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SF PERUSALS

Harriet Jacobs

Lydia R. Diamond

Inspired by
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
by Harriet Jacobs

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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www.SamuelFrench.com
www.SamuelFrench-London.co.uk

FOR PRODUCTION ENQUIRIES

UNITED STATES AND CANADA
Info@SamuelFrench.com
1-866-598-8449

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HARRIET JACOBS was commissioned and given its world premiere by Steppenwolf Theatre Company (Martha Lavey, Artistic Director; David Hawkanson, Executive Director) in Chicago, Illinois on February 11, 2008. The performance was directed by Hallie Gordon, with sets by Collette Pollard, costumes by Ana Kuzmanic, lights by J.R. Lederle, sound by Victoria Delorio, original music by McKinley Johnson, choreography by Lisa Johnson-Willingham, and dramaturgy by Jocelyn Prince. The Stage Manager was Calyn P. Swain. The cast was as follows:

HARRIET JACOBS. . . . . Nambi E. Kelly
GRANDMA. . . . . Celeste Williams
MARY/ENSEMBLE FEMALE . . . . . Leslie Ann Sheppard
TOM/ENSEMBLE MALE . . . . . Christoph Horton Abiel
MAS. NORCOM/ ENSEMBLE . . . . . Kenn E. Head
MS. NORCOM/ ENSEMBLE . . . . . Genevieve Ven Johnson
SAMUEL TREADWELL SAWYER . . . . . Sean Walton
JOSHUA/ENSEMBLE MALE . . . . . Errón Jay

***HARRIET JACOB*S** was first presented as a staged reading in May 2006 at the Kennedy Center, as part of New Visions/New Voices 2006.

HARRIET JACOBS was first performed in the United Kingdom on December 1, 2006 as a rehearsed reading at The Old Vic Theatre produced by Old Vic New Voices.

CHARACTERS

Note: All roles must be cast with black actors.

HARRIET JACOBS – (14-19) The author of the first published slave narrative. Harriet possesses an intelligence and centeredness beyond her years. These traits are equally attributable to the strength that surely any enslaved person must have had to endure, and a personal wisdom and acuity passed down from insightful parents and grandparents. Harriet has a social savviness, a dexterity that serves her well with her family, peers, and slave-owners. She's very educated, and slips easily between a more casual slave vernacular of the time to the formal language used in her writing, and when addressing the audience. She is not "putting this on" or "talking proper"; she is an adept and unconscious "code-switcher." Historically Harriet is described as having light brown skin and dark eyes. She is the daughter of two bi-racial parents. She is pretty, but does not embrace nor consciously exploit her looks. In her setting, they are more often a liability than a blessing and she is aware of this.

GRANDMA – Well-liked, free grandmother.

ENSEMBLE (FEMALE):

MARY – African American. 15. In awe of and dangerously jealous of Harriet. A house servant and field hand, and has fewer of Harriet's social and language graces.

CHARLOTTE

Various other roles.

ENSEMBLE (MALE):

TOM – African American, 18. Handsome, strong, good natured, charismatic. He loves Harriet.

HAROLD

Various other roles.

ENSEMBLE (MALE) / MAS. NORCOM – 50-65. The White Master. The town doctor, he carries himself with a confident swagger. He fancies himself a Godly, family man. (Avoid casting him as the obvious villain.) Various other roles.

ENSEMBLE (FEMALE) / MS. NORCOM – The White Mistress. 27. A faded flower. Once beautiful and carefree, she is a victim of her environment. She is hateful toward her female slaves and wary of her husband. She has born a child a year since her marriage at 17. Various other roles.

SAMUEL TREADWELL SAWYER –White Lawyer. 30s. From a prestigious family. He is intrigued by Harriet's intellect, and physically attracted to her. He is probably not "in love" with her.

ENSEMBLE (MALE) / JOSHUA – 61. A strong-willed field hand and various other roles.

CHILDREN – Harriet's children – Preferably children but could be played by adult ensemble. They are not necessarily required to speak.

A Quick Note from the Playwright.

So, there's something I wish to tell you. Something I've learned while continually revising through many early rehearsal processes, workshops, and sessions with brilliant dramaturgs, friends, and colleagues.

Every time I enter a new rehearsal process I am taken by how incredibly emotionally challenging it is to inhabit the people, feelings and customs of this obscene institution (slavery). This is what theatre artists do, and while we're absolutely up to the task, because we have been trained to do our homework, be open, be present, be vulnerable, sensitive, and precise, it can still be daunting.

Through the writing of this piece, I have felt sometimes so utterly inadequate. How do I presume to honor this reality that my ancestors lived? How can I, a consumer of so many infantilized, exoticized, romanticized, sanitized images of slavery, do justice to the portion of Harriet Jacobs' remarkable life that I wish to share with you?

And this is what I have learned. I am obligated to try. I'm a playwright and when there is a story to tell, I am compelled to tell it. I want Harriet Jacobs to exist, theatrically, alongside Anne Frank and Joan of Arc, because she deserves to. Because young and old, we need her.

