

SLASHES OF LIGHT
By Judy K. Tate

SLASHES OF LIGHT

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SLASHES OF LIGHT

SLASHES OF LIGHT was first produced June 14, 2014 at the Kitchen Theatre in Ithaca, NY by Civic Ensemble and The Kitchen Theatre (Artistic Director for Civic, Godfrey L. Simmons, Jr. and for The Kitchen Theatre, Rachel Lampert). It was directed by Melissa Maxwell; Set by Ravi (Riw) Rakkulchon; Lights by Tyler M. Perry; Sound design by Scott O'Brien; Costumes by Lisa Boquist; Production stage manager was Jennifer Schilansky. Original songs by Judy Tate.

SUNNY.....Judi Jackson
MRS. HEDGES/HELENA.....Sarah K. Chalmers
KALEB.....Jelani Pitcher
STEVEN.....Ryan Hope Travis
THE CONDUCTORS.....Robert McKay

CAST OF CHARACTERS

SUNNY, age 14 – effervescent, curious and full of wonder, musical, smart, but very naïve. A true innocent.

KALEB, age 14 – Angry, a budding radical, intellectual, Sunny's best friend.

STEVEN, age 15 – quiet, plays blues guitar, physically mature and exudes a sexual energy beyond his years

MRS. HEDGES/HELENA, mid 30's/12 white, Polish emigrant, emotionally scarred, WWII survivor.

CONDUCTORS: All played by same actor

A British Rail Conductor

A Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Conductor

An El Train Conductor

Sunny's Father

An Art Institute Guide

Time & Place: 1940's England and 1966-'67, Chicago's South Side

Sets, Light, Sound:

The sets should be minimal and the scene shifts done rapidly. 3 benches, a moving palette, light and sound can suggest sets & move us from one scene to another

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smoothly without set/prop issues or stage-hands to slow things down and take us out of the world.

There are three train cars:

A Chicago Elevated Train Car

A 1940's British Rail Train

The Sleeping Car of a Pullman Train

One moving palette that can roll on and off stage can serve as all of the train cars with changes in sound/light.

Other areas that can be suggested by light and sound:

Sunny's Bedroom

The Bench outside Edward's Prep school

Mrs. Hedges's Classroom

The Art Institute

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

This is an epic play in a spare and simple set. It spans two continents and an unexpected collision of cultures. As one character says “two people could start their journey thousands of miles away from each other and.... end up right here in one big tangle of tracks and trestles.” The year is 1967. The place, Chicago's South Side at an all-Black private middle school, very much like one I attended. Be clear, this is Sunny's story, and I am intentionally turning the familiar trope of ‘White teacher comes to Black school’ on its head. These precocious youngsters are real, remembered and possible. I was one such youngster. Events broadside the characters like collisions, as life does during adolescence. This is a coming of age story that takes place during an era where, as our Conductor reminds us, “an entire race seemed to be lurching through adolescence”. *Slashes of Light* alludes to the lines by quintessential Chicago poet, Carl Sandburg, in which light, through a railroad car window, for a single moment penetrates the darkness and all is made clear.

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ACT I: SEPARATE TRACKS

SCENE 1

Outside of Edward's Preparatory School for the Education of Negro Boys and Girls, a private school, Chicago 1966. SUNNY, 14, and MRS. HEDGES, mid-30's enter from opposite sides of the stage. Both are looking up and out across the audience, perhaps shielding their eyes from the sun, as they react to a terrible screeching of metal wheels against railroad tracks. Mrs. Hedges holds a handful of bright red pills. Just as she's about to take one, Sunny bumps into her, scattering the pills.)

SUNNY. Oh, I'm Sorry. I'll get those. *(She bends down to help retrieve the pills.)*

MRS. HEDGES. They're so loud.

SUNNY. *(Looking up at the tracks, not Mrs. Hedges.)* And they were going too fast. All that screeching means the track needs repair and the train should slow down. You hear it all the time. My dad says there's going to be an accident on those rails one of these days. It's... *(She consciously chooses a big word, practicing it silently, then pronounces it carefully.)* inevitable.

MRS. HEDGES. Is your dad a conductor?

SUNNY. *(Still looking up in the direction of the trains.)* Sort of. He delivers babies. Over there you've got all kinds of trains. Els, commuters, regular railroad trains.

Two people could start their trip thousands of miles away from each other and between all those trains...

MRS. HEDGES. ... they could end up right here in one big tangle of tracks and trestles?

SUNNY. Yeah. Isn't that neat? *(Sunny looks in her direction for the first time and only now does it register that Mrs. Hedges is white)*

Are you lost?

MRS. HEDGES. I don't think so.

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SUNNY. You're— (*“white” is unspoken*)

MRS. HEDGES. —Mrs. Hedges. This is Edward’s Preparatory School for the Education of Negro Boys and Girls, isn't it?

SUNNY. Yes, but you're-- The new history teacher.

SUNNY. Wow. Kaleb's gonna be surprised. (*about her being white*)

MRS. HEDGES. Kaleb is, is he?

SUNNY. He's my friend. He's meeting me here.

MRS. HEDGES. School doesn't start until tomorrow. You're early.

SUNNY. No. I mean he's meeting me here today 'cause there's something I need to learn before school starts.

MRS. HEDGES. Ah, research.

SUNNY. Yeah. Wow.

MRS. HEDGES. I like that, um--

SUNNY. Sunny

MRS. HEDGES. Sunny. I can see why. Well, I look forward to working with you in one of my classes.

SUNNY. Wow.

MRS. HEDGES. You keep saying that.

SUNNY. It's just 'cause--

MRS. HEDGES. Yes?

SUNNY. Except for at the hospital with my dad, and even there, most of the doctors are Negroes--I don't think I've ever had a conversation with a white person before.

MRS. HEDGES. This isn't the south.

SUNNY. Oh, yes it is, Mrs. Hedges. This is up-south. The south side of Chicago. (*beat*) You're not from here are you?

MRS. HEDGES. No.

SUNNY. Did you take the El?

MRS. HEDGES. No. I walked.

SUNNY. From where?

MRS. HEDGES. The other side of town.

SUNNY. Weren't you nervous?

MRS. HEDGES. A little.

SUNNY. I know the feeling.

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MRS. HEDGES. Now you and I have something in common, don't we? (*Mrs. Hedges extends her hand. Sunny takes it.*) It's nice to have met you, Sunny.

SUNNY. Yeah. You too.

SCENE 2

Later that day. The yard of Edward's Prep. On a bench is a portable 45rpm record player, playing You Can't Hurry Love by the Supremes. Sunny's friend, Kaleb, is with her.

SUNNY. The bop, Kaleb. You've got to teach me the bop.

KALEB. Why?

SUNNY. How'm I gonna get a boy to talk to me if I can't dance?

KALEB. "Talk to": as in flirt with, rap to, go a courtin', have pre-conjugal discourse--

SUNNY. Ugh. You make it sound... like a science project. Come on, show me the bop.

KALEB. Well, there's two kinds of bop. This one's the 'gouster bop'. (*He starts to lead. She suddenly stops.*)

SUNNY. The 'gouster bop'. What exactly does that mean, gouster? Is that some derivative of gangster?

KALEB. Derivative? I don't know...

SUNNY. And bop, where does that come from? Is that some shortened updated version of bee bop?

KALEB. Sunny, I didn't come to school a day early to review the etymology of popular dance names.

SUNNY. Etymology. That's good. I taught you that one.

KALEB. I know. You gonna give me points for using it right?

SUNNY. (*Correcting*) Right's the opposite of left.

KALEB. (*Exasperated*) *Correctly?*

SUNNY. Not only that, I'm gonna give you points for using it without even thinking about it.

KALEB. Effortlessly.

SUNNY. Yeah.

KALEB. (*He stops the record.*) Do you really want to do this?

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SUNNY. I'm the only girl who can't dance.

KALEB. Get one of your girlfriends to teach you.

SUNNY. I don't have any. At Roberta's party, Cherise asked me why I even got invited. Every boy picked a girl and I just stood there against the wall.

KALEB. Boo-hoo.

SUNNY. I really need you to teach me.

KALEB. Damn Sunny. (*meaning: you're pathetic*)

SUNNY. Don't curse.

KALEB. (*To get to her.*) Why the hell not?

SUNNY. (*Quoting*) "Cursing is the crutch of the conversational cripple."

KALEB. Where the fuck did you hear that?

SUNNY. In church.

KALEB. I thought you're an atheist. What kind of atheist goes to church?

SUNNY. I'm flawed. Anyway, I've made it this far in life without saying a single curse word.

KALEB. Bully for you. So, who am I standing in for?

