

RASTUS AND HATTIE

By

Lisa Langford

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RASTUS AND HATTIE

To Logan, the best cohort ever.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

RASTUS AND HATTIE was developed in readings at Dobama Theatre in Cleveland Heights, Ohio and Kitchen Dog Theatre in Dallas, Texas.

In October, 2019, RASTUS AND HATTIE was first produced by Raymond Bobgan for Cleveland Public Theatre with funding from the Joyce Foundation Joyce Awards. It was directed by Anne McEvoy, with set design by T. Paul Lowry, lighting design by Benjamin Gantose, costume design by Kerry Patterson, sound design by James Kosmatka, and fight choreography by Kelly Elliot. Leigh Tennant was the stage manager. The cast was as follows:

Needra.....Nicole Sumlin
Malik.....Ananias J. Dixon
Marlene.....Rachel Lee Kolis
David.....Adam Seeholzer
Hattie.....Jeannine Gaskin
Rastus.....Darius J. Stubbs
Dean Hackett/Storekeeper....Andrew Narten

Characters:

Needra: African American, female, late 30s, new mom, geneticist. Fiercely smart.

Malik: African American, male, late 30s, Needra's husband.

Country boy.

Marlene: White, female, late 30s, Needra's best friend.

David: White, male, late 30s, Marlene's husband, lawyer.

Rastus: African American, male, late 50s, robot.

Hattie: African American, female, 50s, robot.

Dean Hackett: White, male, 50-60, academic, Needra's advisor.

Storekeeper: White, male, 50-60, same actor plays Dean Hackett.

Time: The Present and The Past

Place: Cleveland and Mulga, Alabama

Note: Hattie and Rastus are not played robotically.

Westinghouse Research Laboratories created a humanoid robot named Rastus in the 1930s. True story.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

RASTUS AND HATTIE

ACT 1
SCENE 1

Lights up. The set suggests an academic setting, lots of mahogany, shelves lined with books, a desk piled with papers and journals. DEAN HACKETT sits behind the desk, while NEEDRA sits opposite, a bit anxious, but anticipating good news.

HACKETT. (*Holding paper.*) It's brilliant, Needra, just brilliant.

NEEDRA. Thank you, Dean Hackett.

HACKETT. Brilliantly researched, brilliantly reasoned—the peer reviews were glowing—

NEEDRA. I'm happy to hear that.

HACKETT. —but we can't publish it. Not like it is.

NEEDRA. I don't understand; you said it was brilliant—

HACKETT. It is. It's also racist.

NEEDRA. What?

HACKETT. It's racist.

NEEDRA. It's research— on rats!

HACKETT. (*Rifles through paper.*) Brilliant research, but, near the end, there's a paragraph, a passage, a pondering, —

NEEDRA. Where?

HACKETT. (*Shows her.*) Here.

NEEDRA. It's one paragraph.

HACKETT. It's...racist.

NEEDRA. It's a logical extension of my work.

HACKETT. It's quite a projection. We can't publish...that.

NEEDRA. We know that intrauterine stress affects the fetus in rats, in humans. Meta-analysis suggests that trauma is passed down from mother to daughter, to granddaughter, *ad infinitum*. All I'm suggesting is

RASTUS AND HATTIE

an epigenetic alteration that interrupts the generational expression and, in essence, erases the memory of that initial trauma.

HACKETT. That we can publish. It's your...application of that theory.

NEEDRA. Was there a problem with it?

HACKETT. It's sound. Dangerously sound.

NEEDRA. Enslaved African women were routinely punished. A hole was dug for the woman's belly, the hands and feet tied to pegs in the ground and she was whipped.

HACKETT. Ugh...

NEEDRA. That affects the girl-child she's carrying, along with the thousands of ova developing in that female fetus, and so on, for the next couple of generations. In a perfect world, these effects might normalize, but, say, the great-granddaughter lives in the Jim Crow south. *She's* carrying a child. She witnesses the lynching of someone she knows, maybe even loves—

HACKETT. Whew —

NEEDRA. and the cycle continues through the tumult of the sixties, the crack epidemic of the 80s, right into the 21st century. Hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, depression —

HACKETT. Needra —

NEEDRA. — what if science can do what social engineering hasn't been able to? Level the playing field by erasing trauma on a micro level. Wouldn't that be...*amazing*? To just be...Black. A *new* kind of Black. Moving through the world without all that baggage — (*Ebullient:*) A post-racial world: that's not racist; that's hopeful!

HACKETT. Your rather Olympian leap from rats to racial harmony notwithstanding, your research would be completely overshadowed by this one paragraph. It would be Tuskegee all over again! Why don't we take that section out?

NEEDRA. It's what I like about my paper. It's why I do the research I do. I just had a daughter. I want to give her every advantage there is. I'd do this for her.

HACKETT. Needra, you've got this teaching fellowship in Alabama, you're moving to a new city— why stir up controversy? You've got a great career ahead of you. Get published, get tenure, then you can say all

RASTUS AND HATTIE

the crazy stuff you want. It's one paragraph. Take it out. Please?
(*Hands Needra the paper.*) Think about it.

SCENE 2

A christening brunch. MARLENE and DAVID's home. A den, built-in book shelves filled to overflowing. Needra and MALIK enjoy champagne, brie, fresh fruit, and take turns checking on their baby, JERICHO, rocking her in her car seat. Marlene taps her glass and makes a toast.

MARLENE. This is...oh my god. Ahh! (*Wipes eyes.*) I'm not going to cry! I am *so* going to get through this! (*Laughs.*) —

DAVID. Do you want me to do it?

MARLENE. No! No. I'm alright. I'm just...emotional. It's not every day your best friend in the whole world makes you godmother to her first-born daughter.

DAVID. It's a titular honor, honey, you're not the head of a crime syndicate.

NEEDRA. David!

MARLENE. Don't pay him any attention, Needra. He has no idea what it's like to have a *bond* with someone —

DAVID. Aren't we married?