This is also what I have learned. It is hard not to drown in the presumed misery of it all, before cracking the book open, before the house lights even come down.

When you read this play, act this play, direct or produce this play, try not to dwell only in the pain of it. Try, I think, to humbly acknowledge that we bring to it what we do, through the perspectives that we have, whether you agree that it is a slightly skewed perspective or not, and then put that aside and live in the present I've tried to create.

In her book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Ms. Jacobs works to articulate to us the horrors of slavery. In my play, I work to articulate the psychological conundrum of trying to put words to that which is unspeakable. I work to celebrate the humanity that lived between and around the pain. That my ancestors who were enslaved people, lived and cried, and loved and laughed, agitated and manipulated, more fully aware of their own predicament than we'll ever be, but always human and always with a will to live.

Honor, please, the humor in this play, where there is humor. Honor the burgeoning affections where they exist. The familial love where it lives. Try not to plod through it with a guilty, pained, apologetic, pitying, angry, contemporary sensibility – that's too easy. Let it live please, from moment to moment, from laughs to tears, as we live life, walking through the murk of our personal and societal contradictions. We owe it to Ms. Jacobs. We owe it to the ancestors.

ACT I

Scene One

(A light reveals a crude wooden shed, about eight feet high. The shed has only the suggestion of walls and a roughly hewn slanted roof, it is only slightly larger than the space under a conference room table.)

*(***TWO MALE CAST MEMBERS** *unlatch the sides of the structure's roof, to reveal* **HARRIET***, lying on her stomach, writing by candlelight in the small space, now indicated by a skeletal frame.)*

(The candle goes out. Blackness.)

HARRIET. It is a dark that is darker than light. *(***HARRIET** *strikes a match, lights candle, writes furiously, candle blows out. Darkness.)* Blacker even than that. *(***HARRIET** *lights candle again, resumes writing. After a moment she notices audience.)* Today black and small and damp and cold. Tomorrow maybe hot and dry. Full of splinters that bite, and mites that bite, and vermin that bite. Are you there? I am never sure. I see faces in my darkness… until I am alone, again.

*(***HARRIET** *climbs down the ladder, and crosses to center.)*

I must explain. *(***HARRIET** *rolls up her sleeve.)* If you would understand. Please. I try to understand myself. This reality that has brought me to, this reality. I try to make sense of it, and so I ask that you try as well. I fear that

if I say to you that what I experienced under the cruel hand of slavery was unspeakable… I fear that you would incline your heads a bit to the left or the right and say, "Yes, I understand, poor girl," and think no more of it. I fear more that you might throw your head back in exasperation and say, "Tell us something we have not already heard." I promise, I shall try. We shall all try.

(Music begins. Voices of the ensemble begin humming an a cappella spiritual. [Spirituals should be appropiate to the 1800s.])

I promise that you may believe you have heard it, you may believe you know this, and I suggest that it is slightly beyond knowing, because still, I hear the stories, I live the stories and I do not yet understand. *(beat)* This is the flesh. My flesh. My feet. My head. My heart. It is all I have to offer. It is all we have to offer.

*(***MALE ENSEMBLE** *members emerge from the shadows, transforming the austere stage into* **GRANDMOTHER***'s kitchen.)*

I have misspoken. Not ours. Not my flesh. Not my body. Even now, not mine. *(touching her body) (beat)* My *soul.* This is mine. This has always been mine. My heart, my soul, this is what I wish to share. With you.

(Light rises on an old lady, kneading bread on a small table by a hearth. **HARRIET***'s* **GRANDMOTHER***…)*

GRANDMA. Who are you talkin' to?

HARRIET. To whom am I talking Grandma…

GRANDMA. I am sure my granddaughter is not tellin' *me* how to speak…

HARRIET. I'm jes teasing with you.

GRANDMA. *(laughing)* Better be… 'cause seems to me, I'm the one taught you, in your diapers, to say your first words…so, who were you talkin' to? …

HARRIET. Oh, I was just…just thinking.

GRANDMA. Well stop that. Life *is*. We pray to the Lord for deliverance, love the people before us whom we must love, wipe our butts, roll up our sleeves and work. No time for thinking.

HARRIET. *(laughing)* Wipe our butts? What's gotten into you?

GRANDMA. Little bit of the devil today I s'pose. Did I add the leavening?

HARRIET. Probably.

GRANDMA. Take that batch out, they smell ready.

*(***HARRIET** *moves to look out of the window.)*

HARRIET. It's getting late…

GRANDMA. They burning…

HARRIET. *(removing the crackers)* She'll have my hide.

GRANDMA. So take the Mistress a package of warm crackers. Tell her Grandmother wouldn't let you leave 'fore they come out. How many babies she drop, one a year fo de lass six years? Tell her maybe if she cross her legs and eat a cracker, wouldn't be in that condition all the time.

*(***HARRIET***'s removing crackers from a cookie sheet as they speak.)*

HARRIET. If it's just the same to you, I think I won't tell her the latter.

