overly loved.

CHRISTIAN: Ah. Cold. The only cold Fanta in twenty-five kilometers. You don't know how good this tastes.

(Mama flashes a warm flirtatious smile, then pours herself a Primus beer.)

MAMA: And where the hell have you been?
CHRISTIAN: It was no easy task getting here.
MAMA: I've been expecting you for the last three weeks. How am I supposed do business? No soap, no cigarettes, no condoms. Not even a half liter of petrol for the generator.
CHRISTIAN: Why are you picking a fight with me already? I didn't create this damn chaos. Nobody, and I'm telling you, nobody could get through on the main road. Every two kilometers a boy with a Kalashnikov and pockets that need filling. Toll, tax, tariff. They invent reasons to lighten your load.

MAMA: Then why does Mr. Harari always manage to get through?
CHRISTIAN: Mr. Harari doesn't bring you things you need, does he? Mr. Harari has interests that supercede his safety. Me, I still hope to have a family one day. *(Laughs heartily)*

MAMA: And my lipstick?
CHRISTIAN: Your lipstick? Aye! Did you ask me for lipstick?

MAMA: Of course, I did, you idiot!

CHRISTIAN: Look at the way you speak to me, chérie. *Comment est-ce possible?* You should be happy I made it here in one piece.

(Christian produces a tube of lipstick from his pocket.)

Play nice, or I'll give this to Josephine. She knows just how to show her appreciation.

MAMA: Yes, but you always take home a little more than you ask for with Josephine. I hope you know how to use a condom.

(Christian laughs.)

CHRISTIAN: Are you jealous?
MAMA: Leave me alone, you're too predictable. *(Turns away, dismissive)*

CHRISTIAN: Where are you going? Hey, hey what are you doing? *(Teasingly)* Chérie, I know you wanted me to forget, so you could yell at me, but you won't get the pleasure this time.

CHRISTIAN: Here. I saved you some groundnuts, professor.
CHRISTIAN: That's all you saved for me?

MAMA: Be smart, and I'll show you the door in one second.

(Mama scolds him with her eyes.)

(Christian laughs, warmly. Mama puts out a bowl of peanuts, a peace offering.)

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(Mama scolds him with her eyes.)

CHRISTIAN: Ach, ach . . . why are you wearing my grandmama's face?

(Christian mocks her expression. Mama laughs and downs her beer.)

MAMA: You sure you don't want a beer?

CHRISTIAN: You know me better than that, chérie, I haven't had a drop of liquor in four years.

MAMA *(Teasing)*: It's cold.

CHRISTIAN: Tst!

(Christian cracks open a few peanuts, and playfully pops them into his mouth.

The parrot squawks.)

What's there? In the cage?

MAMA: Oh, that, a gray parrot. Old Papa Batunga passed.

CHRISTIAN: When?

MAMA: Last Thursday. No one wanted the damn bird. It complains too much.

CHRISTIAN *(Amused)*: Yeah, what does it say?

(Christian walks to the birdcage, and peers under the covering.)

MAMA: Who the hell knows. It speaks pygmy. Old Papa was the last of his tribe. That stupid bird was the only thing he had left to talk to.

CHRISTIAN *(To the bird)*: Hello?

MAMA: He believed as long as the words of the forest people were spoken, the spirits would stay alive.

CHRISTIAN: For true?

MAMA: Yeah, well, when that bird dies this place is gonna lose part of its story.

CHRISTIAN *(Poking his finger into the cage)*: What are you going to do with him?

MAMA: Sell it. I don't want it. It stinks.

CHRISTIAN *(Still poking; to the parrot)*: Hello.

MAMA: Hey, hey don't put your fingers in there.

CHRISTIAN: Look. He likes me. So, Mama, you haven't asked me what else I've brought for you? Go see. *(Quickly withdraws his finger)* Ow. Shit. He bit me.

MAMA: Well, you shouldn't be messing with it. *(Laughs)*

CHRISTIAN: Ow, damn it.

MAMA *(Impatiently)*: Don't be a cry baby, what did you bring me? Well? . . . Are you going to keep me guessing?

CHRISTIAN *(Sitting back down)*: Go on. Take a peek in the truck. And don't say I don't think about you.

MAMA *(Smiling)*: How many?

CHRISTIAN: Three.

MAMA: Three? But, I can't use three right now. You know that.

CHRISTIAN: Of course you can. And I'll give you a good price if you take all of them.

(Mama goes to the doorway, and peers out at the offerings, unimpressed.)

MAMA: I don't know. They look used. Worn.

CHRISTIAN: C'mon, Mama. Take another look. A full look. You've said it yourself business is good.

(Mama considers, then finally:)

MAMA: Okay, one. That one in front. *(Points into the distance)*

CHRISTIAN: Three. C'mon, don't make me travel back with them.

MAMA: Just one. How much?

CHRISTIAN: Do you know how difficult it was getting here? The road was completely washed out—

MAMA: All right, all right. I don't need the whole damn saga. Just tell me, how much for the one?

