

TINDERBOX

By

Gregory S. Carr

TINDERBOX

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TINDERBOX

for the East St. Louis Community, Past, Present, and Future

TINDERBOX

Tinderbox was originally produced at the SIUE East St. Louis Center for the Performing Arts in East St. Louis, IL by the Creative Exchange Lab and Washington University on May 26-28, 2017, featuring the following cast:

Willie.....Candice Jackson
Simeon.....Gregory S. Carr
Sloe Gin.....Napoleon Williams III
Gloria.....Pamela Geppert
Hale.....Thomas Martin
Wilhelm.....Jakob Hulten
Malindy.....Candies Wilson

Tinderbox received its 2nd production at the SIUE East St. Louis Center for the Performing Arts in East St. Louis, IL by the Creative Exchange Lab on July 1, 2017, featuring the following cast:

Willie.....Andrea Purnell
Simeon.....Gregory S. Carr
Sloe Gin.....Napoleon Williams III
Gloria.....Pamela Geppert
Hale.....Thomas Martin
Wilhelm.....Jakob Hulten
Malindy.....Candies Wilson

CAST: 4 men, 3 women

WILLIE POTTS African American female domestic worker and cook, mid 20s
SIMEON POTTS African American male factory worker, late 20s
SLOE GIN FLINT African American male factory worker, early 30s
GLORIA AIDAN Irish American female landlord, late 40s
HALE AIDAN Irish American male landlord, early 50s
WILHELM LEIDENSCHAFT German American male union leader, mid 40s
MALINDY POTTS African American female grocery store owner, mid 60s

TIME: 1917

PLACE: East St. Louis, IL

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ACT 1
Scene 1

A small bungalow in the “South End” of East St. Louis. WILLIE POTTS, a petite black woman seems to be directing traffic for a move-in day. She points directly at a section of the empty room as her husband SIMEON lugs a rather large trunk. Simeon Potts is a tall, large hulking man with a gentle disposition. He carries the large trunk on his back, obediently and gingerly places it in a corner of Willie’s liking. Trailing far behind is Willie’s brother LOGAN FLINT, who they affectionately refer to as SLOE GIN. Sloe Gin is thin wiry man with sunken eyes, who appears to have seen too much in the world. He sarcastically eyes his new surroundings, laughs to himself, shrugs his shoulders and takes a swig from a mason jar wrapped in a brown paper bag. Willie frowns disapprovingly at him and he stares defiantly back. The brother and sister have a brief staring match, which Willie wins. Sloe Gin reluctantly puts his jar away and picks up his suitcase.

WILLIE. Sloe Gin, it’s too early in the morning for all this foolishness. We gotta get settled and ready for work. We are here now, up in the North, with another chance to make something of ourselves. There wasn’t nothing for us down in Henderson, you know that.

SLOE GIN. I ain’t’ arguin’ with you Willie! Just seem like if we was going to come up North, we shoulda gone to Chicago, that’s all. People at home always talking about Chicago or

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Detroit, not no East St. Louis. Got better jobs up there and more places for colored people to live.

SIMEON. Well, we's here, and we gon' make the most of it Sloe Gin. Mr. Hale and Miss Gloria paid for our train tickets and give us a place to stay. The least we could do is do right by them. Not many colored folks get a chance like this.

SLOE GIN. Don't too many white people get a chance to get all this free brown skin service either.

WILLIE. Sloe Gin, I swear if Daddy hadn't told me to look out for you...

SLOE GIN. Don't go bringing Daddy in all of this Willie Mae! You the one begging me to come with yall. I was fine living in Henderson. Me and some of my friends made a good living fishing in the Ohio River. Making our own money! Running our business. Them white men always paid us good money for some of them big ole flathead catfish and them buffalo.

WILLIE. And as soon as yall would get paid, yall would drink it all up in liquor, chasing after these fass ass women. Besides, you can't fish year-round. Sooner or later, you come begging money from me and Simeon. I swear you just like a big old kid.

SLOE GIN. My mama dead Willie Mae ---and I don't appreciate you trying to tell me, how I grown man, oughta act or how I oughta live.

SIMEON. What we ought to do is finish unpacking, and yall can argue all yall want once we get settled. All yall did was argue before we left Henderson, argued on the train, and now yall are arguing here in East St. Louis. I'm about tired of both of yall. After we get unpacked, I'm going down to my aunt's grocery store, get some eggs, some bacon, and some bread, then Willie gonna cook us a good breakfast.

WILLIE. I know you shamed! How do you know Willie don't want to lay down and take a nap after all that train riding?

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SIMEON. Cause that's what we expecting. Stop being so contrary woman!

WILLIE. Simeon, you know I don't like it when you talk to me like that. I don't respond when you talk to me like that.

SIMEON. Woman, you know I be playing with you. (*Grabs her around the waist and lifts her up.*)

WILLIE. Put me down Simeon!

SIMEON. I'm just showing you who the stronger one of us is. Bible say the woman is the weaker vessel.

WILLIE. Strength ain't always physical. Lotta strong men done been brought to their knees. Samson was the strongest man that ever lived...

SLOE GIN. Here we go! Another rehash of one of Reverend Brooks' sermons! Back on the mourner's bench of Race Creek Baptist Church! Praise, the, Lawd!

WILLIE. "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit..."

SLOE GIN. I got the spirit all right. That moonshine spirit. That's all the spirit I need. (*He takes a drink*)

WILLIE. Sloe Gin, you ain't gonna mess this up for us. We've done worked too hard to come all the way up here to be spending our money bailing you out of jail for public drunkenness. Simeon, talk to your brother-in-law; maybe another man can talk some sense into his hard head.

SLOE GIN. "Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more." I can quote that Bible too, Willie Mae! Don't think you the only one that can quote that Bible! I've done seen some things that'll drive a man to drink!

WILLIE. I'm gonna put the sheets on our bed Simeon. Mr. Hale and Miss Gloria be by soon to check on us. Make sure we

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get everything looking presentable. (*Willie goes into the bedroom.*)

SIMEON. Now Sloe Gin, I'm gonna have to side with Willie on this one. You need to cut back on all that drinking. It ain't good for you, and we don't want no trouble while we're here. There's already enough tension here between the races...

SLOE GIN. What you mean *here*? There's trouble everywhere between the races. We just came from Henderson, Kentucky where they used to own us as slaves. Then when they couldn't own us anymore, they got old Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan to keep us in line. I'm gonna work this job like I did any of them jobs down in Henderson. East St. Louis ain't no heaven. White folks will lynch you up in the North just like they would in the South. Don't you *ever* forget *that*.

SIMEON. I *ain't* disagreeing with you Sloe Gin. All I'm saying is we gotta keep our heads down for a while. We in a new city, we don't know too many people, and we gotta learn the lay of the land.

