

GARTH. *(Holding his picture book aloft.)* A picture book! My picture book—about rabbits!—with words and illustrations by me.

EMILY. *(Correcting.)* Many books.

GARTH. *(Referring to Emily.)* The story of a librarian who came to that shining city.

THOMAS. *(Genial.)* And another librarian, native to that city.

HIGGINS. A kingdom.

THOMAS. Where royalty was scarce.

JOSHUA. And God went missing.

LILY. Where God watched over things.

EMILY. Where books were beloved. And reviled.

GARTH. And there are rabbits!

HIGGINS. *(Sourly.)* Yes, rabbits.

LILY. This is a story of children.

JOSHUA. A story of parents.

EMILY. *(Correcting again.)* No, no—books. This is about books.

GARTH. Many books, but one book in particular. And, to properly peruse it, we have us! And, there are other people in this land. I will play that population. I wrote the picture book, after all. I know something about creating characters.

THOMAS. And this is certainly a story about character.

GARTH. *(With finality.)* So, then, picture this: The story of a story.

THOMAS. A story within a story.

LILY. A children's story.

JOSHUA. A love story.

HIGGINS. A local story.

THOMAS. A Southern story.

EMILY. An Alabama story.

GARTH. And somewhere—between the lines—a true story.

*They address Emily, perhaps each handing her costume pieces or props for the next scene.*

JOSHUA. Tell me a story.

~~LILY. Tell me a story.~~

~~HIGGINS. Tell me a story.~~

~~THOMAS. Tell me a story.~~

~~GARTH. Tell me a story.~~

~~*She enters the next scene.*~~

Scene 1: February 1959

~~*Around 9:30 A.M. at the Alabama Public Library Service. Emily Wheelock Reed enters her office, limping. The heel of one of her shoes has broken off. She sets down a cardboard cup of coffee, and perhaps other materials she carried. She takes off both shoes so she can walk evenly. She puts her shoes and the broken heel on her desk. A 1930s-era radio sits on a shelf behind her desk. She switches it on. Here and throughout the play, Emily is often at her desk, focused on her paperwork, mail, business.*~~

~~RADIO ANNOUNCER. *(Played live by Garth or recorded by Garth. Static obscures the singers' names.)* It's mornin' in Munkgumry... *(Static.)* That was *(Static.)* Ank Iliams "Kawliga." *(Static.)* Next up, "The Singin' Rage," *(Static.)* Miss Atti Age and "Mockin' Bird Hill." *(Static.)*~~

~~*The sound becomes all static. The radio dims and goes silent.*~~

Start

EMILY. Thomas!

*No answer.*

Thomas?

*Thomas enters.*

THOMAS. Good morning, Miss Reed. I hope you had a wonderful weekend. I took myself to a movie on Saturday—

EMILY. *(Interrupting.)* We have yet to see if it is a good morning. It was unexpected, the rain. The traffic. The roads. Thomas, this radio. How old is it?

THOMAS. I don't know, exactly. Did you want me to find out its provenance?

EMILY. No, no. I just thought some music would be soothing this morning. The radio seemed to promise "Patti Page" and "Hank Williams," as far as I could make out. I am late, as you can tell. The steps out front were slippery, I have broken a heel, and I am in a *mood*.

*Emily takes a fresh pair of shoes out of a drawer and slips them on her feet.*

THOMAS. Out front? Were you hurt?

EMILY. No. I need a cobbler, not a doctor. Do you know one?

THOMAS. I could find one. You know the back entrance on Adams Street is much less precarious.

EMILY. I am partial to a rise of granite steps. Among the most inspiring things I have seen since coming to Montgomery are these alabaster hallways and stairs. I would like to shake the hand of the man who put the Alabama Public Library Service in this—shrine.

THOMAS. A little bit of Washington, DC, in the land of Hank Williams.

EMILY. Indeed. And, not a small thing: the coffee cart is out by the front steps, not the back. I need my morning coffee.

*Thomas takes the broken shoes from her desktop.*

Where are you going with my shoes?

THOMAS. I'll get them to a cobbler.

EMILY. You have a reference desk to run. Being my assistant does not mean doing my chores. Just the name of a cobbler, please.

*She holds out her hands to take the shoes from him.*

THOMAS. I've got a book. I'll look up a name of someone nearby.

EMILY. Are you telling me that the reference department of the Alabama Public Library Service has some specialized book on the Cobblers of Montgomery?

THOMAS. Yes, we do. It's called "The Cobblers of the Cradle of the Confederacy."

EMILY. Really?

THOMAS. (*Drily.*) No, it's called the Yellow Pages.

EMILY. State library funding put to good use. Now, if we could get funding to repair the radio.

THOMAS. I'll take it to a shop.

EMILY. No, no. I rarely use it. The signal has always been spotty, that was my point. Static.

THOMAS. I could get rid of it.

EMILY. No, no. I have a place in my heart for antiques, being one myself. Leave it.

*Beat. She looks at him over her glasses.*

You do not wish to argue the suggestion that I am antique?

THOMAS. (*Perfunctory.*) Oh, you're not an antique, Miss Reed.

EMILY. (*Drily.*) Thank you, Thomas, for your spontaneous response. What is the status of our agenda today?

THOMAS. The budget proposal meeting with department heads has been pushed to two P.M. There's a librarian visiting from Mobile, Mrs.—

EMILY. Sullivan. Yes, I will say hello. Is she waiting for me?

THOMAS. She's going through the collection to see what's new. And Miss Bellamy from the Montgomery City Library called, twice. She asked if you'd be willing to read aloud again at the Children's Bookworm Circle. She's eager. In fact, she wondered if you might be able to do it *every* Friday morning.

EMILY. I seem to have left her with the impression that I enjoyed it the first time. You have never heard such shouting: (*In a child's tone.*) "Tell me a story! Tell me a story!" This, while all of the mothers slip out of the room for coffee and cigarettes. I felt like a babysitting service.

*She flips through her day planner.*

Impossible. Friday is my busiest day.

THOMAS. I'll tell her you can't.

EMILY. Tell her I will do it. I can move things around. I will call Miss Bellamy myself.

THOMAS. She had high praise for your last reading.

EMILY. Miss Bellamy need never know that I prefer adult reading.