CHRISTIAN: The same as usual plus twenty-five, because . . . because . . . You understand it wasn't easy to get here with the—

MAMA: I'll give you fifteen.

CHRISTIAN: Ahh! Fifteen? No. That's nothing. Twenty-two. C'mon.

MAMA: Twenty. My best offer.

(Christian mulls it over. He's reluctant.)

CHRISTIAN: Aye. Okay. Okay. Damn it. Yes. Yes. But I expect another cold Fanta. One from the bottom this time.

(Christian, defeated, exits. Mama smiles victoriously, and retrieves another soda from the cooler. She reapplies her lipstick for good measure, then counts out her money.)

Christian reenters proudly bearing two cartons of Ugandan cigarettes. A moment later two women in ragged clothing step tentatively into the bar: Sophie, a luminous beauty with an air of defiance, and Salima, a sturdy peasant woman whose face betrays a world-weariness. They hold hands. Mama studies the women, then:)

MAMA: I said one. That one.

(Mama points to Sophie.)

CHRISTIAN: It's been a good week, and I'll tell you what, I'll give you two for the price of one. Why not?

MAMA: Are you deaf? No. Tst! I don't need two more mouths to feed and pester me.

(Mama continues to examine each woman.)

CHRISTIAN: Take both. Feed them as one. Please, Mama, I'll throw in the cigarettes for cost.

MAMA: But, I'll only pay for one.

CHRISTIAN: Of course. We agree, why are we arguing?

MAMA *(Yelling)*: Josephine! Josephine! Where is that stupid woman?

(Josephine, a sexy woman in a short western-style miniskirt and high heels appears in the beaded doorway. She surveys the new women with obvious contempt.)

Take them out back. Get them washed and some proper clothing.

JOSEPHINE: *Kuya apa (Beat) sasa.* (Beckons to the women. They reluctantly follow)*

MAMA: Wait.

(Mama gestures to Salima, who clings to Sophie.)

You. Come here.

(Salima doesn't move.)

Come.

(Salima clings to Sophie, then slowly walks toward Mama.)

What's your name?

SALIMA *(Whispers)*: Salima.

MAMA: What?

SALIMA: Salima.

(Mama examines Salima's rough hands.)

MAMA: Rough. *(With disdain)* A digger. We'll have to do something about that.

(Salima yanks her hand away. Mama registers the bold gesture.)

And you, come. *(Sophie walks to Mama)* You're a pretty thing, what's your name?

* Note: Swahili translations appear at the end of the play.

SOPHIE (*Gently*): Sophie.
MAMA: Do you have a smile?
SOPHIE: Yes.
MAMA: Then let me see it.

(*Sophie struggles to find a halfhearted smile.*)

Good. Go get washed up.

(*A moment.*)

JOSEPHINE (*Snaps*): C'mon, now!

(*Salima looks to Sophie. The women follow behind Josephine. Sophie walks with some pain and effort.*)

MAMA: Did you at least tell them this time?

CHRISTIAN: Yes. They know and they came willingly.

MAMA: And . . . ?

CHRISTIAN: Salima is from a tiny village. No place really. She was, captured by rebel soldiers, *Mayi-mayi*, the poor thing spent nearly five months in the bush as their concubine.

MAMA: And what of her people?

CHRISTIAN: She says her husband is a farmer. And from what I understand, her village won't have her back. Because . . . But she's a simple girl, she doesn't have much learning, I wouldn't worry about her.

MAMA: And the other?

CHRISTIAN: Sophie. Sophie is . . .

MAMA: Is what?

CHRISTIAN: . . . is . . . ruined.

(*A moment.*)

MAMA (*Enraged*): You brought me a girl that's ruined?

CHRISTIAN: She cost you nothing.

MAMA: I paid money for her, not the other one. The other one is plain. I have half a dozen girls like her, I don't need to feed another plain girl.

CHRISTIAN: I know this, okay, don't get worked-up. Sophie is a good girl, she won't trouble you.

MAMA: How do I know that?

CHRISTIAN (*Defensively*): Because I am telling you. She's seen some very bad times.

MAMA: Yeah? And why is that my concern?

CHRISTIAN: Take her on, just for a month. You'll see she's a good girl. Hard worker.

(*Mama gestures toward her own genitals.*)

MAMA: But damaged, am I right?

CHRISTIAN: Yes . . . Look, militia did undgodly things to the child, took her with . . . a bayonet and then left her for dead. And she was—

MAMA (*Snaps*): I don't need to hear it. Are you done?

CHRISTIAN (*Passionately*): Things are gonna get busy, Mama. All along the road people are talking about how this red dirt is rich with coltan. Suddenly everyone has a shovel, and wants to stake a claim since that boastful pygmy dug up his fortune in the reserve. I guarantee there'll be twice as many miners here by September. And you know all those bastards will be thirsty. So, take her, put her to work for you.

MAMA: And what makes you think I have any use for her?

CHRISTIAN (*Pleads*): The girl cooks, cleans and she sings like an angel. And you . . . you haven't had nice music here since that one, that beauty Camille got the AIDS.

