

TRICKSTER AT THE GATE
(The Story of a Yoruba God on Earth)

By

John Patrick Bray

TRICKSTER AT THE GATE

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Characters:

Jennifer: Creole, late twenties/early thirties.

Donald: African-American; also late twenties, early thirties.

Nell: African-American; the Yoruba God, Esu Elegba; actor playing this role should be in her late 20's, early 30's, and should be able to play a variety of ages

Walter: African-American; has "broken French"/Creole accent;

Lucky: African-American, 20's. Harlem Renaissance Clarinet player (though, the Clarinet can be substituted with a saxophone, trumpet, French Horn; any kind of reed, brass, or wind instrument).

Setting:

Various locations and times

The scenes with Jennifer and Donald are present day in a morgue in Acadiana Parish.

The first Nell sequence takes place just outside New Iberia, Louisiana in 1932.

The second Nell scene with Bobby Lucky takes place in an apartment in Harlem, mid-1920's.

The last Nell scene with Jennifer takes place in a house just outside of Lafayette, Louisiana, a few years prior to the present day.

Author's Note:

Trickster at the Gate was commissioned by the Performing Arts Society of Acadiana under The Big Read Acadiana Grant from the NEA. The Big Read exists in order to promote literacy. Five Parishes were involved in reading and creating works around Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This play is not adapted from the works or biography of Ms. Hurston, but finds its inspiration in her spirit. Ms. Lucy Anne Hurston, Zora Neale Hurston's niece and biographer, saw the premiere, and praised the play for its "purity."

Trickster at the Gate made its world premiere at the Cite des Arts in Lafayette, Louisiana on April 17, 2008 with the following cast and crew:

Nell.....	Vanessa Williams Walter
Boudreaux.....	Johnny R. Edwards II
Lucky.....	Ethan Jordan
Jennifer.....	Bria Hobgood
Choreographer.....	Grace Hamilton
Dancer.....	Donella Batiste
Dancer.....	Britney Benjamin
Director.....	Maureen Brennan
Executive Producer.....	Apiyo Obala
Stage Manager.....	Kaitlynn Broussard
Lighting Technician.....	Rachel Adams
Set Design.....	Duncan Thistlethwaite
Set Painter.....	Sarah Briggs

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Trickster... was also given a staged reading as part of The Big Read NOLA at the Alvar Public Library, New Orleans (under curator Chris Smith) on November 7, 2009 with the following cast and crew:

Nell.....Kristina Marshall
Jennifer.....Aline Stokes
Walter, Lucky, Donald.....Reno McClinton
Director.....John Patrick Bray

Trickster at the Gate made its New York City Premiere Off-Off Broadway at the Ted Bardy Acting Studio in New York City on March 13, 2009. It was produced by the At Hand Theatre Company at the Ted Bardy Acting Studio with the following cast and crew:

Nell.....Amanda Bailey
Lucky.....David Heron*
Walter.....Tyson Jennette*
Donald.....Chris Olson
Jennifer.....Renee Threatte
Dancers/Ensemble.....Valencia King, Sarita Louise Moore

* denotes member of Actors' Equity Association

Director.....Daniel Horrigan
Choreographer.....Sarita Louise Moore
Production Designer.....Stephani Lewis
Assistant Director.....Jessica Browne-White
Stage Manager.....Wei Wang
Asst. Production Designer.....Meghan Monaco
Producer.....Justin Scribner

NOTES ON THE AT HAND THEATRE CO PRODUCTION:

At Hand Theatre Co presents plays in a stripped down style that at once creates a more sustainable theatre and activates the imagination of the audience. Only a few scenic elements were used (a few chairs, including a rocking chair and a small table). All props and scenery handled by Jennifer or Donald's were "literal" or actual, while props in the memory scenes such as Nell's tea set and Lucky's clarinet were mimed by the actors (excluding the props handled by Nell – the wedding ring and cocoa packet - which were literal). All actors wore one costume throughout. Nell's various "looks" for each period were achieved by using a piece of fabric that transformed from a toga style robe, to an apron, to a shawl. The sound for the clarinet was provided by one of the dancers playing an actual clarinet and then a recording. The At Hand Theatre Co production used 2 dancers as a sort of chorus. The dancers represented various elements throughout the play but primarily acted as the gods whom Nell is at odds with. The Dancers remained on stage throughout, watching the play. Nell sits in her rocker and faces a wall when not in a scene. Jennifer and Donald remained on stage and were "suspended" when not in a scene. Lucky and Walter were ushered onto the stage by the Dancers and exited the stage with the conclusion of their respective scenes.

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A dark stage. African drumming. ESU- here after referred to as “NELL” - and Dancers enter and begin dancing in low light. The dancing ends with the DANCERS setting the up following the scene by placing the gurney down stage center. DONALD enters and begins to remove the sheet. JENNIFER enters. He stops.

JENNIFER. Hello?

DONALD. Hey, stranger.