GRANDMA. The latter? You need to watch it with the fancy talk.

HARRIET. I speak from my heart, and so, if my heart is smarter than my master's I cannot help it, and I will not apologize for it.

GRANDMA. Just tell me this. How he have time to run after skirt like he do…? Got her always in the family way, seem he gettin' enough where he lay.

HARRIET. Grandmother stop…

GRANDMA. That's why she so mean, can't lay down for rest for he tryin' to climb on top of her…

HARRIET. Grandmother…

GRANDMA. And if she do lay down, cain't rest proper tryin' to figure out who else he climbin' on top of. Should jes be grateful for a moment of peace on her back…

(Both laugh.)

(The door opens and two **"WHITE* LADIES"** *enter.* **GRANDMOTHER** *and* **HARRIET***'s postures change to proud deference, no hint of the mirth from the moment before. *Note: All "white" characters are represented by* **BLACK ENSEMBLE** *members, donning skeletal white hoop skirts, bonnets, top hats, white gloves, or the like.)*

WHITE LADY 1 (MARY). Molly, I need cornbread for a stuffing…

GRANDMA. *(pointedly)* Good evening to you, Ma'am.

WHITE LADY 1. Yes, of course… Good evening. *(before* **GRANDMOTHER** *can respond)* I need cornbread, the older and harder the better…

GRANDMA. Well ma'am, I jes' gave the pigs the day olds, but if you slice the new down the middle and toast it, it should serve your dressing just fine.

WHITE LADY 2. I hope you have a pass Harriet.

GRANDMA. May I offer your order as a gift, an' in exchange you drop Harriet off at the back of the Norcom estate, splainin' to the Mistress how you ran 'cross her here and asked her to help carry your load.

WHITE LADY 1. Then you will need to add a dozen vanilla wafers to the order.

GRANDMA. Yes ma'am.

WHITE LADY 1. And a couple of those petit fours.

GRANDMA. Yes ma'am.

WHITE LADY 2. Oh, well, I'll have a dozen wafers as well.

GRANDMA. Certainly. *(beat)* That'll be twelve cents.

WHITE LADY 2. Oh…

(She turns to **LADY 1**, *who shrugs.)*

Oh…

(She looks in her purse.)

Maybe just a half dozen then.

(She pays.)

GRANDMA. Harriet, get your shawl.

HARRIET. Thank you grandmother. I see you soon I hope.

GRANDMA. I love you baby. *(pulling her aside)* Please try not to let that mouth get you in trouble.

Scene Two

*(***HARRIET** *enters, carrying a heavy bucket of water and ladle on her head. A rhythmic, muffled work song is heard under the scene…* **HARRIET** *sets down the bucket, removes a small book from her pocket and begins to read.* **TOM** *walks up to her…* **HARRIET** *is startled…quickly putting the book the in her pocket.)*

HARRIET. Lord! Tom! You near scared the devil out of me…

TOM. Harriet?

HARRIET. What you doin'?

TOM. Came to see you. I see what you doin'. You need to be more careful.

HARRIET. Had a moment, thought the workers could use a bit of water. An' they wasn't here, an' I was at a real good place in the story…

(Beat. They stand and grin at one another.)

Tom.

TOM. Uh huh…

HARRIET. Naw, I ain't got nothin' to say, I jes like the way it sounds… Tom. I like the way it taste, your name in my mouth.

TOM. Seems like the name Ezekial, or Elijah might taste better in your mouth.

HARRIET. Maybe would, but I fancy Tom. *(beat – teasing)* If you think it best, I might could go lookin' for a 'Zekial or a 'Lijah to spend my time with.

TOM. Brought somethin' to show you.

*(***TOM** *pulls an ornate piece of a banister out of his bag.)*

HARRIET. It's beautiful. *(beat)* What is it?

TOM. It's the part what holds up a banister. See how sturdy but handsome to look at? I made a tool that makes it

easy to do with just one piece of wood. It's a trick in it, an' I figured out how, an' I think it's gone set me up real nice. ln jes' a few minutes all Master's cronies gone be asking to hire me out to give them somethin' so fancy.

HARRIET. It's clever. You think you get your own shop one day?

TOM. May, or maybe I jes be a carpenter for hire. Make a living, support a family someday.

*(***HARRIET** *smiles shyly, doesn't allow the tone to change to serious as* **TOM** *would have it.)*

HARRIET. *(putting her hands behind her back)* Guess which one…

TOM. I don' have time for playin games…

HARRIET. Jes guess.

*(***TOM** *points to a hand.* **HARRIET** *opens it and a ball of cotton falls out.)*

Good. Try again.

*(***HARRIET***, picks up cotton, puts her hands behind her back, and presents her fists again.)*

Twice. You get three right, I give you a kiss.

TOM. You silly.

(And again she puts her fists out.)

HARRIET. Awright then.