SLOE GIN. Brother-in-law, you got a good head on your shoulders, otherwise you wouldn't have married my sister. My baby sister smart, but she don't have much common sense. I don't believe in buck dancing for these white folks. They gonna recognize me as a *man*. Down in Henderson, we walk down the street, we gotta lower our eyes when a white man walk by. We walk on the *same* sidewalk, the *same* piece of concrete, the *same* piece of land God made, but I can't look him in the eye without being afraid of getting lynched. What kind of sense that make? Ain't we supposed to be equal? Ain't God made us outta the same patch of dirt as him? I put up with that mess down in Kentucky, but I ain't gonna do it here. If I have to go off by myself, I will. But I ain't grinning and skinning for these white folks. Couple of days ago I read in *The Gleaner* that the United

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States might get into the Great War in Europe and there's a good chance some of our colored boys could get a chance to fight. *I* wouldn't fight for this country, but I'd sure fight these *crackers* here trying to kill *us* on a daily basis.

SIMEON. You actually read the newspaper?

SLOE GIN. I can read. Just because I drink, don't mean I can't use my head. Might only have a sixth grade education, but I can read. Now that's *your* wife, but she was my *sister* before she was your *wife*. And I know her. Soon as them white folks get here, she gonna start acting different. Trying to make *them* feel comfortable. You can do what you wanna do, but I'm gonna sit back, observe, and only speak when spoken to. Watch how they treat me and watch how they treat yall. If I don't grin enough or be polite enough for them, they gonna think I'm a *bad nigger*. And that's all right. That way, they gonna be on they Ps and Qs around me, and yall can negotiate some things with them, cause they ain't gonna wanna deal with *me*. (*There is a knock at the door. Sloe Gin and Simeon both stare at each other for a moment. Sloe Gin motions for Simeon to answer the door as he sits down in a nearby chair and begins to whittle a wood carving with a pocketknife he takes out of his pocket. Simeon goes to open the door. It is HALE and GLORIA AIDAN.*)

HALE. Good morning, Simeon. It's good to see you. Did you and your family have a good trip here?

SIMEON. Yes, sir. Mighty fine, mighty fine trip. Thank you for asking.

HALE. Simeon, this is my wife, Gloria.

SIMEON. Pleased to meet you, ma'am.

GLORIA. Nice to meet you.

HALE. Where's the wife? She did come up with you, didn't she?

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SIMEON. Oh, yes sir. (*Yells.*) Willie! Mr. Hale and Miss Gloria here! (*Willie emerges from the bedroom, slightly exasperated at Simeon's loudness.*)

WILLIE. I can hear you honey---I'm just in the next room, not down the street.

SIMEON. Mr. Hale, this here my wife, Willie Mae Potts.

HALE. Nice to meet you, Willie Mae.

WILLIE. Thank you, sir. Nice to meet you.

HALE. And this is my wife, Gloria Aidan.

WILLIE. Nice to meet you, ma'am.

GLORIA. Nice to meet you, too. (*There is an awkward silence as Sloe Gin continues to whittle. Hale walks over to Sloe Gin and extends his hand.*)

HALE. Don't believe I caught your name young man.

SLOE GIN. Don't believe I offered it, suh.

HALE. Well, my name is Mr. Hale, Hale Aidan.

SLOE GIN. And my name is Mr. Logan, Logan Flint. But my people call me Sloe Gin.

HALE. Well, all right, *Logan*. So, I take it you will be working with us at the Aluminum Ore Company tomorrow?

SLOE GIN. I imagine I will, suh.

SIMEON. He's a real hard worker, Mr. Hale. As a matter of fact, he used to run a business selling fish down in Henderson, Kentucky, where we from.

HALE. Sounds like you were pretty successful where you came from Logan. What makes you think you will succeed here?

SLOE GIN. Don't rightly know sir---we gonna have to play our cards according to the hand that we dealt.

HALE. Simeon, may I speak with you outside for a minute?

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SIMEON. Yes, sir. (*Hale and Simeon go out the front door. Sloe Gin goes back to whittling. Gloria and Willie struggle to fill the silence,*)

GLORIA. I know you all just got here, and it's Sunday. You probably won't have time to cook a good Sunday dinner, will you?

WILLIE. No ma'am. We're very busy trying to get unpacked and settle in. Coming to a new town and all.

GLORIA. Yes, Hale and I have had that unpleasant experience. We are originally from New York.

WILLIE. New York! I've always dreamed about going there.

GLORIA. Don't get your hopes up too high. Many parts of it are filthy and very overcrowded. Both of our parents emigrated from Ireland. Learned how to survive! New York was very hostile to Irish immigrants. So, we were very happy to get the opportunity to leave the East Coast and come here to East St. Louis. To get a fresh start. Like you and your husband are going to do.

WILLIE. I guess so.

GLORIA. Are you all planning on starting a family while you're here?

WILLIE. Yes, ma'am, eventually.

GLORIA. Well, what are you waiting on? Children are a gift from God.

WILLIE. Well, we've tried but...we just haven't been successful.

GLORIA. Oh, I see. I'm sorry to hear about that.

WILLIE. That's all right. All in God's timing. You and Mr. Hale have any kids?

GLORIA. No, none of our own. We've adopted many of the children at our church over the years as our children. Sent many a young man off to college. And sometimes they return to East

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St. Louis and settle down. They bring their children by to see us, so we get a “vicarious” grandparent experience. How long have you been married?

WILLIE. About three years.

GLORIA. Hale and I have been happily married for twenty-five years now. We’ve had our ups and downs, but we’ve managed to remain good friends. That’s the secret to a long and lasting marriage. Trust, loyalty, and friendship. Hale and I have at to attend mass at St. Patrick later on this morning, but we would love to invite you over for dinner later on this afternoon. There’s a Baptist church you can attend called the True Light Baptist Church. We expect you all to attend church as well. (SLOE GIN gets up and goes to the bathroom.) Your brother is welcome, but I don’t allow a spot of liquor in my house! I’m sure that’s what Hale is talking to your husband about. Hale and I are members of the Catholic Total Abstinence Benevolent Association out of Chicago. We are trying to form a chapter here in East St. Louis to combat the wanton drunkenness of this ungodly town. Hale and I are proud teetotalers, and we hope to encourage the rest of the coloreds here to do the same. Once you all get started, many coloreds in this community will look up to you, knowing that we hired you. Do you understand?

WILLIE. Yes, ma’am, I do.

GLORIA. Very good then! I’m glad we were able to have this understanding. (*Hale and Simeon come back inside.*) Hale, after mass, we’re going to invite Simeon, Willie, and Logan over for dinner, providing Logan has a couple of cups of coffee to sober up. I could smell him from a mile away. We will not tolerate any lewd or unseemly behavior here. Is that understood?

SIMEON. Yes, ma’am.

GLORIA. Good. Hale, did you have a good conversation with Simeon?

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HALE. Yes, we did.

GLORIA. Did you tell him that we were members of the Catholic Total Abstinence Benevolent Association?

HALE. Yes, Gloria, I did.

GLORIA. Very well then, it's all settled. Hale, give them the itinerary for their work schedule tomorrow because you know I don't like to discuss work on Sunday, especially over Sunday dinner.

HALE. You two men will report for work at the Aluminum Ore Company at 5:45 a.m. because we start at 6:00 a.m. on the dot. Don't be late. Wear some of the dungarees we sent you Simeon and we'll supply Logan with some at work tomorrow. Things get pretty messy at the factory, so be prepared. You're going to experience a lot of heat, deal with some overpowering smells, and do some heavy lifting. But you'll get used to it, good, honest hard work never killed anyone. Some days it's like walking into the pit of hell--- the heat of the fire and the smell of brimstone. Lunch is from 12:00 to 12:30; exactly one-half hour. Bring your lunch, find somewhere quiet, eat your lunch, and do more eating than talking. Your shift is over at 3:30 p.m. We work Monday through Saturday with Sunday off for the Lord's Day. Did I miss anything dear?