JENNIFER. Hello, Donald.

DONALD. Wasn't sure you'd show. Figured I'd have to put your picture on the back of a milk carton.

JENNIFER. They still do that?

DONALD. Just saying. Been awhile, girl.

JENNIFER. Yeah. Been awhile. Never thought I'd have to drive to Southern Louisiana again. Then I see the signs all along I-10 for casinos and sex shops. Things ain't any different around here, huh?

DONALD. I did just make the milk carton reference. *(Beat)* Guess we'd better -

JENNIFER. Not yet. Just...just can't yet.

DONALD. Yeah.

JENNIFER. Can I smoke?

DONALD. It's a public building.

JENNIFER. Oh. *(Beat)* I can't believe it.

DONALD. I know. *(Beat)* You look good.

JENNIFER. Stop.

DONALD. Well, stop looking so good, then I wouldn't have to tell you. *(Beat. He smiles at her. She keeps looking at the sheet.)* Yeah. Thought she'd outlive us all.

JENNIFER. Me, too.

DONALD. No one lives forever.

JENNIFER. Tall Glass gave me a call two days ago, saying you were all looking for me. Not sure how *he* found me, but...I thought I had buried myself far enough in middle America -

DONALD. Your ex-husband.

JENNIFER. *Curtis?*

DONALD. Yeah, he say... (*Jennifer goes pale.*) Hey, easy, girl. You wanna sit?

JENNIFER. Or I could lay on top of Nell.

JENNIFER. He knew where I was?

DONALD. Guess so.

JENNIFER. Jesus.

DONALD. The lord can hear you.

JENNIFER. Sorry.

DONALD. It's okay. Just a little tense, I get that.

JENNIFER. (*Standing*) How long did he...where is he? He...never-mind. Screw him. Bastard. Just a...men...all men, they're all...sorry. He look good?

DONALD. Not as good as you.

JENNIFER. He knew where I was. I'm sorry, that's just news. Can I smoke? (*Beat*) Right, of course not. Medical building and all that. Or, public...not medical...public building. Is this part of the building *really* open to the public?

DONALD. I'm asthmatic. (*She looks through her purse and produces gum.*)

JENNIFER. Why couldn't I find a nice guy like you?

DONALD. Guess I spent too much time in plain sight.

JENNIFER. Yeah. You've always been a friend. (*Donald looks stung. He moves towards the sheet.*)

DONALD. So...you ready to verify -?

JENNIFER. Like I said. Got the call two days ago. Drove all night thinking, "it can't be so. It can't be so." You know, she's well over a hundred? She used to tell me that...this is silly. She used to tell me she was a personification of an African God. Yes, sir. A black god walking around us. (*Donald gives her a look.*) Forgot you were a Baptist. I didn't mean any offense. I know, "god isn't black," Or a woman. Wasn't trying to insult you. (*Beat*).

DONALD. I wasn't insulted. I'm actually a lapsed Baptist; more of an Episcopalian these days.

JENNIFER. The difference being?

DONALD. I'm not Calvinist. We have women ministers in Episcopal churches. My sister is actually a minister. Don't get me wrong, I believe there's only one -

JENNIFER. *(Interrupting)* But she insisted that there wasn't one god, but many. And that the big one, whatever he's called, or it's called, laid some kinda curse on her. *(NELL enters along with the DANCERS who now represent THE VOICE OF THE CREATOR).*

BOTH DANCERS. Oh, Esu, keeper of the gate, trickster of the road.

DANCER 1. Ogun cut a path through the chthonic realm bringing man and god together. And what do you do?

DANCER 2. *(Overlapping)* And what do you do? Obatala creates human from the clay. And what do you do?

DANCER 1. *(Overlapping)* And what do you do? Mankind rejoices in our presence, and we in theirs. And what do you do?

DANCER 2. *(Overlapping)* AND what do you do? You bring palm wine to the tee-totaler's table. You bring palm-wine to Obatala, whose steady hand has molded human form. His hand, under your influence, became shaky. And what did that bring us?

DANCER 1. You create blindness in man, woman, and child. You create the albino, and the duck-billed platypus. You allow the Christian to believe all other Gods are the devil.

BOTH. I banish you into the form of a barren woman to learn of love and death. You will live one unnaturally long cycle. *(Lights change. Nell exits. Jennifer stands.)*

JENNIFER. Wait! Don't...don't show me yet. She has...had...so much life. I don't think I could look. *(Beat)* Well, obviously I *can* look and *have to* look, I just don't want to look yet. Give a girl a minute. *(Donald sits)*

DONALD. I'm gonna have my lunch. Wanna share?

JENNIFER. Been driving all night, thinking all kinds of things I might want to say to her when I see...typical. She had no family, no one she could turn to, so once again it's up to me to... *(Beat. Donald hands her half a Po-Boy.)*

DONALD. Oyster. From Old Time Country. You're not allergic, are you? *(Jennifer sits and takes the Po-Boy.)*

JENNIFER. Thank you. *(Beat)* Sorry. I don't mean anything against Ms. Nell. She was great. *(Beat)*

DONALD. Was she married?

