

*Acting Edition*

**The Apollo Presents...**  
**A New Harlem**  
**Renaissance**

**Short Plays from**  
**The New Black Fest**

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*THE APOLLO PRESENTS... A NEW HARLEM RENAISSANCE: SHORT PLAYS FROM THE NEW BLACK FEST* were originally commissioned by Keith Josef Adkins of The New Black Fest by a generous grant funded to the Apollo Theater from the Black Seed Fund. The plays were presented on the Apollo Sound Stage during The New Black Fest at the Apollo Theater (Kelley Girod, Director of New Works; Kamilah Forbes, Executive Producer) in New York City on April 22, 23 and 25, 2022. The production manager was Belynda M'baye.

## FOREWORD BY KEITH JOSEF ADKINS

Over a hundred years ago the artists and thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance were living in a world that was chockful of iconic events that shaped and defined the Black community as well as our American society. From the Great Migration, Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement and the sanctions of Jim Crow to women's voting rights, the rise and fall of Prohibition and the Great Depression, the creatives and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance did what they were destined to do – placed Black people at the center of that world, and provided us with some of the most profound permeations and depictions of Blackness that are still palpable and remembered today.

The world has changed some since the 1920s and social justice and racial pride still headline our lives, but intersectionality, identity politics and the course-correcting of patriarchy appear to stand at the forefront of our community now. Luckily, there is a new generation of playwrights and thinkers who are courageously and creatively interrogating those ideas and factions and they are taking no prisoners. Whether they are aware that they are continuing a century-old legacy or building on one, these new Black artists are here to ensure no stone within Black life is unturned and to remind us Blackness is forever growing, redefining and expanding its borders.

That's why when the Apollo's Executive Producer Kamilah Forbes tasked me with commissioning playwrights to write short plays on the theme of the new Harlem Renaissance I knew it would be an easy thing to do. I know so many of these writers. Eric Micha Holmes, Christina Anderson, Zora Howard, James Ijames, Dennis Allen II – they are my tribe, my community and my inspiration, and they are always ready to quickly engage with and/or reflect on what's currently happening in the world or in their world, much like the Renaissance artists from one hundred years ago.

Their finished, commissioned short plays were exactly what I expected them to be – bold reimaginings and reminders of the beauty, complexity, vulnerability and changing landscape of what it means to be Black and on this planet right now. Kamilah Forbes, Kelly Girod (the Apollo's Director of New Works) and myself were even more thrilled when we shared all the plays during a weekend of sold out performances at the Apollo and a new generation of audiences felt completely seen and heard by these playwrights.

Society and culture has definitely morphed some since the days of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and, in some ways, it hasn't changed much at all (especially with the fear of WOKE culture and the dismantling of DEI), but the presence of artists whose passions

and convictions are driven by the deep desire to bear witness to being Black remains a beacon in the community. Without these artists and their legacies I'm not sure we'd know where we've been, where we are now, and what the future holds for us. They must always be located, encouraged, nurtured, shared and be given the flowers for the incredible part they play in society – loving and honoring Black peoples.

Keith Josef Adkins

Artistic Director

The New Black Fest

## FOREWORD BY KAMILAH FORBES

It was 2022. As Executive Producer at the Apollo Theater, I was charged with providing a vision for a season for both audiences and artists alike. A season with the goal of basking in the genius and ingenuity of Black arts, artists and culture. We knew our objective was to formulate our 21st century canon initiative that year – building a new canon of Black works. It was during this time that we at the Apollo Theater dove deeply into the inquiry of how our past and future are inextricably linked through the timelessness of our storytellers and stories. The question of how Harlem Renaissance artists responded to the historic events that shaped their time and how contemporary creatives are dealing with the issues of the present moment remained at the center of our inquiry. Our answer would be found through our partnership with The New Black Fest.

Due to their steadfast commitment to amplifying and supporting new work from bright, poignant voices from Black theater, we commissioned The New Black Fest to do what they have a rich reputation of doing across the country and with Black theater. And what an amazing experience and event! The New Black Fest at Apollo Theater brought some of the brightest playwrights together with two dynamic directors and an outstanding ensemble of actors. As part of our diligence to serve as the leading producer and curator of Black Performing Arts, this commission and festival aligned deeply with our mission to produce innovative and inspiring work.

Each play was brilliantly scribed, precisely performed and directed with heart. Audiences leapt to their feet and the plays left an impression on many. From raw and honest characters to plots confronting the challenges of class, stigma, love and joy, these plays from The New Black Fest are both specific and timeless. While the Apollo stands proudly on our legacy of creating culture and history that has informed generations, we eagerly and adamantly commit ourselves to celebrating and supporting the future. The artists whose work you will read in this anthology, and those on a similar journey of writing the plays that tell the stories of our lives, reflect our commitment. Enjoy, and onward in arts and culture.

Kamilah Forbes  
Executive Producer  
Apollo Theater



# **It's Complicated**

“The Ways of White Folks,”  
Langston Hughes

by Michael Bradford

## CHARACTERS

**MASON** – Age 40–50, Mason is an African American History Professor from a college in Connecticut. Erudite and charming all at once.

**MAGDALENE** – Age 40–50, Magdalene is a Caucasian woman whose ancestors once held slaves on the plantation that is now a research center where she is now the Executive Director. She is sincere and forthright.

## SETTING

A large Research Center on an old slave-owning plantation located on the outskirts of Savannah, GA. The actual set is minimal, if anything at all, with a few gardening prop pieces and a leather book bag. Elements of sound to support time of day and location are recommended.

## TIME

Present day.

*(MAGDALENE is dressed for the summer and the garden, floppy hat and all, carrying a wicker basket with flowers hanging over the side. She has a small hand spade and mimes digging. MASON enters, satchel over his shoulder.)*

**MASON.** You work here by chance?

**MAGDALENE.** Yes and no. It's complicated.

**MASON.** I worry when it isn't.

**MAGDALENE.** Is there something I can –

**MASON.** I was hoping to get into the research library.

**MAGDALENE.** It's closed. Sunday.

**MASON.** Thought I might get lucky.

Take advantage of a quiet day.

Feels a little strange.

Huge plantation...when it's empty.

**MAGDALENE.** It's been a library for some time now.

A research library.

**MASON.** Right.

**MAGDALENE.** The University in town has a library, it's open every day, has copies of most of what we keep here.

It's open right now if you need to...

I don't know what time they close but...

We open tomorrow at eight, eight to six, if you'd rather...

**MASON.** Tomorrow's fine.

**MAGDALENE.** Research, I take it?

**MASON.** Yeah.

*(Beat.)*

**MAGDALENE.** Most people can't wait to tell you what it's about.

**MASON.** It's complicated.

**MAGDALENE.** I worry when it's not.

One of the best research librarians in the state works here.

She'll be here in the morning.

She likes complicated.

**MASON.** Nice.

*(Sticks out his hand, she shakes it.)*

Mason.

**MAGDALENE.** Magdalene.

**MASON.** Nice.

I'm staying in Savannah proper and –

**MAGDALENE.** You figured that out already, the “proper” business.

**MASON.** My folks, originally from just outside of Savannah.

Used to come down in the summers.

Been a minute since the last time...some things you don't forget.

**MAGDALENE.** Like “proper.”

**MASON.** Like “proper.”

Listen, maybe you know a healthy spot, get a bite to eat.

Open.

On a Sunday.

