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Samuel French Acting Edition

Blood at the Root

by Dominique Morisseau

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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BLOOD AT THE ROOT was commissioned by The Pennsylvania State University School of Theatre and premiered on March 28, 2014 at Penn State Center Stage. The performance was directed by Steve H. Broadnax III, with choreography by Aquila Kikora Franklin, lighting design by Nathan Hawkins, scenic design by Karl Jacobson, costume design by Carly Reeder, and sound design by Liz Sokolak. The stage manager was Gwen Byrnes and the assistant stage manager was Maria Baratta. The cast was as follows:

RAYLYNN	Stori Ayers
TORIA	Allison Scarlet Jaye
ASHA	Kenzie Ross
JUSTIN	 Brandon Carter
COLIN	 Tyler Reilly
DE'ANDRE	 Christian Thompson

BLOOD AT THE ROOT was commissioned by the Penn State School of Theatre, and was first produced by Penn State Centre Stage; Dan Carter, Producing Artistic Director.

The New York premiere of ***BLOOD AT THE ROOT*** was produced by Penn State Centre Stage and presented by Hi-ARTS and the National Black Theatre, Inc.

CHARACTERS

RAYLYNN – Black woman, young adult, eighteen

TORIA – White woman, young adult, eighteen

ASHA – White woman, young adult, eighteen

JUSTIN – Black man, young adult, eighteen

COLIN – White man, young adult, eighteen

DE'ANDRE – Black man, young adult, sixteen

PRINCIPAL MILLER – any race, man or woman, can be a voice-over or offstage

DA – White man or woman, can be a voice-over or offstage

STUDENTS – any races, young adults

AUTHOR'S NOTES

This play is built on the idea of devised production. What this means is that the work on the page is really only half, and the ensemble is intended, along with the director, to put their own signature on the work in a more defined and pronounced way. The ensemble builds the pictures (i.e. the tree) out of their bodies or creative maneuvering.

The movement that De'Andre does can be dance or other inspired movement. But Hip-Hop-inspired, always.

Most importantly, the ensemble of miscellaneous characters (i.e. Students, Principal, DA, Student Body, etc.) can be assigned as suggested in the parentheses (based on smaller productions), or reassigned as a larger and more ensemble cast. The only thing that is pertinent is that the main scenes and monologues assigned to the core students (Raylynn, De'Andre, Colin, Justin, Asha, and Toria) remain intact for the story to work. All places where their names are written in parenthesis can be reassigned as needed.

Also important: The language of this play should drive. There is a rhythm to it that flows and moves as poetry. As much as possible, there should be few, if any, breaks between lines or within passages of text. Let it flow.

(//) represents a place for interruption, where the next character's line should begin. The first character does not stop their line with the interruption. In *Survival Code*, (/) represents a break in rhythm, not a pause or interruption. It helps to capture the flow of the rap.

*This story is inspired by a series of incidents, media reporting, and
social action in Jena, Louisiana in 2007.*

I dedicate this work to the resilient young men who make up the Jena 6.

The Student Body

*(An arrangement of multi-character voices.
Performed as a continuous piece of text, but staged
as separate characters. The following lines can be
distributed as suggested, or re-assigned to various
ensemble members of the cast.)*

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).

It's a hot day in October

STUDENT (TORIA).

Hot hot

STUDENT (ASHA).

Real hot

STUDENT (JUSTIN).

Melt butter on the street – hot

STUDENT (COLIN).

Walkin' over coals with bare feet hot

STUDENT (DE'ANDRE).

Heads noddin' to a hype beat hot

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).

It's just hot

STUDENT.

Hot hot

STUDENT (JUSTIN).

“We ain't got no race problems here” –

ALL STUDENTS.

NOT

STUDENT (ASHA).

“This ain't 'bout what you thank” –

ALL STUDENTS.

NOT

STUDENT (TORIA).

“This was all just a prank” –

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).

NOT

STUDENT (JUSTIN).

It’s just hot

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).

Hot hot

STUDENT (TORIA).

Anger rising in your throat hot

STUDENT (ASHA).

Belly feelin’ full of smoke hot

STUDENT (COLIN).

So frustrated you could choke hot

STUDENT (DE’ANDRE).

It’s just hot

ALL STUDENTS.

Hot hot

STUDENT (JUSTIN).