JENNIFER. She was a widow.

DONALD. We only have her here as “Nell Boudreaux.” No maiden name. No records. Nothing.

JENNIFER. I don't know her by any other name. Like I said, her husband died a long time ago. They got married sometime in the thirties. She said she was a god...cursed to live as a woman. Damned if she didn't fall in love with a man. A poor share-cropper named Walter Boudreaux. Snagged him one night after standing in one of the cane fields he was looking over. She stood there during a terrible hurricane, swearing to the skies. *(Lights change. The storm grows stronger. Nell and the Dancers enter. The Dancers throughout the scene represent the sugar cane and at times quietly whisper echoes of Nell's speech. Nell looks up at the sky, and then out towards the audience).*

NELL. Oh, cane that pulls up from the earth,
forcing its way towards the sun... *(The Dancers move in the storm and echo her.)* Whose thick juices fill the cups of the hungry,
whose crystals give flavor to the world of man
Do not shrink back from the stormy weather
Do not lose your mighty hold on the soil.
As the thunder of Shango calls down to you to flee
Stand up against him, rooted deep in the earth,
and let him see how thick your stalks are
strong like the machetes of Ogun
Let him see how persistent you can be
Brave as the gazelle which allows herself to be found
by the lion in order to protect her children
You survive changes of all kinds
In syrups, in jams, in rock candy for children
You can survive a change in season
Even in the mightiest of Shango's storms
Sugar cane, sugar cane

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Blossom richly, so we may behold your sweet glory. (*Sounds of thunder. Nell looks around nervously. She stands her ground. Sounds of African Drumming.*) Stand against this storm!

SHANGO! THIS CANE IS NOT YOURS!

YOU CANNOT CLAIM WHAT DOES NOT BELONG!

Though the lion thinks it can eat what is inside the gazelle,
You can not eat the fruits of my work!

I was once the keeper of the road, proud Shango!

You cannot have this! (*The storm gets intense. Violent sounds, flashing lightning. The drums beat harder.*) Take the rice crop if you must, We shall nourish ourselves yet,

Take the feathers from my hat
and wear them as a sign of your personal victory.

You have made me human; made me a woman!

You have followed me throughout this earth.

But this CANE DOES NOT BELONG TO YOU! (*The storm almost takes her away.*)

Yes, Shango, you are loud.

You are strong.

BUT I AM STRONGER!

I STAY HERE AS A MORTAL, BUT DO NOT FORGET WHO I AM!
DO NOT FORGET THERE MAY COME A TIME WHEN I WILL
RETURN! (*The storm gets stronger still. She is shouting against the wind.*)

Sugar cane! BE STRONG! GROW THICK! THICKER! YOU
WILL NOT WASH AWAY IN SHANGO'S WRATH!! YOU HAVE
THE LEGS OF MOUNTAINS

YOU HAVE THE TORSO OF A ROAD

YOU HAVE A HAT THAT PLAYS GAMES IN THE WIND

LAUGHING AT THE EMPTY THUNDER

TICKLES BY LIGHTNING, NEVER FEELING A BURN

YOUR HEART IS THAT OF A WOMAN

WHO WILL NEVER LEAVE THIS EARTH WITHOUT

KNOWING THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LOVE OF A MAN!

(*Lights shift as Nell exits and Dancers set up a table and two chairs, and lights up on Donald and Jennifer.*)

DONALD. Not too many women I know would stand out in a hurricane,
I tell you what.

JENNIFER. She loved him.

DONALD. You ever love someone enough to stand out in a storm for them?

JENNIFER. *(Beat)* So, it's the next day, and she ends up getting a knock on her door. *(Lights down on Jennifer and Donald. A table and two chairs. Nell is sitting at home by herself. WALTER is ushered on by the dancers and "knocks on her door" – the sound of the knock comes from the dancers. She starts to get up slowly. The knock becomes more rapid.)*

NELL. Just a moment, keep your shirt on. Lord, can't a woman sit and enjoy her paper? *(She opens the door. Walter enters).* Oh, good morning, Mr. Boudreaux.

WALTER. And good morning yourself, Ms. Elegba.

NELL. Would you care for some tea?

WALTER. No, ma'am. I haven't ate my breakfast yet.

NELL. Why Mr. Walter Boudreaux, don't you know breakfast is the most important meal of the day?

WALTER. Yes, ma'am.

NELL. Do you see all your mules and work-horses operating without getting their share of oats?

WALTER. I suppose not -

NELL. Then you don't have the sense of a mule. Get in here, and I'll fix you something up, something real good.

WALTER. You know I ain't the type to take up an offer like that, ma'am.

NELL. And you know I ain't the type that hears the word "no."

(A moment. They pause.) I guess that settles it.

WALTER. Aren't you even going to ask me why I was busting down your door?