SUNNY. Why should I tell you? You'll just make fun of me.

KALEB. It's a secret?

SUNNY. *You've* clearly never had a secret.

KALEB. How do you figure that?

SUNNY. When people have secrets they can't wait for somebody else to know. All the girls tell secrets in the bathroom, and they never stay secret longer than the second bell. I don't want to tell you, so it's not a secret. See?

KALEB. (*Re: her wacky "Sunny-logic"*) This is why you don't have any friends. Now who am I standing in for?

SUNNY. (*Enthralled*) He's so...so. I don't know. He's really never looked at me. He's kind of quiet. He probably doesn't even know who I am, but I've seen him playing his guitar sometimes and I just....

KALEB. Are you talking about Steven Blake?

SUNNY. He seems really mature doesn't he?

KALEB. Sure, he spent 5 years in the seventh grade.

SUNNY. He's just got a moustache that's all. Have you seen him playing his guitar at the beach?

KALEB. Every time I go.

SUNNY. I want him to talk to me.

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KALEB. He never says anything--to anybody.

SUNNY. (*Swooning*) I know.

KALEB. You like that?

SUNNY. Can we just try the steps? (*They start. Sunny stops*) Last year you were an okay dancer. But you were great at Roberta's party. Who taught you?

KALEB. My sister's boyfriend, Malik.

SUNNY. That serious guy from SNCC? (*pronounced: SNICK*) Never smiles? I'm surprised he does anything as "shallow" as dance.

KALEB. Malik says "dancing is one of our few remaining cultural remnants".

SUNNY. Didn't Malik used to be Ronald last year?

KALEB. So?

SUNNY. Nothing. (*Kaleb stares.*) I'm ready.

KALEB. (*Slowly showing her as he talk.s*) Now for both of us, the man and the woman—

SUNNY. (*Giggling*) "Man and woman"

KALEB. --it's like a little slide across then back on the right, tap the left heel, slide across the other way, back on the left, tap the right heel.

SUNNY. Unh hunh. (*awkwardly managing*)

KALEB. Now this is where it changes. For you, cause you're the girl, you sort of step back while the boy grinds in forward. I'll just lean forward.

SUNNY. Okay.

KALEB. I'll re-start the 45. Put your arm around my waist and let's try it all together. (*They try again. She is tripping and stepping on him. At the grind part they both stop*)

KALEB. This isn't working.

SUNNY. It's the music. I have a record! It's my favorite... (*She puts on the Righteous Brothers tune, "You've lost that loving Feeling"*)

KALEB. That's your favorite?

SUNNY. Yeah, what's wrong with it?

KALEB. Nothin. If you like that kinda music.

SUNNY. What do you mean? (*Kaleb gives her an "are you that stupid?" look. Nb: they're a white singing duo*) They are not! They couldn't be!

KALEB. Wanna bet?

SUNNY. Well they sound real.

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KALEB. That's what they want you to think, so you'll buy their music and forget about your own.

SUNNY. I can't believe that!

KALEB. Wake up Sunny. Music is money. A black record--

SUNNY. I hate when you say black.

KALEB. Get used to it.

SUNNY. But my whole life we've been fighting to get the word "Negro" capitalized.

KALEB. --A Black record on the top of the charts makes a lot of money. They can't stand to see that happen. So they imitate us. Steal our music. We invent, they profit. Why shouldn't it be the same in music as with everything else in this country. It's called 'co-opting' Sunny.

SUNNY. Geez Louise, Kaleb. I just like the song.

KALEB. 'cause they want you to.

SUNNY. I thought I wanted me to.

KALEB. Nope. It's them. (*Sunny thinks about this a moment*)

SUNNY. Can we dance now?

KALEB. Okay, but you can't "Bop" to this song. Put your arm around me and move along slowly to the, the "Righteous Brothers".

SUNNY. One step or two?

KALEB. Just follow the man.

SUNNY. Follow the man? Why?

KALEB. It's just the way it is. It's natural.

SUNNY. For who?

KALEB. The Honorable Elijah Muhammed says---

SUNNY. The leader of the Nation of Islam is a dancer now?

KALEB. Elijah Muhammed says Allah says the woman should always be 5 paces behind the man.

SUNNY. Why?

KALEB. "Because a strong Black Nation is best served when the woman is following the man."

SUNNY. What if the man doesn't know where he's going?

KALEB. What if the man doesn't---?!? I hate when you get like this.

SUNNY. How come the Righteous Brothers are 'taking my mind', but when Mr. Bean Pie says I have to walk behind you it's okay?

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KALEB. *(Reciting)* "And be warned, the masses will be disrespectful, unbelieving, the white devils have--"

SUNNY. Kaleb, what happened to you this summer?

KALEB. I found out things we should have been learning in school.

SUNNY. Well, we have a new teacher this year and—

KALEB. --she's gonna teach the same tired lessons every other teacher has taught from the same tired white textbooks: "Negroes we like and two zillion other uses for the peanut".

SUNNY. We better dance. I think I'm getting mad now.

KALEB. I *know* I am. *(They start again. It is less than close. Stiff and a little awkward)*

SUNNY. What do I do now---while I'm dancing five paces behind you, my brother?
(She steps on his foot)

KALEB. Ow!

SUNNY. Sorry.

KALEB. That's why Elijah said you better walk 5 paces behind your man. *(They manage to dance)*

SUNNY. I don't know what's happened to you but you better get over it.

KALEB. Why?

SUNNY. Because one, I want you to introduce me to Steven Blake.

KALEB. How 'bout I introduce you to the Righteous Brothers instead. They sound black, you sound white... *(she glares at him)*

SUNNY. And two, You know the new teacher?

KALEB. Yeah?

SUNNY. *She's white. (Kaleb rolls his eyes as we hear the sound of a passing el train growing. They both hold their ears while awkwardly trying to 'bop' as the music blends with the sound of the elevated train roaring by.)*

SCENE 3

Mid-September, a few weeks later. Edward's Prep. Mrs. Hedges's social studies class. We see Sunny, STEVEN. and Kaleb. Steven alternately writes in his notebook or stares off playing air guitar. Sunny stares at him. Mrs. Hedges checks her roster.

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MRS. HEDGES. I'd like to start the assignment, but there are only 3 of you. Each day we seem to lose somebody. Should we wait any longer?

SUNNY. There are the free physicals today Mrs. Hedges, for the Oral Polio vaccines.

MRS. HEDGES. Right... Mr. Johnson said something about it. But he didn't tell me practically the entire class would be missing. (*Kaleb snickers*)

SUNNY. (*Sunny protects her.*) It was sort of last minute.

KALEB. You know sit-ins against segregation? This is a sit out against integra--.

SUNNY. --Kaleb!

MRS. HEDGES. This honors class is small enough on a regular day - we'll just go on without the others. (*She hands out sheets.*) These are suggested ideas for a paper. Of course, you can choose your own topic. In art, as with any human event—

KALEB. A paper about art? I thought this was a history class?

MRS. HEDGES. Can you separate history from art?

SUNNY./KALEB. No! / Yes!

SUNNY. When you say art – do you mean painting?

MRS. HEDGES. Painting certainly, but are there other forms of expression that illustrate the human condition? Steven? (*Steven doesn't answer, only shrugs.*) Do you know, Steven, what I mean by the human condition?

SUNNY. (*Jumping in.*) The way somebody feels!

MRS. HEDGES. Just one person?

SUNNY. Everybody. It's like everything we all go through. Getting born, growing up, getting old, dying.

MRS. HEDGES. Thank you, Sunny. But, are there ways to show it other than painting?

SUNNY. Lots of ways-

MRS. HEDGES. Like?

KALEB. (*Not to be outdone.*) Write a novel or a play.

MRS. HEDGES. Excellent, Kaleb. Steven, is the “human condition” a static event?

SUNNY. No. It has to change. Because people change. And history changes people.

MRS. HEDGES. What do you mean?

SUNNY. Young people can get old. Poor people can get rich. People are born and they die.

MRS. HEDGES. Excellent Sunny. The human condition is full of contrasts. Steven, give me an example of contrast in one of our novels.

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SUNNY. Well, the obvious one is in the *Tale of Two Cities* right? "It was the best of times it was the worst of times"?

KALEB. Charles Dickens! *(To Mrs. Hedges)* How come we're not looking at our own writers?

MRS. HEDGES. Such as...?

KALEB. Aren't you the teacher? *(An uncomfortable moment)* What about Ralph Ellison?-- *Invisible Man*. Now there's a contrast.

MRS. HEDGES. Perhaps that title "Invisible Man" would be a better example of irony Kaleb.

KALEB. No dice. Contrast. Not the title. The book. The "human condition". Look at how he lives. Look at how the white people live.