Air so still there ain’t no breeze

STUDENT (ASHA).

Unmowed grass up to your knees

STUDENT (TORIA).

Books and papers and eighty degrees

ALL STUDENTS.

Only Whites sit at this tree

STUDENT (COLIN).

Whole town stuck in 1960

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).

Ain’t the way it ought to be

STUDENT (JUSTIN).

But that’s the way it is

STUDENT (TORIA).

Ain’t the way it ought to be

STUDENT (ASHA).

But that's the way it is

STUDENT (DE'ANDRE).

Until something's gotta give

STUDENT (JUSTIN).

'Til then we just stay hot

STUDENT (COLIN).

Too hot

ALL STUDENTS.

Hot hot

STUDENT (DE'ANDRE).

Have not

ALL STUDENTS.

Hot hot

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).

Want not

ALL STUDENTS.

Hot hot

STUDENT (JUSTIN).

Live not

ALL STUDENTS.

Hot hot

STUDENT (ASHA).

It's just hot

STUDENT (COLIN).

So damn hot

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).

Feelin' like summer when we in the fall

STUDENT (DE'ANDRE).

Air conditionin' at the mall

STUDENT (RAYLYNN).

Hot

STUDENT (ASHA).

Hot

ALL STUDENTS.

Hot day in October...

(Lights shift.)

Raylynn's Reflection

(Lights up on RAYLYNN.)

RAYLYNN. You know what day today is? – Today a hot as hell day at school. Today the day my ten-page paper in Miss Lawson's class is due and I over-wrote and have eleven. My brother say I'm the only person he know do MO' homework than I'm given. Today I don't care what's on the lunch menu cuz I probly ain't eatin' it no way. Today different. Today got a weight to it. Today makes three years since my mama passed. Today I woke up to the sound of my daddy cryin', even though he pretended like he wunn't. Today my brother walked outta the house befo' breakfast was finished talkin' 'bout he wunn't hungry. Today I ate extra flapjacks just so I wouldn't waste no food cuz Mama used to hate that. Today gonna mean somethin' different, y'heard. Today can't be like no other day. Today gotta count for somethin'.

(Beat.)

You got to live life on the edge. That's what Mama always say. Used to. Break a rule or ten so you remember ain't nothin' more powerful than your own will. People with no will apathetic. That's what she say. Apathy. Ain't nothin' worse than it. Gotta have passion. Even if it's fo' sellin' drugs. At least it's activity. You can always take that energy and turn it into somethin' productive. But just sittin' back and suckin' up air and not participatin' in the world around you – ain't nothin' mo' selfish than that. I'm gon' participate. Got to.

(Beat.)

Today is hotter than the devil's ass. Today is the first day of Autumn Equinox. Today the trees is all full of color. Today a day fo' change. Today I'm gon break a rule. Or ten. To stamp out apathy.

(Beat.)

Today I'm announcing my decision to run for class president. Rule break number one.

(Shift.)

D Day

(RAYLYNN and ASHA in front of the school on the lawn.)

(A White girl sits under the tree and reads a book.)

RAYLYNN. Hot as hell. Need some shade.

ASHA. You oughta stick to it.

RAYLYNN. Ain't got no support.

ASHA. Forget about support. Gotta gain support. Just go out for it Ray.

RAYLYNN. Ain't never been one befo'.

ASHA. Class president? Been one every year since the school opened!

RAYLYNN. Never one look like me.

ASHA. Whassitmatter – look like you! Be one like you now. Who care 'bout what it ain't never been. Whassitmatter?

RAYLYNN. Maybe don't matter. Maybe do. Be a uphill battle to win this race. (*Shift.*) Why folk even say that anyway? Uphill. Instead of what – a downhill battle?

ASHA. It's a stupid saying. Whoever made it up was probably dumber than Alice Miller in fifth period Econ.

RAYLYNN. You see how she was lookin' at me when I said I might run?

ASHA. Alice Miller?

RAYLYNN. Looked at me sideways and all sorts a crooked.

ASHA. Alice Miller is dumber than rocks.

RAYLYNN. Like I smelled un-showered or rotten-egg-like or somethin'.

ASHA. Like unwashed drawers or somethin'?

RAYLYNN. Asha, I'm serious.

ASHA. Or like Jesse's breath after eatin' pork rinds.

RAYLYNN. I mean really serious.