GLORIA. Don't forget to tell them about the strikers Hale. They need to know they must steer clear of the union.

HALE. Yes. Some of the workers at the Aluminum Ore Company, Germans mostly, have formed a union. Their tactics are very devious. They will try to intimidate you, make threats, and even try to physically manhandle you. Pay them no mind, but report anyone who tries to get you to join the union.

SIMEON. I didn't know that.

HALE. There's some tension between the whites and the coloreds because of this, but *you just work*. The Negroes that

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are working for our company are paid extremely well, so there's no need for you to join the union. Do you hear me?

SIMEON. Yes, sir.

HALE. Don't get involved in any of it. These German union bosses really try to get things stirred up around here with their organizing. They're real troublemakers. Both of you will be on clean up detail. I will show you what we need you to do to keep the factory areas clean and then you will be on your own.

GLORIA. And we will see you promptly at 2:45 p.m. We will start our dinner at exactly 3:00 p.m., so don't be late. This is good practice for tomorrow morning. *(Hale extends his arm to Gloria and they walk out arm in arm. After the Aidans have gone, Willie goes to the bathroom.)*

WILLIE. Sloe Gin! Get your ass out here right now! I mean it! *(SLOE GIN slowly emerges from the bathroom.)* Now, I'm gonna say this one time cause you my brother. My husband is the head of this household and everybody up in it, including *you*. And since you can't act like a grown man, I'm gonna be the head of *you*. If you gonna stay, stay. But you ain't gonna be drinking up in here or smoking up in here like you do at home. Simeon convinced Mr. Hale and Miss Gloria to let you have that job. You ought to be thankful. Me and Simeon is going to be respectable up here and take advantage of the opportunity Mr. Hale and Miss Gloria are giving us, and you ain't gonna mess it up. Do you understand?

SLOE GIN. Whatever you say baby sister. I'm gone do whatever you tell me to do. I swear to God on my mama grave, Imma do right. Don't worry about Sloe Gin. I'll smile for the white man when we eat at his house, but that's the only time you gonna see me do it. I'm only doing it for you baby sister, and my brother-in-law. I'll clean every corner of that place from top to bottom, deal with the heat, and put up with the

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smell. But don't ask me to go to no church because I ain't been there since my mama died. God know me, and I know him. He knows my heart. I don't need no preacher telling me how to talk to God. I prays every day. But on my day off, don't look for me, cause I gone need my time away from that white man.

SCENE 2

The bungalow, April 9, two months later. Willie is preparing the table for dinner. She is meticulously placing the forks and plates in an arrangement as if she's expecting some important company. Willie pours water in each of the glasses slowly, stands back, and admires her work. There is a knock at the door. Willie seems surprised because she wasn't expecting anyone other than her husband and her brother. She opens the door to see WILHELM LEIDENSCHAFT, a union leader standing in the door.

WILHELM. Is Simeon Potts here?

WILLIE. No, he isn't. May I ask who is inquiring about him? Is he in any kind of trouble?

WILHELM. No, no, no trouble. My name is Wilhelm Leidenschaft.

WILLIE. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Wilhelm. My name is Wilhelmina Potts, but everyone calls me Willie.

WILHELM. Ah, we share a similar name.

WILLIE. How so?

WILHELM. Wilhelmina is the feminine of Wilhelm. It's a German name.

WILLIE. I always thought it was one of those old southern names.

WILHELM. It's the name of the Queen of the Netherlands. It means "willing to protect."

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WILLIE. I always wondered why my mama named me that.

WILHELM. I work with Simeon down at the Aluminum Ore Company, and I wanted to talk to him off the record.

WILLIE. He and my brother should be home shortly. Can I get you something to drink while you wait?

WILHELM. That would be very kind of you. *(Wilhelm sits down on the couch, while Willie gets him a glass of water. She hands it to him, and he lustily drinks it down.)*

WILLIE. My goodness! You must have been some kind of thirsty to drink that water down like that! Can I get you another glass?

WILHELM. Please. The plant is hotter than the gates of hell and we often get extremely parched working there. I'm sure you've noticed that your husband just can't get enough water from all of the flames down there. *(Willie gets him another glass.)* I understand that you all just came up from the South a few months ago. How are you adjusting to life here in East St. Louis?

WILLIE. Oh, it's an adjustment. Down South everybody speaks to you, colored or white. Here they give you half a smile, if that, a blank stare, or sometimes they don't even look at you at all.

WILHELM. The face of East St. Louis has been changing over the past year. We're primarily a town of hardworking, God-fearing European immigrants. We're German, we're Irish, and a few Armenians have even come here. So, the arrival of so many coloreds is naturally unsettling to some in our community.

WILLIE. Why is it so unsettling? We're just trying to make a living like everybody else. Life ain't easy in the South. They don't want to pay you while you're there, but if you try to leave, they try to intimidate you to try to make you stay there.

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We had to leave on a train at night just to avoid the white folks pressing us as to where we was going.

WILHELM. It's just that we are at odds with the Aluminum Ore Company owners about fair wages, so they decided to bring in the coloreds to try and break our union. The coloreds don't realize they are being used like pawns to destroy the German community. That's why we can beat them at their own game of chess if the coloreds join our union. There's more of us than there are of them. Won't you talk to your husband about this? He seems like a sensible man.

WILLIE. My Simeon is a sensible man. He's a hardworking man. He's also the head of his house and I don't make no decisions without him. You make decisions without your wife Mr. Wilhelm?

WILHELM. I am a widower. My wife died about three years ago around this time.

WILLIE. I'm sorry to hear that Mr. Wilhelm.
My condolences.

WILHELM. Thank you for your kindness. She died of the consumption. A horrible, horrible disease. Her death was her release from the pain and suffering. Mrs. Potts, I believe in fair trade. Germans tend to be pragmatists...

WILLIE. I'm familiar with the philosophical and political leanings of the Germans.

WILHELM. Well, I wasn't expecting...

WILLIE. Maybe you weren't expecting a woman, let alone a colored woman to be able know what you were talking about. I was a schoolteacher for colored children in Henderson, Kentucky. While I was creating lesson plans in the library, I read up on anything and everything I could find.

WILHELM. Then you are familiar with the philosopher's teachings?

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WILLIE. I have read Hegel.

WILHELM. You do realize his middle name was Wilhelm. Georg Wilhelm Hegel?

WILLIE. I do. His thesis, antithesis, and synthesis are quite interesting. You do know that his philosophy influenced W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*?

WILHELM. I am not familiar with that work.

WILLIE. He wrote it in 1903. DuBois saw a connection between Hegel's master-slave dialectic and the condition of the Negro in America today. It's a part of DuBois's double consciousness philosophy.

WILHELM. What do you think about Nietzsche? Frederick Wilhelm Nietzsche.

WILLIE. Hmmph! I try not to.