**MAGDALENE.** Are you asking me for a recommendation or are you asking me to dinner?

**MASON.** Let's say...both.

*(MASON helps her to her feet. They walk up center, miming a lively chat as they go. Up center she takes off her hat and sets [hangs] her hat and basket on the floor [or the coat rack]. They turn and start the next dialogue as they walk back down center. They are in Savannah "proper," standing in front of his hotel.)*

Nice recommendation.

The crêpe was amazing.

Light and full and –

**MAGDALENE.** You sound surprised.

**MASON.** A bit.

**MAGDALENE.** New York City is the only place to get an amazing crêpe?

**MASON.** I can see now it was probably a mistake to mention the big city up "nawth."

**MAGDALENE.** Just teasing.

*(Both smile.)*

**MASON.** Probably tastes the same.

Like most things, context is everything.

Maybe that's why this is feeling a little awkward, *you* walking *me* back to my hotel.

A little backwards.

In context.

**MAGDALENE.** I'm sure you're aware the whole chivalry thing was always a bit of a myth.

**MASON.** I am, but I'm just walking and talking and I have no idea where you need to get to. Or how to get you there.

Let me get you an uber or I can take you –

**MAGDALENE.** I imagine you're going back.

In the morning.

You could take me then.

*(A moment.)*

**MASON.** You're right.

I am.

I can.

**MAGDALENE.** Listen, if you want to kiss me, I think that would be nice.

**MASON.** Nice.

Yes, I do think that would be...nice.

*(They look at each other for a moment, smile, then face upstage. It is the next morning. They are both buttoning their clothes, finishing getting dressed.)*

**MAGDALENE.** A dinner, a walk, a lovely evening and you still haven't told me one thing about your research.

Most people can't wait to tell you!

**MASON.** I think we had more interesting things to talk about.

Or not talk about.

'Sides, I appreciate it but I think you're just being...nice.

I'm sure you heard a million, dusty, uninteresting –

**MAGDALENE.** Well I'm officially interested.

*(Both smile.)*

**MASON.** All right.

I'll do my best not to put you to sleep.

I'm documenting the birth, death and genealogy records of plantations with a population of two hundred or more enslaved peoples.

How this affects historical understanding of the internal slave trade after 1807, when Jefferson, bit of irony, outlawed the external slave trade.

Research question, how does our history since affect contemporary relationship patterns and familial structures in predominately African-American communities today.

How much of that experience do we all carry in our DNA, literally and metaphorically.

See.

A little dusty but I tried to keep it interesting.

**MAGDALENE.** I think it's quite interesting.

*(A moment.)*

I'm sure you know Broadwell was a large plantation, but it never had more than a hundred slaves at any one time.

**MASON.** *Enslaved* people.

And yes. I do know that.

*(A moment.)*

My people, my own family, were...enslaved, on one of the three large plantations in this county.

This is clearly outside the scope of my grant but...

**MASON.** I just need to know where, which one.

If my family knew which plantation, they never talked about it.

By the time I really wanted to know, everybody was passed.

**MAGDALENE.** This is your first stop?

In this county?

**MASON.** My last.

**MAGDALENE.** So...

**MASON.** Yeah.

I just need to see it. Their names.

Written down.

**MAGDALENE.** I see.

And once you find the...records, what next?

**MASON.** No idea.

Maybe a book.

Maybe... I don't really know.

Cross that bridge when it shows up.

**MAGDALENE.** Well the records at the library are extensive and detailed.

Sadly.

**MASON.** (*He looks at her.*) I get the feeling you're not just the groundskeeper.

**MAGDALENE.** It's complicated.

My family left the main house to me.

**MASON.** Your family?

You mean the –

**MAGDALENE.** Broadwell family?

Yes.

Magdalene Broadwell was my maiden name.

**MASON.** I see...

**MAGDALENE.** Noah Broadwell bought the property in 1687, five generations later here I am.

I never wanted children, so once I set up the research library,

I left everything to the state.

They asked me to stay on, manage the library.

So for all intent and purpose...

**MASON.** Right, so...

**MAGDALENE.** So.

Breakfast?

*(A moment.)*

**MASON.** Yeah.

Cool.

Breakfast.

*(They retreat to opposite sides of the stage. We are now in Magdalene's office at the plantation/library. MASON "enters.")*

**MAGDALENE.** You've been busy.

**MASON.** A bit.

**MAGDALENE.** I hear you've found the records you were looking for.

**MASON.** I have.

*(A moment.)*

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# **Thy Will Be Done**

A ten-minute play  
by Dennis A. Allen II

## **CHARACTERS**

**PASTOR PAUL** – male, 40s

**MELODY** – female, late 30s-early 40s

## **SETTING**

New Revelations Baptist Church, Harlem – Pastor Paul's Office

## **TIME**

Present

*(PASTOR PAUL stands facing the audience holding a bible in one hand and a small remote control in the other. He wears a black fitted v-neck t-shirt, jeans, and a wooden cross around his neck. He aims the remote at the audience, presses a button then slips the remote into his pocket.)*

**PASTOR PAUL.** Peace and blessings New Revelations family...

...

Welcome back to a another... ah... hm... no...

...

New Revelations family it's Wednesday again so that means... argh... no...

...

*(PASTOR PAUL reaches back into his pocket, stops the recording, composes himself, then resumes the recording.)*

Welcome to another Won't He Wednesday, I'm Pastor Paul Cummings and we are so happy you are able to virtually join us from wherever you are for today's word. As the second oldest baptist church in Harlem our roots run deep and have nurtured the community with His love for centuries. Remember New Revelations family this coming Sunday we will be back in our Harlem home, praise God, for the first time since the lockdown and so we encourage you to come join us and celebrate His grace, in person, in the flesh, Amen. This community is so special, our diversity is unmatched and I am looking forward to seeing your faith-filled faces as I preach from our pulpit. Of course we will

continue to live stream the Sunday sermon for those of us that prefer to receive His word from the comfort of our homes.

Friends, before we get into today's word for Won't He Wednesdays I want to extend a thank you. As you know we recently lost our Youth Pastor and dear brother in Christ, Pastor Derrick, to Covid-19 complications. The support, prayers and donations that you all have showered on the family and our church is a testament, no, is *the* testament of God's love. Pastor Derrick's memorial can still be viewed on our YouTube page and links to donate to the family can be found there and on the New Rev website.

*(PASTOR PAUL takes a moment to clear the despair from his throat.)*

We tend to look at history and only focus on the bad, the evils, the ills of man that repeat over and over again. During the Spanish flu over six hundred thousand Americans died, due to a combination of the disease, inept leadership and a disregard for human life; a third of the population worldwide was snuffed out and we find ourselves one hundred years later in another pandemic//

*(A door slams. The assertive clicks of high heel shoes echo towards the Pastor's office.)*

**MELODY.** *(Offstage.)* PAUL!

Paul where you at!

*(MELODY enters. She wears red high heels, jeans, and an off-the-shoulder short sleeve blouse. Tattoos decorate her arms and back, bracelets litter her wrists; she has blonde hair and long ornate fingernails.)*

You're a real muthafucka, you know that?

**PASTOR PAUL.** Mel you can't come barging into my office like//

**MELODY.** Fuckalldat. What is your deal?

**PASTOR PAUL.** I don't know what you mean. I'm working Melody//

**MELODY.** A real muthafucka.

**PASTOR PAUL.** God give me strength.

**MELODY.** Yeah God n' a brain n' a heart too!

...

...

