

Monte and Pinky Draft Copy

An opera in one act by Richard L. Rose

Characters:

Monte Towles (Contralto), elderly resident of Shadow Hill Nursing Home

Manager (Soprano), an administrator at Shadow Hill

Pinky Cooke (Contralto), a new resident

Grady Towles (Baritone), Monte's deceased husband

Thomas Calhoun Walker (Tenor), deceased benefactor of Pinky's family

Chorus

Monte is seated center stage working a cross-word puzzle. To her left are a basket on the floor and a quilt on a stand. In the basket are playing cards and more puzzle books. To her right is a small table and another chair. The chorus is seated behind her. All entrances are from stage right. Monte is alone onstage during the choral overture. The Manager enters as the overture ends. Monte continues to look up and down from the puzzle during the conversation. The manager keeps checking her cell phone.

Manager: So, Mrs. Towles, I found--

Monte: Honey, it's Monte.

Hain't been a Missus now for forty year.

Manager: Now, Mrs. Towles, you know that managed care
is not like home, where anyone you want--

Monte: *Monte!* Since Grady's gone, I'm no one's Missus--
And no one's business, either. Funny 'bout that.
Texas was a skillet--hot and flat.

When Grady took me there, my family'd been
like someone died. We left my coves and hills,
the Caney Fork, and farm. My china, kettles,
hope chest, treddle-Singer, and good linen
in the trunks, we drove due west to Texas.

But the business Frank and Grady bought in Cleburne,
a store off Main Street where the drovers turn

their herds into the rail-yard, was no place
to sell dry goods. I knew it the first day.
Six of us in one house a block away
lived two years, serving meals and saying grace.
It wouldn't go. I don't think I willed it.
Still, I never really wanted it.
We drove to Ft. Worth fast as we could get.

Grady stands up in the choir.

Grady: Now Monte, you'll see that it will be all right.

And Cleburne has a Lodge. The brothers there
are bound to help us, Frank says. And I swear

we'll return to Liberty to visit.
And when the store makes good we'll get a place
so Sis and Mom and Frank and Grace will find
their own. Think what's ahead, not what's behind.

Monte: Never thought that I'd be here.

Monte takes out a dictionary as she studies the cross-word puzzle.

Manager: It's fixed--

Monte: Grady's store in Cleburne, the years of selling
Corn Products, waiting for the phone to ring--
solitaire, and sewing Butterick's--
all gone with old Texas. I'm all that's left.

Manager: *Monte!*

Monte: Law! I'm not deaf!

Manager: I've found someone--
a room-mate.

Monte: Well, does she beat the last one?

Does she still have sense? The last one's passing
was a great relief, it's bad to say.
She only hushed to smoke. Then came the day
she lit up and lit out. Why, "vanishing"
is Five Across. (*She fills in the puzzle.*)

Manager: But M--Monte we couldn't find--

Monte: You never mind. I'm no little princess.
But do you have five letters for "duress"?

The Manager looks at her cell phone.

Manager: What? I'd stay, but I've a call. I'm forced to--

Monte: That's it! "Force." Six Down. Aligns with "heaven."
It finishes me off.

She writes in the word, tosses the book into the basket, and looks up.

What's managed, then?

Manager: It means we help. That's why I tried to find you--

Monte: So how are you managing, my dear?

Manager: What?

Monte: My care. I took some risks, you know.

Manager: When was that?

Monte: Oh, ninety years ago.

One time after it had rained we plowed
the hillside. I was twelve and hurryin'
to paddle up the corn, not worryin'
where I stepped because I knew the crowd
already waited for the circus train.

I slipped and fell. Brother turned the team
and lost the row. All I could do was scream.

I near lost a foot. The sidlin' plow
tipped, don't you know, when the off-ox turned.
In life the test comes first; then lesson's learned.

Manager: Miss Evelyn doesn't smoke.

Monte: Evelyn? I low
that's my niece's name. Don't need no chimley
to remind me I am shed of cigarettes.
Don't guess a body's free 'til it forgets.

