



Douglas Turner Ward

DAY OF ABSENCE

A Satirical Fantasy

1965

The time is now. Play opens in unnamed Southern town of medium population on a somnolent cracker morning — meaning no matter the early temperature, it's gonna get hot. The hamlet is just beginning to rouse itself from the sleepy lassitude of night.

NOTES ON PRODUCTION

No scenery is necessary — only actors shifting in and out on an almost bare stage and freezing into immobility as focuses change or blackouts occur.

Play is conceived for performance by a Negro cast, a reverse minstrel show done in white-face. Logically, it might also be performed by whites — at their own risk. If any producer is faced with choosing between opposite hues, author strongly suggests: "Go 'long wit' the blacks — besides all else, they need the work more."

If acted by the latter, race members are urged to go for broke, yet cautioned not to ham it up too broadly. In fact — it just might be more effective if they aspire for serious tragedy. Only qualification needed for Caucasian casting is that the company fit a uniform pattern — insipid white; also played in white-face.

Before any horrifying discrimination doubts arise, I hasten to add that a bonafide white actor should be cast as the Announcer in all productions, likewise a Negro thespian in pure native black as Rastus. This will truly subvert any charge that the production is unintegrated.

All props, except essential items (chairs, brooms, rags, mop, debris) should be imaginary (phones, switchboard, mikes, eating utensils, food, etc.). Actors should indicate their presence through mime.

The cast of characters develops as the play progresses. In the interest of economical casting, actors should double or triple in roles wherever possible.

PRODUCTION CONCEPT

This is a red-white-and-blue play — meaning the entire production should be designed around the basic color scheme of our patriotic trinity. LIGHTING should illustrate, highlight and detail time, action and mood. Opening scenes stage-lit with white rays of morning, transforming to panic reds of afternoon, flowing into ominous blues of evening. COSTUMING should be orchestrated around the same color scheme. In addition, subsidiary usage of grays, khakis, yellows, pinks, and combined patterns of stars-and-bars should be employed. Some actors (Announcer and Rastus excepted, of course) might wear white shoes or sneakers, and some women characters clothed in knee-length frocks might wear white stockings. Blonde wigs, both for males and females, can be used in selected instances. MAKEUP should have uniform consistency, with individual touches thrown in to enhance personal identity.

SAMPLE MODELS OF MAKEUP AND COSTUMING

Mary: Kewpie-doll face, ruby-red lips painted to valentine-pursing, moon-shaped rouge circles implanted on each cheek, blond wig of fat-flowing ringlets, dazzling ankle-length snow-white nightie.

Mayor: Seersucker white ensemble, ten-gallon hat, red string-tie and blue belt.

Clem: Khaki pants, bareheaded and blond.

Luke: Blue work-jeans, strawhatted.

Club Woman: Yellow dress patterned with symbols of Dixie, gray hat.

Clan: A veritable, riotous advertisement of red-white-and-blue combinations with stars-and-bars tossed in.

Pious: White ministerial garb with *black* cleric's collar topping his snow-white shirt.

Operators: All in red with different color wigs.

All other characters should be carefully defined through costuming which typify their identity.

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Scene: *Street.* Time: *Early morning.*

CLEM. (*Sitting under a sign suspended by invisible wires and bold-printed with the lettering: "STORE."*) 'Morning, Luke. . . .*

LUKE. (*Sitting a few paces away under an identical sign*) 'Morning, Clem. . . .

CLEM. Go'n' be a hot day.

LUKE. Looks that way. . . .

CLEM. Might rain though. . . .

LUKE. Might.

CLEM. Hope it does. . . .

LUKE. Me, too. . . .

CLEM. Farmers could use a little wet spell for a change. . . . How's the Missis?

LUKE. Same.

CLEM. 'N' the kids?

LUKE. Them, too. . . . How's yours?

CLEM. Fine, thank you. . . . (*They both lapse into drowsy silence, waving lethargically from time to time at imaginary passerby.*) Hi, Joe. . . .

LUKE. Joe. . . .

CLEM. . . . How'd it go yesterday, Luke?

LUKE. Fair.

CLEM. Same wit' me. . . . Business don't seem to git no better or no worse. Guess we in a rut, Luke, don't it 'pear that way to you?—Morning, ma'am.