MAMA: No. A girl like this is bad luck. I can't have it. Josephine! Josephine!

CHRISTIAN: And, Mama, she's pretty pretty. She'll keep the miners eyes happy. I promise.

MAMA: Stop it already, no. You're like a hyena. Won't you shut up, now.

(Josephine enters, put upon.)

JOSEPHINE: Yes, Mama.

MAMA: Bring the girl, Sophie, back.

CHRISTIAN: Wait. Give us a minute, Josephine.

(Josephine doesn't move.)

Mama, please. Look, okay, I'm asking you to do me this favor. I've done many things for you over the years. And I don't ask you for a lot in return. Please. The child has no place else to go.

MAMA: I'm sorry, but I'm running a business not a mission. Take her to the sisters in Bunia, let her weave baskets for them. Josephine, why are you standing there like a fool . . . go get the girl.

CHRISTIAN: Wait.

JOSEPHINE (Annoyed): Do you want me to stay or to go?

MAMA (Snaps): Get her!

(Josephine sucks her teeth and exits.)

CHRISTIAN (With a tinge of resentment): Tst! I remembered your lipstick and everything.

MAMA: Don't look at me that way. I open my doors, and tomorrow I'm refugee camp overrun with suffering. Everyone has their hand open since this damned war began. I can't do it. I keep food in the mouths of eight women when half the country's starving, so don't give me shit about taking on one more girl.

CHRISTIAN: Look. Have anything you want off of my truck. Anything! I even have some . . . some Belgian chocolate.

MAMA: You won't let up. Why are you so damn concerned with this girl? Huh?

CHRISTIAN: C'mon, Mama, please.

MAMA: Chocolate. I always ask you for chocolate, and you always tell me it turns in this heat. How many times have you refused me this year. Huh? But, she must be very very important to you. I see that. Do you want to fuck her or something?

(A moment.)

CHRISTIAN: She's my sister's only daughter. Okay? I told my family I'd find a place for her . . . And here at least I know she'll be safe. Fed.

(He stops himself and gulps down his soda.)

And as you know the village isn't a place for a girl who has been . . . ruined. It brings shame, dishonor to the family.

MAMA (Ironically): But it's okay for her to be here, huh? I'm sorry, but, I can't. I don't have room for another broken girl.

CHRISTIAN: She eats like a bird. Nothing.

(Sophie enters.)

SOPHIE: Madame.

MAMA (Defensively): It's "Mademoiselle."

(Mama stares at Sophie, thinking, her resolve slowly softening.)

Come here.

(Sophie walks over to Mama.)

How old are you?

(Sophie meets Mama's eyes.)

SOPHIE: Eighteen.

MAMA: Yeah? Do you have a beau?
SOPHIE: No.

(Mama's surprised by her haughtiness.)

MAMA: Are you a student?
SOPHIE: Yes, I was to sit for the university exam.
MAMA: I bet you were good at your studies. Am I right?
SOPHIE: Yes.
MAMA: A petit bureaucrat in the making.

(Sophie shifts with discomfort. Her body aches, tears escape her eyes. Mama uses her skirt to wipe Sophie's eyes.)

Did they hurt you badly?
SOPHIE *(Whispered)*: . . . Yes.
MAMA: I bet they did.

(Mama studies Sophie. She considers, then decides.)

Christian, go get me the chocolate.
CHRISTIAN: Does that mean . . . ?
MAMA: I'm doing this for you, cuz you've been good to me.
(Whispers to Christian) But this is the last time you bring me damaged goods. Understood? It's no good for business.

CHRISTIAN: Thank you. It's the last time. I promise. Thank you.
MAMA *(To Sophie)*: You sing?
SOPHIE *(Softly)*: Yes.
MAMA: Do you know any popular songs?
SOPHIE: Yes. A few.
CHRISTIAN: Speak up!

(Christian exits.)

SOPHIE: Yes, Mad . . . *(Catching herself)* . . . emoiselle.

MAMA: Mama. You do math? Stuff like that?
SOPHIE: Yes, Mama.
MAMA: Good.

(Mama lifts Sophie's chin with her fingers, enviously examining her face.)

Yes, you're very pretty. I can see how that caused you problems. Do you know what kind of place this is?
SOPHIE: Yes, Mama. I think so.
MAMA: Good.

(Mama carefully applies red lipstick to Sophie's mouth.)

Then we have no problems. I expect my girls to be well behaved and clean. That's all. I provide a bed, food and clothing. If things are good, everyone gets a little. If things are bad, then Mama eats first. Am I making myself clear?
(Sophie nods.)

Good. Red is your color.

(Sophie doesn't respond.)

Thank you, Mama.
SOPHIE: Thank you, Mama.

(Mama pours a glass of local home-brewed liquor. She holds it-out.)

MAMA: Here. It'll help the pain down below. I know it hurts, because it smells like the rot of meat. So wash good.

(Sophie takes the glass, and slowly drinks the liquor down.)