I give up Tarreytons when I was eighty.
My little nephew brought them from the store.
I couldn't go to get them any more
myself, or drive myself. Now it's just me.
What's her given name?

Manager: It's Evelyn White.
No smoker, doesn't stay up nights, and says
she plays Canasta.

Monte: Don't say? Well, I guess

you've matched and managed right pert well this time!
Retch me that pack a cards.

She points to the deck in the basket. The Manager gives it to her. As they speak, Monte removes the cards, cuts the deck, and puts half the deck in the middle of the table, turning over the top card for a discard pile. She holds the other cards.

Manager: She's waiting now.
Monte: And us a talkin' on an' on fer no-how! (She calls out.)
Come in! Don't tarry in this day and time!

Pinky enters carrying a large bougainvillea. She's startled when she sees Monte. Monte pauses and looks at the Black woman who is to be her new room-mate. The Manager raises her eyebrows.

So you are Evelyn.

She pauses again, puts down the cards, and extends her hand.

And I am Monte.

They shake hands, to the Manager's relief. The Manager touches her phone.

Manager: I'll leave you now, but if you want me, call.

As she exits, Monte looks after her.

Monte: She don't go to come back 'til I fall.

Pinky nods as she sets her plant on the table and sits down. She picks up a crossword book from the chair and examines it during the conversation.

Evelyn, is that plant a wandering jew?

Pinky: No, bougainvillea. It's a family plant
my mother gave to us from our great aunt,
Vonetta Cooke, given for wages due
to her when she be free. My real name's Cooke.
White was the name we took back when we stay
with foster parents. Mama was away.

Lawyer Walker found her work in Portsmouth
catching rats with dogs and living rough.
He found a house when she had saved enough.
Without Tom Walker, Mama'd never found us;
Vonetta's plant be lost; this wreck you see
would be an Evelyn and not a Pinky.

Monte: Pinky?

She again forms the word "Pinky," but without saying it, as if trying to recall something. Lawyer Walker stands in the choir.

Tom Walker: Whenever things snarled up and old contentions
rose to sink the boat, then someone stood
to smooth the waters with a kindly word
and then we all moved forward, our divisions
just the voices in a sacred harmony.
Despondency was gone and right away
we felt God guiding us to a new day.

As I rest on the porch after a trip
after being face to face with hate,
the sun takes time to rise, but 'ts never late.
I remember every step and slip,
insult, wholesome unhappiness and fear
that made my people pioneers of grace
and watch the sun shine on a human face.

Monte: Pinky?

Pinky: I'm only Evelyn on paper.
Manager didn't listen to my name.
Monte: Or mine. You know they treat us all the same
or we'd be unmanaged, so it's safer
all around to bide and let things be.

Pinky nods solemnly.

Monte: Like that song we used to sing in Liberty.
Know it? "If I be saved, then let me be"?

Monte sings with the choir and Pinky joins in after a few lines. Monte continues to study Pinky during this song.

All: If I be saved, who know but loss,
know but loss and trouble,
and seated on a pearly chair,
I whose will is double,
if I be saved, then any may.
So let me be to find my way.

If I read rightly, Cain was first.
But now we all must share the curse
for heaps of dying ever since
and squaring off the hills in fence.
If we be saved, then any may.
So let us work to make our way.

If like hellbender, we don't rise
but sink in grudge, we'll lose the prize.
We'll feed the slow fire of our pride
and stay in darkness with no guide.
If we be saved, then let us stay
upon the path from day to day.

Monte: *(Aside.)* I've a great mind of a "Pinky" once--

Pinky: Yes, "Just rest in Jesus" we sang in Wando.
Most of that Wando church was Cookes, you know.
Monte: So you stayed in Virginia?
Pinky: Only left once.
One of my sisters needed me in Texas.
I watches her babies and washes laundry
for white folks on the days that I was free.

Along the culvert to the underpass
I walked under the tracks then two miles more.