LUKE. Guess it is.

CLEM. Morning, Bret. How's the family? . . . That's good.

LUKE. Bret—

CLEM. Morning, Sue.

LUKE. How do, Sue.

CLEM. (*Staring after her.*) . . . Fine hunk of woman.

LUKE. Sure is.

CLEM. Wonder if it's any good?

LUKE. Bet it is.

CLEM. Sure like to find out!

LUKE. So would I.

CLEM. You ever try?

LUKE. Never did. . . .

CLEM. Morning, Gus. . . .

LUKE. Howdy, Gus.

CLEM. Fine, thank you. (*They lapse into silence again. Clem rouses himself slowly, begins to look around quizzically.*) Luke . . . ?

LUKE. Huh?

CLEM. Do you . . . er, er—feel anything—funny . . . ?

LUKE. Like what?

CLEM. Like . . . er—something—strange?

LUKE. I dunno . . . haven't thought about it.

CLEM. I mean . . . like something's wrong—outta place, unusual?

* All ellipses in original text. Excerpts defined by intervening-scene descriptions instead of ellipses.

LUKE. I don't know. . . . What you got in mind?
 CLEM. Nothing . . . just that—just that—like somp'ums outta kilter, I got a funny feeling somp'ums not up to snuff. Can't figger out what it is . . .
 LUKE. Maybe it's in your haid?
 CLEM. No, not like that. . . . Like somp'ums happened—or happening—gone haywire, loony.
 LUKE. Well, don't worry 'bout it, it'll pass.
 CLEM. Guess you right. (*Attempts return to somnolence but doesn't succeed.*) . . . I'm sorry, Luke, but you sure you don't feel nothing peculiar . . . ?
 LUKE. (*Slightly irked.*) Toss it out your mind, Clem! We got a long day ahead of us. If something's wrong, you'll know 'bout it in due time. No use worrying about it 'till it comes and if it's coming, it will. Now, relax!
 CLEM. All right, you right. . . . Hi, Margie. . .
 LUKE. Marge.
 CLEM. (*Unable to control himself.*) Luke, I don't give a damn what you say. Somp'ums topsy-turvy, I just know it!
 LUKE. (*Increasingly irritated.*) Now look here, Clem—it's a bright day, it looks like it's go'n' git hotter. You say the wife and kids are fine and the business is no better or no worse? Well, what else could be wrong? . . . If somp'ums go'n' happen, it's go'n' happen anyway and there ain't a damn fool thing you kin do to stop it! So you ain't helping me, yourself or nobody else by thinking 'bout it. It's not go'n' be no better or no worse when it gits here. It'll come to you when it gits ready to come and it's go'n' be the same whether you worry about it or not. So stop letting it upset you! (*Luke settles back in his chair. Clem does likewise. Luke shuts his eyes. After a few moments, they reopen. He forces them shut again. They reopen in great curiosity. Finally, he rises slowly to an upright position in the chair, looks around frowningly. Turns slowly to Clem.*) . . . Clem? . . . You know something? . . . Somp'um is peculiar . . .
 CLEM. (*Vindicated.*) I knew it, Luke! I just knew it! Ever since we been sitting here, I been having that feeling!

Intervening scene: A white couple, John and Mary, panic as they discover that their maid has not shown up for work.

Intervening scene: An overloaded telephone exchange dissolves into chaos as white townspeople call each other to report on missing blacks.

CLEM. (*Something slowing dawning on him.*) Luke . . . ?
 LUKE. Yes, Clem?
 CLEM. (*Eyes roving around in puzzlement.*) Luke . . . ?
 LUKE. (*Irked.*) I said, what, Clem!
 CLEM. Luke . . . ? Where—where is—the—the—?
 LUKE. THE WHAT?!
 CLEM. Nigras . . . ?
 LUKE. ??????What . . . ?
 CLEM. Nigras. . . . Where is the Nigras, where is they, Luke . . . ? ALL THE NIGRAS! . . . I don't see no Nigras . . . ?!
 LUKE. Whatcha mean . . . ?
 CLEM. (*Agitatedly.*) Luke, there ain't a darky in sight. . . . And if you remember, we ain't spied a nappy hair all morning. . . . The Nigras, Luke! We ain't laid eyes on nary a coon this whole morning!!!!
 LUKE. You must be crazy or something, Clem!
 CLEM. Think about it, Luke, we been sitting here for an hour or more—try and recollect if you remember seeing jist *one* go by?!!!
 LUKE. (*Confused.*) . . . I don't recall. . . . But . . . but there musta been some. . . . The heat musta got you, Clem! How in hell could that be so?!!!