MRS. HEDGES. *(Not playing into his contentiousness)* The books on our reading list were given to me by the principal. I'll suggest we include more Negro writers from now on.

KALEB. Black writers.

MRS. HEDGES. Thank you.

KALEB. You're welcome. *(beat)*

MRS. HEDGES. Steven? Conflict?

SUNNY. It's a fight.

MRS. HEDGES. Thank you, Sunny. Steven?

STEVEN. Like what just happened here.

MRS. HEDGES. Why yes, Steven!

KALEB. *(not to be outdone)* Like what's been going on in this country for the past 100 years.

MRS. HEDGES. You're referring to civil rights.

KALEB. No kidding.

MRS. HEDGES. I'd like a paper on that.

KALEB. I'll give you a paper on that.

MRS. HEDGES. Thank you.

KALEB. You're welcome. *(An El train roars by. Mrs. Hedges stops and stares in the direction of the noise.)*

SUNNY. Mrs. Hedges. *(beat)* Mrs. Hedges. *(The train passes. She turns to Sunny.)* I don't understand when people talk about conflict and there's only one person in the story. How can that be? You don't fight yourself.

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MRS. HEDGES. You don't? Look up the term "internal conflict" and propose a paper.

SUNNY. *(Thinking.)* Okay.

MRS. HEDGES. So, keep in mind exploring these ideas as we visit the Art Institute throughout the semester. Steven, I'd-- *(Steven gets up and exits the class quickly.)*

KALEB. *(To Sunny.)* Like clockwork. *(The Bell Rings.)*

MRS. HEDGES. Kaleb. Thank you. I'm looking forward to reading your paper. *(They all exit.)*

SCENE 4

Later that day, outside of the school. Sunny sits strumming chords on a guitar to "Cruel War". A guitar chord book lays open in front of her. Kaleb enters with books and listens.

KALEB. You play any Motown on that thing?

SUNNY. *(She plays three chords over and over.)* Shhhh. Listen. I heard it on the radio--down at the end of the dial. It's a love-song.

KALEB. So?

SUNNY. It's an anti-war song too.

KALEB. Anti-war song? You a hippie now?

SUNNY. King's against the war.

KALEB. I'm sick of King. He's lost his mind. He has no business talking about the war.

SUNNY. Shhh, just listen. *(She sings a little, we see Kaleb. Is moved in spite of himself.)* "The cruel war is raging and Johnny has to fight and I want to be with him from morning 'til night". It's so beautiful. Who sings it? That woman-- Joan Baez? Am I saying it right? What kind of name is that? *(NB: It's not Joan Baez, but Peter Paul and Mary.)*

KALEB. What do I care? I keep my tuner on the opposite end of the dial. W.V.O. N. The Voice of the Negro.

SUNNY. What do you think of her?

KALEB. I just said I don't care.

SUNNY. I mean Mrs. Hedges.

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KALEB. I give her points for daring to show her face in this school. But I take them all away for thinking she's qualified to teach us history.

SUNNY. She uses the mimeograph, Kaleb. We've never had anybody mimeo tests for us.

KALEB. Tests aren't exactly a favor.

SUNNY. You're just mad. She embarrassed you in class today.

KALEB. She should be embarrassed because everybody cut her stupid class.

SUNNY. She's smart Kaleb. She's got guts. She's gone through something. I can feel it.

KALEB. All she's gone through is your imagination Sunny. Wake up. She's a blond, blue-eyed devil.

SUNNY. Woman.

KALEB. White woman. I go through more walking to school and back everyday than she will in a lifetime.

SUNNY. Like you're so oppressed.

KALEB. I never thought I'd live to see the day when Sunny Wilson's mind was taken by the man.

SUNNY. I just like the new history teacher! It's not voodoo. White people don't just walk up to you and snatch your mind. What about choice, Kaleb?

KALEB. Is your nose just naturally stuck up the new teacher's backside or is that a choice? *(Steven enters)*

KALEB. Hey Steven, what's happenin' man?

STEVEN. What it is, Kaleb?

KALEB. It's your world man. I'm just a squirrel tryin' to get a nut. *(Sunny strums a chord loudly.)* Oh. Steven this is Sunny. Sunny--Steven. *(pause.)* Well, I'll catch you on the rebound, man. Sunny. *(Kaleb exits.)*

SUNNY. I don't know why he does that.

STEVEN. What?

SUNNY. Gets around other people and talks like that.

STEVEN. It's just a thang.

SUNNY. Yeah, just a thang.

STEVEN. You play that?

SUNNY. Yeah. Well, no. Well sort of.

STEVEN. Wanna show me?

SUNNY. Show you? Oh. How I play. Uh, sure.

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STEVEN. *(He leafs through her music books.)* These yours?

SUNNY. Yeah. I bought this guitar a few months ago. I want to take lessons at the music school up the street from my house, but I haven't got up my nerve. I figure I need to know how to play a little before I take lessons.

STEVEN. *(He stares at her.)* Unhunh.

SUNNY. I know, "Wouldn't you take lessons 'cause you don't know how play?" Most people would. But I've got a research complex. I just made that up. I like to make stuff up.

STEVEN. Songs?

SUNNY. Yeah. Sometimes.

STEVEN. Show me.

SUNNY. Well--the only thing I've made up so far is a love song.

STEVEN. Okay

SUNNY. But-

STEVEN. I won't take it personal.

SUNNY. Okay. *(Sunny nervously sings a naive but heartfelt upbeat pop/folk song. Her voice shakes.)*

"Baby it's unusual the way I never looked at you like this before

Dah dah dah dah dah

And I hope it's mutual,

The feelings I get 'cause it's you boy I adore.

Dah dah dah dah dah

There's more but I'll skip to the chorus:

It's the special kind of way you walk

And the special kind of talk you talk

The feelings are inside me I don't know how to take

It's those special kind of feelings I don't know how to shake

But it's all right. Everything's all right. (She stops.)

SUNNY. I'm too nervous I can't anymore. I sound like Buffy St. Marie. *(They sit quietly.)*

STEVEN. I liked it.

SUNNY. You did?

STEVEN. Yeah. You meant those words.

SUNNY. Kaleb says it sounds white.

STEVEN. You play colors on that thing or music?

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SUNNY. You know what he means. I just gravitate to the wrong sound I guess. I'm an inadvertent sell-out. I even like the Righteous Brothers. Kaleb says they stole our sound.

STEVEN. Motown and Stax sell that sound--to anybody who'll buy it.

SUNNY. I never thought of that.

STEVEN. Music's bigger than that. It's for sharing. Ideas are like bubbles anyway.

SUNNY. Bubbles?

STEVEN. Floating up from the bottom. Black folks are on the bottom right now, so we have most of the ideas. *(beat)*

"An inadvertent sell out". That's funny. Give me that thing.

(He plays the first verse and chorus to Sonny Boy Williamson's "Keep it to Yourself" with ease.) You like it?

SUNNY. *(Enchanted)* Yeah. You write it?

STEVEN. Nope. But it's by somebody named Sonny.

SUNNY. You're teasing me.

STEVEN. Nope. And you know what color that song was?

SUNNY. Black?

STEVEN. Nope. Blue. That was Chicago blues. *(They laugh.)*

SCENE 5

Night, 4AM. The Sleeping Car of a train rolls on stage. We see slashes of light through the window as the train moves. Kaleb sleeps. The BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS CONDUCTOR enters.

CONDUCTOR. This is Chicago! Chiiiiicccaaaagooooo! All Aboaaaarrrd!

Alll Tickets--all tickets, please. *(Kaleb wakes sleepily from his berth)*

Your ticket sir.

KALEB. Who are you?

CONDUCTOR. A proud member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters! Just like your grandpa. Your ticket please.

KALEB. Where am I?

CONDUCTOR. You're sleeping. Don't you love the way the light hits these windows and just for a moment everything seems clear. Your ticket?

KALEB. Where am I going?

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CONDUCTOR. Well, that depends on you.

KALEB. What time is it?

CONDUCTOR. Almost dawn.

KALEB. Oh brother. This is really out. How did I get here?

CONDUCTOR. Well, like most young colored folks your family come up here from Alabama 'round 'bout the 1930's.

KALEB. No. Here.

CONDUCTOR. I'm tellin' ya. They was trying to escape lynching and some downright viscous conditions. Take them Scottsboro boys, sharp fellas, though you'd never know it from the way they got treated. Things like that make a family move up north--

KALEB. Where are we going with all this? I have school in the morning.

CONDUCTOR. Good for you, 'cause you won't be goin' nowhere you don't stay in school. Every colored body know it's hard work and a diploma that separates the wheat from the chaff. It's that education what makes the difference between selling newspapers on the corner or writing for one.