ASHA. His breath be smellin' bad after them rinds though – don't it?

RAYLYNN. It do.

ASHA. Like Lawd boy! What kinda hot sauce do you put on them thangs? Smell like shitfire and hell comin' outta his mouth!

RAYLYNN. He still got the support of the whole football team. That's how he's even in the race. And they gonna be hard to win over. Got some kinda code of brotherhood or somethin' 'tween 'em. Even for the stupidest thang. They stick by each other like flies to horseshit. And it don't get horseshittier than Jesse, ya heard me.

ASHA. Well I'm datin' E-Money now so maybe I can get 'im to sway 'em to your side.

RAYLYNN. You datin' E? Since when?

ASHA. Since the other day when he told me I got a nice ass for a White girl.

RAYLYNN. He say that to you?!

ASHA. In front of half the team.

RAYLYNN. And you ain't smack him across his face? I woulda smacked him across his face.

ASHA. I did. And then I handed him my cell number.

RAYLYNN. What you do that for?

ASHA. I like a man with honesty.

RAYLYNN. That ain't honesty. That's disrespect.

ASHA. I thank disrespect is thankin' it and not sayin' nothin'. If you thank I got a nice ass, just say so. Get all the particulars outta the way. That's what I like.

RAYLYNN. You like it cuz you crazy.

ASHA. I like it cuz it's true. I got a great ass.

(DE'ANDRE runs on, catching a football being tossed to him.)

DE'ANDRE. *(Yelling offstage.)* Shut up maine! Thas why yo' mama smell like cornchips and toe jam!

(He comes sloppily over to RAYLYNN and ASHA and playfully puts his arm around RAYLYNN.)

Whaddup big sis.

RAYLYNN. Boy get offa me. You smell like testosterone and dollar-sto' cologne.

DE'ANDRE. All the shawties love my cologne.

RAYLYNN. All the shawties in yo' head.

DE'ANDRE. Gimme some chips.

RAYLYNN. Ain't got no chips.

DE'ANDRE. You got somethin'. I know you ain't eat all them Cheetos you had earlier.

(RAYLYNN digs in her bag and pulls out a bag of Cheetos. She throws it at DE'ANDRE.)

(ASHA pulls out a nail file and begins busying herself – preoccupied.)

RAYLYNN. Here fool. Go'on get outta my face.

DE'ANDRE. Whaddup woadie?

ASHA. Whaddup D.

RAYLYNN. De'Andre why you botherin' us? Ain't you got practice right now?

DE'ANDRE. Naw. Practice cancelled for today.

ASHA. Cancelled for what? E ain't tell me it was cancelled.

DE'ANDRE. Ain't go into details. Sign on the locker room do' [*door*] just say it cancelled. But it must be somethin' kinda serious. We got a game next week and Coach been vexed tryin' to get us in shape. He don't neva just be cancellin'.

RAYLYNN. Well where you headin' now?

DE'ANDRE. Goin' over Derrick house fo' a bit. That's where e'erbody gon' chill.

RAYLYNN. What about later? Wit' Daddy. 'Spose to go'on down to the site –

DE'ANDRE. Ain't talkin' 'bout none of that right now.

RAYLYNN. You ain't gonna go?

DE'ANDRE. Ain't talkin' 'bout none of that right now. That what ya'll wanna do, ya'll go 'head on. But I ain't goin' to no graveyard.

RAYLYNN. But what about Daddy –

DE'ANDRE. (*Ignoring RAYLYNN.*) Ay dere' Asha, E said to tell you he gon' be at Derrick's.

ASHA. What he tell you to tell me that for? He can't speak for himself?

DE'ANDRE. I 'ono.

ASHA. Tell him I don't be takin' no second-hand messages. He know how to text me.

DE'ANDRE. Whateva. Just tellin' what I know.

RAYLYNN. What I'm gon' tell Daddy? What you want me to say 'bout why you not comin' wit' us...even though you knowin' what it mean to 'im?

DE'ANDRE. Say whateva you want. You an' him can hold onto them bad memories 'til they make you crazy. I can't do it no mo'.

RAYLYNN. Ain't all bad memories.

DE'ANDRE. Maybe not to you...

(DE'ANDRE turns to walk away.)

Tell Daddy I be home lata. Catch you when I catch you.

(DE'ANDRE tosses his ball up into the air, catches it, and disappears.)

