MULEHEADED, OR ZORA AND LANGSTON WRITE A PLAY

By
David Robson

© 2026 by David Robson
CAUTION: Professionals and Amateurs are hereby warned that performance of **MULEHEADED, OR ZORA AND LANGSTON WRITE A PLAY** is subject to payment of a royalty. It is fully protected under the copyright laws of The United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright Union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth) and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention, the Berne Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. All rights, including without limitation professional/amateur stage rights, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound recording, all other forms of mechanical, electronic and digital reproduction, transmission and distribution, such as CD, DVD, the Internet, private and file-sharing networks, information storage and retrieval systems, photocopying, and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved. Particular emphasis is placed upon the matter of readings, permission of which must be obtained from the Author in writing.

The English language stock and amateur stage performance rights in the United States, its territories, possessions and Canada for **MULEHEADED, OR ZORA AND LANGSTON WRITE A PLAY** are controlled exclusively by Next Stage Press. No professional or nonprofessional performance of the Play may be given without obtaining in advance written permission and paying the requisite fee.

SPECIAL NOTE

Anyone receiving permission to produce **MULEHEADED, OR ZORA AND LANGSTON WRITE A PLAY** is required to give credit to the Author as sole and exclusive Author of the Play on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play and in all instances in which the title of the Play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the Play and/or a production thereof. The name of the Author must appear on a separate line, in which no other name appears, immediately beneath the title and in size of type equal to 50% of the size of the largest, most prominent letter used for the title of the Play. No person, firm, or entity may receive credit larger or more prominent than that accorded the Author.

"I likes a woman/six or eight or ten years older'n myself./
I don't fool with these young girls."—
Langston Hughes

"I do not weep at the world.
I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife."—
Zora Neale Hurston

Muleheaded, or Zora and Langston Write a Play was first presented in a staged reading by Passage Theatre Company at the Mill Hill Playhouse in Trenton, New Jersey, on May 31, 2025, as part of its Word on Front festival. It was directed by Ozzie Jones.

The cast was as follows:

ZORA—Constance Thompson

LANGSTON—Phillip Brown

LOUISE—Journey Jones

Muleheaded, or Zora and Langston Write a Play premiered in a production by Passage Theatre Company at the Mill Hill Playhouse in Trenton, New Jersey, on January 29, 2026. The production was directed by Brishen Miller, with scenic design by Jaelyn Alston-Frye, costume design by Tiffany Bacon, and lighting design by Tydell Williams. The production stage manager was Ben Davis Simonetty.

The cast was as follows:

ZORA—Constance Thompson

LANGSTON—Anthony Vaughn Merchant

LOUISE—Unissa Cruse

CHARACTERS

ZORA—*African American in her late 30s*

LANGSTON—*African American in his late 20s*

LOUISE—*African American in her 20s*

TIME AND PLACE

The parlor of a house in Westfield, New Jersey, early 1930 to early 1931.

NOTE

The play takes place over the course of roughly one year. Productions may employ short, imaginative transitions to suggest the passage of time and the gradual changes in the relationship between Hurston and Hughes. These moments are optional, but directors should ensure—by whatever means they prefer—that the progression of time and circumstance remains clear to the audience. The script is designed to work effectively with simple scene breaks as well.

MULEHEADED, OR ZORA AND LANGSTON WRITE A PLAY

SCENE ONE

Early February 1930. Lights rise on the parlor of a small house. The room contains a sofa, coffee table, a few chairs, and a Victrola. Left is a doorway that leads to a bedroom and an unseen bathroom. Right is a door that leads to an open-air porch which can be seen through the open door and screen door. ZORA stands, center. LANGSTON sits nearby, an upright, bulging suitcase next to him.