**PASTOR PAUL.** Are we having a staring contest?

**MELODY.** Did you know Derrick had a will?

**PASTOR PAUL.** You didn't?

**MELODY.** No Paul, I did not. Did you?

**PASTOR PAUL.** I always advocate that we get our houses in order before we get called home.

**MELODY.** Nigga da fuck? Ain't nobody ask your preachin' ass for a metaphor.

**PASTOR PAUL.** Melody...what is wrong?

**MELODY.** Derrick left everything to the church.

**PASTOR PAUL.** What do you mean everything?

**MELODY.** EV-ERY-THING.

**PASTOR PAUL.** Okay...that's...

**MELODY.** Don't act like you ain't know.

**PASTOR PAUL.** I didn't.

**MELODY.** I don't believe you.

**PASTOR PAUL.** I make it a point not to meddle in others' relationships.

**MELODY.** Nigga all you do is meddle. You've dedicated your life to meddling.

**PASTOR PAUL.** Mel you are hurt and disappointed right now and I understand//

**MELODY.** Ain't nobody disappointed. I knew you was on that bullshit. Been peeped it since way back. When we was coming up you always had some hustle, some scam goin'. When you went up top and came home all "born again," you had everyone else fooled, Derrick definitely believed in your ass but ME. Nah. This God shit is just another hustle. No different than the gift cards or the IRS calls. That's why you never caught me here on a Sunday.

**PASTOR PAUL.** Melody I don't know what you want from me.

**MELODY.** I want You to be straight up for once in your life. All you care about, all you've ever really cared about is money. You ain't stop being a hustla, your hustle just changed. You out here lettin' white tourists sit in the pews, watchin' "the niggers" praise their god, like we monkeys at the zoo.

**PASTOR PAUL.** (*Mockingly.*) How you know that if you ain't never here?

**MELODY.** Fuck you Paul!

**PASTOR PAUL.** Okay.

**MELODY.** Why you? Why Derrick always choose you? He was my husband. My high school sweetheart. My life. Mine. Not yours. Not yours.

...

...

**PASTOR PAUL.** Hey. Mel. Sit down. Please. Please.

...

...

You and I have always had a...contentious relationship//

**MELODY.** Pssh.

**PASTOR PAUL.** but our love for Derrick and his love for us allowed you and I to bond in a way that we both would've thought impossible, right?

**MELODY.** I mean "bond" is a strong word, but yeah you held us down during some rough patches. So?

**PASTOR PAUL.** So...the love isn't gone just because Derrick is no longer physically here. The love is just as strong if not stronger.

**MELODY.** Paul I ain't come here for no sermon.

**PASTOR PAUL.** I'm saying

I have no reason to nor would I lie to you. Did we talk about the importance of having a will? Yes. Even before this pandemic, with everything my siblings and I went through when my mother passed, I encouraged folk to have things in order to avoid the mess.

**MELODY.** I always loved your mom, she was wild. Always kept it real.

**PASTOR PAUL.** Yeah, real ignorant.

Five kids, three baby daddies, no power of attorney and her, "What I need a will for, I ain't got nothin'." Left us with;

Do we or don't we pull the plug? Do we bury or cremate? Who gets the dog? How do we divvy up the money she had in the mattress?

We just inherited chaos.

**MELODY.** She had money stashed in her mattress? Daaamn. Miss Cummings was ol' school for real.

...

...

Why wouldn't he talk to me about his will?

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# **Cliff & Clara & Her Baby**

A ten-minute play  
by Lauren A. Whitehead

## **CHARACTERS**

**CLARA** – Black. Young-ish. Eight months pregnant.

**CLIFF** – White. The same age-ish as Clara.

## **SETTING**

Brooklyn.

## **TIME**

The high heat of summer.

*(Lights up on **CLIFF** and **CLARA** sitting on a couch in an apartment that is incredibly neat and obviously cobbled together from garage sales and thrift stores. Despite its order, there is a large, disheveled corner crowded with all manner of baby projects in progress, each of them in various states of completion.)*

*(**CLARA** is working as hard as she can to be as quiet as she can while retrieving and eating chips from a family-sized bag. She is black. Young-ish. Eight months pregnant, wearing overalls with a sports bra. It is the high heat of summer. Brooklyn. Fireworks and police sirens and helicopters and loud-talkin'-ass neighbors are just kind of always happening in the background.)*

*(**CLIFF** is sitting on the floor, midway through building some elaborate nursery item. He is white. The same age-ish as **CLARA**. And while his hands are absolutely full, he's sitting stiffly, still and listening intently.)*

*(A scurry is happening somewhere in the apartment that is inaudible to everyone except **CLARA**.)*

**CLARA.** See there! There! Did you hear it?

*(She struggles to get up. Gives up.)*

Did you hear it?! Over there!

*(**CLIFF** doesn't move.)*

**CLIFF.** I didn't hear it.

**CLARA.** Shhh...

**CLIFF.** Stop eating chips for a second so I can hear.

**CLARA.** I can't stop eating chips, love. The chips need me.

**CLIFF.** Well, I'm not gonna be able to hear anything over the bag of –

**CLARA.** Shh! There it is again! By the stove.

*(They listen as she still tries to get a chip. He looks at her lovingly and also frustratedly.)*

**CLIFF.** For real?

**CLARA.** We have a mouse.

*(She rubs crumbs off the top of her belly and on to the floor. She closes the bag of chips and puts them on the other side of the couch. CLIFF gets up to get a hand vacuum.)*

**CLIFF.** Yes. I know. I'm taking care of it.

**CLARA.** I'm not bringing my baby into a house with a mouse.

**CLIFF.** *(Sing songy alongside her.)* You're not bringing our baby into a house with a mouse... Yes, love. I know.

**CLARA.** I'm not.

**CLIFF.** I know. *(Beat.)* You're bringing our baby into a house *infested* with mice.

**CLARA.** STOP IT!

*(CLARA reaches for the chips and begins eating them again.)*

**CLIFF.** Can you just trust me?

**CLARA.** Fine.

**CLIFF.** Good. Now let me ask you this...

**CLARA.** What?

**CLIFF.** Would you bring our baby into a boat with a coat?

*(A holding back of laughter kind of beat on his part.)*

Would you bring our baby into a park after dark?

**CLARA.** It's really unattractive.

**CLIFF.** Last one, last one: would you bring our baby into a –

**CLARA.** Shh! See, there it is again! Did you hear it?

*(A very loud firecracker whistles and pops very close to the window.)*

**CLIFF.** Can't hear shit actually. Annnnd yep, like clockwork, here come the helicopters.

*(Helicopters flying overhead and meanwhile CLARA is drinking so much water.)*

**CLARA.** It'll pass.

**CLIFF.** I don't think it will but I *do* think that it's a conspiracy.

**CLARA.** A conspiracy to do what?

**CLIFF.** Torture us. Enrage us. Exhaust us so we'll stop marching and protesting.

**CLARA.** I can't talk about the protests boo... I just can't engage that right now. Me and Baby just need – we just need –

*(She's struggling again to get herself up. CLIFF helps her and once on her feet, she waddles to the fridge, opens both of the doors and maneuvers her belly into the fridge and her face and shoulders into the freezer. It's clear she's done this before.)*

Between the heat and the hormone dreams, my blood pressure is just...

**CLIFF.** Yea, but that's my point. The whole point is to make us feel like powerless, paranoid wrecks until we're so anxious we give up and just accept that we can't do shit about the perpetual trauma of living in a police state.