(RAYLYNN looks after her brother for a moment.)

(RAYLYNN turns her gaze on the tree. ASHA pulls out a compact and is now preoccupied with refreshing her makeup.)

ASHA. (*Mumbling to herself.*) Sending me stupid messages. What am I? Some groupie?

RAYLYNN. You know what day today is?

ASHA. What you mean?

(Beat.)

RAYLYNN. Nevermind.

(RAYLYNN keeps her gaze on the tree. And the students sitting underneath.)

ASHA. You know what you oughta do?

RAYLYNN. Sun is killin' me right now.

ASHA. Start a list of slogans. You be real good at it with all them lofty ways you be thankin'.

RAYLYNN. I hate slogans.

ASHA. Every candidate got slogans.

RAYLYNN. 'Cept me. Slogans ain't for me. Sound like bullshit and lies. That's all.

ASHA. Ain't got to be lies. You make it sound like poetry.

RAYLYNN. Poetry can sound pretty and still be a lie. No slogans.

ASHA. You just got to see it. Can't have no campaign without slogans. I'm gon' come up with somethin' and show it to you on a poster.

RAYLYNN. Ain't sho 'bout no poster –

ASHA. – Just trust me.

(RAYLYNN turns her attention toward the tree again.)

RAYLYNN. You notice how it always been the same kinda people sittin' under that tree? Neva nobody different?

ASHA. I ain't neva really paid attention.

RAYLYNN. Ain't never seen nobody like me sittin' under that tree. Ain't never been nobody like me run for class president. You ever look up one day and realize you been doin' the same thing for so long, you ain't even sure why? Like you just followin' rules and ain't never stop to question – why it's a rule in the first place?

ASHA. I'ono. Maybe.

RAYLYNN. Today feel like a different kinda day. Don't it?

ASHA. Different how?

RAYLYNN. New rules-kinda different.

ASHA. What you talkin'?

RAYLYNN. I'm gon' get me some shade.

ASHA. What for? Don't go over there. Ain't nothin' but a bunch of snobs and cliques sit under that tree.

RAYLYNN. And today...me too.

(RAYLYNN walks slowly but decisively over to the tree. ASHA watches with terror.)

(The shade of the tree washes over RAYLYNN. All students and onlookers are illuminated in a moment of stillness. Shock. Disgust.)

Rule break number two.

(Sound of a school bell ringing.)

The Cutting Room

*(Lights up on TORIA and JUSTIN in a classroom.
There are press materials all around in prep for the
school paper.)*

TORIA. That's a good article. That's a good fuckin' article.
Why everytime I submit somethin' do you have to shit
on it Justin?

JUSTIN. It's too long.

TONIA. Long and good.

JUSTIN. Doesn't matter how good it is. It's too long.

TORIA. Then tell me where to edit it. I can take constructive
criticism.

JUSTIN. No you can't.

TORIA. Don't tell me I can't. I'm tellin' you I can!

JUSTIN. You can't. You suck at criticism.

TORIA. Says who?

JUSTIN. Says Melissa Bordeaux, our most recent story editor
to quit. Says JoAnn Seaver before that. Says Michael
Hendrix and Barry Stevens and Collen Smith –

TORIA. This is a crock a shit.

JUSTIN. And you cuss too much.

TORIA. Like fuck I do!

JUSTIN. Had to use so many symbols to bleep out your
language in that last article, it looked like the whole
thing was written in alien code.

TORIA. It was about freedom of speech. I was cussing to
make a point.

JUSTIN. Well your point almost got our whole edition
shut down and nearly got us all put on probation. I
promised Principle Miller I was going to do a better job
at monitoring proper content for this paper and I'm
sticking to my word.

TORIA. Justin, I'm tryin' to be a journalist. In real life. Do
you get that?

JUSTIN. I don't see what this has to –

TORIA. In real life! Not in some pretend lil' high school basement where the most interesting thang in print is whether or not we're having fake horsemeat on the lunch menu or who in God's name among the popular and stuck-up is gonna win Prom King and Queen. I am not interested in whether or not the auditorium gets a fresh coat of paint before December or whether or not the football team wins a single game this year. I am not interested in these pathetic little trifles that make up our sad existence as sheltered brats this side of the Mason-Dixon line. I am interested in the true art of journalism. I want to tell the stories everybody else at this school and in this town is too pussy to cover –

JUSTIN. Jesus Toria –

TORIA. Like how many girls at this school have covered up their abortions because their parents are too primitive to allow a sex-ed course that isn't taught by eighty-year-old Mrs. Wellsley who wouldn't know how to model puttin' on a condom if she had a ten-foot penis statue right in front of her –

JUSTIN. God Toria!!