*(***TOM** *guesses right a third time.* **HARRIET** *kisses him, quickly on the mouth.* **TOM** *starts to leave.)*

Wait Tom. Can you keep this for me, so we can play next time I see you, even if it's not in the cotton field.

*(***TOM** *crosses back.* **HARRIET** *hands him a cotton ball.)*

Wait.

(And the other from the other fist. They both laugh heartily.)

TOM. You bad.

HARRIET. Yes I am. I most certainly am dear Tom.

(As **TOM** *exits, the work song becomes stronger, until* **HARRIET** *is surrounded by workers…the work is shown in synchronized, highly choreographed, rhythmic movement. Eventually, each worker drops his or her song to sip from the kettle and sit under a tree. When the last worker has taken a sip, and the bucket with him, the song has finally dwindled.)*

HARRIET. *(to house)* If you have not seen a cotton field, when the cotton is almost ready for picking, you have missed one of the most beautiful sights God has given us. I like to kneel in the middle of an' open field, so the cotton is just below my eyes. For as far as you can see it looks like a soft blanket, or maybe even heaven. I think God has given the south cotton because he does not often give us snow.

(Song begins, continues under:)

Sometimes I lie on my back and look at the clouds and I feel as though I just might melt on up into them. I close my eyes an' try not to think…

HAROLD (ENSEMBLE). Name's Harold. Work de fields. Forty-sebben years ole. Live here all my life. Blessed by God 'cause I never got solt away from my fambly.

HARRIET. …I am sorry for you if you have not seen a cotton field, when the cotton is almost ready for picking.

HAROLD. Only time I remember a real beatin', was day 'fore my eighteenth birfday. Took a liken' to a young girl worked next ta me in de fields.

HARRIET. Juss soff an white an' little specs of brown…
Is so soff…

HAROLD. Overseer caught us spendin' time together 'hind a tree on break. She was a good girl.

HARRIET. It truly is breathtaking. It is the one time when I feel most unburdened.

HAROLD. Weren't doin' nothing put her in a way bring shame to her or her fambly.

HARRIET. …As though my heart would float up an be one with the blue sky above me, and my body would just follow along.

HAROLD. So, dis overseer calls all de workers over…

HARRIET. Like I be light as a feather, maybe shifting this way and that, depending on the strength of the wind.

HAROLD. Make them stand all around us in a circle…

HARRIET. I close my eyes an' try to close my ears an' heart to the stories…

*(***HARRIET** *lies down…)*

HAROLD. Overseer make us get undress an tell us to do things we wouldna even done by ourselves.

HARRIET. The clouds real pretty…

HAROLD. Her mama, two aunts, an' a grandpappy had to watch me lay on top of her. An' jes then I think, don' matter what happen to me, 'cause de lord don' wan' people ackin like dis.

HARRIET. And the blue of the sky bluer than any blue…

HAROLD. An I get offa her an ah put on my pants an ah tell Overseer he gone have to finish what I start 'cause I too young to go ta hell fo his sins. An he beat me so hard I couldn't lay down t'sleep fo the pain. Only part my body not scarred to dis day from dat beatin's de bottom my feet.

HARRIET. Maybe the sky not that blue…

HAROLD. De girl, don't know what had happen' to her.

(Silence. A shift.)

HARRIET. I see the blood and sweat and tears dripping off my pretty cotton and it not so pretty. *(beat)* My work is elsewhere. Easier because I do it with a roof over my head, shoes on my feet, and the North Carolina sun off my back.

*(***HARRIET** *steps downstage and speaks to audience so fieldhands can't hear)*

HARRIET. Harder maybe 'cause I see life on the other side of misery. Harder 'cause I live under the feet of the whites who wish us to believe that we are animals.

(The light shifts, and we are inside. Bags that had been slung over arms for picking, and bundles that represented babies on backs, reveal a small chandelier, candles, aprons the women don, vests the men put on, furniture, etc. It is all hustle and bustle, as the field hands become house servants.)

HARRIET. It is quite amazing really, the inner workings of the "big house."

(rhythmic, fast tempo, work music)

I don't think Mistress Norcom would know how to keep it going were it not for the administrative skills of the head male servant, the female cook, and the various household talents of the rest of us.

(The "house" is set up as **HARRIET** *speaks. This is both a highly choreographed depiction of* **HARRIET***'s work day, and a portrayal of the cat and mouse game that goes on between* **HARRIET** *and the* **MASTER**. *The whole* **ENSEMBLE** *is involved.)*

First thing in the morning, before the sun comes up, I empty the bedpans.

*(***MASTER NORCOM** *hands* **HARRIET** *a bedpan, catches her wrist and whispers into her ear.)*

I then rekindle the fires in each and every room. I help the mistress with her morning toilette…

(A "servant" transforms into the **MISTRESS***, with Harriet's assistance as she talks.* **MASTER NORCOM** *lurks but does not approach* **HARRIET**.*)*

This includes the second removal of a bedpan, heating and carrying water for a bath, the combing and

arranging of hair, stockings, petticoats, and skirts, and the fastening of each and every button.