WILHELM. And why is that? Now he was a great German philosopher, too.

WILLIE. I cannot follow someone who proclaims that 'God is dead.'

WILHELM. If it helps, Nietzsche was an atheist and didn't believe God ever existed in the first place.

WILLIE. Well, what do you believe, Mr. Wilhelm?

WILHELM. I was raised a Lutheran as a young boy, learned Luther's Small Catechism in school, got married in a Lutheran church, and gave my wife a Lutheran burial service...

WILLIE. I'm so sorry for your loss. However, you still haven't answered my question about what you currently believe.

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WILHELM. Why did you give up teaching? You would have been a great teacher with such a wide array of knowledge.

WILLIE. And it's obvious you are well-skilled in politics by the art of evading my question. The Henderson County School Board made me quit when I got married. Said I couldn't tend to the needs of the children and be a good wife, so they let me go. Although most of the principals were men, they never had to quit their jobs when they got married.

WILHELM. To answer your philosophical question, I believe in one creating one's own destiny. We must play with the hand one is dealt. That is why I believe in our labor union. We can create our own destiny. All of us working together can make it good for all parties involved.

WILLIE. That's all well and good if the races were truly equal.

WILHELM. All right Mrs. Potts, you are a practical woman. And you're probably a very shrewd manager of your resources, however limited they might be. Being here May have limited your resources and you may be experiencing some hardships. What if I had some of my friends in the AF of L to secure you a position?

WILLIE. The AF of L?

WILHELM. The American Federation of Labor. It is the union that represents us. That way, both you *and* your husband could make a decent wage. Especially if the two of you decide to start a family.

WILLIE. Where is this job located?

WILHELM. The Armour and Company Meat Packing plant.

WILLIE. Ain't no colored girls working there. Nothing but white women.

WILHELM. You would be one of the first. The union is a stabilizing force in the community, not a dividing force.

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WILLIE. I would have to talk this over with my husband before I make a decision one way or another.

WILHELM. This is understandable, but this could be an excellent opportunity for you and your husband to establish yourselves financially. Many coloreds come up from the South and become dependent upon the pawn shops, the gambling, and the other vices East St. Louis has to offer. You and your husband could be different---you could be leaders that the German and the Negro communities could respect.

WILLIE. You sound like the Aidans.

WILHELM. The Aidans?

WILLIE. Mr. Hale and Miss Gloria Aidan. We just had Easter dinner at their house the Sunday before last. Miss Gloria insisted that we start dinner at 3:00 p.m. (*Imitating Gloria*) "We will now celebrate this Easter dinner of roasted lamb upon the hour our Lord breathed his last." They're the ones who brought us here. Everybody wants the colored people to be upright around here, but I know of a couple of saloons around here including some whorehouses. And not one of these white people seems to get in trouble about any of it either. Especially the police. They're rounding up our colored men trying to make them look like the criminals while they're busy making money off those whorehouses, gambling, the saloons, and shooting up East St. Louis.

WILHELM. Do you like music Mrs. Potts?

WILLIE. I like all kinds of music. Beethoven, Bach, Handel...

WILHELM. All good Germans, mind you. The best music and the best musicians come from Germany.

WILLIE. I also enjoy Will Marion Cook, Bob Cole and Rosamond Johnson and Scott Joplin. Scott Joplin just died a few weeks ago I heard. And W.C. Handy! Now he used to live in my hometown of Henderson, Kentucky.

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WILHELM. *The W.C. Handy? The writer of “The St. Louis Blues”?*

WILLIE. One in the same. He met his wife in Henderson and lived there for about ten years. So, all the great musicians don’t come from Germany – many of them are born right here in the United States.

WILHELM. You truly are a music lover. I just bought a new phonograph and I need to get rid of my old one. Would you like to have it?

WILLIE. Well, I don’t know if I should...

WILHELM. Think of it as a housewarming gift. You can listen to all of your favorite musicians while you work at home and then once you begin working, you can listen to it when you come home to relax. (*Hands her a business card.*) Here’s my card. I want you to contact Frederick Kittel. Call him and tell him that I recommended you and he will speak to the owner about getting you a job there. (*Simeon and Sloe Gin come in the door. Willie quickly puts the card in her bra. Once Simeon sees Wilhelm, he walks directly to Willie. Sloe Gin walks over to the sink to get a glass of water, waiting for the fireworks to begin.*)

SIMEON. Willie, what this man doing up in my house?

WILLIE. Mr. Wilhelm...

SIMEON. I know who he is, I work with him every day. What he doing up in my *house*?

WILLIE. He came here to talk to you.

SIMEON. You coulda told him I wasn’t *here*.

WILLIE. I just thought...

WILHELM. Please, Simeon, don’t blame your wife for my intrusion. She asked the nature of my visit and requested that I come back later when you were home, but I insisted. Charge it to me, not to your wife. Mrs. Potts was just showing me her spirit of hospitality.

TINDERBOX

SIMEON. So, what you got to say to me ain't already been said? I ain't joining no union. Yall Germans trying to force the colored folks to join yall unions, so you can get back at the owners. The owners bring us up here to pit us against the union. What do I look like biting the hand that's feeding me? Ain't no union come down to no Kentucky, no Tennessee, no Alabama, no Georgia, or no Mississippi to bring Negroes up North, give them a job, and a place to stay. The first thing yall tell us is we got to pay union dues out of our first paycheck. We ain't barely been here but two months, and yall already trying to run us out of town.

WILHELM. You've only been here a short while, but I can see that you are a hard worker, you're a family man, and you're an honest man. If more coloreds saw someone like you join us, they might be inclined to join.

SIMEON. So, I gotta be your sacrificial lamb?

WILHELM. Up against the owners we're all sacrificial lambs! Together we could be a herd instead of being picked off by the wolves one by one. I wanted to come by and tell you that tomorrow we are going to go on strike. The owners have just fired our treasurer, and our fear is that management is looking to fire other union leaders like me.

SIMEON. Well, I understand that Mr. Wilhelm, but I've got to do what's best for me and my house. Mr. Hale and Miss Gloria come all the way down to Henderson and talked to us, paid for our train tickets, and made sure this house was available to us. I still ain't seen what the union doing except threatening a lot people, getting the owners to fire people, or getting fired themselves. Leave us alone. I done told you I'm fine where I'm at.

WILHELM. When my people came to America in 1848, we were persecuted too. They came right around the start of the

TINDERBOX

Civil War. And do you know what they did? They fought for your people because they knew what it was like to be mistreated. We joined the Union Army and fought side by side with Lincoln to preserve this country. Your people were enslaved for the color of their skin, but my people were oppressed because of their political and religious beliefs. We won't stand for it here in America.

SIMEON. I thank you for stopping by Mr. Wilhelm, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave.

WILHELM. Why can't you get this through that thick head of yours? This is serious! When we go on strike tomorrow, I can't promise anyone's safety who goes to work for these companies. *(Sloe Gin arises from the kitchen and opens his coat to reveal a .45 caliber pistol.)*

SLOE GIN. I believe the man said he wanted you to leave his house. Now, if he was in your house, and you asked him to leave, I believe that there would be no hesitation and you would comply. So, as the sergeant-at-arms of this here here house, I'm going to politely escort you to the door.