I had a room above my sister's store.
It wasn't much, you'd say, but God's my witness,
when I shut the door, peace flooded in.
Then came the time she said we had to go
back home--from Texas ways and heat, you know.
And after that it was the live-in work,
the week-ends spent on Mama and my nieces,
nephews and their chirren. I found peace is
not in a room or any place you'd mark
on maps or travel to. It's what you do
to find what suits you. Some say it's a call.
But I heard nothin'. Walkin' my way was all.

Last week, my niece's daughter brought me here.
She had nothing more for me to do.

Monte nods during this recital.

Too much trouble for them. Oh, I knew!
Too many falls, and more mishaps to fear.
It's better here, folded away. No more
to do for: washin's done and babies fed.
It's better here: this chair, this single bed.

Monte: Well, I declare, we both are quite a sight!
We make a pair--Aunt Pinky and Aunt Monte.

They laugh and continue to nod at each other and laugh together as Monte speaks.

Raising our sisters' babies! When they want
to go, *we* go. And where they finally light
we stay and even raise their babies' babies.
Who sees when you're a girl in crinolines
the pass you'll come to after many sins?

Pinky: I had a petticoat when I be nine
Mama saved from Missus' castaways.
Flour sacks with leg-holes hemmed up sideways
were under it.

Monte: My Mama would make mine
from feed bags and save the muslin scraps
for wraps and quilts like this one. (*She points to the quilt.*)

Pinky: Mind I saw
it in your guest room--the bed with feets that claw.

Monte is startled, finally recognizing Pinky.

Sister only nodded when I told her
'bout that bed and shiny dining table
with its claws on balls--

Monte: the Queen Anne table.
That thing had belonged to Grady's mother.
She had it special-shipped from Tennessee.
You are right smart, I see, to hold your peace.
You're the Pinky ironed a perfect crease!

Pinky: Tuesdays!

Monte: I never honed to see you more.

Pinky: God's plan.

Monte: He's laid off to bring us here
and taken his good time.

Pinky: He'll make it clear.

Monte: Yes, He will make it plain.

Pinky: From his deep store--

Both: So much that we were now seems so dark.
The dark and fearful clouds we so much dread
are blessings raining mercy on our heads.

Pinky: If it be dark, your Grady drove me home.

Monte: All he did was try to ease the way
while I complained because we had to stay.

Pinky: Yes, he was a good man, not like some.
I recall one of my ladies mixed her sheets
with her sweetie's robe and pointed hat.
I left and didn't go back after that.

Both: The rivers are behind us now: the James,
green Caney Fork, and dry-bed Trinity.
The soft hills are beyond us. The dark sea
fills with our streams and passing dreams and names.
We too will drain down to waters deep
beneath the fields and plains, and sleep awhile
and wait for breaking day and summer's smile.

Monte deals the cards. They begin to play, taking cards, discarding, and going down as they sing with the choir.

All: Moses walked with the people in the wilderness.
People cried and this is what they said,
"What you mean, driving us through this dry wilderness?"
Moses prayed and then God said:
"Strike the rock! Find the water in the wilderness."
He struck the rock and then the waters flowed.

Strike the rock and the water flows in wildernesses.
Strike the rock!

At the well, a woman of Samaria
met the Lord, and this is what he said,
"If you take the water I am giving you;
flowing like a stream from your heart, it will spread.
Strike the rock when you wander in the wilderness.
Find the place where the water flows.
Find the Lord who is water in the wilderness.
Strike the rock!

Finis

Notes: Grady and Monte Towles were the composer's aunt and uncle. Thomas Calhoun Walker (1862-1953) was a Virginia educator and civil rights leader from Gloucester whose story is told in ***The Honey Pod Tree***. The words attributed to him in this opera are rendered from his own words in this book. Pinky is a character from the story "Three May Keep A Secret" in the first volume of ***Frameshifts***, by the composer. The book is commercially available from Amazon and publicly available from Richard Rose's blog site, <http://www.frameshifts.com>. It should be noted that the story about these people is fictional.

Musical allusions include Cowper's hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" and numerous other quotations within the score.