NELL. Probably to make sure that I was okay after the hurricane. You've always been a good neighbor. I say "always," but I do mean these past few years.

WALTER. Yes, ma'am, and that's certainly part of it.

NELL. Well, good. *(She offers him some tea.)* Tea?

WALTER. Does it matter if I say 'no, thank you, ma'am'?

NELL. No, I guess that won't do no lick of good.

WALTER. Well...

NELL. Cream and sugar?

WALTER. Just cream, please. Sugar tends to scare me.

NELL. Scare you? You a diabetic, Mr. Boudreaux? Or is it all that working out in the field.

WALTER. I think it would be the latter, ma'am. Don't have no diabetes I know, that's for sure.

NELL. That's good. You work too hard, Mr. Boudreaux. For that no good-

WALTER. Mr. Ferguson is the richest man in town, Ms. Nell.

NELL. He don't even live in this town.

WALTER. He doesn't have to. Man like that can set up his home wherever he wants. You know he's been finding oil all over? Right under his feet. It's like they're wearing magic shoes, everyplace they step, black gold.

NELL. Mr. Ferguson have his way, the entire town will be just one big tunnel of oil.

WALTER. Wouldn't be the worst thing.

NELL. Sure it would, sir. There are people here. People that rich folk don't consider. (Beat). Oh, what the hell am I telling you for. You're more stubborn than a –

WALTER. Mule?

NELL. I was going to say "a man." (*Nell begins to "pour tea".*)

WALTER. Ouch.

NELL. Tea-cake?

WALTER. No thank you, ma'am. This isn't really a social call.

NELL. I noticed. Yet, here I am with two for two, as if I'm expecting somebody. Don't you wonder who it is I expected? (*Beat.*) Walter. When are you gonna stop fussing and give me a kiss?

WALTER. Ms. Elegba.

NELL. The door is closed. You can call me Nell.

WALTER. I don't think I can kiss you today.

NELL. No? And why not? (*Beat.*) Something make you change your mind about...something?

WALTER. No. Well, no, ma'am. It's just that...how about I get us some sugar for this tea?

NELL. I have some of my own here.

WALTER. But I want to use some of my share of the crops today. I know it's still just a cane, but...you might appreciate this.

NELL. Did it hold against that terrible storm last night? (*Walter exits. He re-enters with presumably, the world's thickest, and largest piece of sugar cane.*) What in the world?

WALTER. Exactly what I was asking myself, Nell.

NELL. Call me Ms. Elegba, you left the door open.

WALTER. What do you make of it?

NELL. I...I don't know.

WALTER. You don't?

NELL. I have never seen such a large...thick...cane.

WALTER. Me, neither. That's saying something, Ms. Elegba, for I been a share-cropper my entire life. Now, I've seen Broccoli the size of new-born babies, and I've seen rice that you might mistake for gum-drops, but this...this is completely beyond me.

NELL. The way I see it, it's a miracle.

WALTER. A miracle, huh?

NELL. Yes, sir. A miracle. How much you think you can sell that cane for?

WALTER. Sell it? How can I sell it? Who'd buy it?

NELL. Who'd buy it? You seriously asking who'd buy the tallest, thickest, richest sugar cane ever known on the planet?

WALTER. What am I gonna tell Mr. Ferguson? He'll never believe it.

NELL. Maybe you shouldn't tell him anything. Maybe you should get out from under his big gold thumb.

WALTER. That ain't honest.

NELL. You just made the both of you much richer. Stalk like that might line both your pockets with gold. Well, he already has gold. What's richer than gold?

WALTER. You really think so?

NELL. You ain't saying "hey, everybody, I just raised the biggest bunch of dust you ever lay eyes upon! Come pay for my dust!" Man, this is sugar! This is something every man, woman, and child craves. It's the only reason why mankind eats their supper, 'cause they know something sweets on the way after.

WALTER. Ms. Elegba, this is only part of a cane. They're all about thirty feet high.

NELL. Thirty feet?

WALTER. Overnight. (Beat). You know what I think?

NELL. Go ahead and tell me.

WALTER. I think it's the devil's work.

NELL. Aw, hush up with that!

WALTER. The devil came up outta the storm and made my sugar bewitched!

NELL. I ain't listening to any foolishness about the devil being in your crops.

WALTER. It's devil-sugar! Probably poisoned! Probably damn us all for even looking at it! (*Nell slaps him.*)

NELL. I apologize, Mr. Boudreaux. I must ask you to leave my house. Devil sugar. You would know a blessing if it came up and bit you on your big, black ass. (*Pause*)

WALTER. So, it was you...I thought I saw you out in the cane. During the storm. Shouting something mighty. The lightening would shout at you, and you would shout on and on right back at it.

NELL. Foolishness. It was probably the devil.

WALTER. It might have been the devil, Ms. Elegba...but I know it was you. (*Pause*)

NELL. Sit down, Walt.