WILHELM. Make sure you know how to shoot that gun. You may need to use it at a later date. *(Wilhelm opens his coat to reveal his .45 caliber pistol.)*

SLOE GIN. Oh, trust me sir, I'm quite familiar with shooting a gun. You don't have to worry about that.

WILHELM. I will leave, but I believe you are making a terrible mistake. East St. Louis is like one big tinderbox we're all sitting on---one bad spark and this whole place could go up in flames. The strike will happen tomorrow, Simeon. I will see you tomorrow on the picket line. If you change your mind, I will put in a word for you.

SIMEON. My mind's made up.

TINDERBOX

WILHELM. Suit yourself. It was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Potts. Thank you for the water and your kindness. Auf Wiedersehen.

SLOE GIN. Apple strudel to you, ya blockhead.

WILHELM. (*Laughing*) Schwarze Menschen. (*Wilhelm leaves.*)

SLOE GIN. That kraut just called me a nigger. I oughta go out there and cut his throat.

WILLIE. How do you know Sloe Gin?

SLOE GIN. We hear a lot.

SIMEON. What the hell were you doing with that blockhead up in here?

WILLIE. Who are you talking about?

SLOE GIN. Leidenschaft. That's what they call them Germans down at the plant, blockheads. They call us 'schwarzes'. I guess that's they way of calling us 'niggers'. He crazy.

SIMEON. Yeah, but he's right about things heating up down at the Aluminum Ore Company. The owners say the German union bosses ain't loyal to America. Say they loyal to the Kaiser of Germany and on the Kaiser's payroll. Them Germans will turn on each other, so you know they won't have no problem turning on us.

WILLIE. You're not going to be in any danger, are you?

SLOE GIN. Not unless he has one of these.

WILLIE. Sloe Gin, where did you get that gun from?

SLOE GIN. From the Illinois Credit Company down on Missouri Avenue. I traded my granddaddy's watch for it. I can always tell the time by the sun, but if I go down, I want to do it while I was standing up for something.

SIMEON. Willie, Sloe Gin's got a point---people are going to start acting crazy around here if that union goes on strike. I

TINDERBOX

don't want to be on the outside looking in. Getting a gun might not be a bad idea.

WILLIE. That's asking for trouble Simeon. The Lord said, "He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword."

SLOE GIN. Yeah, didn't stop old Peter from cutting that boy's ear off when they came to get Jesus. He had a sword, and he didn't die.

WILLIE. Sloe Gin, signifying is worse than stealing.

SLOE GIN. I'm just trying to keep my brother-in-law safe. There's a lot of tension down at that plant towards us. When them union boys see us coming, they hush their conversations. I know they be talking about us.

WILLIE. And I'm trying to keep my husband alive. You know they already scared of colored men, let alone a big man like him. These white folks don't need no reason to kill our men other than they look at them the wrong way. East St. Louis ain't no different from Henderson. We just got to ride this storm out.

SLOE GIN. Well, Simeon's auntie got some other ideas.

WILLIE. Simeon, what Aunt Malindy talking about?

SIMEON. Aunt Malindy is good friends with Dr. Leroy Bundy. He been fighting for colored people rights here in East St. Louis for a long time.

SLOE GIN. We just came from his house before we came home. Dr. Bundy's saying we ought to get ready for a race war.

SIMEON. This thing's been simmering before we even got here. Lotta the union bosses call us strikebreakers. They say that the companies brought us in to break up the union and push out the union leaders like Leidenschaft. That's why I don't like him---always getting up in my face trying to tell me I gotta join they union.

WILLIE. Well, you need to tell him that you don't plan on getting involved in no race war! They had a race riot up in

TINDERBOX

Springfield about nine years ago. We don't need that here. I didn't come here to fight – I came here to work.

SIMEON. Now Willie, we've already talked about this before. We agreed that I would work, and you would manage the house. You know you better with organizing and arranging things and talking to all these insurance people.

WILLIE. Well, what if those German shut down the plant and you couldn't work? How would we survive?

SIMEON. They ain't gonna shut down the plant.

WILLIE. Those unions got a lot of power. What if I had to go to work then?

SIMEON. We just gonna cross that bridge when we come to it. In the meantime, I need you to fix another plate at the dinner table tonight.

WILLIE. Who's coming over for dinner? Simeon, you didn't tell me this morning anybody was coming over for dinner.

SIMEON. It's just Aunt Malindy.

WILLIE. It don't matter whether it's Aunt Malindy or the Queen of England, I need to know these things.

SIMEON. Woman, what is wrong with you? This woman has extended us credit for these groceries down at her store, mainly because we family. The least we could do is give her a good meal in appreciation.

WILLIE. I got a feeling she's coming over to talk about more than just the price of tea in China.

SLOE GIN. She ain't talking about no China, but she's a Garveyite.

WILLIE. Marcus Garvey? That crazy Jamaican who be running around with that general's outfit on? DuBois says he's a clown and a buffoon and that Negroes shouldn't take him seriously.

TINDERBOX

SLOE GIN. I want to hear what she has to say. Now I've seen some Negroes wear some right curious outfits, but that ain't never stopped me from hearing what they have to say. Don't judge a book by its cover now. Bible say 'Judge not, lest ye be judged.'

WILLIE. Soon as you get to drinking you wanna start preaching. You better make sure Miss Gloria don't come by here and get a whiff of you smelling like some moonshine still.

SLOE GIN. Ain't nobody scared of that white woman! Now she can talk to her old, henpecked husband any old way, but I'm a man. Ain't no woman of mine gonna boss me around.

WILLIE. I'm a woman, and I boss you around.

SLOE GIN. I said no woman of *mine*. You my sister---you've been bossing me my whole life. But that woman---she'd drive a man that don't even drink to drink.

WILLIE. I'm so glad you menfolk think that cooking is so much easier than working at that plant. That kitchen is hot, I gotta spend hours in that heat, lifting and carrying iron just like you. You ought to try it sometime.

SIMEON. Willie, you know I can't cook.

WILLIE. Then stop acting like I'm some magician that can stretch this meal to feed one more mouth without telling me.

SIMEON. I'm sorry sugar.

WILLIE. Don't going trying to sweet talk your way out of it.

SIMEON. I can make it up to you, woman. Make you scream and holler...

SLOE GIN. I don't need to hear all of that!

SIMEON. That's how married folks talk. You ought to try it sometime.

SLOE GIN. Hell, I can talk like that, but I ain't got to be married. In fact, she ain't got to be *my* woman. Just space and opportunity.

TINDERBOX

WILLIE. Well, yall get washed up before dinner and I'm going to try to straighten this house up before Aunt Malindy gets here. Smelling like puppies---get out my face.

SIMEON. My mama said a man was two-thirds dog by nature--it's up to the woman to hold the other third to keep him from being a full-fledged dog.