TORIA. Or how about the number of boys on the football team who'd rather be dating each other than all the girls they swap semen with –

JUSTIN. Toria seriously!

TORIA. – but because we're so anti-homo they take it out on every chick at Cedar High and that's why the number of relationship violence is like – sky high right now –

JUSTIN. You don't have the stats to prove that.

TORIA. I could get them.

JUSTIN. But you don't have 'em –

TORIA. Or like how about the fact that none of the Black students on campus hardly ever hang out with any of the White students on campus or vice versa because we're all a bunch of racist pricks –

JUSTIN. Toria, enough!

TORIA. You know I'm tellin' the truth.

JUSTIN. It's a student paper. A STUDENT PAPER. We're not trying to change the world or disrupt capitalism or bring down the government. We're just giving people something interesting to read while they're waiting on the bus or have a free period or somethin'.

TORIA. What's our readership Justin?

JUSTIN. I'm not doin' this now. I've got to finish getting this layout done.

TORIA. Is it still ten people? Or did we drop to five this month?

JUSTIN. You know I'm working on a new layout to increase our popularity.

TORIA. (*Mocking him.*) OH! Gee! A new layout! That's what's gonna save our dyin' paper! While every other delusional student at this school is networkin' on Facebook or bloggin' about what colleges they wanna go to, you're workin' on some new colors for the layout. You're changin' the font from Times New Roman to Comic Sans and that's really gonna make everybody lose their shit and run to pick up a fuckin' paper!

JUSTIN. I don't have time for this Toria.

TORIA. Just print my fuckin' article.

JUSTIN. It's about where to get good birth control. Do you seriously think I can print that?

TORIA. It's not just about that – it's about protecting yourself and having a healthy teen sex life. Did you even read it carefully? Or did you get so excited at the word "birth control" that you skeeted on yourself before you could finish?

JUSTIN. You know what Toria? I'm the editor now. I'm the editor and the copier and the publisher and everythang else this dyin' paper needs, and I'm also the one student who hasn't stopped talkin' to you for basically everythang because you're so obviously annoyin'. So write another damn article or else walk cuz I ain't got the time to argue with you no more about it.

(JUSTIN turns away from TORIA and continues working on his layout.)

(A defeated TORIA is silent for a moment.)

TORIA. (Meekly.) It's our senior year.

JUSTIN. I know.

TORIA. I want to cover somethin' amazin'. Just once. Just to leave my handprint here, y'know? You've got to understand what that means. Aren't you sick of just bein' invisible at this place?

JUSTIN. Who say I'm invisible?

TORIA. Oh Justin, please. You're more invisible than me. And I'm damn near a ghost.

(Shift.)

I don't want this year to be like every other one, y'know? Where folks like us get lost forever into this abyss of nobodies because we're the only ones who know we're alive. Still waitin' on this place to give back, y'know? These past three years I ain't done nothin' but give and give to this hellhole, and ain't hardly reaped nothin'. But I decided this year...I can. Finally find a purpose for what I am at this school. I'm an investigator. And I can't leave this year without fully definin' what I am. This is the year I can etch myself into stone. Be a journalist. That's what I want Justin. Don't you?

JUSTIN. Maybe.

TORIA. Then let me have a shot to break the rules a lil' bit. Write somethin' excitin'.

JUSTIN. Can't do birth control. Got to answer to too many people. They'll shut it down.

TORIA. Goddamn Justin.

JUSTIN. But if you can find another topic 'fore I go to print in three days, I promise to give it a fair read.

TORIA. So you admit you stopped at "birth control"?

JUSTIN. Three days Toria. Go get your ballsy story and keep it under two thousand words. And it better fit in the new layout.

TORIA. You ain't sayin' nothin' but a word.

(Lights shift.)

The First Vote

(In the school hallway. COLIN and RAYLYNN are next to each other at their lockers.)

RAYLYNN. You on the football team?

(COLIN looks around himself. Realizing she's talking to him, he responds cautiously.)