MARLENE. (*Ignores him.*) To grow up together. (*Takes Needra's hand.*) Knee socks and pigtails.

NEEDRA. Sleep overs.

MARLENE. High school crushes.

NEEDRA. Rush week.

MARLENE. Maid of honor.

NEEDRA. *Matron* of honor.

MARLENE. And now this. Godparents. (*Hugs Needra.*) Oh, Needra!

NEEDRA. Oh, Marly!

MALIK. Oh, my god.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

DAVID. Malik, you wanna go get a beer? There's gotta be a bar around here where we can get our balls back.

MARLENE. No —I want to make a toast! I have to make a toast! Ok. Ok. Today marks an incredible special moment in all our lives. Today, Needra and Malik christened Baby Jericho; and David and I promised to love her, nurture her, and share everything we have with her.

NEEDRA. Awww.

MARLENE. (*Laughs.*) She's ours! She belongs to us now, forget about taking her home. I love that little girl. So much. Oh! And in honor everything that's happened today, I've got a special treat!

NEEDRA. No —

MARLENE. Yes! Now, Needie, I know you're still trying to lose the baby weight —

NEEDRA. Marlene, you didn't—

MARLENE. —we cannot let a moment like this go by—

NEEDRA. You got cake!

MARLENE. —without something chocolate—

NEEDRA. Please, let there be cake!

MARLENE. —and frosted with buttercream!

(*HATTIE enters with a large cake with a sparkler on top. She is a robot, Black, dressed in antebellum attire. Needra and Malik are stunned.*)

NEEDRA. Is this a joke?

MARLENE. No, it's gluten-free.

MALIK. I think she's referring to the...uh...the...um...your—

NEEDRA. —slave.

MARLENE. What?

NEEDRA. Your slave.

MALIK. You've got...a slave.

MARLENE. Hattie?

NEEDRA. Did you see this in Southern Living?

MARLENE. You mean Hattie.

NEEDRA. One of those Plantation getaways? Because you do this, Marlene, remember Shabby Chic? All the burlap and ruffles?

MALIK. Our daughter got christened and you got...a slave.

NEEDRA. Malik, it's just a costume—

RASTUS AND HATTIE

MARLENE. Hattie —

NEEDRA. Isn't it? She's not a slave. Is she?

MALIK. A slave?

DAVID. Of course not! I'm pretty sure the 14th Amendment prohibits—

MALIK. (*Alarmed.*) It's the 13th Amendment!

DAVID. Wait, I'm a lawyer, what's the 14th?

MALIK. He's a lawyer! He doesn't even know!

DAVID. Dred Scot! It overturned Dred Scot!

NEEDRA. Marly—

MARLENE. Hattie is—

DAVID. Or was it Plessy vs. Ferguson?

MALIK. I told you! I told you! Let my brother and his wife be the godparents, but noooo! “Marly's my best friend since first grade! She was in our wedding! I have to ask her!”

NEEDRA. It doesn't mean anything—

MARLENE. What—

NEEDRA. I mean it *means* something—

MARLENE. But I'm the *godmother*—

DAVID. Madison vs. Marbury? I'm kidding/ you know that, right?

MARLENE. —you promised *God*!

NEEDRA. Not quite really—

MARLENE. —if something happens to you two, David and I get Baby Jericho—

MALIK. Oh, you splittin' up families now?!

(*RASTUS has come out from the kitchen with a towel over his arm and a bottle of champagne. He is a robot, Black, dressed in antebellum attire.*)

RASTUS. Freshen your drink, boss?

MARLENE. Not now, Rastus—

MALIK. Oh *hell* no!

MARLENE. So what does it mean?

MALIK. Not a goddamn thing! (*To Needra.*) My daddy always said, “Junior, if you wait long enough white people/ gon' white people!”

MARLENE. *White* people?

NEEDRA. Malik—

MARLENE. You think I'm “white people?”

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. Well, you *do* have two Black people dressed as slaves serving brunch—

MARLENE. They're not people—

MALIK. Oh! My gawd! Not even *three fifths*!

DAVID. They're *robots*!

NEEDRA. What?

DAVID. They're robots.

MALIK. Robots. (*Needra and Malik warily circle Hattie and Rastus, who stand still with their heads hung low.*)

DAVID. My uncle used to work for Westinghouse in the 30s. The company had this hush-hush contract with the government to build humanoids—

NEEDRA. Humanoids?

DAVID. Robots, but really, really, human-like. They were supposed to fight our wars, clean our homes, stuff like that. When World War II started, the program was shut down, so Westinghouse could concentrate on the war effort. But my uncle kept two and tinkered with them until he died.

MARLENE. We were up at his old cabin by the lake a while back and we found them.

DAVID. I've been going through my uncle's notes, like, *60 years* of notes, and I've figured out the basic stuff, they're bipedal, android-Rastus, gynoid-Hattie.

MARLENE. We're going to turn them over to the authorities, but David's seen about fifty patents in their facial expressions alone and he wants to make sure his uncle is properly credited. And, you know, money. Lots and lots of money.

DAVID. They seem to have this...intelligence that grows with human interaction—

MARLENE. Hattie baked your cake!

DAVID. —but I haven't figured it out yet.

MARLENE. She heard me describing it on the phone with the bakery and next thing you know— (*She shimmies and sings to the tune of Rihanna's "Birthday Cake."*) "Cake, cake, cake, cake, cake—"

MALIK. (*To Marlene.*) Don't do that.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

DAVID. They're loyal, deferential—but not capable more complex emotions, like, you know, self-preservation, love.

NEEDRA. Why are they Black?

MARLENE. They're not Black.

NEEDRA. They most certainly are.

MARLENE. They're not even human.

MALIK. Don't. Do that.

MARLENE. They're not! *(Marlene takes a book off the bookshelf. It's an old-fashioned ledger full of notes, pictures, and diagrams.)* See? Look here. *(Pulls out a newspaper clipping.)* This was at the World's Fair in 1937, right here in Cleveland. This was an earlier model, Remus.