KALEB. What else would I do? I'm just a kid.

CONDUCTOR. If you bright enough, and you prob'ly are, you'll get yourself a high school diploma then go on to a good college.

KALEB. Like Morehouse.

CONDUCTOR. Morehouse? You could go to a good college.

KALEB. Morehouse is a good college.

CONDUCTOR. You ain't got to go to colored schools no more. Set your eye on Harvard, Yale--one o' them Ivy league schools. They lettin' colored in there now. Pull yourself up and never look back, son. Do something important.

KALEB. Something white.

CONDUCTOR. Something that contributes to society.

KALEB. I was thinking about joining the Fruit of Islam. Or the Black Panther Party.

CONDUCTOR. Fruits and Animals? I don't know. What colored folks need is to show white folks that they can give something to the whole society. You can make more out yourself boy. You don't have to settle.

KALEB. Oh, man, wake me up. Oreo farts like you give me indigestion.

Pretending you're a 'race man'. Talkin' 'bout how far we've come. I say two words

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about somethin' black folks can do for each other and you preach about proving yourself to the man. The truth is you hate black people.

CONDUCTOR. Well, I don't much like that word "black" so, I guess you probably right.

KALEB. You agree with me?

CONDUCTOR. This is your dream, son, you play every part.

KALEB. You're saying I hate myself?

CONDUCTOR. Don't take it so serious. You wouldn't be a young fella, you didn't hate yourself and everybody else. Colored folks is all like that right now-- adolescent.

KALEB. I want to wake up now.

CONDUCTOR. *(Continuing.)* The whole damn race. Everybody trying to figure out who they are--where they going--what it mean to be a man, what it mean to be a woman--

KALEB. I don't know where I'm going. *(pause)* Or what it means to be a man.

CONDUCTOR. Oh. That's why you're such a hard knot little radical. You confused.

KALEB. *(Kaleb looks out the window)* I'm not confused! There are just things nobody tells you about.

CONDUCTOR. You know son, you can say anything here.

KALEB. You're a conductor. You're old enough to be my grandfather.

CONDUCTOR. Talk to your subconscious about that.

KALEB. Well, I have these thoughts. All the time.

CONDUCTOR. You startin' to get a little hot and bothered are you?

KALEB. What do I do about it?

CONDUCTOR. Maybe you'd better keep your business to yourself.

KALEB. But you said I could talk about anything here!

CONDUCTOR. Yeah, but it's almost daylight. You might not be able to cope.

KALEB. If I can't talk about these things in here, where can I talk about them?
(Conductor becomes uncomfortable.)

CONDUCTOR. You got that ticket?

KALEB. You kicking me out?

CONDUCTOR. Out your own dream? Even an old oreo fart like me got more sense than that. I know when somebody need they sleep. Allll Tickets please!!!

(Kaleb returns, frustrated, to the berth as the train rolls off.)

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SCENE 6

Same Night and Time. Sunny's Room. Sunny sits on her bed trying to write a song on her guitar. There's a lyric sheet beside her. She strums simple chords and sings.

SUNNY. *Everybody's got somewhere they're goin'// Everybody's got somewhere they've been// I'm standin on the border at the station// Nose pressed against the window lookin' in.* Ugh! Geez Louise! Now I've written a country song! I worked all night on a country song! Kaleb's right I'm hopeless. *(The conductor as her DAD enters. He has a stethoscope and medical bag. Sunny is implacable.)*

DAD. Sunny, you've been up all this time?

SUNNY. Yeah daddy. I was trying to write a song. You comin' in or going out?

DAD. Well, Pumpkin, I'm headed out to bring a baby in.

SUNNY. I won't keep you.

DAD. The mom just started labor, I've got a little time. Can I hear the song?

SUNNY. *(fussy)* No. It's all wrong.

DAD. Oh. Then nevermind.

SUNNY. Well, I don't know. Maybe you could just read it.

DAD. Okay. I'll just read it. *(He reaches for the lyric sheet.)*

SUNNY. But don't say anything about the words.

DAD. *(Dad stares at her.)* Read it, but don't mention the words?

SUNNY. Daddy! *(He reads it.)*

DAD. This is sad. Is this how you feel? "Nose pressed against the window looking in"

SUNNY. This is why I didn't want to show you. It's not the words. I don't want to talk about the words.

DAD. Is this about that questionnaire at school? Is that "paper" why you feel like this again?

SUNNY. No daddy, it's not about that stupid paper! It's the music. It's sounds country.

DAD. Well, play it for me.

SUNNY. No! *(pause)* Somebody told me to try a different rhythm, so I tried to find a different rhythm.

DAD. That's good, right?

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SUNNY. No, because then the beat's not right for the words. The beat's too confident and the words - the words are...

DAD. Can we talk about the words?

SUNNY. I don't want to talk about the words! The words are the words. I shouldn't be writing about me anyway.

DAD. What should you be writing about?

SUNNY. About revolution or those poor misunderstood Viet Cong or something. *(she gets teary)* There's a war going on outside.

DAD. Well, not directly outside. It's in Southeast Asia. What do you know about revolution or the Viet Cong?

SUNNY. Nothing! But it's important.

DAD. Important to you?

SUNNY. I need to write a song and this one doesn't sound right.

DAD. Okay. Let's back up. *Why* do you need to write this song? Is it for a class?

SUNNY. No.

DAD. Then it's for somebody?

SUNNY. Sort of.

DAD. And this person is really important to you...

SUNNY. Yeah. And if I don't learn how to write a really good song-- he'll never... *(Dad smiles.)* Don't smile at me like that.

DAD. Why not? It's very sweet to write a song for somebody. *(He thinks a moment, then wryly.)* Are they Vietnamese? A revolutionary?

SUNNY. Don't you have to go deliver that baby?

DAD. Yeah. I'm just a conductor on life's miraculous railroad. *(Sunny smiles, he's made her happy.)*

SUNNY. I love you, Daddy.

DAD. I love you too, Cupcake. Get some sleep. Don't let the sun catch you crying. *(They kiss. He exits.)*

SCENE 7

Same night and time. The El train of "the caring conductor".

Steven sits strumming his guitar and staring out the window. The conductor enters from another car.

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CONDUCTOR. I thought that was you. Where you been?

STEVEN. Nowhere.

CONDUCTOR. Haven't seen you in almost two weeks. You been on a different train?

STEVEN. What's it to you?

CONDUCTOR. It's 4am, most young folks are at home dreaming.

STEVEN. I don't dream.

CONDUCTOR. You got folks? They know you out the house? There's a curfew, you know, if you're under 16.

STEVEN. You gonna tell the police on me?

CONDUCTOR. Would you care if I did? *(Steven shrugs.)* Then you might as well stay. *(pause)* Besides it's nice to have a little music. You write that one?

STEVEN. Yeah.

CONDUCTOR. It about anyone special?

STEVEN. Maybe.

CONDUCTOR. Well, son, nobody could accuse you of draining the world of words. 'scuse me. *(Conductor goes to microphone,)* This is Adams and Wabash-- The Chicago Loop. *(Train rolls off.)*

SCENE 8

A few weeks later. The Art Institute, Chicago. There hang prominently four Edward Hopper paintings: Railroad Sunset, Approaching a City, The El Station, Hotel by a Railroad and a Hopper etching - Night on the El train. The Conductor is a TOUR GUIDE at the museum. During the conductor's speech Mrs. Hedges makes notes and glances at Steven who quietly, intently studies the El train paintings. He makes notes in a composition book. In the gallery, Kaleb and Sunny sit on a wooden bench, listening. Steven moves to the bench and Sunny offers him the seat next to her. He takes the seat. Kaleb is visibly upset by this.

GUIDE. Edward Hopper-- An American painter whose work is known for its bare manner and contrasts of light and shadow. His work evokes feelings of loneliness and isolation. *(He points to Approaching A City.)* This railroad painting lacks even one human figure. The viewer is the train, the unseen traveller in a curious limbo, neither completely inside nor outside the city. Hopper's somber palette and simple

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form suggests a future both predictable and unknown. Follow me to the next gallery. (*Conductor leaves. Kaleb starts out. Sunny looks back for Steven*)

KALEB. You heard the man Sunny, let's go.

SUNNY. Just a minute. (*turns to Steven*) Hey, Steven. I wrote another song, but it doesn't sound right.

STEVEN. Wrong color?

SUNNY. Yeah, like red-neck. I want it to be blue. Good thing I'm not a painter. I tried to fix it, but I think there's something wrong with me. Probably "identification with the oppressor" or something. The melody's country and even though I kind of like the words they don't go right. Every time I--

STEVEN. --whoa, Sunny. It's just chords.