WILLIE. Well, you better believe I got that leash. Now get on outta here. *(Sloe Gin goes into the bathroom to wash his hands, while Simeon steals a kiss from Willie and goes into the bedroom. Willie picks up a broom and starts to sweep. A pot on the stove begins to boil over. She drops the broom and runs to the stove to lower the heat, but some of the water spills over onto her hand. WILLIE recoils in pain and runs over to the sink to rinse the burn with cold water. She shakes her hand and then resumes cooking and cleaning.)*

SCENE 3

The bungalow, later that night. Simeon, Sloe Gin, and MALINDY, are sitting at the dinner table eating. Willie is in the kitchen and is stirring some cake batter in a mixing bowl. [OBJ]

SLOE GIN. So, what this man mean by 'Africa for Africans'? We ain't no Africans. We born here in America.

MALINDY. That's where you're wrong Sloe Gin. We *are* Africans. Africans here in America. Many of us just don't know it yet.

SIMEON. But this Garvey's from Jamaica. How he going to help us? Why don't he help them Jamaicans?

MALINDY. Because we're all in the same boat because we came over in the *same* boat. The only difference between

TINDERBOX

blacks from Jamaica, blacks from Cuba, blacks from Brazil, and blacks from America is where the boat stopped.

SLOE GIN. That don't make no sense.

MALINDY. Well sure it does! When the white men brought our people over here during the slave trade, they brought them over in what they called the Middle Passage. Some of them Africans were dropped off in Cuba. Since they speak Spanish in Cuba, so did the slaves. They dropped some of them Africans down in Brazil. Since they speak Portuguese in Brazil, so did the slaves. They dropped some of them Africans off here in America. Since they speak English here, so did the slaves. Now on one side of the island of Santo Domingo, they speak Spanish, while on the other side in Haiti, they speak French. That white man got us all confused by giving us all these different languages so we couldn't communicate with each other. A living Tower of Babel!

SIMEON. My grandmother told me about when she was a little girl that she was a slave, but she never talked about them being no African.

MALINDY. That's one of the white man's tactics---divide and conquer. Let me give you an example. My father told me that some of them Africans that they never could break used to play them drums at night. The master would whip them the next day, find them drums, and burn them up, but those Africans would go out in the woods, carve out a log and make themselves another drum. Only this time, they would hide them where the slave master couldn't find them. And then they would meet out in the woods and practice their own religion, separate from the white man's religion that he'd forced on them.

WILLIE. Nothing but heathen religion.

MALINDY. You can call it what you like niece, but them Africans wasn't bowing down to no blond-haired blue-eyed

TINDERBOX

Jesus the way these Negroes do in most of these Baptist churches. Jesus ain't no more blonde-haired and blue-eyed than the man in the moon. That slave master used that image to control the slaves, to instill fear in him. Because if God looked like him, they ought to obey him. Nothing but a lie from the pit of hell. Bible says he had eyes of fire and hair like lamb's wool. That don't sound like no white man to me.

SLOE GIN. So, do you think Jesus was a colored man?

WILLIE. Sloe Gin, that's the silliest question I ever heard.

SLOE GIN. Why it got to be silly? I'm asking the woman a question cause I ain't never heard of any of this before. Just cause you believe Jesus was a white man, don't mean I got to believe it. You really think he was colored?

MALINDY. Had to be! Look at where he come from! Israel surrounded by Africa and Asia---nothing but people of color. Every shade from fair brown-skinned to blue-black hue. Only white folks around there was them Greeks and Romans and that was only because war brought them there. And remember when Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt to flee Herod when the king had all those babies under two years old slaughtered? Do you think a blond-haired and blue-eyed baby could have blended in with those Egyptians, who we know, ain't nothing but black people?

SIMEON. Marcus Garvey teach you all that?

MALINDY. Some of it, but I also read a lot on my own. Dr. Bundy got a lotta books on it. He let me borrow some of them sometimes. How you gonna understand the world around you if you don't read about it? How you gonna understand the white man's ways if you haven't read about what he's done to the Black people all throughout history? And he's gonna do it again and continue to do it until Blacks take their rightful place

TINDERBOX

as kings and queens in this world. The only place we can be truly kings and queens is by going back to Africa.

SLOE GIN. I don't know nothing about no Africa.

MALINDY. There's room for you to learn.

WILLIE. W.E.B. DuBois thinks that Garvey is a charlatan.

DuBois says that we need to educate ourselves here in America and integrate the finest institutions of higher education to lead our people out of the darkness. Not getting on some crazy West Indian's back to Africa boat. What if them Africans don't want us back? Marcus Garvey say anything about that?

SIMEON. Willie, let Aunt Malindy tell her story.

WILLIE. I ain't stopping Aunt Malindy from telling her story! I just wanna know.

MALINDY. No, no, that's all right. She's got a right to her opinion. A lot of people who listen to DuBois think they know it all ---just like him.

SIMEON. Willie got a college degree, so she think she got the right to tell everybody how they should live.

MALINDY. Where'd you go to school baby?

WILLIE. I graduated from Kentucky State, in Frankfort.

MALINDY. You see, we need more educated black people like you so we can advance the race. But we've got to start thinking for ourselves outside of the white man's plantation. Let me give you an example nephew. What you think this means when people do this in church nephew? (*Malindy puts up one finger, crouches on tippy toes and walks in an extremely subservient pose.*)

SIMEON. It just means excuse me, I don't want to draw no attention to myself, and I'm just going to the bathroom.

MALINDY. Now that's where you've been misled by the white man. We've been doing this in in the black church for years. You see folks in these Baptist churches put they finger

TINDERBOX

high up in the air, lower they head, then walk on tippy toes like this. (*Malindy demonstrates*) Common sense will tell you that if you walk like that you are drawing attention to yourself! It's because when slaves went to church with their slave masters, they had to sit in the balcony. They couldn't worship on the same level as the white folks. As if God is a respecter of persons. Then when a slave had to go relieve him or herself, they had to throw they finger high in the air like this, lower they head and walk on tippy toes to signal to the master "I ain't running away master, Ise just going to the outhouse, don't send the overseer and the dogs after me!" Now that's how the white man done us. Looka heah. It's 1917 and black folks still walking around in they churches the same way and the white man ain't nowhere in sight. They call that a 'slave mentality.'

SIMEON. I seen my mama and daddy do that, my grandmother and grandfather do it, the ushers do it, even the preachers do it. I ain't seen nothing wrong with doing it. Everybody did it at my church.

MALINDY. But have you ever questioned it, or did you do it just because everybody else was doing it?

SIMEON. I figured it must be right cause everybody in the church was doing it.

MALINDY. That's cause the white man be using mind tricks on us and we don't even know it. Let me give you another example. Before yall got here, they showed that movie *The Birth of a Nation* down at the Majestic Theatre down on Collinsville Avenue. White folks packed the place, but all the NAACP organizations around the country were protesting it.

SLOE GIN. I didn't never see it went it came to Henderson. All I know is that they lynched a man after they started advertising for that movie in Henderson.

TINDERBOX

MALINDY. This man, D.W. Griffith made this movie that glorified the Old Confederacy during the Civil War and made the Ku Klux Klan look like heroes that would save America from the ‘savage’ black man. Woman named Lillian Gish was one of the stars of it. You know she stayed right here in East St. Louis with her aunt and uncle and worked that very theatre they showed the movie in.

SIMEON. They got all the power, all the wealth, all the guns, and we the terror that keeps them awake at night.

MALINDY. On top of that, Woodrow Wilson invited him to the White House to give a special showing of the movie.