NEEDRA. Oh, god.

MARLENE. And the main attraction was the Aquacade, a giant pool with a floating stage in the middle. Johnny Weismuller was the star and he'd sing a song then dive into the water to do a little water dance or something—

MALIK. Weismuller, Weismuller, wasn't he in those old black and white movies, like Robin Hood or something?

DAVID. Tarzan —

MARLENE. —so Remus and Weismuller have a little bit—

NEEDRA. A bit?

MARLENE. A bit, a routine. *(In a funny voice.)* My son's the smartest baby there ever was. He already talking and he's just two months old.

DAVID. *(Joining in.)* Two months? That's nothing! Don't you read the bible?

MARLENE. The bible?

RASTUS. Yeah, it said Job cursed the day he was born! *(David pats Rastus' shoulder.)*

MARLENE. The bit kills, Remus gets the biggest laugh every night and Johnny—

DAVID. Tarzan—

MARLENE. —Mr. Hollywood star, doesn't like it. So the last night of the fair, he pushes Remus into the pool—

MALIK. Black people can't swim.

NEEDRA. *(To Malik.)* That isn't true.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

MARLENE. And Remus wasn't a person; sparks started coming out of his ears, flames shooting out of his eyes. When they pulled him out, he was rusted in rigor mortis and they scrapped him.

DAVID. My uncle used some of his leftover parts for Rastus here. (*He taps Rastus' head.*) He's got all the old routines. They're hysterical.

MARLENE. So they're robots. Pieces and parts.

DAVID. Widgets and whatnots.

MARLENE. Mechanical stuff—

MALIK. (*He looks at Hattie.*) —covered in brown skin.

MARLENE. That doesn't mean they're Black.

DAVID. No. Black is so much more than skin. It's jazz and blues— (*Rastus activates and begins to hum and dust.*) —and food, you know, food— (*Hattie activates.*)

HATTIE. I better go check on supper, Miss Marlene. I made Hoppin' John. (*She exits.*)

DAVID. —and, and, soul, lots of soul... (*Malik shoots him a look.*) Ok, ok, I don't know what Black is, but they're *not* Black. They're just...robots. You and Needra are our best friends; do you think we'd bring out two Black servants dressed in antebellum clothes if we thought of them as anything other than robots?

MARLENE. They're marvels of science.

DAVID. Mechanical wonders.

MALIK. Not...human?

NEEDRA. Of course not. I'm sorry...it's just that they look so...it's been a long day. (*Looks at baby.*) Jericho's knackered and I am, too. (*Beat.*) Thank you, Marly, for being the godmother, for the brunch, for everything. (*They hug.*)

MALIK. I'll go get the car. (*He kisses Needra and exits.*)

DAVID. (*He kisses Marlene.*) I'll go check on the girls. (*He exits.*)

MARLENE. I'll ask Hattie to wrap this up for you. (*She takes the cake and exits.*)

(*Needra watches Rastus dust. He is mumbling to himself, "Job cursed the day he was born, Job cursed the day he was born..." He stops and wipes a tear from his eye. Needra gasps.*)

RASTUS AND HATTIE

MARLENE. (*O.S.*) Needie! Come taste this Hopping Jim! (*She picks up Jericho's baby carrier to leave and looks back at Rastus once more before exiting.*)

SCENE 3

Needra and Malik's house, which is in a state of flux. There are boxes, and mattresses on the floor. Needra sits up in bed. Malik enters from the bathroom. Malik readies himself for bed. Beat.

NEEDRA. You're not blacker than me.

MALIK. Didn't know it was a competition.

NEEDRA. I know who I am.

MALIK. Yes, you do.

NEEDRA. It is the 21st century.

MALIK. Two thousand and some change.

NEEDRA. And I don't have to prove my Blackness to anyone.

MALIK. Your Black card can never be revoked.

NEEDRA. Black people are not monolithic.

MALIK. Whole lotta ways to be Black.

NEEDRA. I read *Wretched of the Earth...in French!*

MALIK. *Les Damnés de la Terre!*

NEEDRA. (*She breaks down.*) So why am I friends with that woman?! (*Malik takes her in his arms and rocks her gently.*) We've been friends for twenty years! I let her touch my hair! (*Malik shoots her a look.*) But, lately, every fucking day is a damn teachable moment! I can't believe—

MALIK. It was...unexpected.

NEEDRA. (*She pulls back.*) You did the pause.

MALIK. What pause?

NEEDRA. The pause! The pause! The pause you do when you mean the exact opposite of what you say: (*She imitates him.*) "It was... unexpected." What you mean is it was totally expected!

MALIK. You think *I* think it was expected—even though I *said* "unexpected"—that your white friend had two Black robot slaves in her house?

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. Because I think you think I *allowed* this to happen!

MALIK. You *did* let her touch your hair.

NEEDRA. You think I facilitated this—

MALIK. She *is* the godmother of our child.

NEEDRA. —by being *that* Black friend.

MALIK. What Black friend?

NEEDRA. You know what Black friend! The one who told her she could twerk. Who cornrowed her hair. Who let her say ‘nigga’ when Juvenile came on the radio.

MALIK. Damn, you let her drop the n-bomb?

NEEDRA. What in her liberal, left-leaning, limited mind did not look at *Rastus* and *Hattie* and say, “I’m a keep this shit in the basement when Needra and Malik come over?”

MALIK. (*He tucks his feet under the covers.*) How often do you concern yourself with the daily life of an ant? You don’t. You know why? You’re not an ant. You benefit from ants being ants. You never have to see them and when you do, your only concern is whether to step on them or find a can of Raid.

NEEDRA. Black people aren’t ants.

MALIK. Tell white folks. (*He rolls over to go to sleep.*)

NEEDRA. I don’t *hate* white people.