SUNNY. Chords?

STEVEN. You need to learn blues chords.

SUNNY. That's all?

STEVEN. Pretty much.

SUNNY. Well, maybe you can show me sometime?

STEVEN. Sure.

KALEB. Sunny, come on.

SUNNY. Okay. (*To Steven.*) Thanks. (*Sunny and Kaleb exit.*)

MRS. HEDGES. You like these paintings don't you? They're quiet.

STEVEN. Like me?

MRS. HEDGES. Maybe.

STEVEN. And you want to draw me out.

MRS. HEDGES. That would make learning easier.

STEVEN. For who?

MRS. HEDGES. Well. Both of us. (*They are both silent a moment.*)

STEVEN. (*Referring to Approaching a City*) You don't like these paintings. This one especially.

MRS. HEDGES. To me it's like the train just disappeared.

STEVEN. There's light in it. Maybe the train's just around the corner. (*He looks right into her.*) You don't like the trains.

MRS. HEDGES. How did you know that?

STEVEN. I see you. In class. When the El goes by. I see you don't like it.

MRS. HEDGES. They are noisy.

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STEVEN. It's not the noise. *(beat)* I like the trains. You can see things. But not too much. Just enough. Just for moments. *(He recites:)*

"Night from a railroad car window

Is a great, dark, soft thing.

Broken across with slashes of light."

MRS. HEDGES. That's Carl Sandberg!

STEVEN. Yeah.

(He turns to exit.)

MRS. HEDGES. Steven. Why don't you say things like that in class?

STEVEN. *(He shrugs and starts to walk away. Stops. Turns and looks fully at her.)*

Nice Legs. *(He exits. Mrs. Hedges looks after him, stunned.)*

SCENE 9

The classroom. The next day. Ms. Hedges decorates a bulletin board with art/photographs. She pulls pictures from a box to display. One photo [a child wearing a tag around her neck] has fallen to the floor, or perhaps sits on her desk, production choice. Steven enters.

STEVEN. You wanted to see me?

MRS. HEDGES. Yes, Steven, I did. *(Beat, as she composes herself-- he left her off-kilter in the last scene.)* Steven, you've got a long life ahead of you. You can punish yourself with it, or use it to its fullest advantage.

STEVEN. Punishment or use?

MRS. HEDGES. *(Alarmed.)* What?

STEVEN. Those are my only two choices? Punishment or use? *(Mrs. Hedges's alarm grows as suddenly the lights change and she is on a 1940's London train, though this doesn't yet have to be clear to the audience.)*

HELENA, age 12, rummages through the pockets of a uniform jacket hanging on a hook. The CONDUCTOR enters. He speaks in a working-class British accent.

CONDUCTOR. Caught you! I caught you red-handed. You're a thievin' little guttersnipe, aren't you?

HELENA. I... I...

CONDUCTOR. You know what happens if they find thieves aboard the train?

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HELENA. No.

CONDUCTOR. They cut off their fingers!

HELENA. No!

CONDUCTOR. Whhhhhhht! Just like that, lopped off

HELENA. No!

CONDUCTOR. Then they turn the train around, and send them back.

HELENA. No!

CONDUCTOR. What were you stealing from me?

HELENA. I... I... wasn't stealing from you. Really I wasn't.

CONDUCTOR. Ah! You're lying! You know what they do to little girls who lie don't you?

HELENA. No.

CONDUCTOR. They cut out their tongues.

HELENA. *(She covers her mouth.)* No!

CONDUCTOR. What were you looking for then?

HELENA. Nothing.

CONDUCTOR. Tell me what were you looking for?

HELENA. Candy! I only wanted some more of the candy!

CONDUCTOR. I won't tolerate stealing on my train.

HELENA. *(She drops to her knees and grabs hold of his trouser legs.)* I'm sorry.

CONDUCTOR. *(He takes them from his pocket.)* Why, here it is. *(She reaches for it and he pulls it away.)* I'd have given you the candy, but now... I don't know.

HELENA. Please don't tell on me.

CONDUCTOR. You'll have to be punished. Give me your hand.

HELENA. Don't cut off my fingers!

CONDUCTOR. *(Warning.)* Ah. Ah. Ah.

HELENA. Please, don't cut out my tongue!

CONDUCTOR. Punishment or use? You choose.

HELENA. Punishment or use?

CONDUCTOR. Put them to use and you can save them.

HELENA. Use. Please. Use!

CONDUCTOR. All right then. *(He unzips his trousers, holds her head in his hands.)* I'll show you what to do. *(Lights change back to classroom and Steven is still standing there)*

STEVEN. Punishment or use? *(Mrs. Hedges. Tries to collect herself)*

SLASHES OF LIGHT

MRS. HEDGES. What?

STEVEN. Those are my only two choices? Punishment or use?

MRS. HEDGES. Yes... About the Art Institute. I was stunned by what you said.

STEVEN. Stunned.

MRS. HEDGES. Yes.

STEVEN. Good.

MRS. HEDGES. Not many of my male students would dare to recite poetry.

STEVEN. *(He realizes they're not talking about the same thing)* Oh.

MRS. HEDGES. Steven, that was the first time the whole semester you've spoken up.

STEVEN. I dig trains.

MRS. HEDGES. You quoted Carl Sandburg.

STEVEN. He digs trains, too.

MRS. HEDGES. Why don't you show me that in class?

STEVEN. Carl Sandburg?

MRS. HEDGES. No. You. The you that has all of that intelligence inside. The part of you that that reads poetry and recites verse. *(Steven Shrugs.)* Steven, you're failing.

STEVEN. At what?

MRS. HEDGES. Why are you making this difficult?

STEVEN. Why don't you like the trains?

MRS. HEDGES. You're failing my honors class. You cut other teachers' morning classes as well. Starting out the year like this isn't good. If it keeps up you may not pass.

STEVEN. If it's not the noise what is it?

MRS. HEDGES. Steven! *(Getting nowhere, Steven Starts to exit. Flustered, Mrs. Hedges tries a different tack)* So. You like poetry?

STEVEN. Yeah.

MRS. HEDGES. What other poets do you read?

STEVEN. Ginsburg, Blake, Hughes, Ferlenghetti, Jones, Williamson.

MRS. HEDGES. Jones? Leroi Jones?

STEVEN. Yeah.

MRS. HEDGES. And Blake is William Blake?

STEVEN. Nope. *(He points to himself.)* Steven Blake. *(They both laugh.)*

MRS. HEDGES. And Williamson?

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STEVEN. Sonny Boy Williamson. He writes blues.

MRS. HEDGES. I'm afraid I don't know him.

STEVEN. And you want to teach me.

MRS. HEDGES. There must be something I can teach you that you don't already know. *(Steven doesn't answer. Mrs. Hedges picks up his composition book)* Are these your poems? May I see them?

STEVEN. No.

MRS. HEDGES. It might help with your grades. You test into honors classes but you're failing school.

STEVEN. They're mine.

MRS. HEDGES. *(Re: his poems.)* Pick out one, something that's not too private and let me read it.

STEVEN. Why?

MRS. HEDGES. Because I want to know you. I want to know how to reach you.

STEVEN. You can't go where I like to be.

(He recites the poem, seducing her)

"Night from a railroad car window is a great, dark, soft thing..."

MRS. HEDGES. *(She realizes.)* The trains? You mean the trains?

STEVEN. Isn't that exactly what it's like?

MRS. HEDGES. You ride the trains at night? *(Steven looks away.)* For how long? *(Steven doesn't answer.)* Does your father know? *(Steven shrugs.)* Oh, Steven. This is a problem. *(Steven slumps into a chair and buries his head in his arms. She opens the composition book. He doesn't stop her. She reads a poem.)*

Smooth ride down a fast track

Life slides by in fractions - that's a clever analogy, Steven

I'm a south side boy on a late night train

Got my share of distractions – good rhyme scheme.

Time's a thread on an unwound spool

"now" is my salvation

Who wants a future when the past is cruel?

Just get me to the station.

Steven, what's this about? *(Steven reaches out and takes her hand, turns it face up to look at her scarred palm. She would pull it back, but he holds them firmly. She allows him to look.)*

STEVEN. This is your secret, isn't it? *(She pulls her hands away.)*

SLASHES OF LIGHT

MRS. HEDGES. I... I like your poem.

STEVEN. I like you.

MRS. HEDGES. Don't say that.

STEVEN. Why? You like me too.

MRS. HEDGES. Of course I like you, Steven, you're my student. But not in the way that you--

STEVEN. You want to teach me, so--

MRS. HEDGES.