SIMEON. The president of the United States? He let them show that movie at the White House?

WILLIE. Woodrow Wilson and D.W. Griffith went to college together. They were good friends.

MALINDY. You know something about this niece?

WILLIE. I’m always reading *The Crisis* whenever I get the chance. It’s the only way for colored folk to know what’s going on in the world.

MALINDY. Uh-huh. I read that one, too.

SLOE GIN. That’s why I say we got to ‘lock and load’ and ask questions later.

MALINDY. Then, they got this white man, Edgar Rice Burroughs, writing books about a white man, get this, *living* in the jungle, *rules* over all the animals, *and* the Africans that live there. They call him, *Tarzan*.

SIMEON. *Tarzan*? What kind of mess is that?

MALINDY. That’s what Aunt Malindy been trying to tell you nephew. You got to pay attention to the world around you. This is what the white man uses to confuse us. It’s called *propaganda*. Lot of people think propaganda is just a war term--but who says there ain’t a war on us?

TINDERBOX

SIMEON. Aunt Malindy, you and Uncle Hoppy was always trying to tell us about all this when we was younger when we used to come to visit yall for the summer, but me and my brothers and sisters just thought yall was crazy.

MALINDY. Well, I sure have enjoyed have dinner with my niece and my nephews. Aunt Malindy gonna head on home because I got to open the store up at six o'clock in the morning sharp. A woman my age needs her beauty rest, so I can stay Black *and* beautiful.

SIMEON. Me and Sloe Gin gonna walk you home. With all this talk around here about a race war, you don't need to be walking around East St. Louis by yourself at night.

MALINDY. Child please! I don't walk by myself. I take him with me.

SIMEON. That's all fine and dandy that you're going to take the Lord with you but...

MALINDY. Oh baby, I know the Lord is always with me. I'm talking about him. (*MALINDY takes a pistol out of her purse.*) Yea, though I walk through the streets of East St. Louis, I will fear no cracker; thy Smith and thy Wesson, they comfort me.

SLOE GIN. That's my auntie! I love me some Aunt Malindy!

MALINDY. These folks, black and white know Aunt Malindy been carrying a gun since your Uncle Hoppy died. Many a nigga has tried to come in and try to rob my store, but when they see they gonna get a piece of hot lead in betwixt they teeth, they change they mind. Malindy don't fear nobody but God.

SIMEON. Just the same, we gonna walk you home. These is some different kind of days---I can feel it.

MALINDY. You got that intuition, like your mama and daddy. They had it.

SIMEON. I ain't saying all that...

TINDERBOX

MALINDY. You ain't got to say it, I can see it all over you. All right nephew, yall can walk me home. Willie, thank you for the wonderful dinner. I appreciate it. Next time yall have to come over to my house for dinner. I'll fix you some black-eyed peas, some greens, candied yams, macaroni and cheese, some fried chicken, and some ham hocks.

WILLIE. Here Aunt Malindy, take a plate home. That way you don't have to worry about cooking tomorrow. And thank you so much for the groceries. *(Willie hands Malindy a plate wrapped up with aluminum foil. Malindy lights up her corncob pipe and begins to smoke.)*

MALINDY. Thank you so much baby, I so appreciate it. Come on yall. Aunt Malindy's got a date with the Sandman and I can't be late.

SIMEON. We be back in a minute Willie. Lock the door behind us.

WILLIE. All right honey. *(Sloe Gin, Simeon, and Malindy go out the front door and Willie locks it behind them. She begins to clean up the table and put dishes in the sink. Minutes later, there is a knock at the door. Willie opens the door thinking it is Simeon returning.)* What did yall forget Simeon? *(She looks around, but no one is at the door. However, there is a large box sitting on the doorstep. Willie quickly brings it into the house, shuts the door, and locks it. She sets the box on the couch in the living room and curiously opens it. Willie pulls out an old phonograph that is in mint condition. Inside the box are several records, including classical tunes like Bach and Beethoven. There is also a 78 rpm of Harry Anthony's rendition of "Bird in a Gilded Cage." She takes it out and begins to play the song. A smile lights up her face as she listens to the song. Also in the box are pair of work dungarees and a red scarf. While the song*

TINDERBOX

is playing she takes out Wilhelm's card and walks to the phone. Willie initially hesitates, but then dials for the operator. She holds the dungarees up to her body to size them up.) Hello, operator? Could you connect me with BRIDGE – 1619? Yes. Mr. Frederick Kittel. Yes, I can hold, thank you.

SCENE 4

The bungalow, the next day. Willie is getting dressed in some dungarees and begins to wrap her head with the red scarf. Just as she is about to leave, Simeon and Sloe Gin come bursting in the door.

SLOE GIN. Brother-in-law you gots to calm down! They ain't gonna let us cross that picket line. And since you don't believe in carrying no weapon, how you gonna fight them? You might be a big boy and all, and you might get a few shots in on them, but they outnumber us. What we ought to do is gone ahead and join that union. That way we'd be protected.

SIMEON. What *we* ought to do? Nigga, if wasn't for me, you wouldn't have got that job. And now you trying to tell *me* which direction we supposed to take? You better sit down somewhere. (*Simeon notices Willie dressed in factory work clothes.*) And where *you* going?

WILLIE. I got me a job.

SIMEON. Didn't you hear me talking to Sloe Gin? The German union bosses are on strike and they ain't allowing anybody to cross the picket line.

WILLIE. I *heard* you Simeon. That's why I'm going to go to work this morning.

SIMEON. Going to work? Where?

TINDERBOX

WILLIE. Armour and Company meat packing plant. They hiring colored girls for clean-up detail.

SIMEON. Woman, when was you gonna tell me this?

WILLIE. I figured you would be upset about the strike and all and wondering how we were going to pay our bills, so I took this job.

SIMEON. And how long you been knowing about this? Cause we shall ain't had no conversation about that right there. And where this record player come from?

WILLIE. Simeon, we ain't got time to talk about all this. We can talk about this when I get home...

SIMEON. Willie, we need to talk about this now!

WILLIE. Well, that ain't gonna happen! I'm not going to be late for the first day of work. And we don't know how long this strike gonna last. You gonna have to trust me Simeon. I *am* your wife! You've been pulling the load since we got here, now it's my turn.

SIMEON. Mama ain't never worked a day her life when my daddy was alive. It ain't the way it's supposed to be.

WILLIE. Well, I ain't your mama, I'm *me*. Me, Simeon! You need to be happy for *me*. I'm not trying to usurp any of your ability to be the head of your house---you're a wonderful provider. But we in a situation that requires us to have some *faith*. And a part of that faith is I need you to *trust* me. I need for you to believe in *me*. This wasn't something I had in mind when we got here. We didn't know the union was going to go on strike like this again. There was no way we could predict this. But here we are. We've got to live the here and now, not in what was and has been, or even what will come in the future. You've got to understand that Simeon. Before we got married, I made my own money, and I took care of myself. I was going to let you get established once we moved here and after about a

TINDERBOX

year, I was going to get a teaching job. It would be nice if life fell into nice cookie cutter pieces, but sometimes it don't go like that.

SIMEON. I hear you Willie, I hear you.