(As **HARRIET** *leaves the* **MISTRESS**, **MASTER NORCOM** *catches the* **MISTRESS** *by her wrist, whispers in her ear and pats her bottom, she exits,* **MASTER** *walks to* **HARRIET** *and whispers in her ear.)*

Once the house is awake I hang the rugs on the line out back and beat them. I wash and polish the floors.

*(***MASTER NORCOM** *admires her in her knelt position.)*

I clear and wash breakfast dishes. I dust each baseboard. I wash the windows. I polish the silver.

*(***MASTER NORCOM** *whispers in her ear.)*

I clear and wash the lunch dishes. I mend clothes, darn socks, and iron linens. I lay the rugs back down.

*(***MASTER NORCOM** *whispers.)*

and on and on it goes. And this is my reality. But worse than mine, today…are the stories that never stop…

(The hustle and bustle, the rhythms and movement of work continue at top speed. A very old **CHARLOTTE NORCOM [ENSEMBLE]** *steps forward, struggling with a basket of laundry. The work continues behind her.)*

CHARLOTTE. I born here. People 'member de ole master an missus as decent an' good 'cause dey went to church, hab a big, well dressed fambly, an kep' all us slaves clean an fed. Dat massa, de doctor's daddy, was always after me, had me too, 'cause I was der and dats what dey could do. Missus din' like it. She always steady lookin' at me like I her worsest enmy. Affer my third baby come out lookin' mo like de massa din de massa hisself, she come to my cabin, night affer de birf an takes him. Don' know if she kilt de baby or solt him. I think probly kilt him 'cause none de house servants

never could look me in de eyes affer dat. Still, dey kep me on, an one day she jes start ta beatin me wiff a iron kettle rod. She sho woulda beat me to my deaf, loss my leff eye dat day, but de rod broke an she had to stop long 'nuff to hear me say, "God fo sho cryin fo you today." I say, "I sho wouldn't treat a dog as you treatin' me." An she stop an commence to fall on de flo' cryin', an I comfort her. Later I get a whippin' 'cause some blood dripped on the Mistress's silk skirts. Dey long dead now.

*(***CHARLOTTE** *recedes into the working* **ENSEMBLE**. *Their efforts dwindle and they exit, as* **HARRIET** *steps forward.)*

HARRIET. The only real escape is the time I spend in the loving cocoon of Grandmother's kitchen, with the two people I love most in the world. It is not just the sweet smell of cinnamon rolls mingled with the sharp scents of sage and parsley…it is the warm embrace of unconditional love. The comfort of my steady Tom and Grandma's incomparable sass…

(As **HARRIET** *speaks she moves into* **GRANDMA***'s kitchen where* **GRANDMA** *and* **TOM** *sit eating biscuits and gravy.)*

GRANDMA. Incomparable sass…there you go again with the words.

TOM. We love your words Harriet… But, I still tryin' to see whatchu gettin' at?

HARRIET. Jess that I believe there are two kinds of mean Mistresses.

TOM. It don't matter.

HARRIET. Hear me Tom… There are Mistresses who know that this *(beat)* …

GRANDMA. What?

HARRIET. How it is…this way we live… Slavery…

GRANDMA. Lord have mercy…can't you never talk 'bout who was seen goin' into the tool shed with who…like a

normal girl. An I don't like to gossip, but it was Annie an' that boy what works in the house, they call him Red…

HARRIET. Still, I am making a point. There are those mistresses who know that this thing, this way we live, slavery, is evil and wrong and so lash out because they must convince themselves that we are animals that they might sleep at night, and hold their heads up in church on Sunday morning.

GRANDMA. *(offering* **TOM** *another biscuit)* Another biscuit Tom?

TOM. Please. Thank you ma'am.

GRANDMA. I jes noticed 'cause I think Red at least five years younger than that girl. An whatever they was doin' in the tool shed, they didn't come out the shed with not even a hammer…

HARRIET. It is as though I am not talking.

TOM. It is never as though you are not talking.

HARRIET. And then there are those Mistresses who would treat their own meanly, and so certainly would have no regard for us. An' all of them, steady getting treated mean by they own men.

TOM. And God sees only the mean behavior, and would not care why.

HARRIET. If I can distinguish between the two, certainly God can.

GRANDMA. Because you sit on the right hand of God the father almighty?

HARRIET. Because I have the thought, and the thought must be put there by God.

TOM. Now you sound like the Master. "God has told me that I must take care of you black heathens because you cannot see after yourselves."

HARRIET. I just think that the Mistress who only beats me because she is miserable, hurts when she does, and so will be judged accordingly.

GRANDMA. And so you believe you'll sit at the table of milk and honey next to the woman who beat you?

HARRIET. Oh no Granny, she'll be servin' me at the table.

TOM. *(laughing)* See this is what brings me 'round even when I may pay for it tomorrow.

GRANDMA. I thought it was my biscuits.

TOM. You thought wrong old lady.

HARRIET. Tom!