MALIK. (*He rolls back over.*) Me neither. But I’d be a fool to act like the last four hundred years never happened. Kiss me. (*Needra kisses him.*) G’night. (*Malik plumps his pillow, turns off his light and goes to sleep. Needra turns off her bedside lamp and does the same. They sleep.*)

NEEDRA. (*She turns on the light.*) Wake up.

MALIK. (*He turns on the light.*) What?

NEEDRA. Is this how we’re going to raise Jericho—

MALIK. Yes. (*He turns off light. Needra crawls over him and turns on his light.*)

NEEDRA —to not trust white people?

MALIK. That’s the plan. (*He turns light off.*)

NEEDRA. I don’t want to do that. I want to move beyond that. We have moved beyond that.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

MALIK. My daddy always said, “Junior, feed the devil with a long-handled spoon.” You know he hungry, no need to get your fingers bit.

NEEDRA. So all white people are racist until proven innocent?

MALIK. Not all. For example, *my* white friends don’t have robot slaves. That I know about.

NEEDRA. They’re not slaves!

MALIK. Automated house Negroes, then.

NEEDRA. Marly just didn’t...understand how...*jarring* it would be for me to see Rastus and Hattie.

MALIK. *Rastus and Hattie.*

NEEDRA. She doesn’t know about all that.

MALIK. History?

NEEDRA. It was ages ago. Besides, her family’s Latvian or Slovenian—they came here after all that.

MALIK. It’s still going on. They had plenty of time get in while the getting’ was good. (*A beat. Needra gives up, turns off her light. A beat. Malik sits up, turns on his light.*) You didn’t tell her. (*Needra snores.*) She doesn’t know. (*Needra snores louder.*) Because you didn’t tell her. You didn’t tell Marlene we’re moving.

NEEDRA. I didn’t see a need to bring it up. Between Facebook and Facetime, she’ll hardly know I’m gone.

MALIK. We’re moving to Alabama! She won’t notice you’re 700 miles away?

NEEDRA. I didn’t know what to say: “My husband is chasing some boyhood memory of wisteria and red clay so he’s taking me away from all I’ve ever known?”

MALIK. Needra, we’ve been through this a thousand times. I told you when you met me I was a country boy and eventually I was gon’ wanna go back home. And, yes, I want my daughter to grow up like I did, climbing trees and playing in the dirt. Saying yes ma’am and no sir. Being loved on by my brothers and sisters and my mama’nem. Don’t you want her to know her people?

NEEDRA. I got people! Well, I did when my mother was alive. And I never really knew my dad... Malik, *Marlene* is my people.

MALIK. You need new people.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. What about white people down south? Down south white people have pick-up trucks and flags and *yeee haaaah!*

MALIK. The South is honest. I'd rather you spit in my face than shoot me in the back. *(Beat.)* Come here, come here. *(Malik pulls Needra closer and puts his arm around her. She rests her head on his chest.)*

MALIK. Close your eyes. What you hear?

NEEDRA. *(Smiles.)* Your heart.

MALIK. Uh-unh. That's a ole bullfrog down by the creek behind granny house. Ribbit. Ribbit. Ribbit. *(Malik runs his fingers over Needra's arm.)* What's that?

NEEDRA. Your fingers.

MALIK. No ma'am. That's the rain. It's 90° in the shade; drops hit a magnolia blossom and fall sweet on us. Drop. Drop. Drop. *(Malik lifts her face and kisses her.)* What is this?

NEEDRA. A honeybee? *(He kisses her neck and down her shoulder.)*

MALIK. Does it sting?

NEEDRA. Your mama biscuits?

MALIK. *(Still kissing.)* It's almost as good.

NEEDRA. *(Giggles.)* Malik, what is it?

MALIK. It's home. *(Lights fade as Malik kisses Needra's fears away.)*

SCENE 4

Next morning. Needra enters her old lab one last time. Sounds of rats in cages. Happy rats in cages. Needra looks around. She adjusts something on one of the cages, an action that shows how much she cares about these rats. She comes to her favorite rat.

NEEDRA. Hey...hey, sweetie. I brought you something. *(She pulls a flower out of her purse. She inhales its scent. And places it in the cage.)* Smell that. Smells beautiful, doesn't it. Your great-grandmother would go crazy when I brought her one of these. She loved them. Until she didn't. But *you* love them, don't you? Yes, you do. Mothers and their mothers can be...problematic. My mother was hard. And she treated me

RASTUS AND HATTIE

like love might make me soft. She learned that from *her* mother, who lay in bed for months on end covered in darkness; who learned it from *her* mother, who was frequently slapped for sitting with her legs open; who learned it from a woman who didn't even own herself— (*The rat does something only a geneticist could love. Needra laughs and mimics happy rat behavior.*)

You really love those flowers. And if you love them...I'm right. And my daughter will *never* know a love borne out of fear.

SCENE 5

Later that afternoon. Marlene's kitchen. Couple days later. Hattie is at the kitchen island, chopping or kneading something. Hattie is abundantly pleasant. Needra lets herself in. She is carrying a wicker basket with a blue checked cloth full of freshly baked scones. She turns around and startles at the sight of Hattie.

NEEDRA. Oh!

HATTIE. (*Smiling.*) Afternoon, ma'am.

NEEDRA. You startled me. I didn't expect to see you standing there when I came in.

HATTIE. Sho' wasn't my intention, miss. Shall we try again?

NEEDRA. What—hunh? Yeah. Ok. (*Needra goes out.*)

(Hattie ducks down behind the island or hides somewhere else. Needra knocks. No answer. She knocks again. No answer. Finally, she lets herself in. She looks around; Hattie is not there. Suddenly, Hattie pops up, startling Needra again.)

NEEDRA. Oh!

HATTIE. Was that better, ma'am?

NEEDRA. You startled me, Hattie.

HATTIE. Sho' wasn't my intention. I wasn't standing there when you came in.

NEEDRA. No, you were not—

HATTIE. Did you forget I was here?