WALTER. Losing formalities?

NELL. Walter. Please sit. (*He does.*) I was out there in the field last night because... (*Beat*) Two years ago, you said you'd consider marrying me. You remember?

WALTER. Yes, ma'am.

NELL. And what did you tell me?

WALTER. It wasn't right a share-cropper marrying a woman who was so...cosmopolitan. What can I give you?

NELL. A life with someone I could love.

WALTER. A broke life. A poor life. But maybe...maybe if I just saved up enough. We could talk.

NELL. Yes. And then, the first hurricane hit.

WALTER. Lost just enough to make sure I'd be tied to the land forever.

NELL. And did Mr. Ferguson suffer?

WALTER. No, ma'am. But that's part of the deal.

NELL. (*Clearing away the "tea set".*) That's part of the deal. You slave away on that land.

WALTER. I ain't nobody's slave. I'm a free man.

NELL. Free man? I know what free men look like, Walter. They ain't tied to nothing. (*Beat*) Your cane was lost. So was my hopes.

WALTER. Well.

NELL. Every night after, I'd sneak into your field, and say some good old-fashioned praise chants. Asking the cane to raise out of the ground, and be full, rich, packed with the crystals that drive the human race mad with ecstasy. The human race must think sugar's even better than sex, the way you all make your big eyes at it, licking your lips, imagining...whatever it is you folks imagine. Last night, Shango, god of thunder, was out, howling out a big storm. Shango and I have an old debt to settle, that has left me here on this earth, alone and barren. And I gave your sugar cane praise. I praised it above the storm. Any power that I possess was passed into the cane. The cane became my voice, shouting back at the storm. Look how thick, like the muscles of the gods themselves. Yes, Walter. Your sugar cane survived. But for what purpose? FOR YOU TO SAY THEY ARE DEVIL WORK. There ain't no devil like that. There is an Esu, a trickster, a god of the gate, a god the slaves had to call St. Peter, a god who has been thoroughly unemployed these thirty years...who will live out her life as a barren woman to pay an old debt. (*Beat*) I love you, Walter. But if you don't like the cane, I know a few words that will bring them down. After that, though, they won't grow back. Not like this. (*Pause*)

WALTER. You saying you some kinda god?

NELL. Forget it, Walter. Just go home. Tomorrow, your sugar will be as it's supposed to.

WALTER. But -

NELL. Just go! (*He starts to exit and turns.*)

WALTER. I can't go. I'm too tired, Nell. I'm too tired. Look at me. How many years you think I got left in me that I can work that field all by myself? I ain't got the power of your voice. A few seasons like this - (*indicates the big cane*)- and yes, I'll be out from under Mr. Ferguson's thumb. And then maybe...

NELL. Maybe what?

WALTER. Maybe we can revisit. Something we had talked about. A long time ago. Before the storm.

NELL. What if it's devil's work?

WALTER. Probably is. I'll just say my prayers a little stronger. *(Pause)* What do you think?

NELL. I think you need to come back in.

WALTER. Close the door?

NELL. No. Leave it open, Walt. Leave it for the world to see. *(He enters.)*

WALTER. Ms. Elegba -

NELL. Nell.

WALTER. Nell? *(Looks over at the door and back at her. She nods.)* I think you just made me a rich man.

NELL. The world loves its sugar.

WALTER. That's not what I'm talking about.

NELL. Hush. *(They kiss.)*

WALTER. You definitely some kinda voodoo lady.

NELL. Oh, yeah?

WALTER. You sure put a hex on me, Ms. Nell, I tell you what. *(He speaks a few lines of broken French. Lights change as the dancers clear away the table and chairs, and escort Walter off. Donald and Jennifer are under a no-smoking sign, smoking.)*

JENNIFER. That's the way she told me it.

DONALD. What's that bit about St. Peter?

JENNIFER. St. Peter. When the slaves were taken out of Nigeria, they were told they had to be Catholic. So, they were converted in Haiti, Cuba, Central America, Louisiana...most of them were told they were worshipping the devil.

DONALD. I thought slaves weren't supposed to have souls. Isn't that how the traders justified it?

JENNIFER. Wasn't the point. They were told to look at St. Peter, instead of Esu. Both were gate-keepers.

DONALD. That voodoo shit, man. Gives me the willies.

JENNIFER. You just say "the willies?"

DONALD. Um...yes. It does, though.

JENNIFER. And a zombie getting off the cross to bring back the dead, no willies there. *(Donald looks horrified.)* I'm sorry. I haven't been to church in awhile.

DONALD. Yeah, well. It's not a bad thing, you know. To have someone to pray to. Talk to. Communicate with. Someone who can help get you out of your own way.

JENNIFER. So. Only lonely people go to church? *(Pause.)*

DONALD. No. Not just...It's nice to know someone is there.

(Lights change. Nell and Dancers enter. Throughout speech Dancers moves as gods debating and then accepting Nell's obligatory offering.)