GRANDMA. *(laughing)* He's right, start thinkin' too much of yourself when folks all time tellin' you 'bout your talents.

TOM. Those talents bought your freedom, so you keep right on thinkin' highly of them.

GRANDMA. But long as he owns my kin, I am still under the thumb of the good Doctor Norcom.

HARRIET. He can't touch you, he wouldn't dare. Don't want the town to see his true colors.

TOM. Truth be told, it is your beauty, not your biscuits brings me round.

HARRIET. What about my beauty?

GRANDMA. Don' worry, I ain' gone steal yo man.

TOM. I think you should worry Harriet. Grandma lookin' good today…

GRANDMA. I'm goin' to the shed, be back in four minutes.

*(***GRANDMA** *exits to shed.* **HARRIET** *moves to* **TOM***'s lap.)*

TOM. You noticed she always tellin' us jes' how long. "I be back in three an' a half minutes, an' forty seconds."

HARRIET. But it's never long enough for me to get a good kiss.

(They kiss.)

TOM. I thought that was pretty good.

HARRIET. But not long enough.

(They kiss again.)

TOM. Long enough for me to get worked up though.

HARRIET. She wants you worked up, so you'll ask for my hand.

TOM. I woulda done that a long time ago if I thought it was yours to give.

HARRIET. So you would deprive me the joy of hearing you ask?

TOM. To spare myself the pain of having him say no. Or worse, he convince my master to sell me away.

HARRIET. Or sell me away.

TOM. He ain't thinkin' 'bout sellin you away. Not how he be all the time lookin' at you.

HARRIET. Doesn't that bother you?

TOM. I lose my mind, I be bothered by that. He is still just lookin' at you?

HARRIET. Yes, but don't say nothin' to Grandma 'bout it, please. She worry too much, may even say somethin' cross to him and get me sold down the river. *(beat)* Tom, you think we can run from this one day?

TOM. We ain' gone have to run. We gone buy our freedom.

HARRIET. Don' you think we gone make some pretty, smart babies Tom?

TOM. Don' know I wan' bring babies into dis kind of a world.

HARRIET. Don' think there's nothin' you can do 'bout that. Not if you love me like you says you do. 'Sides ain' gone make no babies jes kissen' fo four minutes…

TOM. I can wait Harriet…we say the words, jump de broom and then make the babies… We ain't got to live like animals, jes 'cause we got to live like animals.

GRANDMA. Here I come…into the kitchen…

HARRIET. Here she come into the kitchen…

GRANDMA. Hope I don't see nothin' an old woman ain't s'posed to see…

HARRIET. *(jumping off of* **TOM***'s lap)* What you not s'posed to see Grandma? Tell me, so I'll be sure not to be doin' it next time you go to the shed for four minutes.

GRANDMA. Tom hadn't you better be goin' now? Gettin' close to sundown.

TOM. Yes'm. Can I just have one kiss to hold me in the fields next week?

GRANDMA. 'Course you can.

*(***TOM** *looks as though he's walking to* **HARRIET** *for a last embrace, steps past her and sweeps* **GRANDMA** *into a dip, kissing her loudly on the cheek.)*

TOM. Be seein' you ladies.

GRANDMA. You be careful de Paddy Rollers don't getchu.

*(***TOM** *exits.)*

GRANDMA. *(to* **HARRIET***:)* He a mess.

HARRIET. 'Bout the prettiest, nicest, most hardworking mess this side the Mississippi, an he chose me.

GRANDMA. I'm glad to see you lettin' your heart go for a change.

HARRIET. I didn't let it go, he jes' grabt a hold of it faster'n I could keep it. You know the Master won't let us.

GRANDMA. Yes. But you got to let Tom be a man and try.

*(***TOM** *pokes his head back in the door.)*

TOM. Almost forgot. Grandma, it alright wit' you if I ask Harriet for her hand?

GRANDMA. Wha' chu think Tom?

TOM. How 'bout Harriet, you give me your blessing to go to Master Norcom and ask for your hand?

*(***HARRIET** *runs and hugs him.)*

HARRIET. You have my blessing! Always did…now go, fo' your overseer make it so you cain't come back.

*(***TOM** *exits. Light rises on* **HAROLD SKINMORE [ENSEMBLE]**.*)*

HAROLD. I's always big, like my daddy, and 'cause of it, d'overseer use me ta do his wuppin'. He say, "Harrolll commere," an han' me de whip and yell me to keep goin' 'til he say stop. Las' week I kilt Sam an' Nancy's girl, couldna been mo den twelve. Didn' mean to. He jes keep sayin, "Give her 'nether," an I has to do it. I don wan do it. I has to. Or it be me get beat. I cain't get a wife, cain't have no friends 'cause of it. Truly, I ain't a bad person. Truly I ain't.

Scene Three

*(***HARRIET** *and* **MARY** *scrub the floor and talk.)*

HARRIET. And they was so pretty… I gone have a little girl some day. It jes…it made me sad Mary.

MARY. I don't see was so sad 'bout that.