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. No, I didn't forget, I'm just not used to—never mind. (*Beat.*)
Is Marlene in?

HATTIE. No ma'am, she is not.

NEEDRA. I just...it's just I brought her some scones. From the bakery.
This bakery she likes. We like. (*Wistfully.*) They made our wedding
cakes.

(*Hattie tilts her head. Whatever this gesture is, it's the gesture she
makes when she encounters something new.*)

HATTIE. Scones?

NEEDRA. Baked goods. You eat them for breakfast. Maybe, brunch.
Marly loves brunch. (*Hattie lifts the checkered cloth.*)

HATTIE. You mind?

NEEDRA. No, no—please, have one. (*Hattie takes a scone. She holds it
in the flat of her hand like a rock.*)

HATTIE. Flour, baking powder, salt, sugar, butter, shortening, cream,
and one egg.

NEEDRA. And blueberries. They're blueberry scones, with a lemon
glaze. Marly's favorite.

HATTIE. Is they? Why, I'll whip up a fine batch right now.

NEEDRA. I-I brought these for her. Do you expect her back soon?

HATTIE. Can't rightly say, ma'am. You can leave them here and I'll
make sure she gets them first thing.

NEEDRA. I wanted to tell her something. Something I have to tell her.
With the scones.

HATTIE. Can I take a message?

NEEDRA. I need to...tell her in person.

HATTIE. Do you want to wait in the sittin' room? I be happy to fix you
some sweet tea.

NEEDRA. (*She moves to leave.*) I'll just...come back later.

HATTIE. Alright, then, I'll tell Miss Marlene you stopped by.

NEEDRA. (*She turns back.*) No! No. Don't tell her that.

HATTIE. But you stopped by—

NEEDRA. Yes, but I don't want her to know.

HATTIE. - I'm lookin' at you now, you right in front of me and if Miss
Marlene was here, she'd see you, too—

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. But she's not here. And I don't want her to know. Not yet. Hattie, please don't tell her. It'll be our secret. (*Hattie tilts her head.*) A secret. Between you and me. Something you keep. In your bosom. For a friend. (*Beat. Hattie rights her head.*) (*Re: Hattie's preparations.*) Whatcha making?

HATTIE. Supper. Oh, you know, (*Rattles items off.*) cucumber salad, sweet potatoes, catfish consommé, stewed okra, hot water cornbread—

NEEDRA. Wow, all that?

HATTIE. The missus likes a hearty first course—

NEEDRA. I guess she does, since the only thing she knows how to make is reservations.

HATTIE. Second course is my specialty: barbecue pulled-pork and fried chicken on a bed of hominy and butter beans. Then a sweet offering of tea cakes and banana puddin' for dessert.

NEEDRA. Do you always cook like this?

HATTIE. 'Course, ma'am.

NEEDRA. I mean all this? Every night?

HATTIE. Yes, ma'am. It's what I'se for. (*She puts a spoon to Needra's lips.*) Taste this.

NEEDRA. (*Tastes.*) Oh my god—that is so *good!* Is that (*Tastes her own lips*) cardamom?

HATTIE. (*Nods.*) With just a touch of blossom honey— (*Covers her mouth.*) Oops, Miss Marlene don't want me giving my ways away.

NEEDRA. What?

HATTIE. She say folks don't know how to cook like this no more, so I tells her hows I do it and she scratch 'em down in that notebook she got—

NEEDRA. Marlene is writing a cookbook—

HATTIE. I done tol' her about a hundred dishes—

NEEDRA. —with *your* recipes?!

HATTIE. (*Smiles.*) I reckon so. (*Turns stove down.*) Now, I'ma put this on simmer so I can bring the laundry in—

NEEDRA. Laundry?

HATTIE. Oh, yes, Master's shirts should be 'bout finished boiling and ready to hang on the line. He done took to line-dried linens right nicely.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

(Re: the pot on the stove.) Now when it start to smelling savory and flavorful? Put five teaspoons of water in and pat your foot—I be right back. *(Hattie exits. Needra looks around the kitchen at all the cooking and baking dishes. She stirs a pot, bends over to check the oven. Marlene backs in the door with packages and shopping bags. Needra sees her first and ducks behind something.)*

MARLENE. Hattie? Hattie? Could you help me with these packages? *(Mistakes Needra for Hattie.)* Hattie! I told you about hiding from me—*(Needra comes out from hiding.)*

NEEDRA. She hides from you?

MARLENE. Oh, Needie, I thought you were Hattie.

NEEDRA. Hattie hides from you?

MARLENE. Only when she's done something wrong. What a pleasant surprise! What are you doing here? *(Needra grabs the basket of scones. Marlene has a Southern accent; Needra is projecting and it's her imagination, but Marlene has a pronounced Southern Belle accent.)*

NEEDRA. I brought you these—

MARLENE. From the bakery we love!

NEEDRA. From the bakery we love. Marly, I wanted to talk to you—

MARLENE. I told you! Didn't I tell you? Once you have a baby, you have no time for yourself. We haven't had a sit-n-sip/

NEEDRA. /A sit-n-sip?

MARLENE. since kitty was a puss!

NEEDRA. Why are you talking like that?

MARLENE. Would you like some lemonade? I can have Hattie squeeze some fresh—*(Harshly.)* Hattie! *(Tastes a bit of a scone.)* Mm, blueberries! Hattie! I want some lemonade!

NEEDRA. She's in the yard, Marly, hanging laundry.

MARLENE. I programmed her to be finished with that by now. *(Slaps open a hand fan.)* Hattie! Some lemonade, please? Miss Needra and I are parched to witherin'!

NEEDRA. Why are you *talking* like that? *(Hattie enters, out of breath.)*

HATTIE. I'm sorry, Miss Marlene, truly I am. I just thought Master's shirts could use a lil' bluing, so I— *(Marlene, slaps shut her fan and strikes Hattie with it.)*

RASTUS AND HATTIE

MARLENE. Lemonade, please.