I think I'd better arrange a tutor for you.

STEVEN. You tutor me.

MRS. HEDGES. I don't think that will work.

STEVEN. You say I need help. Help me.

MRS. HEDGES. *(The sound of an approaching El train rises, she pushes down panic.)*

STEVEN. What are you so afraid of? *(The El train roars by.)*

MRS. HEDGES. That train's going too fast. *(He reaches down for her pricked hand. He puts her hand to her own racing heart, covering it with his own.)*

STEVEN. It's not the train. *(Again she pulls her hand away.)*

MRS. HEDGES. Go Steven. Now. *(He looks at her, then exits. Mrs. Hedges swallows pills from a bottle retrieved from her purse on her desk or a pocket. Sunny sees this.)*

SUNNY. Mrs. Hedges. Are you all right?

MRS. HEDGES. Oh. Uh, yes, vitamins.

SUNNY. Are you sure you're okay?

MRS. HEDGES. *(Relieved for the distraction.)* What can I do for you?

SUNNY. That's funny. I came here to see if there was anything I could do for you.

MRS. HEDGES. Sunny, that's awfully kind. *(Ms. Hedges hands her something to do. They begin to sort, arrange, move papers and books, decorate bulletin board—whatever works for production)*

SUNNY. I like what you've done so far.

MRS. HEDGES. What have I done?

SUNNY. There's something different about the way you teach. You get us thinking. I never wanted to write a paper before. It's as if you really think we're smart.

MRS. HEDGES. You are. This is about the brightest group of kids I've ever met.

SUNNY. You've taught other places?

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MRS. HEDGES. (*Unsure why she's asking.*) Before I came here, I taught at a Lutheran School.

SUNNY. With white kids?

MRS. HEDGES. Yes. It was very... German.

SUNNY. Are we as smart as the white kids? You know what they say; "act your age and not your color..."

MRS. HEDGES. I never heard that expression. That's awful.

SUNNY. Kaleb warned me about that: "Don't go airing our dirty linen in public".

MRS. HEDGES. Is he afraid that white kids are brighter than you?

SUNNY. Kaleb? Are you kidding? He's not afraid of anything.

MRS. HEDGES. You kids are as smart and talented as any I've ever met. Smarter.

SUNNY. Really?

MRS. HEDGES. (*An idea occurs to Mrs. Hedges.*) Sunny, I need a tutor, there's someone I don't think I can, --*should*, work with and you'd be perfect for the job. I can let you know who it is once I get their parent's permission. Can you do it?

SUNNY. Sure. Wow. Thanks.

MRS. HEDGES. It'll keep you busy. You'll have less time to spend with your friends.

SUNNY. (*Hesitating.*) Oh, ok...

MRS. HEDGES. Don't you have any friends besides Kaleb? Girlfriends?

SUNNY. Last year in class all the girls got together and sent around this questionnaire. It was like the Junior High Kinsey Report. They called it the Sex Appeal Paper. In one column you were to list the date you "became a woman" and in the next space you were to put your hip size and your bra size. The boys used it to make their choices about who was "fine" and who was a "dog".

MRS. HEDGES. A dog?

SUNNY. Ugly. (*beat*) I couldn't fill it in.

MRS. HEDGES. Of course you couldn't. That's a cheap and hurtful game they play.

SUNNY. Mrs. Hedges, I couldn't fill it in because I don't have any hips or tits or anything else. I haven't 'become a woman'. Once a month I moan a lot and skip swimming class just so I won't get laughed at.

MRS. HEDGES. You *pretend* to have your period every month?

SUNNY. Yes.

MRS. HEDGES. This makes you a "dog"?

SLASHES OF LIGHT

SUNNY. No. I'm not a dog. I'm okay in the face. That saves me. And I'm smart, but that's all I am. I don't have sex appeal.

MRS. HEDGES. Is that important?

SUNNY. It never was before, but now...

MRS. HEDGES. You've got a crush on somebody.

SUNNY. I've always done really well in school. I never thought about boys...

MRS. HEDGES. But now, you think about them all the time.

SUNNY. Just one boy... and the sad state of my bust-line.

MRS. HEDGES. The state of your bust-line is nobody's business.

SUNNY. That's easy for you to say, you've got one.

MRS. HEDGES. Women were not constructed for push up bras and centerfolds-- we were constructed-- biologically constructed-- to nurture life.

SUNNY. My dad's an OB- he explained how it all works- but come on, Mrs. Hedges, 36D is what makes the boys like you.

MRS. HEDGES. Breasts are a beautiful thing because they give life. A child is strengthened and protected from disease by nursing at its mother's breast.

SUNNY. My dad gives formula.

MRS. HEDGES. In countries where there's no formula children nurse a very long time.

SUNNY. My mom only nursed me a week. That's when she got sick.

MRS. HEDGES. I'm sorry. I lost my mother when I was young, too.

SUNNY. Really? (*Mrs. Hedges nods.*)

MRS. HEDGES. If your mom were alive she would tell you what I'm telling you now.

SUNNY. Maybe, but in the meantime I've got no bosom and no sex appeal.

MRS. HEDGES. You've got everything you need for what's important.

SUNNY. I've never even been kissed.

MRS. HEDGES. When you're older you'll understand: to hold a child at your breast will be the most awe-inspiring thing ever. To nurture a child.-- that is the appeal of sex. (*Sunny looks at Mrs. Hedges in awe. No one's talked to her like this*)

SUNNY. Wow. You know how I don't have any girlfriends? Well, now... now I've got you, huh Mrs. Hedges?

MRS. HEDGES. (*A beat, as Sunny smiles.*) I'll let you know about tutoring once it's all arranged.

SLASHES OF LIGHT

SUNNY. Thanks. *(Sunny starts to leave, crossing angry kale. Who carries a term paper in his hand.)* Hi, Kaleb!

KALEB. Sunny. *(She goes. Kaleb slams the term paper down on Mrs. Hedges's Desk and stares at her.)*

MRS. HEDGES. Do you have a question?

KALEB. Yeah. Why's there no grade on this paper?

MRS. HEDGES. I thought I'd give you a chance to try again.

KALEB. Try what again?

MRS. HEDGES. Finding out as much as you can about the beginnings of the civil rights movement, and how it has affected you. I assigned you a research and reflection paper. This treatise on *(She reads.)* "Evils of the white devil in American society" isn't the assignment. Couldn't you find any magazine articles on Martin Luther King? Talk about how he's important to you.

KALEB. I don't like King.

MRS. HEDGES. Like him or not, he's one of the leaders of the civil rights movement. If you don't like King what about Malcolm X? Or even something in your own words about you or your parents' experience here in Chicago with local leaders.

KALEB. You didn't even read it, did you?

MRS. HEDGES. I read every word, Kaleb. Over and over. Especially this paragraph: "White people's lack of color creates in them a sense of inferiority. Soon they try to overcome it by dominating and diluting genetically superior dark people." See Frances Cress Welsing's Theory of Color Confrontation. *(Mrs. Hedges has become visibly nervous and more angry.)* Where'd you find your source material?

KALEB. I have a friend in college.

MRS. HEDGES. Is this what you believe?

KALEB. What do you know about it, huh?

MRS. HEDGES. Is it what you believe, Kaleb?

KALEB. What would you know about what my people went through in this country? And I'm not just talking about slavery. I'm talking about day after day being treated like you're nothing but a thing. Tagged from the day you're born to the day you die like something on a reject rack.

MRS. HEDGES. If that's your experience, Kaleb, write about it! But don't bring me the re-hashed ramblings of some prejudiced friend of yours.

SLASHES OF LIGHT

KALEB. You don't know a damn thing about my experience. You probably get out of your limousine and have a red carpet rolled out for you wherever you go. Somebody probably announces, "The white woman's here! The white woman's here"! You live a sugar-coated life. Don't tell me how to write a paper.

MRS. HEDGES. (*Angrily*) I live a sugar-coated life!? You don't know a thing about me! (*Mrs. Hedges goes to her desk, grabs pen and paper, slams them on the desk in front of Kaleb.*) Sit. Start writing. (*But a picture has fallen from a book or is lying somewhere and Kaleb picks it up, fascinated.*)

KALEB. Nineteen-forty-- whoa. Is this you? (*Mrs. Hedges. Turns to see.*)

MRS. HEDGES. Give me that. (*She reaches for it, but Kaleb keeps it, staring at it.*)

KALEB. What's that tag around your neck?

MRS. HEDGES. Please give me that picture.

KALEB. What's that tag?

MRS. HEDGES.

I was traveling. Kaleb--

KALEB. Where were you going?