HARRIET. It's the way little girls play together.

MARY. And…

HARRIET. And it broke my heart.

MARY. Hand me the rinse pail. Way I see it, your heart break too easy. You ain't gone live to see twenty-five.

HARRIET. Why I wanna live to be an old lady anyway?

(The very pregnant **MISTRESS** *enters stage left and walks past.* **HARRIET** *and* **MARY** *scrub, never speaking, not taking their eyes off of her until she exits.)*

MARY. I jes tellin' you. Your heart's too soff.

HARRIET. People always wanna confuse a soft heart for a soft soul. I'm jes fine thank you.

MARY. You welcome. You see Tom lately?

HARRIET. Why you ask?

MARY. You get tired of him, you let me know… I could make him very happy.

HARRIET. You a mess. See, this what I mean. These girls, what I seen in the field, was playin' like they do before they get like us, an' let a man make them jealous. They ain't thinkin' 'bout how pretty they look or tryin' to impress a boy. They jes lovin' each other and the day and the moment.

MARY. Whas this?

*(***MARY** *points to a spot on the floor.* **HARRIET** *leans over and scrapes the mark with her thumbnail.)*

HARRIET. Thas from those new shoes Mistress got from Paris. They paint the soles black.

MARY. Well them fashionable shoes gonna get us a whippin' fa sho'.

(Both girls stop their talking and scrub furiously. It's a frantic, frightened scrubbing. Finally, the spot is removed. Both are relieved.)

HARRIET. It was a little white girl and a little slave girl.

MARY. What?

HARRIET. What I was sayin…

MARY. Das right…

HARRIET. You know I don't put much stock into yellow hair and blue eyes, but this girl cute, all pink cheeks and dimples and curls. And the other's the kind of pretty I wouldn't wish on no slave girl. She be lucky she keep her virtue 'til she twelve bein' that pretty. Red brown, long curly braids and dimples too. Probly they sisters. But I know they only got 'bout two more years to love each other an' be friends, fo they know the truth.

MARY. It probly only be bad fo the niggra gal.

HARRIET. 'Course it worse for her, but the other one gone lose her best friend the day she know she own her best friend. And then, maybe five years later, they both look each other in the face real good and know the truth 'bout who they daddy is. An' it won't make no difference.

MARY. 'cept probbly the mistress sell her long 'fore that.

HARRIET. You ain't said a word. Don't wish pretty on no one.

MARY. You pretty, an' I ain't half bad myself.

HARRIET. That's why we in de big house, but you know there's some prettier an' smarter'n me. Heard 'bout that girl down on the Simms place? Took a flatiron to her own face ta keep de Massa an' his sons away from her.

MARY. I told you 'bout that.

HARRIET. I'll get the fresh water.

MARY. Thas all right. I finished here. I'll put back the furniture and do the entryway if you bleach and boil the diapers.

HARRIET. That lye bleach eat the skin off my fingers.

MARY. Poor Harriet. Maybe try fo'teen hours picken an' shuckin' come an' talk to me 'bout your hands.

HARRIET. I sorry Mary. I forget you got ta work outside too.

MARY. Don't pity me, jes don' be complainin' 'bout a little lye bleach.

*(***HARRIET** *finds a spot downstage right, as light fades on* **MARY** *furiously drying the floor.)*

*(***HARRIET** *takes diapers off of a line and puts them in a large bucket, poking occasionally at them with a large stick. She sits on an upside down pail and pulls a small novel, from under her apron. The following is a round, each* **ENSEMBLE MEMBER** *repeating the passage* **HARRIET** *reads from the beginning.)*

HARRIET. "Under the trees whose boughs made a friendly darkness, the amorous D'elmont throwing his eager arms round the virtuous Meloria's waist, placed burning kisses upon her neck,"

*(***MAN ENSEMBLE** *begins, whispering:)*

MAN ENSEMBLE. "Under the trees whose..."

HARRIET. "creating in her, a kind of ecstasy,"

*(***FEMALE ENSEMBLE** *begins whispering the quote.)*

HARRIET. "which might perhaps, had they been now alone, proved her desires were little different from his…"

*(***ENSEMBLE** *repeats, staggered, fading out as* **HARRIET** *continues to speak.)*

HARRIET. Lost in the pages of a book I travel into exciting lands and become princesses and fair maidens. They always *fair,* but in my mind they look jes like me. In books I am beautiful and virtuous, well dressed, and

always rescued by a handsome man who loves me for my beauty and my innate kindness. Innate kindness. I like the way that sounds. *(***HARRIET** *closes the book.)* When I learned to read, it was my mistress before this one who taught me. The master's now dead sister. I do not think she taught me because she was particularly "virtuous" or *(beat)* "innately kind." I think she taught me because she was bored, as any sane woman resigned to a life of childbirth and frivolity would be. I also think she was not at all bright, and did not consider that once she taught me to read, I would then and forevermore, know how to read. It was as though my acquiring of each letter, each syllable, each phonetic advancement was an amusing miracle…but it had not occurred to her that those things might stay in my mind. Mistress Norcom would know better…

*(***MISTRESS NORCOM** *has approached* **HARRIET** *from behind.)*

You startled me Ma'am.