*(Beat.)*

**CLARA.** *(From inside the freezer.)* I'm not sure it's about you so much, boo, but...

**CLIFF.** What?

**CLARA.** Nothing. Let's go over the plans again, yea?

**CLIFF.** I'm not hearing you from inside the –

**CLARA.** *(Louder now.)* LET'S GO OVER THE PLANS AGAIN.

**CLIFF.** Clara, no. I don't want – we got it, okay?

**CLARA.** Can you just –

**CLIFF.** It's just not really fun to imagine all the worst case scenarios, you know?

*(She comes out of the freezer eating ice cream out of a half gallon with a spoon.)*

**CLARA.** I'm a black woman in America, my love, of course I know.

**CLIFF.** Do you keep a spoon in the freezer?

**CLARA.** I decided to cut out the middleman...

**CLIFF.** The middleman being... The walk to the silverware drawer?

**CLARA.** Exactly. I just keep it in the carton now. It's much, much easier.

**CLIFF.** Can't tell if I'm impressed or disgusted.

**CLARA.** It can be both, babe. It's both. Free your mind, alright. *(Beat.)* Alright, should we start?

**CLIFF.** If we have to.

**CLARA.** Yes. Let's run through the scenario where Baby has already been delivered and now I'm experiencing pain that everybody thinks is normal even though I feel like it's not...

*(He is clearly dreading this practice.)*

**CLIFF.** Okay. Is it normal or is it not?

**CLARA.** Doesn't matter cause I feel like it's not.

**CLIFF.** Yea, but it *does* matter because if it's only a feeling then we talked about how you would prefer it if I encouraged you to do some self-reflecting before we went into crisis prevention.

**CLARA.** Okay, let's not get into all that part right now.

**CLIFF.** Well, I don't know which protocol to implement if the scenario isn't clear.

**CLARA.** Yes, dear, but that's the reality of the situation. The scenario will never be clear. Like it's all going to be fuzzy and unpredictable.

**CLIFF.** Or maybe it'll be just fine.

**CLARA.** Maybe it'll be better if we were prepared.

**CLIFF.** Okay, then, for the sake of practice, which protocol –

**CLARA.** For the sake of practice, let's say I've self-reflecting but I still feel like it's not normal, okay? Jesus. Fuck.

*(A single firecracker whistles and pops.)*

**CLIFF.** Maybe we should practice at another time.

**CLARA.** Maybe you should practice trusting me when I talk about my feelings.

**CLIFF.** To be clear, we are talking about your made up feelings in a made up scenario right now, right? Yes.

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# **Rampjaar**

by James Ijames

## **CHARACTERS**

**GENE** – A security guard at the museum.

**VANCE** – A visitor, an art student.

## **SETTING**

An art museum. A big one. Like the Met.

## **TIME**

I'm trying to do real time...but...we'll see.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Rampjaar is a dutch word that loosely translates to “disaster year.”

*(An art museum. A big one. Like the Met. The din of a crowd dwindling. Over the speaker we hear an announcement that the museum is closing in ten minutes.)*

*(On the wall is a portrait. Dutch Renaissance. Dark, lovely, expensive. It is hanging on the fourth wall.)*

*(In front of the painting is a bench. A museum bench. Simple. Bright pine. A rich person's name etched on a little slip of brass.)*

*(Sitting on the bench, in front of the painting, is **VANCE**. She studies it. She has been sitting in front of the painting for hours. I would say since right after the museum opened.)*

*(**GENE** is watching from the side. He has been watching **VANCE** at least since lunch.)*

**GENE.** You know we bout to close right?

**VANCE.** Hmm? What?

**GENE.** How long you been here?

**VANCE.** I think I got here around nine.

**GENE.** Okay, art lover! You just spent the whole day?  
That's nice, that's nice.

**VANCE.** Yes.

**GENE.** Aw! I love that... the appreciation you're showing here. I like to see people appreciate the art.

**VANCE.** Do you have a favorite?

**GENE.** This one actually. Something about it. I feel like I've looked at it so long, it's a part of me. It's mine.

**VANCE.** It is yours.

**GENE.** Huh. Right! I suppose it is now. On like a spiritual level. Deep sis.

**VANCE.** Few years ago I was in the beauty salon getting my hair done and there was this TV show where this woman was holding a piece of china.

**GENE.** Okay.

**VANCE.** The woman and the china were almost the same color. She called the china, Wedgwood.

**GENE.** If you're looking for household pieces, that's two floors up. I think there's some Wedgwood in there. If you hurry I think you could probably see them.

**VANCE.** I couldn't care less what Wedgwood was but suddenly I felt like it was important. The whole image was telling me to pay attention. I was supposed to know what it meant. Why else would this nice porcelain white lady be telling me that the tea cup she was holding was Wedgwood. They were all neoclassical in style. I didn't know what neoclassical was, having not yet gone to graduate school to study art history.

**GENE.** OHHHHH! You're a student!

**VANCE.** Yes.

**GENE.** Here we go. I was getting so confused. But now I understand. I see the art students in here all the time. You don't really give me that energy.

**VANCE.** What energy is that?

**GENE.** Just sort of...emo.

**VANCE.** That's...really accurate.

**GENE.** I'm an observer. But I interrupted you. Neoclassical?

**VANCE.** Yeah. When I learned the term in school, I understood it... It was meant for me to understand it. That's no mistake. It's intentional.

**GENE.** What?

**VANCE.** The white lady with the white cup in a style that we're supposed to believe is the origin of goodness, of civilization, of beauty, of reason, of intellect. But in real life...it's a bunch of dishes. Its goodness requires my acquiescence. My belief in a lie.

*(GENE stares at VANCE. She is still studying the painting. An announcement over the speaker system says something about how much time visitors have in the museum.)*

**GENE.** Uh huh. Well. You're welcome to stay a bit longer but...we're closing soon.

**VANCE.** I'm going to take this painting with me.

**GENE.** What you mean?

**VANCE.** Yeah...that's what I'm going to do.

**GENE.** I... I don't think you can.

**VANCE.** Sure I can. Someone brought it in here.

*(GENE is confused. Wait a minute...)*

**GENE.** Oop! Is this a prank show. Ha! I always thought someone should prank one of us. It makes sense. Where's the camera?

**VANCE.** No. No candid camera. No pranking. This ain't a joke. I'm gonna take it.

**GENE.** Uh... Miss... I'm gonna –

**VANCE.** – It belongs to me.

**GENE.** I believe it belongs to the museum.

**VANCE.** I could change your mind.

**GENE.** Miss...

**VANCE.** She is rather ordinary looking isn't she?

**GENE.** Who?

**VANCE.** The woman in the painting. That's Dina Vinke. Her husband was a Dutch businessman who lost everything in the tulip crash and then made his fortune in the trade of African people. He had this painting done to commemorate the birth of their first child.

**GENE.** Oh. Interesting.

**VANCE.** It is. The ship in the background there. Do you see it?

**GENE.** Yes.

**VANCE.** It's called De Weduwe which translates to The Widow. On the ship's final voyage from Ghana to the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean an illness ripped through the ship and the captain, Dina's husband. He made the executive decision to throw all of the sick captives overboard in order to recoup the insurance on the cargo... the cargo... the people...