CLEM. (*Triumphantly.*) Just think, Luke! . . . Look around ya. . . Now, every morning mosta people walkin' 'long this street is colored. They's strolling by going to work, they's waiting for the buses, they's sweeping sidewalks, cleaning stores, starting to shine shoes and wetting the mops—right?! . . . Well look around you, Luke—where is they? (*Luke paces up and down, checking.*) I told you, Luke, they ain't nowhere to be seen.

LUKE. ????. . . This . . . this . . . some kind of holiday for 'em—or something?

CLEM. I don't know, Luke . . . but . . . but what I do know is they ain't here 'n' we haven't seen a solitary one. . . . It's scary-fying, Luke . . . !

LUKE. Well . . . maybe they's jist standing 'n' walking and shining on other streets.—Let's go look!

Intervening scene: Without the maid Lula to comfort her, the infant daughter of John and Mary wails louder and louder, provoking a furious argument between her parents.

MAYOR. (*Striding determinedly toward desk, stopping midways, bellowing.*) WOODFENCE! . . . WOODFENCE! . . . WOODFENCE! (*Receiving no reply, completes distance to desk.*) JACKSON! . . . JACKSON!

JACKSON. (*Entering worriedly.*) Yes, sir . . . ?

MAYOR. Where's Vice-Mayor Woodfence, that no-good brother-in-law of mine?!

JACKSON. Hasn't come in yet, sir.

MAYOR. HASN'T COME IN?!!! . . . Damn bastard! Knows we have a crucial conference. Soon as he staggers through that door, tell him to shoot in here! (*Angrily focusing on his disorderly desk and littered surroundings.*) And git Mandy here to straighten up this mess—Rufus too! You know he shoulda been waiting to knock dust off my shoes soon as I step in. Get 'em in here! . . . What's the matter wit' them lazy Nigras? . . . Already had to dress myself because of JC, fix my own coffee without MayBelle, drive myself to work 'counta Bubber, feel my old Hag's tits after Sapphi—NEVER MIND!—Git 'em in here—QUICK!

JACKSON. (*Meekly.*) They aren't . . . they aren't here, sir. . .

MAYOR. Whaddaya mean they aren't here? Find out where they at. We got important business, man! You can't run a town wit' laxity like this. Can't allow things to git snafued jist because a bunch of lazy Nigras been out gitting drunk and living it up all night! Discipline, man, discipline!

JACKSON. That's what I'm trying to tell you, sir . . . they didn't come in, can't be found . . . none of 'em.

MAYOR. Ridiculous, boy! Scare 'em up and tell 'em scoot here in a hurry befo' I git mad and fire the whole goddamn lot of 'em!

JACKSON. But we can't find 'em, sir.

MAYOR. Hogwash! Can't nobody in this office do anything right?! Do I hafta handle every piddling little matter myself?! Git me their numbers, I'll have 'em here befo' you kin shout to— (*Three men burst into room in various states of undress.*)

ONE. Henry—they vanished!

TWO. Disappeared into thin air!

THREE. Gone wit'out a trace!

TWO. Not a one on the street!

THREE. In the house!

ONE. On the job!

MAYOR. Wait a minute!! . . . Hold your water! Calm down—!

ONE. But they've gone, Henry—GONE! All of 'em!

MAYOR. What the hell you talking 'bout? Gone? Who's gone—?

ONE. The Nigras, Henry! They gone!

MAYOR. Gone? . . . Gone where?

TWO. That's what we trying to tell ya—they just disappeared! The Nigras have disappeared, swallowed up, vanished! All of 'em! Every last one!

MAYOR. Have everybody 'round here gone batty? . . . That's impossible, how could the Nigras vanish?