HATTIE. Yes'm. (*Hattie, chastened, sets about making lemonade. Marlene motions for Needra to sit down at the kitchen table and joins her.*)

MARLENE. Where is my darling little godbaby? Auntie Marlene has some cheeks to pinch! Oh, I can't wait to watch her grow up.

NEEDRA. She's at home, with Malik—um, Marly, that's what I wanted to talk to you about—

MARLENE. Me, too! Now, I know you didn't mean what you said—

NEEDRA. What I meant—

MARLENE. —about me not being the true and honest godmother—

NEEDRA. —was that you're the godmother—

MARLENE. Of course, I am!

NEEDRA. —but you're not the guardian. If something happens to me or Malik. You're not the guardian.

MARLENE. Oh. Oh. But I went to church. Baptist church. All morning and half the *day* Baptist church. I wore a *hat*. I bought a hat for the christening.

NEEDRA. It wasn't a christening, technically, it was a dedication.

MARLENE. You said it was a christening.

NEEDRA. It's *like* a christening—Black people—Baptists—Black Baptists, we don't christen babies, see, we—

MARLENE. *All* Black people?

NEEDRA. Well, no, not *all*—

MARLENE. Because I'm sure in the history of the world some Black person somewhere christened a baby—

NEEDRA. Well, yeah, somewhere—a dedication is like a promise. That's why there was no water, we lifted Jericho—

MARLENE. (*Dramatically raises her arms to the heavens.*) “Behold! The only thing greater than yourself!”

NEEDRA. No, not like *Roots*—

MARLENE. Like jumping the broom?

NEEDRA. Marly, I'm trying to tell you!

RASTUS AND HATTIE

MARLENE. Well, tell me. I don't know why you're carrying on so. Every now and then you do your little kumbaya, paint something red, black, and green, but you're not really *Black*.

NEEDRA. (*Defensively.*) Yes, I am.

MARLENE. (*Dismissively.*) You're *census* Black, (*Laughs.*) but inside, you're white as me!

NEEDRA. I am not!

MARLENE. You never could take a compliment—

NEEDRA. That wasn't a compliment! (*Hattie brings a tray with lemonade and glasses.*)

HATTIE. Lemonade. (*Marlene and Needra take glasses.*)

NEEDRA. Thank you. (*Hattie goes back to cooking.*)

MARLENE. So, tell me how this christening that wasn't a christening makes me the godmother not the godmother.

NEEDRA. Aren't you going to say thank you?

MARLENE. No. Why should I?

NEEDRA. She just gave you lemonade.

MARLENE. My toaster gives me toast, I don't say thank you.

NEEDRA. (*Rising.*) Because she's Black! (*Marlene's Southern accent is gone; reality interrupts Needra's imagination.*)

MARLENE. Because she's a robot! (*Grabs Needra by the arms.*)
Needra!

HATTIE. Shall I get the rope, Missus?

MARLENE. Hattie, I'll finish dinner. Take yourself out to the tool shed with Rastus and power down, please.

HATTIE. Yes'm. (*Hattie exits.*)

MARLENE. Needra.

NEEDRA. Don't look at me like that, like I'm crazy, like I didn't see what I saw!

MARLENE. What did you see?

NEEDRA. I saw a Black woman cooking and cleaning your house, you smacking her around and treating her like a thing and not a person!

MARLENE. She *is* a thing—she's a robot. I know with the skin and the clothes it's hard to see that, but it's true.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. It's not just her; it's you! Waving that fan and barking orders.

MARLENE. (*Realizes.*) This is one of those Black things—

NEEDRA. /I don't understand,

MARLENE. I don't understand.

NEEDRA. you *know* me, Marly, and when you know someone, you know what hurts them, even if it doesn't make sense, even if /she's a robot.

MARLENE. She's a robot. Needra, honestly, you know me: I'm lazy and I'm greedy. Every time I teach her something, that's one less thing I have to do and more money in my pocket when David gets those patents figured out. I wasn't thinking about...whatever you're thinking about. /What were you thinking?

NEEDRA. What were you thinking? You act like the sole reason for Hattie's existence is to take care of you, be there/ for you, understand you—

MARLENE. I don't understand you—

NEEDRA. —we don't talk about stuff!

MARLENE. We talk about stuff all the time.

NEEDRA. Real stuff.

MARLENE. Real stuff?

NEEDRA. Race stuff.

MARLENE. Oh. Oh. You want to talk about race stuff? Because, traditionally, we've...*eschewed* race stuff.

NEEDRA. We've...abstained.

MARLENE. We've got a lot of catching up to do—

NEEDRA. It's been easier on

MARLENE. O.J.

NEEDRA. our friendship

MARLENE. crack

NEEDRA. to talk about

MARLENE. Katrina

NEEDRA. the things

MARLENE. why black guys always hit on me

NEEDRA. we have in common

RASTUS AND HATTIE

MARLENE. and not you

NEEDRA. instead of the things

MARLENE. Obama

NEEDRA. that tear us apart

MARLENE. first term not the second

NEEDRA. I really thought it

MARLENE. Trayvon Martin

NEEDRA. best if we didn't

MARLENE. boy, did I want to

NEEDRA/MARLENE. talk about that!

MARLENE. O.J. did it, right?

NEEDRA. Probably.

MARLENE. He totally did it!

NEEDRA. More than likely.

MARLENE. Ok...whew...because I mean, Needra, I'm like, if you didn't see *that*—

NEEDRA. —if I didn't see that, then what?

MARLENE. If you didn't see that...

NEEDRA. ...you'd wonder why we're friends.

MARLENE. I mean, yeah. A little.

NEEDRA. I didn't want that, Marly.

MARLENE. You don't think he's innocent—

NEEDRA. I wanted us to be friends.

MARLENE. —because he's sooo not innocent. I mean, who else could've—

NEEDRA. Marly! It's not about O.J.!