NELL. Shango? Shango? Oh, Shango, who can shave the head of a child with a thin streak of lightening. Shango whose voice can shake the mountains, and free the rivers, causing the valleys to flood. Oh, Shango, thank you for your storm. I am burning three of the largest, thickest stalks for you. *(A low roll of thunder.)* But that's all you getting. The rest of it belongs to Mr. Boudreaux. After this, he ain't even gonna work for Mr. Ferguson anymore. Thank you for that. Maybe...maybe curses ain't so bad after all. Seems to me I'm still coming out on top. *(Beat)* Obatala, thank you for Walter. *(She smiles. End of scene. Lights on Donald and Jennifer. Jennifer is holding a cup of coffee. Donald hands her a yearbook.)*

DONALD. Here.

JENNIFER. Oh my God. NO!

DONALD. Oh, yeah.

JENNIFER. Why do you carry this around with you?

DONALD. All socially active people keep their senior yearbook on hand at all times.

JENNIFER. Look at my hair!

DONALD. Yeah. Look at me, I got the "Kid N'Play" box-cut kicking. A lot of people around here still do. *(Beat)* There you are again. Look at your friend: Lauren. She has that permanent, like, Motorcycle helmet head.

JENNIFER. As opposed to riding a motorcycle without a helmet-head? Look. You see that fan I've got? Put it away.

DONALD. Why?

JENNIFER. Burn it!

DONALD. It ain't that bad.

JENNIFER. *(Beat)* Married right out of high school.

DONALD. Right.

JENNIFER. He had a sixty-three split window Chevy. Mostly made of tape and rust.

DONALD. Still. Cool car.

JENNIFER. I'm not really a car person.

DONALD. All girls are car people. It's why guys get fancy cars.

JENNIFER. Well...complimenting his car is the only nice thing I could think to say about him.

DONALD. He drives a Toyota now. *(Beat)* Just seen him around town.

JENNIFER. Toyota. Good for him. *(Beat)* He married?

DONALD. Don't think so.

JENNIFER. You two talk about me?

DONALD. *(Beat)* Nah. Just asked him where you were. *(He strokes her hair. Pause. She stands up.)*

JENNIFER. I know you got plenty to do, Donald. I appreciate your understanding in not, you know, diving right in and looking at her.

(Beat) I'm sure you get used to seeing this sort of thing. But I ain't.

Never seen a...you know.

DONALD. It's alright, it's alright.

JENNIFER. I guess you must understand the soul better than most people. Looking at the shell of a human. Their spirit...isn't home anymore. I'm just not ready yet to see if it's her. *(Beat)* Nothing could break her spirit, though. You should hear her talk about Africa.

DONALD. And the voodoo.

JENNIFER. Voodoo. *(Beat)* African mythology mixed with Christianity. A lot of the folks that were forced to keep statues of St. Peter looked at their statues, and said "I know you're in there, Esu, keeper of the gate."

DONALD. You said that before.

JENNIFER. And I'll say it again if I have to. Lord knows Ms. Nell said it to me at least a hundred times a day. It was true. It was true to Ms.

Nell, anyway. But a lot was true to her.

DONALD. Right.

JENNIFER. Like that jazz song.

DONALD. Jazz song?

JENNIFER. You ever write a song for a girl?

DONALD. Maybe. (*Lights begin to change as Dancers set up a table and chair.*)

JENNIFER. Ms. Nell says there was a jazz instrumental written for her. Way back in the twenties. Before going to Louisiana. She was in Harlem. She said he once had a relationship once with a horn-player named "Lucky." Lucky is just what he wasn't. Until Ms. Nell...left him. (*The Dancers perform a Shadow Dance. LUCKY enters as Dancers exit. He crosses to the "phone". He picks it up, dials, waits a beat, slams it down.*)

LUCKY. Damn it. Damn it all. Damn that woman. Damn women, everyone. Curse their...womanly ways. (*Lucky spies his "clarinet", picks it up and blurts out a terrible sound. Notes: sound is produced by one of the Dancers playing an actual clarinet while Lucky mimes playing. In the original production, it was a sax-ophone; it could be a French Horn, a trumpet; any brass or wind is fine; for the purposes of stage directions, it's a clarinet.*) Remove this sting, damn it all! Remove it so I can play! I can't get through it. I don't even want it. It all sounds generic. Boring. The world echoes taxi cabs in the rain, and yesteryear's jazz in fading Harlem. Bring it all back, damn it. Everything is so dull...I pray for silence. Total silence. Let there be silence. Let the next sound be the only sound I hear..and let it....let it be her footstep at my door. Oh god, or gods, whatever's out there, bring her back here. I'll tell her. I'll rip her a whole new asshole. I'll show her what jellyroll means, and send her out. Leave her begging. (*He takes a deep breath, and looks around, as if making sure no one can hear him. He begins to sing.*) I gave her my sugar

And all she leave me is salt

I gave her my sugar

All she leave me is salt

She needs bigger living

If we be poor, it's my fault. (Nell enters.)