THREE. Beats me, but it's happened!

MAYOR. You mean a whole town of Nigras just evaporate like this—poof!—Overnight?

ONE. Right!

MAYOR. Y'all must be drunk! Why, half this town is colored. How could they just sneak out!

TWO. Don't ask me, but there ain't one in sight!

MAYOR. Simmer down 'n' put it to me easy-like.

ONE. Well . . . I first suspected somp'um smelly when Sarah Jo didn't show up this morning and I couldn't reach her—

TWO. Dorothy Jane didn't 'rive at my house—

THREE. Georgia Mae wasn't at mine neither—and SHE sleeps in!

ONE. When I reached the office, I realized I hadn't seen nary one Nigra all morning! Nobody else had either—wait a minute—Henry, have you?!

MAYOR. ???Now that you mention it . . . no, I haven't . . .

ONE. They gone, Henry. . . . Not a one on the street, not a one in our homes, not a single, last living one to be found nowheres in town. What we gon' do?!

MAYOR. (*Thinking.*) Keep heads on your shoulders 'n' put clothes on your back. . . . They can't be far. . . Must be 'round somewheres. . . . Probably playing hide 'n' seek, that's it! . . .

JACKSON! JACKSON!

JACKSON. Yessir?

MAYOR. Immediately mobilize our Citizens Emergency Distress Committee!—Order a fleet of sound trucks to patrol streets urging the population to remain calm—situation's not as bad as it looks—everything's under control! Then, have another squadron of squawk buggies drive slowly through all Nigra alleys, ordering them to come out wherever they are. If that don't git 'em, organize a vigilante search-squad to flush 'em outta hiding! But most important of all, track down that lazy goldbricker, Woodfence and tell him to git on top of the situation! By God, we'll find 'em even if we hafta dig 'em outta the ground!

Intervening scene: John reports to Mary that Lula is not at her home.

(Scene shifts back to Mayor's office later in day. Atmosphere and tone resembles a wartime headquarters at the front. Mayor is poring over huge map.)

INDUSTRIALIST. Half the day is gone already, Henry. On behalf of the factory owners of this town, you've got to bail us out! Seventy-five percent of all production is paralyzed. With the Nigra absent, men are waiting for machines to be cleaned, floors to be swept, crates lifted, equipment delivered and bathrooms to be deodorized. Why, restrooms and toilets are so filthy until they not only cannot be sat in, but it's virtually impossible to get within hailing distance because of the stench!

MAYOR. Keep your shirt on, Jeb—

BUSINESSMAN. Business is even in worse condition, Henry. The volume of goods moving 'cross counters has slowed down to a trickle—almost negligible. Customers are not only not purchasing—but the absence of handymen, porters, sweepers, stock-movers, deliverers and miscellaneous dirty-work doers is disrupting the smooth harmony of marketing!

CLUB WOMAN. Food poisoning, severe indigestitis, chronic diarrhea, advanced diaper chafings and a plethora of unsanitary household disasters dangerous to life, limb and property! . . . As a representative of the Federation of Ladies' Clubs, I must sadly report that unless the trend is reversed, a complete breakdown in family unity is imminent. . . . Just as homosexuality and debauchery signalled the fall of Greece and Rome, the downgrading of Southern

Bellesdom might very well prophesy the collapse of our indigenous institutions. . . . Remember—it has always been pure, delicate, lily-white images of Dixie femininity which provided backbone, inspiration and ideology for our male warriors in their defense against the on-rushing black horde. If our gallant men are drained of this worship and idolatry—God knows! The cause won't be worth a Confederate nickel!

MAYOR. Stop this panicky defeatism, y'all hear me! All machinery at my disposal is being utilized. I assure you wit' great confidence the damage will soon repair itself.—Cheerful progress reports are expected any moment now.—Wait! See, here's Jackson. . . . Well, Jackson?

JACKSON. (*Entering.*) As of now, sir, all efforts are fruitless. Neither hide nor hair of them has been located. We have not unearthed a single one in our shack-to-shack search. Not a single one has heeded our appeal. Scoured every crick and cranny inside their hovels, turning furniture upside down and inside out, breaking down walls and tearing through ceilings. We made determined efforts to discover where 'bouts of our faithful uncle Toms and informers—but even they have vanished without a trace. . . . Searching squads are on the verge of panic and hysteria, sir, wit' hotheads among 'em campaigning for scorched earth policies. Nigras on a whole lack cellars, but there's rising sentiment favoring burning to find out whether they're underground—DUG IN!