MARLENE. You're right. You're right. Besides, the coke and hookers will have him back in jail in no time—

NEEDRA. It's about us. (*Beat.*) I have this theory—

RASTUS. (*O.S.*) Miss Marlene!

NEEDRA. —that you can erase trauma, it's based on my research—

RASTUS. (*O.S.*) Lawd, please, come here!

NEEDRA. —which is what I wanted to talk to you about, I got a fellowship and it means—

RASTUS. (*O.S.*) I done tried my best—Miss Marlene!

RASTUS AND HATTIE

MARLENE. (*Shouts.*) Rastus! You're supposed to be powered down in the shed! Needie, I'm sure it's very interesting, but you know I'm no good with science—

HATTIE. (*O.S.*) Missus!

MARLENE. They're worse than children! I have to go; we'll talk, about stuff—not O.J.— stuff—I gotta go! (*Marlene exits. Needra sits alone.*)

NEEDRA. I have to move. I'm moving. To Alabama. (*Needra takes a letter she has written out of her purse. She hesitates, and then leaves the letter on the table.*) Tomorrow.

SCENE 6

Later that evening. Side by side. Needra is finishing her packing. Marly is in her kitchen. Marly picks up her cell. Needra picks up her cell. Marly dials. Needra puts down the phone. It rings. Needra watches it. It goes to voice mail.

MARLY. Needy? You're not picking up. (*Deep breath.*) O.K. O.K. That's really...

I don't know what I'd say if you did.

NEEDRA. (*Needra picks her phone and dials.*) Marly?

NEEDRA/MARLY. You're calling me.

NEEDRA. I hope you're not mad--

MARLENE. I'm *not* mad.

NEEDRA. I've been thinking about...

MARLENE. Remember that time when...

NEEDRA. We were in college and--

NEEDRA/MARLY. *the Black kids*

MARLY. why couldn't we hang out with ()

NEEDRA. the Black kids. I wanted to--

MARLY. I *wanted* you to...

NEEDRA. see the world--

MARLY. and... (*End of voicemail beep.*) Shit. (*She redials.*)

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. for just a minute, the way that you see () (*End of voicemail beep.*) Oh. (*She redials Marly. A cacaphony of beeps and messages and ringtone.*)

MARLY. Hello?

NEEDRA. Hello?

NEEDRA/MARLY. Hello? Damn— (*They hang up. They dial again, and words ricochet out of their mouths.*)

NEEDRA. It's *not* alright! And it's never been—

MARLY. I've only ever tried to do the right thing—

NEEDRA. the twerking, the n-word—certainly not the n-word!!

MARLY. —which, by the way, would have been a *great* movie--

NEEDRA. When I saw you with Hattie, I *knew*:

MARLY. —if he hadn't thrown the garbage can through the window!!

NEEDRA. YOU DON'T GET IT!

MARLY. I DON'T KNOW!! (*They hang up.*)

SCENE 7

Next day. A U-Haul truck outside of a roadside general store. The cab of the truck faces downstage. Needra and Malik, holding Jericho's car seat, exit the store.

MALIK. (*Unwrapping candy.*) We must not be too far from the state line. (*Eats candy.*) Mmmm! Can't get this nowhere but home.

NEEDRA. They sell them at Trader Joe's.

MALIK. Yeah, for fifteen dollars a box. This penny candy down here. Individually wrapped, in a great big ol' barrel. Reach in shoulder-deep and get the ones on the bottom that's half melted so you can lick your fingers while you pay for 'em. (*Licks fingers.*) Mm!

NEEDRA. I don't see how you can eat that. It's nothing but pure sugar.

MALIK. I shoulda asked the clerk if he had some—what was that candy—what was it! We used to sneak it in to Sunday school when I was little—

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. Just promise me you're not going to stop at every five and dime in Macon County looking for it.

MALIK. What's wrong, baby?

NEEDRA. I don't like the way he looked at me.

MALIK. Who? The man in the store?

NEEDRA. He was following me around the whole time!

MALIK. He was just seeing if you needed anything.

NEEDRA. He was invasive! "Y'all from around here?" "Where you headed to?"

MALIK. He was friendly!

NEEDRA. I'm not used to that—people in Cleveland aren't *friendly*.
(*Needra puts Jericho's car seat in the back seat.*)

MALIK. People in the South are; they make conversation. (*Needra and Malik get in the front seat. Malik starts the truck. As the engine turns over, there is a knocking sound.*) What the/

NEEDRA. /he was profiling me! (*They drive.*)

MALIK. He was just minding the store! Needra, come on now, we moving back South, you can't carry all that down here.

NEEDRA. This is where it comes from! I'm not carrying anything. It was here long before we crossed the Mason-Dixon Line.

MALIK. You got a thing about the south.

NEEDRA. Uh, yeah.

MALIK. It ain't that way no more.

NEEDRA. Huh.

MALIK. Ok, it is; but it ain't. It's so much more to me than that. Don't I got a right to it, too? (*They drive in a short silence.*)

MALIK. Damn. Missed the turn. Let's take the scenic route.

NEEDRA. Look at those trees.

MALIK. Pretty, ain't they? Angel Oak—we had one in the back yard old as time.

NEEDRA. I just see...bodies swinging/ and nooses and angry mobs—

MALIK. Needra! (*Puts his arm around her.*) It is what it is. You go in with your eyes open and you might see the good.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. That's what I want. That's what I'm trying to do. (*Beat.*) I had this rat, when I was first starting my research? Roxy. She was beautiful—shiny fur, long, smooth tail—

MALIK. You know you talking about a rat, right?

NEEDRA. She was! She was special. To me, at least. And when the experiment started, we put magnolia blossoms next to her cage—she loved the smell of magnolias. Roxy'd grind her teeth, and her eyes would bulge out—

MALIK. That's a happy rat?