COLIN. Yeah.

RAYLYNN. Senior this year?

(Again, and with a little surprise, he responds cautiously.)

COLIN. Yeah. So.

RAYLYNN. Transfer student, right?

COLIN. Yeah. So.

RAYLYNN. Okay. Cool.

(COLIN looks at RAYLYNN stoically. They both go back to their locker business.)

It's like three of ya'll this year. Transfer students.

COLIN. I know.

RAYLYNN. Cool.

(Beat.)

My brother play on the team too. Runnin' back.
De'Andre.

COLIN. He a junior.

RAYLYNN. Thas him.

COLIN. He's good.

RAYLYNN. Guess so.

COLIN. Big ego.

RAYLYNN. Thas him. What about you?

COLIN. Quarterback.

RAYLYNN. Thas one of the good ones, right?

COLIN. You don't know the game?

RAYLYNN. Not much. Just enough to scream touchdown when they kick the ball through the H lookin' thang.

COLIN. Naw that ain't a...nevermind.

RAYLYNN. Football ain't my kinda thang. Just show up for D. Sometimes. When he ain't gettin' on my nerves.

COLIN. ...

(Smiles.)

...

RAYLYNN. Class was kinda crazy today, right?

COLIN. Yeah.

RAYLYNN. Miss Hooper and them pop quizzes.

COLIN. She give 'em a lot?

RAYLYNN. Only when she in a bad mood. Like if she had a bad date the night befo o' somethin'. But you can sometimes tell when she 'bout to go out that night. She come to school wearin' them skinny jeans that she can't hardly fit into. You see her dressin' that way, you know you betta study up on yo' notes lata on. Almost all a her dates be bad. Can't catch a man if she put silk panties on a fishin' line. Don't nobody wanna put up with alla her personality. Sound of her voice make me wanna cut my ears off most of the time.

COLIN. It real high-pitched and squeaky.

RAYLYNN. I rather get run over by a truck than listen to her talk all night.

COLIN. Mack truck.

RAYLYNN. Exactly.

(They laugh faintly for a moment.)

(Beat.)

You ain't like... You don't seem like no football player.

COLIN. What you meanin' by that?

RAYLYNN. Ain't meanin' nothin' bad. Just way we talkin' right now. Can't get most of 'em to say two words to me, 'less they askin' 'bout D. But you just got...ease or somethin'.

(Pause.)

COLIN. You the first person that done really...

RAYLYNN. What's that?

COLIN. Nevermind.

(Another pause.)

RAYLYNN. I was wonderin'...

COLIN. Yeah?

RAYLYNN. If you was plannin' on votin' on class president.
Like, if you had made up yo' mind yet?

COLIN. Ain't really thought 'bout it. Got too much other
stuff on the brain.

RAYLYNN. Oh.

(Pause.)

Well if you get to thinkin' 'bout it...maybe you vote for
me. I'm runnin'.

COLIN. Is you?

RAYLYNN. I am.

COLIN. How come?

RAYLYNN. It's just time.

(Pause.)

COLIN. Yeah – maybe...

*(ASHA enters the hallway. Approaches RAYLYNN
urgently.)*

ASHA. Where you been at? Been lookin' for you for like ten
minutes.

RAYLYNN. Been right here.

ASHA. You ain't heard??

RAYLYNN. Heard 'bout what?

ASHA. Lawd, girl... Shit done hit the fan. After you went
and sat under that snob tree yesterday, they say two
other ones done it too.

RAYLYNN. Other ones like who?

ASHA. You know what I'm sayin'. Ones like us.

RAYLYNN. Like us?

ASHA. Black, fool!

RAYLYNN. Asha – yo' ass ain't hardly –

ASHA. And now shit done hit the fan.

RAYLYNN. What kinda shit?

ASHA. You got to come...you got to come see...

(ASHA begins pulling RAYLYNN off. She tries to pull away.)

(RAYLYNN snatches free for one sec. Looks back at COLIN.)

RAYLYNN. I'm Raylynn. Or you can call me Ray. That's who to vote fo'.

COLIN. I'm Colin. See you...

(ASHA pulls RAYLYNN off.)

(COLIN looks after them for a second.)

(Shift.)

Willie Lynch

(A suite.)

(Music.)

(Movement.)

(The staging/embodiment of three nooses being tied to a tree begins to happen as the following dialogue occurs.)