MAYOR. Absolutely counter such foolhardy suggestions! Suppose they are tombed in? We'd only accelerate the gravity of the situation using incendiary tactics! Besides, when they're rounded up where will we put 'em if we've already burned up their shacks — IN OUR OWN BEDROOMS?!!!

JACKSON. I agree, sire, but the mood of the crowd is becoming irrational. In anger and frustration, they's forgetting their original purpose was to FIND the Nigras!

MAYOR. At all costs! Stamp out all burning proposals! Must prevent extremist notions from gaining ascendancy. Git wit' it. . . . Wait—'n' for Jehovah's sake, find out where the hell is that trifling slacker, WOODFENCE!

COURIER. (*Rushing in.*) Mr. Mayor! Mr. Mayor! . . . We've found some! We've found some!

MAYOR. (*Excitedly.*) Where, man? Where?!!!

COURIER. In the—in the—(*Can't catch breath.*)

MAYOR. (*Impatiently.*) Where, man? Where?!!!

COURIER. In the colored wing of the city's hospital!

MAYOR. The hos—? The hospital! I shoulda known! How could those helpless, crippled, cut and shot Nigras disappear from a hospital! Shoulda thought of that! . . . Tell me more, man!

COURIER. I—I didn't wait, sir. . . . I—I ran in to report soon as I heard—

MAYOR. WELL GIT BACK ON THE PHONE, YOU IDIOT, DON'T YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS!

COURIER. Yes, sir. (*Races out.*)

MAYOR. Now we gitting somewhere! . . . Gentlemen, if one sole Nigra is among us, we're well on the road to rehabilitation! Those Nigras in the hospital must know somp'um 'bout the others where'bouts. . . . Scat back to your colleagues, boost up their morale and inform 'em that things will zip back to normal in a jiffy! (*They start to file out, then pause to observe the Courier reentering dazedly.*) Well . . . ? Well, man . . . ? WHAT'S THE MATTER WIT' YOU, NINNY, TELL ME WHAT ELSE WAS SAID?!

COURIER. They all . . . they all . . . they all in a—in a—a coma, sir . . .

MAYOR. They all in a what . . . ?

COURIER. In a coma, sir . . .

MAYOR. Talk sense, man! . . . Whaddaya mean, they all in a coma?

COURIER. Doctor says every last one of the Nigras are jist laying in bed . . . STILL . . . not moving . . . neither live or dead . . . laying up there in a coma . . . every last one of 'em . . .

MAYOR. (*Sputters, then grabs phone.*) Get me Confederate Memorial. . . . Put me through to the Staff Chief. . . . YES, this is the Mayor. . . . Sam? . . . What's this I hear? . . . But how could

they be in a coma, Sam? . . . You don't know! Well, what the hell you think the city's paying you for! . . . You've got 'nuff damn hacks and quacks there to find out! . . . How could it be somp'um unknown? You mean Nigras know somp'um 'bout drugs your damn butchers don't?! . . . Well, what the crap good are they! . . . All right, all right, I'll be calm. . . Now, tell me. . . Uh huh, uh huh. . . Well, can't you give 'em some injections or somp'um . . . ?—You did . . . uh huh . . . DID YOU TRY A LI'L' ROUGH TREATMENT?—that too, huh. . . All right, Sam, keep trying. . . (*Puts phone down delicately, continuing absently.*) Can't wake 'em up. Just lay there. Them that's sick won't git no sicker, them that's half-well won't git no better, babies that's due won't be born and them that's come won't show no life. Nigras wit' cuts won't bleed and them which need blood won't be transfused. . . He say dying Nigras is even refusing to pass away! (*Is silently perplexed for a moment, then suddenly breaks into action.*) JACKSON?! . . . Call up the police—THE JAIL! Find out what's going on there! Them Nigras are captives! If there's one place we got darkies under control, it's there! Them sonsabitches too onery to act right either for colored or white! (*Jackson exits. The Courier follows.*) Keep your fingers crossed, citizens, them Nigras in jail are the most important Nigras we got! (*All hands are raised conspicuously aloft, fingers prominently ex-ed. Seconds tick by. Soon Jackson returns crestfallen.*)