MRS. HEDGES. If I thought you really wanted to know--

KALEB. I asked you, didn't I?

MRS. HEDGES. (*She considers him a moment*) I was going to a town outside of London. My parents had sent me away.

KALEB. All by yourself? Why?

MRS. HEDGES. To save my life. (*The lights change. Sound of railroad trains and steam whistles. It's the railroad station circa 1940. Kaleb watches as Mrs. Hedges steps into this new reality as her 12 year-old self. She dons the coat, wears a tag around her neck and has a small suitcase. The Conductor enters.*)

CONDUCTOR. Get away from the window! (*She doesn't answer and doesn't move. She cries.*) Go and sit down. You can't stand here. (*She doesn't move.*)

What's the matter? (*She doesn't answer.*) What does your tag say? (*She shows him her tag.*) Helena. (*Familiarly*) Kannst du Deutsch, Helena? (*Trans: Helena, do you know German?*) Warum sprichst du dann nicht? (*Then why don't you say anything?*)

HELENA. Ich bin nicht ein Deutschlander. (*I am not German*)

SLASHES OF LIGHT

CONDUCTOR. *(Laughing, he now he speaks with the working class British accent from earlier, making it clear he's the same conductor.)* Not German? Most of the children on this train are.

HELENA. I was born in Poland. Osweicim. *(Pronounced: oshvyentcheem)*

CONDUCTOR. Think I've heard of it.

HELENA. I was on the German trains. We had tags like this, but we slept on our feet. Put our noses through cracks in the boards.

CONDUCTOR. Not today?

HELENA. Not today.

CONDUCTOR. I thought you looked too tidy for that. How long have you been in London then?

HELENA. One year.

CONDUCTOR. Only a year? Looks like the bombing followed you. *(Helena is stricken.)* Going to the nuns, are you? It'll be quieter up north. Was that your mum then, out the window?

HELENA. My foster mum.

CONDUCTOR. Where's the first one? *(She begins to cry.)*

CONDUCTOR. Oh. Well. Nevermind then. It was painless I'm sure. Gas is like going to sleep, I heard.

HELENA. *(She lunges at him.)* Arrghhhhh.

CONDUCTOR. *(Grabbing her arms.)* You're quite the steamin' little kettle eh? *(She cries and tries to fight him.)* There, there. Settle yourself. *(She continues to fight him.)* Look, I've got something to calm you. *(The conductor. Takes bright red pills from his pocket, hands them to her.)* These will help. *(She refuses.)* Come on, then. It's just like candy, see? Candy. Pop it in, you'll feel better for the train ride. You don't even need water. *(She eats them. She becomes calm. She removes her hat and coat. She returns to the present-day classroom.)*

KALEB. Why didn't your folks go with you?

MRS. HEDGES. They didn't speak perfect German. They were stopped at a transit point.

KALEB. A what?

MRS. HEDGES. My God, Kaleb, there was a World War. Don't you know anything about it?

KALEB. I know plenty. My uncle fought Japs.

MRS. HEDGES. I beg your pardon?

SLASHES OF LIGHT

KALEB. World War II.

MRS. HEDGES. Kaleb, the Germans tried to take over the whole of Europe. They marched into Poland. Turned it into a giant prison. My parents were taken to a camp.

KALEB. A camp?

MRS. HEDGES. They'd built over 400 of them. "Vernichtung durch Arbeit."

KALEB. What?

MRS. HEDGES. Annihilation through work. If you didn't die from the work, they put you in a gas chamber.

KALEB. A gas chamber? *(Mrs. Hedges breathes deeply, she's going to have to teach.)*

MRS. HEDGES. My parents believed everybody should be equal. They taught it in schools. Wrote about it in books. So they were called "undesirables". They were sent to a camp. I don't know for certain what happened to them. Are you telling me you don't know anything about-- *(Frustrated she rummages through several boxes.)* I have a book around here somewhere... *(She finds it.)* Here. *(She hands it to Kaleb who reads a little.)* That is what would have happened to me if my parents hadn't put me on that train. It's what became of the town I grew up in. The German's renamed it Auschwitz. Go ahead. Read it. Read it out loud.

KALEB. *(He reads aloud)* "When we arrived there was no food – as if we weren't expected to be there long enough to eat. We were hungry all the time. *(He looks up, disturbed.)* You sure this isn't Mississippi?"

MRS. HEDGES. Keep reading.

KALEB. "Everyone worked— children, old people. We all had sores on our feet that wouldn't heal. Our arms and legs shrunk. We weren't just tired and hungry and sick... we were in decay." *(Kaleb looks up at Mrs. Hedges realizing this is far more serious than he thought. She stares at him.)*

MRS. HEDGES. I've never seen a red carpet. *(He looks at the photo again then quietly hands it back to her.)*

KALEB. *(With an edge.)* Can I keep this book?

MRS. HEDGES. If you'll re-think your paper. I want you to write about what's important to you, Kaleb.

KALEB. I did.

MRS. HEDGES. What's *really* important...

SLASHES OF LIGHT

SCENE 10

The Bench. Late October. Sunny sits strumming her guitar, when Steven enters.

SUNNY. Steven!

STEVEN. Hey, Sunny. Kinda late.

SUNNY. I was... well, I was sort of hanging around waiting for you...

STEVEN. I'm here.

SUNNY. Yeah, you are.

STEVEN. I guess you want to learn some blues chords.

SUNNY. I'd love to. But that's not why I was waiting for you. Steven, Mrs. Hedges had asked me if I would tutor somebody. I just found out from the guidance counselor it's you.

STEVEN. Tutor me? *(Suggestively.)* In what? *(Sunny nearly melts.)*

SUNNY. History, I guess. And anything else you want. I mean... like English and stuff. We can start whenever you want. *(Steven looks at her. Sunny's heart is nearly beating out of her chest)* I really don't get why you don't just let Mrs. Hedges tutor you.

STEVEN. Is that what she told you? I won't let her?

SUNNY. No. I just thought... well, that she was too busy or something. *(She thinks a moment.)* Do you like Mrs. Hedges? *(Steven looks at her, not knowing how much she perceives.)* I mean... cause you hung out talking a lot at the Art Institute.

STEVEN. *(He has his own meaning.)* Yeah. I like her.

SUNNY. Oh, me too! I was beginning to think there was something wrong with me for liking the new white history teacher.

STEVEN. Colors are still important to you, huh?

SUNNY. Me? No. Not me. *(Beginning to run on again.)* I mean, sometimes... like I like fall days like this. The leaves, they're pretty colorful. There's not too many more nice ones though. Pretty soon my fingers will freeze and I won't be able to play at all. But otherwise color doesn't—

STEVEN. *(He cuts her off.)* Sunny, it was a joke.

SUNNY. Oh.

STEVEN. Let me show you a blues chord progression.

SUNNY. I'd like that. *(He puts his arms around her from behind to guide her fingers to the right frets. He shows her three chords.)*

SLASHES OF LIGHT

STEVEN. That's G. That's C. That's D. That's a G *(She gets them. She looks up into his face. He looks at Sunny. Their mouths are inches from each other, when suddenly Steven gets up.)*

SUNNY. Where you going?

STEVEN. You practice those three for now. *(He leaves Sunny sitting on the bench, swooning at being nearly kissed.)*

SCENE 11

At the bench. It is cold. Kaleb sits on the bench reading the holocaust book Mrs.hedges gave him. Sunny enters.

SUNNY. You weren't in the lunch room today for lunch.

KALEB. Nope.

SUNNY. You didn't come yesterday either.

KALEB. Nope.

SUNNY. You didn't come to Izola's for fries this morning.

KALEB. Nope.

SUNNY. Are you avoiding me?

KALEB. Nope.

SUNNY. Aren't you freezing?

KALEB. I'm okay.

SUNNY. What are you reading?

KALEB. *(He quickly hides the book in satchel.)* Nothing... a novel.

SUNNY. I just came from the library. I got a couple of books for us. *(Kaleb looks up)*

KALEB. Shouldn't you be finding books for your "tutoree"? It's that day, isn't it?

SUNNY. Kaleb, when Mrs. Hedges asked me to tutor somebody I didn't know it was gonna be Steven. And what do you care, anyway?

KALEB. I don't. Not one damn. Forget it Sunny. What books did you get?

SUNNY. I got "Man and his Symbols", by some guy name Carl Jung. *(She pronounces it with a hard "J".)* Ever heard of him?

KALEB. Unh unh. *(Meaning 'no'.)*

SUNNY. Get this. He says our dreams are symbols.

SLASHES OF LIGHT

KALEB. Let me see that.

SUNNY. Give it back. He says in our dreams we can make up for stuff that's out of whack while we are awake.