**GENE.** That really happened?

**VANCE.** It did. So when the ship finally made it to the port in New Amsterdam, a woman disembarked. I don't know what her name was but they called her Lucky. Cause she had survived the ordeal. She gave birth to Hank who begot Winnie and Grace. Grace was sold to a planter in Georgia who took a fancy to lighting the skirt tails of the servant girls on fire to watch them. Her daughter's name was Ishtar and she had a slew of boys. The youngest being Caleb who had nothing but girls much to the chagrin of the planter. His eldest daughter Patsy bore many children. Somebody say she was pregnant the majority of her life. Tonk was her last son and was sold off to a planter who was also a senator in the congress of the new nation that he lived in called

the United States... It goes on from there... Peg and Willy and Marcellus and Caesar, Placidly and Harmony and Grace. But Herbert Jr. knew nothing of slavery and his daughter Grace gave birth to an intrepid young woman she named Helen who worked her way through school and married a man who worked as hard as she did. They had a daughter who they encouraged to follow her dreams. And here. I. Is.

**GENE.** You?

**VANCE.** Me.

**GENE.** How do you know all of that?

**VANCE.** I'm really good at research.

**GENE.** Damn.

*(GENE looks at the woman in the painting.)*

What happened to her?

**VANCE.** Not sure. I imagine she and her husband went on being rich and selling people. Do you think she knew?

**GENE.** Who?

**VANCE.** Dina? What was gonna happen? What was possible? The cost of ease...

*(GENE considers this.)*

**GENE.** Yes.

**VANCE.** Really?

**GENE.** Yes. How could she not. She...

**VANCE.** Just didn't care.

*(The museum is mostly empty by now.)*

**GENE.** I don't think I can let you take the painting.

**VANCE.** Sure you can. You just turn a blind eye.

**GENE.** Look, I think it's best if you just be on your way and we can act like this didn't happen.

**VANCE.** How many Black people does this painting cost?

**GENE.** How many –

**VANCE.** – How many Black men, women and children does that painting cost? That one right there. How many indigenous people do you imagine? Put a number to it? Six? Eighteen? Forty-five? How many?

**GENE.** I don't know.

**VANCE.** Of course you don't. I don't either it is properly innumerable. You don't know, or rather you can't possibly know how many because you can't, how could you conceive of using people as currency, or keeping them as property...

**GENE.** I can't.

**VANCE.** But you still feel it in your bones. That's the trick of all of this. You are distracted into thinking everything is work while a lie tears out your insides. I'm Vance by the way.

**GENE.** I would normally say nice to meet you Vance.

**VANCE.** But this isn't a normal interaction.

**GENE.** It is not.

**VANCE.** Come sit with me.

**GENE.** Hmmm?

**VANCE.** Oh Gene! Bruh! The day's almost over... just sit.

**GENE.** How you know my name?

**VANCE.** Name tag.

**GENE.** Hmph.

**VANCE.** Come on. Sit.

*(GENE walks over and sits beside VANCE. He is uneasy but weirdly drawn in. What iiis her deal?)*

**GENE.** What kind of art do you study?

**VANCE.** These guys. The Dutch Masters.

**GENE.** Like the cheap cigars they make blunts with?

**VANCE.** WOW! Well...yeah.

**GENE.** You study cheap cigars?

**VANCE.** No... I... there were these Dutch painters.  
Rembrandt, Vermeer, Bray. I study them.

**GENE.** Hmm?

**VANCE.** Don't approve?

**GENE.** I mean. Don't you want to look at some people  
that look like you.

**VANCE.** Yeah. And I do. But... I don't know... the painting  
just sort of found me.

**GENE.** No offense at all but... I mean...

**VANCE.** I thought...maybe they could unlock something  
for me?

**GENE.** What?

**VANCE.** How to get back what I lost?

**GENE.** What you mean?

**VANCE.** All of these cost something.

**GENE.** They say they priceless but... hmmm.

**VANCE.** No such thing... it's us. You and me. We are the  
price of these paintings. The price is that we will look  
at them and aspire to what we see.

**GENE.** You wanna look like them?

**VANCE.** No.

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# **Color Theory**

by Eric Micha Holmes

## **CHARACTERS**

**MAN & WOMAN** – Black, late 30s, upwardly-mobile transplants to Harlem.

## **SETTING**

Blank stage. Two stools.

## **TIME**

Post-pandemic Harlem.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTES**

Act breaks are transitional spaces the director is invited to explore with staging, music, design, blocking, and/or emotional adjustments.

## ACT ONE

(**MAN** and **WOMAN**.)

(*They talk to us.*)

**MAN.** I walked in on them. They were on my bed. *Our* bed. It was an engagement gift to ourselves, so there was something ironic...*tragic*. Tragic about seeing them laying on our bed. Splayed out...serene. Almost inviting. Like they were daring me to find them. And that's when I did it. I had to. There was no way I would not. So I did.

(*Beat.*)

I put on my wife's panties.

**WOMAN.** He's married. And I have a four-year-old daughter in a two bedroom in the one-fifties. But he has his own business so we always had a place to go.

**MAN.** Pink. Pale but not rosé. Vivid but not fuchsia. Lacey but modern. Think "pink" and that's the color they were...*perfect*.

**WOMAN.** We met at work. This was before the pandemic. We didn't meet *at* work, we met *while* we were working because I'm in Communications for this arty non-profit you never heard of. And he was doing some drywall in the office.

**MAN.** The house was a mess. Karen just got back from a trip so her clothes were everywhere and... yes, okay, my wife's name is Karen. And, yes, Karen is white. I'm sorry. It's not her fault. We cannot choose who we fall in love with; and we sure as shit can't choose their name.

**WOMAN.** We started... I won't say "dating" but we started hooking up. Every other weekend or so. More when the pandemic hit.

**MAN.** So I'm standing in front of a mirror wearing Karen's pink panties. And this is not the part of the story where I, like, *discovered* I'm a woman or whatever. If I learned anything it's that I could lose a couple pounds. I'd put on a good COVID-20. The panty line, like, zagged across my junk... my gut folded over the sides and the hair... agh...so much hair...

**WOMAN.** It wasn't great, the, uh...sex. I mean, it was *fine*. Which is what I wanted. I wanted something soft... familiar. Fine. I'm working from home, schools were canceled, I'm a single mother, and my daughter is...not fine.

**MAN.** My wife and me, we stopped... I mean, you know... since the pandemic? And it's not because we didn't want to. It's because we just, like, *forgot* to – so nature took our bodies back. "This," I thought when I looked in the mirror, "*This* is what a thirty-seven-year-old man's body looks like." Without gyms. Without showers and a tight fade and giving a shit. *Decolonized*. This is my big, fat, hairy, decolonized, Blackity-Black-Black body.

(*Beat.*)

Wearing panties.

(*Beat.*)

To be honest? I never felt more masculine.

**WOMAN.** He was guilty and I liked that. I liked that he was unavailable. I wanted something I could give up.

**MAN.** I took the panties off and I laid 'em back on the bed. I cannot stress enough how...*uneventful* this was. Probably? I'd have never remembered putting them on. If not for what happened next:

**WOMAN.** I'm not a casual person. Unhealthy attachment is my jam. But this was the summer of 2020 when we all did things out of character. The pressure. Work alone was enough to... look, I'm not even gonna get into work because it's boring since my boss is... I mean, he's a nice guy. White. Very *nice* and very white and he started doing this thing, in the weeks after George Floyd and the marches and all that, he kept going out of his way to, like, *compliment* me at staff meetings. Thanking me, over and over again for just, like, doing my job. He'd even give me credit for things I didn't do. It was extra. My girlfriends were like (*Snapping.*) "Get it, girl! Reparations." But... I don't know...I guess I just don't like that kind of attention. So...