NEEDRA. The happiest. It meant she felt safe, and happy, and loved. Then we started shocking Roxy whenever the magnolia blossoms were around. A mild shock, to the feet. But it might as well have been a thousand volts; she was terrified. She didn't know what it was. She didn't know why it was happening. She just knew when she smelled magnolia blossoms...life didn't make any sense. She had a litter, they grew up. We never shocked them, they'd never even been near the flower, but the first time we let them smell that scent they were terrified. And their children. And their children. (*Beat.*) I see kids today, with sneakers on their feet and cell phones in their hands that cost more than their ancestors were sold for, and I think, *what* have you got to be afraid of? Then I see them scatter when the police drive by and tense up when a teacher calls their name...and I get it. I get it. It took me four generations to finally figure out how to turn that fear off in a rat. So I could put a magnolia blossom in their cage and hear them purr instead of watch them cower.

MALIK. I ain't eem know rats could purr. Purr for me.

NEEDRA. (*Laughs.*) The farther south we get, the more country you sound.

MALIK. Come on, purr.

NEEDRA. (*Snuggles closer.*) Mmmmm.

MALIK. One mo' 'gin. (*Needra laughs, then purrs.*) You feel safe?

NEEDRA. And happy. And loved— (*The knocking sound again. Needra tenses.*)

MALIK. Something musta come loose. (*Malik pulls over and parks the car. He gets out and Needra follows.*)

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. Malik! Malik— (*The sound of the U-Haul door rolling up. A pause.*)

MALIK. No. (*Rastus comes around from one side and Hattie from the other.*) Needra, no.

NEEDRA. I didn't know what else to do!

MALIK. You coulda left them where they was at!

NEEDRA. I couldn't!

(*Rastus notices something in the rear of the truck and slips away unnoticed.*)

MALIK. Yes, you could *have*!

NEEDRA. Malik, they were scared!

MALIK. Needra, they're *robots*! (*Kicks tire.*) Now we got stolen property and we crossed state lines with it.

NEEDRA. Property? That's what you're worried about?

MALIK. Yeah. That's how you go to jail: you take something that belong to someone else and the police lock you up.

NEEDRA. What about humanity?

MALIK. Needra, bolts and bits. Wires and widgets. That's all they are.

NEEDRA. No! Marlene. You should have seen her—she was stealing their ideas, exploiting their labor; she-she was *beating* them. It was like I didn't know her!

MALIK. Or you knew good and well, just chose not to see.

NEEDRA. I'm not like you; I don't think all/ white people are—

MALIK. Ain't nobody said all! Who said all—

(*Baby Jericho begins to wail. Needra moves to get the baby from the back seat. Hattie tilts her head, then acts.*)

HATTIE. Oh, Missus, don't you fret none! Let me. (*Hattie climbs into the back seat and comforts the baby.*) Shhh. Shhh. You hush now.

Auntie Hattie's here. (*Rastus reappears, smudged a little with grease.*)

RASTUS. Tightened up the thingamajig on your whatchamado, Boss.

Us ride smooth, now, won't we? (*Rastus climbs into the back seat with Hattie and the baby.*)

(*Malik shoots Needra a look. Silently, they get in the U-Haul and begin to drive. A while.*)

MALIK. We gon figure this out

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. Don't talk to me like I'm a child

MALIK. Tonight! Soon as we get to where we going

NEEDRA. I am a grown woman,

MALIK. It's gon be some things made plain and clear

NEEDRA. with a PhfuckingD

MALIK. 'Cause you done forgot

NEEDRA. and you will not condescend to me like

NEEDRA/MALIK. "I'm a man!"

MALIK. I love you, woman! But a steady drip will wear a hole in a rock!

HATTIE. Ma'am? I don't mind loud-talking and I'm programmed not to judge, but I'm worried you might wake the baby.

MALIK. Turn them off.

NEEDRA. *You* turn them off.

MALIK. I'm driving. (*Whispers.*) They creeping me out. A little.

NEEDRA. Bolts and bits. Wires and widgets.

MALIK. Baby, what is it?

NEEDRA. What is what?

MALIK. You been hateful since we left Ohio.

NEEDRA. Maybe that's what Dixie does to me.

MALIK. We been through this—

NEEDRA. It was an abstraction then.

MALIK. We bought a house.

NEEDRA. We could rent it out!

MALIK. And your fellowship? Needra, we not renting out the house.

We not giving up your fellowship: we here. In the South. I love it, you love me—just a matter of time before you love it, too.

NEEDRA. I've got a feeling.

MALIK. (*Puts his arm around her.*) What you got to be scared of when you up under me?

NEEDRA. My bones. Something in my bones, the *marrow* of my bones...remembers.

MALIK. How many times I got to tell you, it ain't like that no more? It's the 21st century. South got Black mayors, Black police chief, Black doctors. Just like in Ohio. Only things is light and easy.

RASTUS AND HATTIE

NEEDRA. Light and easy?

MALIK. Like rain falling out a magnolia blossom.

NEEDRA. Light and easy. (*A while.*)

MALIK. Pick your feet up.

NEEDRA. What?

MALIK. Pick your feet up. (*Pause.*) When I was a little boy and we came back from out of state, my daddy would say, “Junior, pick up your feet,” when we were about to hit the state line.

NEEDRA. Are you serious?

MALIK. (*Playfully.*) Come on. Pick up your feet.

NEEDRA. It’s stupid.

MALIK. Do it for me.

NEEDRA. I’m surprised you can take your mind off my “grand larceny” long enough to play some silly— (*Malik takes her hand.*)

MALIK. We almost to the state line—lift up your feet, please?

NEEDRA. Malik—

MALIK. Come on, jump into the South with me— one...two...
(*Needra joins in, in spite of herself.*)

NEEDRA/MALIK. ...three!

(*Hattie and Rastus lift their hands in the air as Malik and Needra lift their feet and the U Haul crosses the state line and enters Alabama.*)

Lights out.

(*When the lights come back up, Malik and Needra are dressed in antebellum clothes and the U-Haul has become a horse-driven cart.*)

NEEDRA. (*Alarmed.*) Malik?

END OF ACT 1

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS –
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