JUSTIN. So it went somethin' like this. School assembly the other day. New transfer student. Didn't know the ropes. Asked some kinda question. 'Bout that tree. That huge oak tree sit in the front of our school yard. Call it "Ol' Devoted" cuz of how long she been planted there and never hacked or diseased. Got years of carvings and marks on it. Most folk 'round here know to just walk past it and leave it be. Know how things is at this school. These people eat with these people. Those people eat with those. These folk hang out with these folk. Those folk hang out with those. Ain't nobody got no problems with it. Ain't worth questionin'. What's the use? It ain't hurtin' nobody. Folk like who they like. Wanna be near who they wanna be near. And just so happen that folk like to be around other folk they got stuff in common with. That's just what it be. Now everybody know that the tree out front – "Ol' Devoted" just be a hang-out spot for some of them cliques. But one of them new transfer students come down from North Carolina. Ain't know what it's like down here in Louisiana. Ask this question in front of the whole school. Ask –

STUDENT (DE'ANDRE). Can only White people sit under that tree out front?

STUDENT (TORIA). He was tryin' to start trouble.

STUDENT (ASHA). They always tryin' to start trouble.

STUDENT (COLIN). Didn't sound like trouble to me.

STUDENT (RAYLYNN). Was a fair question to ask.

JUSTIN. And then the student got taken out of the assembly. Got reprimanded by half the faculty for bein' disruptive. But later that day, this one senior got somethin' in her head about Ol' Devoted. Say that senior –

RAYLYNN. They call me Ray.

JUSTIN. – announced she's running for class president. Say she just felt fed up yesterday or maybe like some kinda martyr. Who knows? Say she went over to where that tree was and sat down underneath it. Call it gettin' some shade. Then say after while, two other students done went over...maybe followin' her lead. Three Black students sittin' under a tree that everybody else know be a hangout for these cliques.

TORIA. White cliques.

JUSTIN. And now today...whole school is in an uproar. Come out to the yard at lunchtime, and that's when everybody see. Three nooses hangin' on the branches of that great oak tree.

RAYLYNN. Three nooses.

COLIN. Three nooses.

ASHA. That's what everybody see.

JUSTIN. Three nooses hangin' on the branches of that great oak tree.

(The music increases.)

(The symbol of the tree is illuminated.)

(The symbol of the nooses rocking back and forth.)

(RAYLYNN is illuminated among the crowd. She stares at the tree. At the nooses.)

(The sound of laughter.)

STUDENT VOICES (ASHA & TORI). It was just a prank.

STUDENT (COLIN). What's the big deal?

RAYLYNN. *(In disbelief.)* Nooses. Hangin'. Like vines...

JUSTIN. And it went just like that. That's what the story is.

(The image of the nooses on the tree remains, but less dominant. The lights are softened.)

(Lights illuminate TORIA, who now sits before JUSTIN. She has joined his realistic world.)

TORIA. And you're gonna let me write it?

JUSTIN. With just the facts. Yes.

TORIA. What facts? Are there really just facts to this? Or lots of shades of gray here, Justin?

JUSTIN. Toria, you wanted to do an interesting story that we can print in the paper. I'm giving you an interesting story.

TORIA. So I'll talk to some folks. Get their side of the scoop. Find out why somebody would do somethin' so racist –

JUSTIN. Not racist, Toria. You're puttin' too much opinion on it. They're just callin' it a prank.

TORIA. A prank?

JUSTIN. That's what Principle Miller is callin' it –

TORIA. It's nooses, Justin.

JUSTIN. It's rope hangin' from a tree, Toria. Rodeo rope.

TORIA. We ain't got no rodeo teams here, Justin!

JUSTIN. Toria, look. I'm not gonna argue with you. I'm doin' what I promised. I'm givin' you a story to cover.

TORIA. 'Cept you don't want me to really cover it.

JUSTIN. I just want you to do what you s'posed to do as any good journalist would. Be objective. Don't get carried away with your feelins. Just state the facts.

TORIA. Feelins is what makes good writin', Justin. The rest ain't nothin' but empty words on paper.

(Shift.)

Don't you got no feelin' 'bout alla this yaself?

JUSTIN. What's that 'spose ta mean?

TORIA. Seein' them ropes danglin' from that tree like...

(Beat.)

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