(*Pause.*)

...it was around that time I slept with a married man.

**MAN.** Later that morning, Karen finds me in the hallway and says, casually, almost like an afterthought, she said, "Are you cheating on me?"

**WOMAN.** I like that I had a space, just one space, where I didn't have to be a Black mom or a Black Social Media director or even a Black Woman.

**MAN.** Sorry?

**WOMAN.** I could just be a girl, having perfectly average sex with a perfectly average man.

**MAN.** Cheating? On who. *You?*

**WOMAN.** But these kindsa situations aren't built to last. So after one last weekend together, I made a decision. Not to like, call it off because there was nothing to call off so I decided to, like, ghost myself out of it.

**MAN.** I'm not cheating on you. Why would I cheat on you? And she's like, "What about last weekend? When I was visiting my mother. You didn't have anyone here?"

**WOMAN.** So we met at a brownstone on 127th street where he was contracted to paint a living room.

**MAN.** (*To us; definitively.*) I've never – and I mean *ever* – cheated on my wife. I'm faithful...*pathetically* faithful. I'm so faithful, sometimes I'll have dreams that I'm cheating on Karen. But...the weird thing is...even the girl I'm cheating with, like, *in* my dream? Is played *by* Karen. It's not her but it's her body. Her face. That's how whipped I am. I can't even cheat on my wife in my sleep.

**WOMAN.** Did I mention this married dude I was sleeping with was also white? I mean...he was from Moldova which I didn't even look up. I just know it's white and he's white and makes me wonder, like, what am I looking for? I'm almost forty. I've only slept with seven people in my entire life because I'm *really* picky and all of them were white.

**MAN.** Even though I'm faithful, the way Karen was lookin' at me in the hallway...it was like she knew something. Something I didn't. I swore she grew. I could see my reflection, like, shrink in her bright yellow eyes as she grew, uncoiling, savoring it, the moment right before the strike. Then her hand appeared from behind her back.

(*Demonstrates.*) Like this. Turns her fist over and opens it to reveal...the pink panties.

"So where did these come from?"

## ACT TWO

**WOMAN.** The best part about the, uh...“affair” is a bougie word but, like, the best part about hooking up with a contractor was that he had keys to bougie apartments and he knew when they’d be gone. It was a great way to see the city.

**MAN.** And I was like, “Those? Those are your panties, right?” And she says, and I’ll never forget this, she said. “No, these are *not* mine. *These* are way too nice.”

**WOMAN.** The last time we hooked up was at a brownstone on 127th and Malcolm X Boulevard.

**MAN.** I thought they were yours! That’s why I put them on – (*Catches himself.*)

**WOMAN.** We did it on a sofa covered in plastic.

**MAN.** And she says, “And that’s why you put them on *what*.”

**WOMAN.** It was hot. The plastic stuck to our sweat.

**MAN.** And I said “that’s why I put them on...*the bed*. If they belonged to my side piece why would I put them on the bed.” Then she was like, “*I* put them on the bed. After I found them under the couch. They fell out when I removed the plastic.” And that’s when I remembered something:

**WOMAN.** We were always careful not to leave anything behind. We checked for security cameras, door men, baby cams. We had a whole system.

**MAN.** “Baby, I wasn’t here either. The painter was here. Remember? I stayed with Mike cuz the paint fumes fuck up my sinuses. I’m not cheating!”

**WOMAN.** In the shower, I watched flecks of paint dissolve and circle the drain. And it was then that I knew. I knew this was the last time I’d see him. I made up some reason I had to go. And I think it was at the doorway I said something vague. Vague and a little...mean? I said... “So I’ll see you around.”

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# **Goddess Help Us**

by Christina Anderson

## CHARACTERS

**ELLIE** – early 30s, Black American woman. A musician, software designer.

**FREDI** – late 30s, Black American woman. A musician. Has a Grammy on her bookcase.

**MILLS** – early 30s, Black American woman. A music hobbyist. Ellie's roommate and best friend.

## SETTING

Ellie's kitchen in Harlem, NY.

Fredi's kitchen somewhere else in New York.

Convention lobby.

## TIME

It flows in a dream-like way. We are present in Ellie's kitchen on a weekday morning. We flow back five years in Fredi's kitchen on a Friday evening. We snap forward to a music conference in Austin. We touch various moments throughout a specific span of time.

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

The “=.” symbol is called chicken feet. Given the context of the scene, it represents an active moment that transcends words. It can be a gesture, a look, or a consideration to say the next line (or the choice to say something different). The duration of the moment should be no longer than a sneeze.

There is an unspoken intimacy between Fredi and Ellie. At times it breathes in the music. Other times it breathes in the exchanges that take place in Fredi's kitchen.

*(Two cramped kitchens.)*

*(One in Harlem.)*

*(The other not in Harlem.)*

*(**ELLIE** and **MILLS** sit in the Harlem kitchen.)*

*(They stare at their phones, reading the same thing.)*

*(The not-Harlem kitchen is empty.)*

*(But something burns.)*

*(Is it the farro cooking on the stove?)*

*(The gluten-free bread in the toaster?)*

*(Or the stuffed butternut squash in the oven?)*

*(Whatever it is, it's definitely burning.)*

*(And instead of smoke, the not-Harlem kitchen fills with sanctimony.)*

*(What does sanctimony look like in this play world? Is it purple light? Bubbles? Packing peanuts?)*

*(From the Harlem kitchen **ELLIE** speaks to us:)*

**ELLIE.** My name is Ellie.

This is my kitchen.

That's my roommate, Mills.

**ELLIE.** We live in Harlem.

And in this room,

at this moment,

time feels like it folds into itself.

Right now it feels like 1925, '65, '85, 2005, two thousand and twenty...

*(Shift.)*

Five years ago, I attended an event not far from my apartment.

A panel discussion. Four musicians talked history, future, and craft.

One of them said things that made me sit up a bit taller.

Her presence impacted me. And many others.

I introduced myself afterwards. That was five years ago.

This morning, five years later, I read an essay she just published.

It's about me. Without naming me.

It contains a litany of wrongs I supposedly committed against her –

**MILLS.** You have to respond.

Fill in the gaps she conveniently skipped.

**ELLIE.** I don't know if I want to do that.

**MILLS.** Why not?

The way she describes what went down  
makes you look suspect.

She writes an essay; you write one back.

**ELLIE.** No essay.

If people want the truth, they have to look me in the eye and hear my words. I'd rather post a video.

*(Hesitates.)*

But I don't know if I want to respond.

*(Annoyed.)*

Why does she get to dictate how this goes, again?

She starts things, she stops things...

All I do with this woman is react –

*(In the not-Harlem kitchen filled with sanctimony smoke, the detector goes off. But instead of the typical high-pitched beeps, we hear snippets of **ELLIE**'s opening monologue:)*

**SANCTIMONY ALARM.** "...time feels like it folds into itself.  
Her presence impacted me..."

*(**FREDI** rushes in. She opens windows, shuts off the oven, uses a dish towel to fan the sanctimony away from the detector.)*

"...It's about me. Without naming me... Five years ago...  
Five years ago... Five years ago"

*(**ELLIE** leaves the present day of her Harlem kitchen and enters Fredi's not-Harlem kitchen from five years ago. **FREDI** passes her the dish towel. **ELLIE** continues to fan the sanctimony from the detector as **FREDI** tries to restore and salvage things.)*

*(The alarm falls silent. **ELLIE** continues to wave the dish towel as she speaks to us:)*

**ELLIE.** This is Fredi.

Who I heard speak on that panel.