JACKSON. Sherriff Bull says they don't know whether they still on premises or not. When they went to rouse Nigra jailbirds this morning, cell-block doors refused to swing open. Tried everything—even exploded dynamite charges—but it just wouldn't budge. . . . Then they hoisted guards up to peep through barred windows, but couldn't see good 'nuff to tell whether Nigras was inside or not. Finally, gitting desperate, they power-hosed the cells wit' water but had to cease 'cause Sheriff Bull said he didn't wanta jeopardize drowning the Nigras since it might spoil his chance of shipping a record load of cotton pickers to the State Penitentiary for cotton-snatching jubilee. . . . Anyway—they ain't heard a Nigra-squeak all day.

MAYOR. ???That so . . . ? WHAT 'BOUT TRAINS 'N' BUSES PASSING THROUGH? There must be some dingies riding through?

JACKSON. We checked . . . not a one on board.

MAYOR. Did you hear whether any other towns lost their Nigras?

JACKSON. Things are status-quo everywhere else.

MAYOR. (*Angrily.*) Then what the hell they picking on us for!

COURIER. (*Rushing in.*) MR. MAYOR! Your sister jist called—HYSTERICAL! She says Vice-Mayor Woodfence went to bed wit' her last night, but when she woke up this morning he was gone! Been missing all day!

MAYOR. ??? Could Nigras be holding brother-in-law Woodfence hostage?!

COURIER. No, sire. Besides him—investigations reveal that dozens or more prominent citizens—two City Council members, the chairman of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, our City College All-Southern half-back, the chairlady of the Daughters of the Confederate Rebellion, Miss Cotton-Sack Festival of the Year and numerous other miscellaneous nobodies—are all absent wit'out leave. Dangerous evidence points to the conclusion that they have been infiltrating!

MAYOR. Infiltrating???

COURIER. Passing all along!

MAYOR. ???PASSING ALL ALONG???

COURIER. Secret Nigras all the while!

MAYOR. NAW! (*Club Woman keels over in a faint. Jackson, Businessman and Industrialist begin to eye each other suspiciously.*)

COURIER. Yessir!

MAYOR. PASSING???

COURIER. Yessir!

MAYOR. SECRET NIG—!???

COURIER. Yessir!

MAYOR. (*Momentarily stunned to silence.*) The dirty mongrelizers! . . . Gentlemen, this is a grave predicament indeed. . . . It pains me to surrender priority of our states' right credo, but it is my solemn task and frightening duty to inform you that we have no other recourse but to seek outside help for deliverance.

Intervening scene: A TV announcer reports on the chaos that the disappearance of the blacks has caused. From a character named CLAN he learns that the disappearance is a plot. From another named AIDE he hears how the absence of blacks will disrupt white efforts to exploit them, and PIOUS claims that blacks are possessed by Satan. When all efforts to locate the missing blacks fail, the MAYOR decides to make a personal appeal.