WILLIE. I know you hear me, but I need you to listen to me – I need you to understand. This is temporary. All of this will pass. But we've got to do what we've got to do for now. That's all I'm saying. Now, we can finish talking about this when I get home, but I gotta go. Love you. *(Willie kisses Simeon and smacks Sloe Gin on the head as she walks out the door.)*

SLOE GIN. When that sister of mine sets her mind to something, it ain't no stopping her.

SIMEON. I just don't like being in the dark. One day she cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the house, next thing she want to go to work. It ain't adding up.

SLOE GIN. Well, all we can do is wait for the man to call us back to work. In the meantime, I wanna play something on this here record player. Wonder if there's anything to my liking in this here record pile. Bach? Nope. Beethoven? Unh-uh. Handel's "Messiah"? I ain't trying to hear nothing like that. Wait, here's something I might want to hear. Will Marion Cook, "Darktown Barbecue." This sounds like my kind of song. *(Sloe Gin puts the record on the phonograph. As he listens to the song, Sloe Gin does a bit of a "cakewalk" dance. He soon gets lost in the rhythm and melody of the song as if he were in another universe. At the close of the song, there is a knock at the door. It is HALE AIDAN. His face is red, and he seems to be sweating profusely.)*

HALE. You all just need to stay put for a few days. This strike will pass very shortly. If they don't come back to the table after we make them an offer, we are going to bring in some more of your people and any place where we can find them and replace

TINDERBOX

these blockheads. Mr. Fox still says that you should not talk to them about joining the union. We did not bring you people here for that reason. Just for work.

SLOE GIN. Begging your pardon *suh*, but I believe I'm gone do whatever the hell I want to do. I don't need you or Mr. Charles Fox telling me how to live my life.

HALE. Simeon, I told you back in February that I or Mrs. Hale would not tolerate any disrespect from your brother-in-law! You promised me that you would keep him in line, and we were not to worry. A man's only as good as his word.

SLOE GIN. You supposed to keep *me in line*? Who died and made you king, nigga?

SIMEON. Sloe Gin, now you know that me and Willie had to bail you outta jail after you got into that fight in Henderson. I promised your sister that I would look out for you for her sake. You ought to apologize to Mr. Hale Sloe Gin.

SLOE GIN. Why I got to apologize to him? For speaking my mind? For speaking to that white man like he any other man? He ain't God to me like he is to you.

SIMEON. He a man just like you and me.

SLOE GIN. Then you didn't hear what he just said to you and me. Treating us like we plantation niggers.

HALE. Now that's not true! I don't see color---my parents taught me to treat people all the same. Black, white, yellow, brown or purple, we're all the same.

SLOE GIN. Now ain't that funny? Every morning when I wake up and look in the mirror I see a Black man, so I don't know who you seeing!

HALE. Well you can consider yourself fired sir.

SLOE GIN. You ain't fired me! I'm gone picket with the union. And after we win, they gone get my job back for me. And then what you gonna do? Then what you gonna say to me?

TINDERBOX

HALE. Simeon, I want him out of this house before nightfall. If he is here in the morning, I will send the East St. Louis Police to have him evicted. You should pay attention to the company you keep from now on, you hear me sir?

SIMEON. Yes, sir.

SLOE GIN. Why you gotta speak to him when you ought to be speaking to me? I'm a man! And you address me as a *man*!

HALE. Simeon, I wish you well. All of this will be settled in a few days. Where is Willie Mae?

SIMEON. She...she out grocery shopping.

HALE. At this early hour?

SIMEON. She at my Aunt Malindy's grocery store. She work with her a little bit from time to time.

HALE. Your Aunt Malindy can be a handful Simeon. She follows Leroy Bundy too closely. Mayor Mollman and I have spoken in great detail about him. Trying to give the colored people here in East St. Louis too much political power is a dangerous proposition. There are many white people here, both union and non-union who are blaming the colored migration from the South for many of East St. Louis' woes. A word to the wise my friend---we're living in perilous times. Separate yourself from anyone who may jeopardize you and your wife's future. These Germans may be showing their allegiance to the Kaiser when they should be loyal to Old Glory. I don't know if I could make it any plainer. He needs to be gone before the end of the day. I've got a meeting with Mr. Fox in about an hour to determine what happens next with this strike. Good day. (*Hale leaves.*)

SIMEON. Look what you done done Sloe Gin! I knew this was gone happen. But your sister begged me to help you, like she's always helped you. Well no more. You on your own this time Sloe Gin.

TINDERBOX

SLOE GIN. Naw brother-in-law, I've always been on my own. You see, once you have been raised in the streets, you know how to make it in these streets. I make friends who will bring me in their houses like Jesus say. I'll be all right. Tell my baby sister I'll check on her. I ain't never gonna stop looking out for her. That was my mama's dying wish---for me to look out for my baby sister. And that's what I'm gone do. Maybe you need to find some backbone of your own.

SIMEON. I got some backbone Sloe Gin! And I don't need no drunk two-bit hustler looking down his nose at me. I know my daddy. I got his name and his blood run through my veins. When I met your sister, I became a father figure for her because she never knew hers and you wasn't the kind of man she could look up to. God knows I've tried to help you Sloe Gin. But you ain't gone pull me and Willie down with you. We said that, and we mean that. Joining that union ain't gonna be nothing but trouble for you. Them Germans ain't gonna accept you. They just gonna use you for their purpose.

SLOE GIN. Yeah, I might be a drunk, but you think Mr. Fox down at the Aluminum Ore Company ain't gonna use you? *(Pauses)* You right brother-in-law. I ain't know my daddy, and me and Willie was raised up by our grandmamma. She did the best she could with us. Willie turned out all right, but I needed a man to keep me in line. That's why I stayed in the streets and that's why I had to spend some time in the Henderson County Jail. But the difference between you and me as I know I ain't nothing, but a sinner saved by grace. Nobody tells Sloe Gin what time of day it is---I can call it myself. Now, soon as we got up here, that white man and that white woman tell you what to do---you jump Jim Crow for them. They say jump, you say how high. God bless my baby sister, but as soon as she get mad, she run all over you. She went out and got that job at the

TINDERBOX

meat company and told you to wait until *she* get home to talk about it. You see I remember when they lynched Ellis Buckner down on Powell Street and I saw what they did to him. They claimed he was trying to rape this white woman but there wasn't no trial. About 40 white men wearing masks, dragged him out of the jail, and lynched him to a weeping willow tree down by the banks of the Ohio River. I'll never forget it because it was a Sunday morning. After they lynched old Ellis, I bet them white men washed they hands, had they wives cook them breakfast, went to church, and sang "Nearer My God to Thee." And yeah, that's why I drinks hard --- drinking helps me to manage the pain I felt that day after seeing Ellis hanging in that tree. Or why I felt I didn't have no power to stop what I saw was wrong. I cain't never forget what I saw! So, when you come down off your sun shiny mountain and come down in the cold cruel valley with the rest of us sinners, then you will start to breathe God's air --- and *then* you will know you a man. Be your own man Simeon. Not some white man's shoeshine boy. White men don't care nothing about us. You remember that. I'll be by later to pick up my things. (*Sloe Gin walks out the door leaving Simeon dumbfounded by the sheer weight of his words.*)

END OF ACT 1

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