I introduced myself afterwards

and a few weeks later I'm here.

In her *not*-Harlem kitchen.

She invited me over for dinner.

*(Acknowledges the disaster of the burnt meal.)*

But she ended up ordering out –

**FREDI.** I'm sorry about this, Ellie.

**ELLIE.** It's okay.

**FREDI.** I didn't smell anything burning.

**ELLIE.** I didn't either.

**FREDI.** The alarm stopped.

I think you can stop...

**ELLIE.** Oh...

*(Stops waving the dish towel.)*

What can I do?

**FREDI.** Relax while I order from the pizza place downstairs.

What do you like on yours?

**ELLIE.** Whatever is fine with me.

**FREDI.** Veggie?

**ELLIE.** Yes.

*(FREDI places the call. ELLIE speaks to us:)*

Fredi is a musician who comes from a long line of family that played, wrote, painted, and danced in every major Black arts movement since the 1920s.

She feels like a Renaissance – this is the first thing I notice about her

when I'm here at her apartment. Time feels like it folds into itself.

She feels like 1925, '65, two thousand and twenty –

**FREDI.** *(Into the phone.)* Thanks Tony...

*(Ends the call.)*

They'll bring it up in a few.

**ELLIE.** Okay.

**FREDI.** So the plugin?

**ELLIE.** The plugin...?

**FREDI.** Before the detector went off, you were telling me about...

**ELLIE.** Oh. Right.

**FREDI.** Keep talking. I'm getting our glasses.

*(FREDI exits.)*

**ELLIE.** Uhhh...yea. So I'm designing this new software synth.

It's the fifth one I created from scratch.

I do everything: record the sounds, write the program, design the UI...

*(FREDI re-enters with their glasses. ELLIE takes hers.)*

**FREDI.** What's the new one?

**ELLIE.** It's in beta. I call it: Goddess Help Us...

**FREDI.** That is an amazing name for an instrument...

**ELLIE.** Thanks. I want it to have the vibe of a confidante, a friend, a guide.

**ELLIE.** So the sounds you can get from it will be earthy, grounded, yet ethereal.

Like good advice from a trusted friend or an ancestor.

**FREDI.** Give me an idea of what it sounds like.

**ELLIE.** Uhhh... I don't have my computer...

**FREDI.** Sing something.

*(ELLIE is shy to do this.)*

No? Okay, well, describe one of the sounds to me and I'll try to recreate it.

*(ELLIE speaks to us.)*

**ELLIE.** I did.

And she sang...

*(FREDI sings an earthy and ethereal improvised tune. Roberta Flack meets The Weeknd...)*

I thought it was beautiful.

*(Listens.)*

Later in the evening, Fredi asked if I'd like to collab on a project. Create a virtual synth from her great-grandmother's piano –

**FREDI.** I think we could make something really magical.

I'd play every note, conjure every sound we can imagine from it.

And you'd record it all.

The piano isn't perfect, but there's charm in that, you know?

There's history, too. Thelonius Monk played it once...

**ELLIE.** (*To us.*) I build software instruments.

You can download them, like an app,

and play them on your phone, laptop, tablet...

I don't charge too much. Between ten, twenty-five dollars.

Solange used one of my synths on a song...

but she never released it. The song, I mean.

(**MILLS** *reads an excerpt from Fredi's essay:*)

**MILLS.** "...this person's attempt to 'cancel' me is pathetic and disappointing. I do not profess my fame. That's never been my style. But I do acknowledge my artistic status and recognition is greater than others. So I'm used to being approached by young artists. I can often sense the hunger to take but never give. I hoped this person was different. But I was wrong."

=.=

Fredi is such a trifling –

(*Fredi's doorbell rings.*)

**FREDI.** Yay! Pizza's here.

(**FREDI** *exits to get it.*)

**ELLIE.** (*To us.*) When a certain type of artist gets called out, there's a tendency for that person to latch onto another artist

to justify, scapegoat, or what-about the situation.

Usually, the artist who gets dragged into the situation has *less* power than the person who's being called out.

=.=

Less *social* power, that is.

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# **The Moon, The Sun and The Stories We Play**

A play in moments  
by Dane Figueroa Edidi

## **CHARACTERS**

**SELENE** – A Black Trans Woman. A Moon Woman. An Artist.

**GREGORY** – A Black man (cis or trans). A Man of Sun. A producer.

**GRANDMA** – A Black cis woman. A Spirit. A Memory. A Storyteller.

## **SETTING**

A New York Apartment, Haunted by the Unspoken,  
Needing to Be Exorcised by the Letting Go.

## **TIME**

Hours in A Day, Moments between feelings, A Time when Suns  
are preparing to set... or Any Day after the year 2021.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTES**

\*\*\*The Narrator is the Spirit of Selene's Grandmother\*\*\*

\*\*\*While the play is grounded in reality, it is not realism\*\*\*

\*\*\*The most ideal director for this play is a Black woman, the least ideal  
is a white cis man\*\*\*

## Scene One

### The Moon Wakes On A River Of Tears

**GRANDMA.** We are in a small apartment

Simple in its grandeur

Warm in its embrace

There is a small table in the corner with a cup of water

A libation of memory

There is another table

Round like always

Two chairs settled on opposite sides of it

waiting on a reason to draw themselves together

A window

With sun peering through

is behind it

*(There is the beep of a machine.)*

**GREGORY.** *(On the message machine.)* Hey babe

I hope you are doing well

So

...

I have some bad news

...

**GRANDMA.** A door opens somewhere

Selene appears

Sorrow hanging to her

(**SELENE** *appears, sorrow hanging to her.*)

A night gown clinging to body

desperately

She moves towards the window

A ghost in her own flesh

Her steps

gingerly

against the ground

Trying to summon something of the days before

**GREGORY.** (*On the message machine.*) So they want to  
pass on your play

The team just feels like it really won't work in this  
season's slot

I really did try to fight for you...

**GRANDMA.** Selene

A moon woman

skin that lets you know she Black

and full of that old magic

of memories

stored there in the treasure troves of melanin

The kind hidden within discovery and reclamation

**GREGORY.** (*On the message machine.*) I mean I kept  
telling you it wasn't commercial enough

I'm sorry

...

It's just

Those types of plays are hard to sell

...

I'm sorry

**GRANDMA.** She stands in front of the window

The sun an ocean of Gold

The blinds

Sullen

Attempting to keep it at bay

Sunlight weeps

dripping themselves down walls

dropping against flesh

glaring when they touch eye

Selene covers her eyes

Daring not to close the blinds

She

A phantom living in her tomorrows

Goes back into her room

**SELENE.** Can you believe this shit Grandma

**GRANDMA.** She shuts the door

## Scene Two

### The Laughter of Tears Sound Like Joy

(**GRANDMA** goes to the clock and turns it.)

**GRANDMA.** An hour later

An alarm blares

Screaming

“Get up gal

You got magic to conjure

You got screams to hurl

You got white folk to rattle”

(*She laughs.*)

(*We hear the sounds of* **SELENE** *getting ready.*)

The sound of a shower

The sound of a ticking clock

The sound of teeth being brushed

The sound of make up being put on

The sound of hair being brushed

sounds

Of mourning hidden behind each gesture

Selene readies herself

Lullabies of womanhood singing

Sounds

(**SELENE** comes out of her room smiling.)