MAYOR. Good evening. . . . Despite the fact that millions of you wonderful people throughout the nation are viewing and listening to this momentous broadcast—and I thank you for your concern and sympathy in this hour of our peril—I primarily want to concentrate my attention and address these remarks solely for the benefit of our departed Nigra friends who may be listening somewheres in our far-flung land to the sound of my voice. . . . If you are—it is with heart-felt emotion and fond memories of our happy association that I ask—“Where are you . . . ?” Your absence has left a void in the bosom of every single man, woman and child of our great city. I tell you—you don't know what it means for us to wake up in the morning and discover that your cheerful, grinning, happy-go-lucky faces are missing! . . . From the depths of my heart, I can only meekly, humbly suggest what it means to me personally. . . . You see—the one face I will never be able to erase from my memory is the face—not of my Ma, not of Pa, neither wife or child—but the image of the first human I laid clear sight on at childbirth—the profile—better yet, the full face of my dear old . . . Jemimah—God rest her soul. . . . Yes! My dear ole mammy, wit' her round ebony moonbeam gleaming down upon me in the crib, teeth shining, blood-red bandana standing starched, peaked and proud, gazing down upon me affectionately as she crooned me a Southern lullaby. . . . OH! It's a memorable picture I will eternally cherish in permanent treasure chambers of my heart, now and forever always. . . . Well, if this radiant image can remain so infinitely vivid to me all these many years after her unfortunate demise in the Po' folks home—THINK of the misery the rest of us must be suffering after being *freshly* denied your soothing presence?! We need ya. If you kin hear me, just contact this station 'n' I will welcome you back personally. Let me just tell you that since you eloped [left],* nothing has been the same. How could it? You're part of us, you belong to us. Just give us a sign and we'll be contented that all is well. . . . Now if you've skipped away on a little fun-fest, we understand, ha, ha. We know you like a good time and we don't degrudge it to ya. Hell—er, er, we like a good time ourselves—who doesn't? . . . In fact, think of all the good times we've had together, huh? We've had some real fun, you and us, yesiree! . . . Nobody knows better than you and I what fun we've had together. You singing us those old Southern coon songs and dancing those Nigra jigs and us clapping, prodding 'n' spurring you on! Lots of fun, huh?! . . . OH BOY! The times we've had together. . . . If you've snucked away for a bit of fun by yourself, we'll go 'long wit' ya—long as you let us know where you at so we won't be worried about you. . . . We'll go 'long wit' you long as you don't take the joke too far. I'll admit a joke is a joke and you've played a LULU! . . . I'm warning you, we cant stand much more horsing 'round from you! Business is business 'n' fun is fun! You've had your fun so now let's get down to business! Come on back, YOU HEAR ME!!! If you been hoodwinked by agents of some foreign

* Often in advertisements for runaway slaves the word "eloped" appeared as a euphemism for "escaped." See a selection of eighteenth-century runaway advertisements in Reading #8 of Theme II, ENSLAVEMENT, in the resource toolbox THE MAKING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY: Vol. I, 1500-1865, at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/

government, I've been authorized by the President of these United States to inform you that this liberty-loving Republic is prepared to rescue you from their clutches. Don't pay no 'tention to their sireen songs and atheistic promises! You better off under our control and you know it! . . . If you been bamboozled by rabble-rousing nonsense of your own so-called leaders, we prepared to offer s[o]me protection. Just call us up! Just give us a sign! . . . Come on, give us a sign . . . give us a sign—even a teeny-weeny one . . . ???! (*Glances around checking on possible communications. A bevy of headshakes indicate[s] no success. Mayor returns to address with desperate fervor.*) Now look—you don't know what you doing! If you persist in this disobedience, you know all too well the consequences! We'll track you to the end of the earth, beyond the galaxy, across the stars! We'll capture you and chastise you with all the vengeance we command! 'N' you know only too well how stern we kin be when double-crossed! The city, the state and the entire nation will crucify you for this unpardon-able defiance! (*Checks again.*) No call . . . ? No sign . . . ? Time is running out! Deadline slipping past! They gotta respond! They gotta! (*Resuming.*) Listen to me! I'm begging y'all, you've gotta come back . . . ! LOOK, GEORGE! (*Waves dirty rag aloft.*) I brought the rag you wax the car wit' . . . Don't this bring back memories, George, of all the days you spent shining that automobile to shimmering perfection . . . ? And you, Rufus? . . . Remember the happy mornings you spent popping this rag and whisking this brush so furiously 'till it created music that was sympho-nee to the ear . . . ? And you—MANDY? . . . Here's the waste-basket you didn't dump this morning. I saved it just for you! . . . LOOK, all y'all out there . . . ? (*Signals and a three-person procession parades one after the other before the imaginary camera.*)

DOLL WOMAN. (*Brandishing a crying baby [doll] as she strolls past and exits.*) She's been crying every since you left, Caldonia . . .

MOP MAN. (*Flashing mop.*) It's been waiting in the same corner, Buster . . .

BRUSH MAN. (*Flagging toilet brush in one hand and toilet plunger in other.*) It's been dry every since you left, Washington . . .