NELL. Never thought you cared for that blues. You said singing the blues is a sign of being stupid.

LUCKY. Then I am the stupidest man alive. (*She approaches him and rests her head on his shoulder.*)

NELL. Play me something, Lucky. Something mellow.

LUCKY. Nell. I don't want to beat around the bush. I...

NELL. I can't talk of that.

LUCKY. I would have married you.

NELL. What do I wanna get married for? Matriomony'd just widen my hips and narrow my life.

LUCKY. And I ain't never asked you this question.

NELL. I know you haven't.

LUCKY. So, bear with me while I do.

NELL. Lucky, don't ask. Just let me tell. Some women, they just ain't born to have children. Now, I thought for the longest while I was one of them. But after you and me started up, and that little...miracle...appeared in me, I thought "uh-oh. This is new." But when...it couldn't come to term...it was a reminder. Just a reminder. Some women can't have children. *(Beat)* And ain't it for the best?

LUCKY. Maybe.

NELL. You and I, we was never *serious*, right?

LUCKY. I guess....maybe I was. *(Pause)* Maybe I wasn't. I don't know.

NELL. Good. Now that we got that outta the way, play me something nice, Lucky. Mellow.

LUCKY. Can't play, Nelly girl.

NELL. I ain't no Nelly girl.

LUCKY. Whatever.

NELL. It's not whatever, you son of a bitch!

LUCKY. Whoa - !

NELL. It's a name, and the name is mine. Don't try to make me some cute possession.

LUCKY. I didn't mean to, Nell.

NELL. I ain't one of your little girls -

LUCKY. What girls?

NELL. Just come crawling to you cause you put on that big daddy voice-

LUCKY. IT AIN'T LIKE THAT!

NELL. No?

LUCKY. No! Come here, baby.

NELL. Don't you dare call me "baby." *(Beat. Lucky puts his arms around her. She doesn't seem to object. He kisses her neck a bunch of times.)* What's that supposed to do?

LUCKY. Relax you a little.

NELL. This is about as relaxed as I'm getting, Lucky.

LUCKY. I remember my kisses used to melt you like butter on a biscuit. Remember?

NELL. And I'm sure it coulda worked, but you're the one who just made me all tense again.

LUCKY. Bet I can relax you. Like the old days.

NELL. Last month was a long time ago. *(Pause)* How is, what's her name?

LUCKY. Who? *(She breaks away from Lucky.)*

NELL. The one with the whore's name.

LUCKY. She ain't a whore.

NELL. What's her name again? *(Beat)*

LUCKY. Trixie.

NELL. Trixie, that's it. How is little Ms. Trixie?

LUCKY. Who cares about her?

NELL. You sure did, last time I seen you.

LUCKY. It ain't...she ain't...no.

NELL. She "ain't no" what?

LUCKY. She didn't mean nothing.

NELL. Aw. That's too bad, Lucky.

LUCKY. I got better in my life.

NELL. Do you?

LUCKY. Yes. *(Puts his arm around her again.)*

NELL. Oh, I see. So, she left and now here I am. Is that it?

LUCKY. I missed you is all. After all that happened...

NELL. Obatala have mercy. Here I was, about to smear myself all over you, have a little game, and go to it. But you? *(Beat)* You telling me you love me, Lucky? Is that it? *(Pause. She reacts.)*

LUCKY. I just missed you.

NELL. Play me something. Anything. Or I'm turning on the radio.

LUCKY. Don't turn it on.

NELL. Right now, I'll I'm thinking about is leaving to some clarinet music. Can't you provide for that one simple request? *(Nell offers Lucky the "clarinet" and he pushes it away.)*

LUCKY. I can't.

NELL. You can't?

LUCKY. No.

NELL. I see. *(Beat. Nell starts to exit.)* Maybe it was too much, me coming over here like that.

LUCKY. No, it wasn't!

NELL. Sure it was! You're kissing my neck with all the passion of a sewer grate, asking me if I'm melting. Damn, boy, what is wrong with you?!

LUCKY. I don't want to hurt you.

NELL. You can't.

LUCKY. But I don't want to hurt me either. *(Beat)* I need you.

NELL. You need me.

LUCKY. Yes. *(Pause)*

NELL. Okay, so you need me. So, now what? You won't even play for me.

LUCKY. It's not because I don't want to.

NELL. No?

LUCKY. No.

NELL. Then what is it? *(Beat)* Lord have mercy, I am out the door faster than you can say "woman, don't you go out that door so fast." Way I see it, you got yourself a head full of "do wrong" right now, and I ain't up to that kind of chase. What is it you want?

LUCKY. Lay with me.

NELL. Well, that was obvious.

LUCKY. Nell!

NELL. I was ready to lay with you ten minutes ago. But you're acting all crazy. What is it?

LUCKY. I can't play my clarinet unless you sleep with me.