MISTRESS NORCOM. What are you doing?

HARRIET. *(still holding the book)* Bleaching the diapers.

MISTRESS NORCOM. Hand me that.

*(***HARRIET** *"innocently" offers the bucket of diapers.* **MISTRESS NORCOM** *slaps her and gestures to the book.)*

Not only does she read, an act punishable by death, but she reads garbage. What will the good doctor do when I tell him?

*(***HARRIET** *assumes an exaggerated "slave" dialect.)*

HARRIET. I's so sorry. Please may I goes back to my work?

MISTRESS NORCOM. Perhaps he'll finally give you the flogging you deserve and send you to the auction block.

HARRIET. It true, the Hacketts comin' by at noon? I really oughta make haste and lay out de table *(beat)* so's it bees ready for dem.

MISTRESS NORCOM. You seein' that black field nigga from the Stewart Plantation?

HARRIET. Don't know watchu mean ma'am?

MISTRESS NORCOM. Stop acting dumb and answer me plain. Have you been spending time with that black boy from the Stewarts' place?

HARRIET. Most de slaves on de Stewarts' plantation black.

MISTRESS NORCOM. Jes' know that the blackest one came shufflin' up to the back of the house this mornin' asking for an audience with the Master. The Doctor and I were just getting settled at the breakfast table. I answer the door and says, "And what is this regarding?"

(A light rises on another area where we see "The Massa" and **TOM**. *The scenes overlap.)*

MISTRESS NORCOM. And he says,

TOM & MISTRESS NORCOM. If it please you jes as much,

TOM. I'd like to make my business wit de Massa hisself.

MISTRESS NORCOM. Says it just like that,

TOM. *(groveling)* Wit de Massa hisself.

MISTRESS NORCOM. Don't seem like the way a boy spend time with our Harriet would say it, but he takes off his hat, and lowers his head and says those insulting words to me just like that. "Wit de Massa hisself."

TOM. If it please the Mistress, I would be most grateful if I may speak with the Master alone.

MISTRESS NORCOM. Just like I am too stupid to smell the insult. As though he might as well say…

TOM. Cain't do my business with you, you ain't nothing but a foolish gal. You ain't no good for nothin' but warmin' the bed and havin' babies.

MISTRESS NORCOM. So I say, you wait just right here.

*(***MISTRESS NORCOM** *steps into the scene.)*

MISTRESS NORCOM. *And* I get the good Doctor, and I stand behind his left shoulder, because of course, now I want to know, what business does this dirty nigra have that's

too important for my female ears. And he pulls out a filthy envelope with at least seven hundred greasy dollar bills in it and says,

TOM & MISTRESS NORCOM. If it please de Massa

MISTRESS NORCOM. He in love wit a servant girl…

TOM. …and I know the askin' price be somewhere in de fambly of five hunded. But I know de servant been in dis here family a long time, so I sweetened the deal wit two mo' hunded,

MISTRESS NORCOM & TOM. and would de kind Massa…

TOM. …see in his heart fo to let me buy her into freedom wit' de money I earned for my own freedom, so's I might marry her, and live outside of sin 'til such a time as my own good Massa see his way to let me buy my freedom.

(Light fades on **TOM** *and Massa.)*

MISTRESS NORCOM. First I think, how a field nigga get that kind of money…

HARRIET. He a carpenter. Hire himself out on his off time…

MISTRESS NORCOM. Shut up that mouth. And then I think, this is a good day. Truly a glorious day. I will have extra pocket change, and be rid of lazy Harriet, all at once. And may I share what the Good Doctor does then?

(Light rises again.)

He counts each and every one of those dirty bills, twice. And he says,

MASTER NORCOM. Which property is it you're so in love with as to give up your own freedom?

TOM. Harriet sir.

MISTRESS NORCOM. And my husband walks into the kitchen, throws the money in the fire, and says,

MASTER NORCOM. I'll sell her to you for eight hundred and fifty and not a penny less

MASTER & MISTRESS NORCOM. on the day hell freezes over.

(Light out on **DOCTOR** *and* **TOM**.*)*

MISTRESS NORCOM. I only tell you this because you are like family to me. And so, if we are to put up with one another for the rest of eternity, let it be understood. I will tolerate no more insolence. I will not be reminded of the skills my dear stupid sister-in-law imparted to you before her unfortunate demise. And I will not have you skulking about with my husband. *(pause)* Understood.

HARRIET. Yes.

MISTRESS NORCOM. I did not hear you clearly. You said?

HARRIET. Yes ma'am.

MISTRESS NORCOM. Now please get the table laid and make sure the cook has prepared a lunch for eight. We musn't appear unready for the Hacketts. Are you crying?

HARRIET. No ma'am.

MISTRESS NORCOM. I didn't think so.

(Lights out. Up immediately on:)

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