KALEB. Really?

SUNNY. Yeah. Not only that, but he says that sometimes we'll be dreaming not just our own dream, but the same thing as a whole group of other people, a whole culture, maybe even the whole world.

KALEB. You mean every black man could be havin' my dreams?

SUNNY. I don't know Kaleb, but you know what we need? A project. That's what's missing for you and me. A reason to be together.

KALEB. That's not what's missing, Sunny.

SUNNY. Kaleb, when you were teaching me to bop this summer-- that was great, right?

KALEB. Except you never learned.

SUNNY. Maybe it was too much pressure. One of us trying to teach the other. Maybe we can start a project that will teach us both something.

KALEB. I'm not tellin' you my dreams.

SUNNY. That's why I got the second book. (*shows it to him*)

KALEB. This is a book of personality disorders!

SUNNY. I know!

KALEB. This is a book psychologists use to analyze their patients. You're not getting near me with that.

SUNNY. Not you! Remember I was telling you that Mrs. Hedges has been through some kind of experience or something? (*Kaleb stiffens.*)

KALEB. You want to analyze Mrs. Hedges. I thought you liked her.

SUNNY. I do.

KALEB. Do people go around analyzing people they like? Isn't that like talking about 'em behind their back?

SUNNY. Not if it's science. (*Beat.*) Kaleb, there's something serious going on with her.

KALEB. What are you talking about?

SUNNY. Remember the first time I went to see her in her classroom?

KALEB. Yeah.

SUNNY. She was taking these pills.

KALEB. They're called 'mother's little helpers'.

SLASHES OF LIGHT

SUNNY. But she takes so many. And she has these scars on her hand, too.

KALEB. What kind of scars?

SUNNY. I don't know. But some are fresh.

KALEB. You think she's hurting herself...

SUNNY. I don't know, but we could watch her and read this book. Then we'd know. We could analyze her and know!

KALEB. If you think the woman's stabbing herself why don't you just ask her why?

SUNNY. I can't. But if I had something wrong and couldn't talk about it, I'd want somebody to help, wouldn't you?

KALEB. If you're gonna analyze somebody don't they have to know they're being analyzed?

SUNNY. I don't know. You ever know anybody in analysis?

KALEB. Black people don't need analysis. We already know why we feel so bad.

SUNNY. You gonna help me or not?

KALEB. This is a big waste of time, Sunny. Find something else.

SUNNY. *(Tempting him.)* I'll let you look at the dream book.

KALEB. *(Tempted, then after a beat, he winces.)* So how's this supposed to work?

SUNNY. First we're gonna study these books. Then we should take notes on everything we see Mrs. Hedges do. Then you and I can meet here once a week after school and figure it all out.

KALEB. Won't that interfere with your tutoring sessions?

SUNNY. Maybe Steven would want to be in on it too.

KALEB. That's a terrible idea.

SUNNY. Why?

KALEB. Talk about a brain case.

SUNNY. He's quiet but it doesn't mean--

KALEB. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

SUNNY. Wanna shake on this?

KALEB. No. Give me five. *(she does)*

SUNNY. To analysis! *(pause)* Kaleb. There's something else. Something I really need to know about.

KALEB. What's that?

SUNNY. Kissing.

KALEB. Oh, Sunny, no.

SLASHES OF LIGHT

SUNNY. I'm the only girl in the whole class who hasn't ever kissed anybody. That report said so.

KALEB. Forget about that report.

SUNNY. What about you? Have you ever kissed anybody? (Kaleb doesn't answer.) So, it could be practice so we'll be good at the real thing.

KALEB. No!

SUNNY. Then think of it as research. It will make us better for the analysis project. We could take notes.

KALEB. Notes? On kissing?

SUNNY. Please.

KALEB. No.

SUNNY. Pretty please.

KALEB. Damnit Sunny.

SUNNY. Don't curse. (*Beat.*) It's cold out here. I read that kissing can heat you up. C'mon. I'll pretend you're somebody I like, and you can pretend I'm somebody you like. Who do you like?

KALEB. Let's just get this over with. (*They kiss. It is simple and almost clinical. They look at each other*)

SUNNY. Are you warmer?

KALEB. No. You?

SUNNY. No. (*They take out their notebooks and start writing*)

KALEB. (*Kaleb looks up*) Who'd you pretend I was?

SUNNY. Steven, who else? Who'd you pretend I was? (*Kaleb's jaw sets. Steven enters with books and guitar.*)

SUNNY. Hi Steven. You're early.

STEVEN. Yeah. I'm that way. Hey Kaleb.

KALEB. What it is, man? So, you two gonna study or is this gonna be a music lesson?

SUNNY. Kaleb, don't be that way. Hey Steven, guess what? Kaleb and I are gonna analyze Mrs. Hedges!

KALEB. Sunny--

SUNNY. No, it's okay, right Steven? You see, she keeps doing these weird things; spacing out when the trains go by, taking those pills, I even think she's been cutting her hand with something!

STEVEN. Really?

SLASHES OF LIGHT

SUNNY. And we're going to find out why! Maybe you can help us.

STEVEN. How?

SUNNY. Well, I bet there's a lot you see and don't talk about. Meet us after school and we can talk about it.

STEVEN. That's not really my scene.

SUNNY. What is your scene?

KALEB. I think this is where I leave.

SUNNY. Oh, Kaleb. I was hoping we could all do this together.

KALEB. Some other time. I'm cold. *(Kaleb exits.)*

SUNNY. He's so mean and moody.

STEVEN. He's got things on his mind.

SUNNY. How do you know that?

STEVEN. I look at him.

SUNNY. I look at him too, but he just seems mean and moody.

STEVEN. Then why do you stay friends with him?

SUNNY. All the time I think, "this is the last day". I'm not going to be friends with Kaleb anymore. But I always come back.

STEVEN. *(With his own meaning.)* I know what you mean.

SUNNY. You do?!

STEVEN. Yeah. It's like a pull or something. You come back 'cause it's all you know. When somebody hurts you, but you love them, maybe the only thing you can do is go away...

SUNNY. You mean like transfer schools... I couldn't do that just to get away from Kaleb. My dad wouldn't let me.

STEVEN. Nah, prob'ly not.

SUNNY. Do you think about your dreams?

STEVEN. Nah.

SUNNY. Really? 'Cause this book I read, it's amazing. What about when you're awake. Do you have dreams then? You know, like daydreams. Things-you-want kinds of dreams.

STEVEN. I guess. *(Sunny looks at him clinically.)*

SUNNY. You said sometimes the only thing to do is go away. I dream about that sometimes. If you ran away, where would you go?

STEVEN. I'd get on a train and ride down south.

SLASHES OF LIGHT

SUNNY. Down south?!? But everybody ran away from there. They hate us down there.

STEVEN. But at least they're honest about it. *(Sunny gets the joke. They share a laugh.)*

SUNNY. *(Teasingly.)* What kind of dream is that? Know what I think? I think I'll learn to play the guitar really well, then hitch-hike to California. I'll get famous playing in clubs and stuff and get asked to be on Johnny Carson. And after I play my number one hit song to all America while they lie in bed looking over their toes, I'll say I want to thank my dad, my mom up in heaven, and especially I want to thank my friend Kaleb. Because if he hadn't made me so mad I'd never have left Chicago and found out who I truly was. *(Steven laughs appreciatively.)* Now you.

STEVEN.

Nah.

SUNNY. C'mon... you do it.

STEVEN. *(After an awkward beat.)* Okay. I'm gonna hop on a train with my guitar. *(Sunny waits expectantly. Then slowly, monitoring his effect on Sunny.)* But before that I'm gonna stop by the bench outside of school and grab my friend, Sunny. She's about to get famous so I better ride her coattails. *(Sunny nearly melts.)* I listen to her play her music on the street corners. Everybody loves her sound. It isn't white, and it isn't black – it's brand new. *(Winks.)* Sometimes she even lets me play along. *(She giggles, playfully punches his arm.)* And when it gets late I'll get us a room in some fleabag hotel, which I can do 'cause everybody'll think I'm twenty-one. And it'll feel good to sleep in a bed all night. And I won't lock the door. Then one night, I'll flip on the T.V and my mouth will drop open because there's my friend, Sunny, singing her heart out on the Johnny Carson show. And I don't know why I'm surprised, because I always knew she was good. When she thanks her father and her mother up in heaven and finally her friend Kaleb, I'll think to myself... *(He looks directly at her.)* If she had been my girl I'd have never let her down. *(She reaches up to touch his watering eyes.)*

SUNNY. Wow. You're eyes... they're-- *(He leans in, pulls her to him and they kiss. It is tender and full)*

END OF ACT I

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