NELL. You...what?!

LUCKY. I can't play my clarinet...

NELL. ...unless I sex you? *(Lucky nods. Nell cracks up.)*

LUCKY. Damn, now girl, I got a problem. Don't be laughing at my weakness.

NELL. No, it's not. But, please, I gotta hear you say "I can't play my clarinet unless you sex me." *(Beat. He can't.)* Go on! *(He still doesn't.)* I'm out the door!

LUCKY. I can't play my clarinet unless you sex me.

NELL. Nonsense. *(Beat)* What about the Cotton Club?

LUCKY. What about it?

NELL. You get your clarinet up just fine there, no sexing from me needed.

LUCKY. I ain't been back. Not since...

NELL. Roy Lucky. You stopped playing the Cotton Club?

LUCKY. Yes.

NELL. On the brink of your success?

LUCKY. Yes.

NELL. You don't need sex. You need an enema. *(Nell makes to leave.)*

LUCKY. Wait! Don't go!

NELL. Roy William Luckwood, you have lost what little sense Obatala gave you.

LUCKY. It's not about sense, or your voodoo bullshit -

NELL. - it's about your clarinet bullshit.

LUCKY. A man needs a muse. A fire! Fire needs a spark! Fire don't burn forever. You know that when you're an artist. It don't burn forever. The first night I saw you -

NELL. Here we go.

LUCKY. YES HERE WE GO! *(Beat)* The first night I seen you, you was trying to get into the Cotton Club. I hear you say, "I know the manager." I'm on the bandstand, and I hear you. Hell, we all hear you. The rest of the world just got silent when you come in a room. You go on and on about how the two of you got drunk at the Bishop on 47th. Telling everyone how he loved you up so good. "Jelly roll!" You were saying real loud, "Jelly roll!" Making the stiffs uncomfortable, and the uncomfortable stiff. All eyes on you. You say, in a voice that can shake the wallet out of any free-thinking man, "Albert says meet him here. He runs the place. Let's all have a drink!" It's silent for a moment, then some brave soul finally challenges you with, "we don't know no Albert here." Big shock. I seen it all over your face. But then something amazing happens. You don't cry. Not even a tear. Instead, you laugh. A big, fool-hardy laugh, saying "that fat son of a bitch sure fooled me. And to think, I had to bend all the way around just to..."

NELL. I am pretty flexible.

LUCKY. I'll leave off the vulgar details you shared with anyone who would listen. "Aw, hell," you say, "someone buy me a drink just to get the taste of him outta my mouth."

NELL. Lord, he was the SALTIEST man. Just looking at him can raise your blood pressure.

LUCKY. I don't think you've been permitted to use your money anywhere since. Seems whenever you take a seat, three drinks appear magically in front of you. But that night, that first night... your laugh intoxicated me. I could hear it all the way up next to the bandstand where I was getting ready to play. I'm standing under the lights, and I bring my clarinet to my mouth, the reed feeling like it's alive under my tongue, and I look out into the crowds. When the light hits your eyes, all you can see from the bandstand is outlines. White silhouettes. A general mass. But then, your hat hit the light. I don't know how. You like them big hats, but it had to be twelve feet tall to hit the lights. Magic? I can see your eyes. Two rubies. Like you didn't even have whites in them. Burning into me. Two thick, black pools a man can get lost in. And I knew then that I...

NELL. That you what?

LUCKY. I needed to bed you.

NELL. That it?

LUCKY. That's it. I see you, and I'm thinking, "yeah, I'll bed this girl. Be my muse. Be my flame. Stay here until the spark goes out." But when you left...when you no longer smiled at me. I could feel the glare of the lights again. The wash of silhouettes in the audience, like a big still, unfeeling painting. Nothing going on. No rubies. No life. That's when I realized that I need you.

NELL. There. Now that was easy. Wasn't it easy?

LUCKY. Yeah. Simple.

NELL. Lord, Lucky. It ain't that simple. If that was it, we woulda bounced on that bed a little and I coulda left.

LUCKY. It is that simple.

NELL. Honey, what you need is the entire package: love, devotion, commitment, and all that jazz. You only lying to yourself if you can't say that much. I know Trixie wuddn't good for much, but I'm sure she didn't need a map to your zipper. I'm sure she could roll as well as any of them.

LUCKY. True. *(Beat)* But Trixie didn't almost have my baby.

NELL. And I *almost* did? There was no almost about it, Lucky. Baby was there. It was there for the blink of an eye, then was gone.

LUCKY. But it could have happened.

NELL. It could have, but then what? You gonna play your clarinet for it's supper? You gonna buy it's diapers with a few sweet notes at the Cotton Club? Or a street corner? Don't think this great Harlem Jazz age we're living in will last forever.

LUCKY. Maybe not forever. But for a little while, maybe. Just while the child -

NELL. THERE IS NO CHILD!

LUCKY. BUT THERE WAS!

NELL. AND IT'S GONE!

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