MAYOR. (*Jumping in on the heels of the last exit.*) Don't these things mean anything to y'all? By God! Are your memories so short?! Is there nothing sacred to ya? . . . Please come back, for my sake, please! All of you—even you questionable ones! I promise no harm will be done to you! Revenge is disallowed! We'll forgive everything! Just come on back and I'll git down on my knees— (*Immediately drops to knees.*) I'll be kneeling in the middle of Dixie Avenue to kiss the first shoe of the first one 'a you to show up . . . I'll smooch any other spot you request. . . . Erase this nightmare 'n' we'll concede any demand you make, just come on back—please???! . . . PLEEEEEEEZE?!!!

VOICE. (*Shouting.*) TIME!!!

MAYOR. (*Remaining on knees, frozen in a pose of supplication. After a brief deadly silence, he whispers almost inaudibly.*) They wouldn't answer . . . they wouldn't answer . . .

Intervening scene: The ANNOUNCER reports that after the mayor's appeal, the city erupted in a riot that nearly claimed the mayor's life. Their fury spent, the despairing whites abandon the defeated city. Lights come up on LUKE and CLEM as at the beginning of the play.

(*Lights rise slowly at the sound of rooster-crowing, signalling the approach of a new day, the next morning. Scene is same as opening of play. Clem and Luke are huddled over dazedly, trancelike. They remain so for a long count. Finally, a figure drifts on stage, shuffling slowly.*)

LUKE. (*Gazing in silent fascination at the approaching figure.*) . . . Clem . . . ? Do you see what I see or am I dreaming . . . ?

CLEM. It's a . . . a Nigra, ain't it, Luke . . . ?

LUKE. Sure looks like one, Clem—but we better make sure—eyes could be playing tricks on us. . . .

Does he still look like one to you, Clem?

CLEM. He still does, Luke—but I'm scared to believe—

LUKE. . . . Why . . . ? It looks like Rastus, Clem!

CLEM. Sure does, Luke . . . but we better not jump to no hasty conclusion . . .

LUKE. *(In timid softness.)* That you, Rastus . . . ?

RASTUS. *(Stepin Fetchit, Willie Best, Nicodemus, B. McQueen and all the rest rolled into one.)* Why . . . howdy . . . Mr. Luke . . . Mr. Clem . . .

CLEM. It is him, Luke! It is him!

LUKE. Rastus?

RASTUS. Yas . . . sah?

LUKE. Where was you yesterday?

RASTUS. *(Very, very puzzled.)* Yes . . . ter . . . day? . . . Yester . . . day . . . ? Why . . . right . . . here . . . Mr. Luke . . .

LUKE. No you warn't, Rastus, don't lie to me! Where was you yestiddy?

RASTUS. Why . . . I'm sure I was . . . Mr. Luke. . . . Remember . . . I made . . . that . . . delivery for you . . .

LUKE. That was MONDAY, Rastus, yestiddy was TUESDAY.

RASTUS. Tues . . . day . . . ? You don't say. . . . Well . . . well . . . well . . .

LUKE. Where was you 'n' all the other Nigras yesterday, Rastus?

RASTUS. I . . . thought . . . yestiddy . . . was . . . Monday, Mr. Luke—I coulda swore it . . . ! . . . See how . . . things . . . kin git all mixed up? . . . I coulda swore it . . .

LUKE. TODAY is WEDNESDAY, Rastus. Where was you TUESDAY?

RASTUS. Tuesday . . . huh? That's somp'um . . . I . . . don't . . . remember . . . missing . . . a day . . . Mr. Luke . . . but I guess you right . . .

LUKE. Then where was you!!!???

RASTUS. Don't rightly know, Mr. Luke. I didn't know I had skipped a day.—But that jist goes to show you how time kin fly, don't it, Mr. Luke. . . . Uuh, uuh, uuh . . . *(He starts shuffling off, scratching [his] head, a flicker of a smile playing across his lips. Clem and Luke gaze dumbfoundedly as he disappears.)*

LUKE. *(Eyes sweeping around in all directions.)* Well. . . . There's the others, Clem. . . . Back jist like they useta be. . . . Everything's same as always . . .

CLEM. ??? Is it . . . Luke . . . ! *(Slow fade.)*

___CURTAIN___