She emerges

A painting of joy  
Tears hidden behind a smile  
The doorbell rings  
Selene sighs  
The sounds of keys jiggling  
The door opens  
Gregory emerges bathed in artificial light  
Gregory is a man of sun  
Where he goes space fills with heat  
The thing about heat is  
too much can burn ya  
Dry you out  
Make you so thirsty that the great flood itself won't fill  
the sea in you

**GREGORY.** I called you

**SELENE.** I know

**GRANDMA.** Gregory looks at her

Wanting to conjure joy in her

But he ain't got the range

She knows this so her smile tries to assuage his discomfort

**SELENE.** Greg it's fine

I am feeling much better

I even sent my manuscript in to my publisher

A Bitch may not have Broadway

But she know how to write a novel

**GREGORY.** What did he say

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# **Holding**

by Zora Howard

## CHARACTERS

**MARIAMA** – (f), Black, 30s

**OPERATOR** – (f), one actor will voice all

## SETTING

A room.

## TIME

Now.

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

A speech usually follows the one immediately before it, except when one character starts speaking before the other has finished, the point of interruption is marked “/”.

**OPERATOR.** Gracias por/ llamar a Dynamic Solutions.  
Escuche atentamente–

**MARIAMA.** (*Offstage.*) No, no, no.  
English. English.

*(A room, empty except for a single, wooden chair. Water leaks from several spots in the ceiling. A symphony of syncopated dripping.)*

**OPERATOR.** *(On speakerphone.)* ...for English, press one.  
Para Español, oprime dos.

*(A cellphone touchpad key – “beep.”)*

**MARIAMA.** *(Offstage.)* Fuck.

**OPERATOR.** Gracias por/ llamar a Dynamic Solutions.  
Escuche atentamente –

**MARIAMA.** *(Offstage.)* No, no, no.

English. English.

*(Several keys on the touchpad at once – “beep  
beep beep.”)*

**OPERATOR.** Lo siento, esa/ no es una entrada válida.  
*(Pause.)* Gracias por llamar –

**MARIAMA.** *(Offstage.)* Please. Go back. English. Inglés.

*(Pause. Robot sounds.)*

**OPERATOR.** Thank you for calling Dynamic Solutions.

*(MARIAMA enters laden with a number of pots, some towels, and a mop, her cell phone balancing delicately on top of it all.)*

Please listen carefully to the following options as our menu has changed.

If you have an existing account, please press one.

**MARIAMA.** Operator.

**OPERATOR.** For our contractor associate line, please press two.

**MARIAMA.** Operator.

**OPERATOR.** For claims and appeals, please press three.

**MARIAMA.** O-per-a-tor. I would like to speak to an operator.

*(Robot sounds.)*

**OPERATOR.** I understand that you would like to speak to an operator. In a few words, please tell me what you're calling about.

**MARIAMA.** I have a leak.

**OPERATOR.** I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. In a few words/, please tell me what you're calling about.

**MARIAMA.** Leak. Leak. Water is falling from the ceiling.

**OPERATOR.**

You can say make a payment, or press one. Existing order, or press two. Technical support, or press three. Location and hours, or press four.

**MARIAMA.** *(Receiver very close to her mouth.)*

I have a leak. There is water. Falling. From my ceiling. I need someone to help me stop the water falling from –

**MARIAMA.** *(Losing it.)* I have a leak I have a leak I have a –

*(Pause.)*

**OPERATOR.** Okay. You said Liens. Is that correct?

**MARIAMA.** No. I said –

**OPERATOR.** Transferring you to our next available agent.

*(On hold now: pleasant, nondescript music fills the space.\* An endless loop. MARIAMA rests a moment in the chair as she waits.)*

---

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In order to better assist you, please have your thirty-six digit account number ready.

*(Seconds haven't passed before MARIAMA notices a new leak on the opposite side of the room.)*

**MARIAMA.** What the –

*(MARIAMA drags the chair across the room to get a better look.)*

**OPERATOR.** All of our representatives are assisting other callers. Your estimated wait time is *(Another voice.)* [two hours and fifty-three minutes].

**MARIAMA.** *(Re the leak.)* Where is it coming from?

**OPERATOR.** Rather than wait on hold, we can call you back when it's your turn within *(Another voice.)* [three hours and sixty-four minutes]. To receive a callback, say callback or press one. To remain on hold, say hold/ or press two.

**MARIAMA.** Hold. Hold, hold, HOLD.

*(MARIAMA, now atop the chair on her tippy toes, reaches to touch the source of the most recent leak when all of a sudden an even newer [and more aggressive] leak starts up in another corner.)*

No no. No. NO!

**OPERATOR.** Please note, by speaking to a representative and providing personal information, you are agreeing to our privacy policy, which you may or may not find on our website.

*(MARIAMA jumps down from the chair and, with a running start, slides a pot from one of the original leaks towards the new leak, nearly busting her ass in the process.)*

**MARIAMA.** You will not win.

*(A success! And yet, somehow, in that moment, all of the original leaks shift about an inch and a half outside their respective pots at the same time, rendering her initial pot system obsolete.)*

Arghhhhhhhh!

**OPERATOR.** Your call is important to us. Please wait for the next available agent.

*(MARIAMA rushes around the room like a madwoman, rearranging the pots, sliding the towels into new positions, leaping over the newly-formed puddles in between.)*

*(A new sound is now introduced into the space. Whatever it is, it's coming from above. The leaks rebel – it is now practically raining in the room.)*

**MARIAMA.** *(Calling through the ceiling to the apartment upstairs.)* HELLO! HELLO YOU ARE LEAKING ON ME

*(MARIAMA shoots across the space and grabs the mop. Then hops back atop the chair and starts banging on the ceiling.)*

YOU ARE LEAKING ON ME! HELLO

**OPERATOR.** *(Heavy southern accent.)* Hello, thank you for calling Dynamic Solutions. My name is Jessica. Who do I have/ the pleasure of –

**MARIAMA.** *(Still to the apartment upstairs.)* STOP PLEASE YOU ARE LEAKING ON ME!

**OPERATOR.** I'm sorry?

**MARIAMA.** YOU ARE LEAKING ON ME!

**OPERATOR.** Hello, is anyone there?

*(MARIAMA, all of a sudden aware of the live agent on the line, dashes over to her phone.)*

**MARIAMA.** *(Out of breath.)* Hello?! Yes! YES. I'm here. I'm here I'm here/ I'm

**OPERATOR.** Thank you for calling Dynamic Solutions. This is Jessica. And whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with today?

**MARIAMA.** *(Still out of breath.)* Mariama. I am Mariama.

**OPERATOR.** How can I help you today, Mariama?

**MARIAMA.** I have a leak. I have many leaks. I am leaking. Everywhere.

**OPERATOR.** Hmmm. Well, that's no fun.

**MARIAMA.** *(Wtf?)* No. It is not.

**OPERATOR.** Let me see what I can do about that.

**MARIAMA.** Thank/ you.

**OPERATOR.** So, when you're ready, I'll just take that thirty-six digit account number from you.

**MARIAMA.** I don't want – I don't have that.

**OPERATOR.** That's okay. It's either gonna be on your membership card, or if you don't have that, you can find it right up there in the left hand corner of your last statement. You can also find it on your online account.

**MARIAMA.** I don't have an online account.

**OPERATOR.** That's no problem. I can go ahead and set that up for you –

**MARIAMA.** *(Exasperated.)* Is there any other way I/ can –

**OPERATOR.** How about, okay, let me see. What's your date of birth?

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