ZORA. She hates me!
LANGSTON. What?
ZORA. It's true!
LANGSTON. No!
ZORA. You should have seen the look on her face: like, you know, that "I-smell-shit" look.
LANGSTON. You're reading into things.
ZORA. You warned her I was coming, right?
LANGSTON. Of course! She set the day and time—
ZORA. What'd you say about me?
LANGSTON. I said, "You must meet Zora, Godmother. She's one of the best female writers of her generation."
ZORA. You said that?
LANGSTON. In the letter, yes.
ZORA. Why "female" writer?
LANGSTON. Maybe I didn't say "female"; I forget. Anyway, who cares how she looked! What did she *say*?

ZORA. She said she was pleased to make my acquaintance. I told her how, you know, we had met before, but she probably didn't remember me.
LANGSTON. She's a very old woman.
ZORA. Old, but sharp. I think she may have remembered me, but she didn't want to let on—was feeling me out. And she loves her some Langston Hughes. "Oh, he's a wonderful boy," she said.
LANGSTON. Boy…?
ZORA. All I know is, she showed me a couple of the gifts you gave her—the jewelry box, the African necklaces. There's a whole Langston Hughes display case over there. Got your awards, handwritten letters. And there's a photograph of you.
LANGSTON. Is that the Van Vechten one?
ZORA. Who?
LANGSTON. Carl Van Vechten—photographer, patron of the arts.
ZORA. White man, white hair, always snooping at parties in Harlem?
LANGSTON. That's him.
ZORA. Something funny about that cat. Nice portrait, though. Right next to Godmother's signed copies of your poems: "I, Too, Sing America!"
LANGSTON. Ha!
ZORA. "I am the darker brother./They send me to eat in the kitchen/When company comes,/But I laugh,/And eat well,/And grow strong."
LANGSTON. Stop it, Zora, you're embarrassing me.
ZORA. Own it, honey, own it! You're becoming a cottage industry. And you're very lucky to have her as a patron. You know that, right?
LANGSTON. I do.
ZORA. How about a little enthusiasm, dear heart?
LANGSTON. What do you want me to say? It's a bargain you make.
ZORA. You make it sound like a deal with the devil.
LANGSTON. I didn't say that.
ZORA. It's okay. The devil never done me no harm himself. He makes me an offer, I'm willing to listen.
LANGSTON. How long were you there?

ZORA. I don't know—an hour maybe.
LANGSTON. Was there tea?
ZORA. What?
LANGSTON. She usually has tea brought out.
ZORA. I didn't get no tea.
LANGSTON. Maybe she was all out.
ZORA. People like Charlotte Mason don't countenance no tea shortages. But I see, she only brings out the tea for the golden children.
LANGSTON. You're being silly.
ZORA. I can read people, Langston, and what I read in her eyes was…was…I'm a little too much for some people. I understand.
LANGSTON. You speak your mind, that's all. We should talk more about this in the morning.
ZORA. Where you going? You just got home.
LANGSTON. It was a long trip, and I didn't expect to find you on my front porch at this late hour—
ZORA. She asked me whether I thought I was a credit to my race.
LANGSTON. What did you say?
ZORA. I said I'm a credit to myself and race has nothing to do with it.
LANGSTON. I told you that she likes to think of herself as a guardian angel for us.
ZORA. Us who? You and me?
LANGSTON. You know what I mean. It probably went much better than you thought it did.
ZORA. She just let me go on talking—about my research, about Doctor Boas, about, you know, Eatonville.
LANGSTON. Was it a conversation?
ZORA. More of a monologue. She gave me a few "um hums", but she left me out there hanging by myself mostly.
LANGSTON. I can call her tomorrow.
ZORA. Don't bother. She has enough smart Black folk on her payroll already. I'm kind of uncomfortable taking money from some rich old white lady whose idea of Black culture is Zulu tribesmen and driftwood sculptures from the great Dark Continent. All her art from Senegal and

Rhodesia—it's nice, but it's like she's only seeing the part of us she wants to see—the mythic part, the pure part, the unblemished part.
LANGSTON. You figured all that out from one meeting with her?
ZORA. Didn't you?
LANGSTON. We met when I was very young.
ZORA. What, like three years ago?
LANGSTON. Four! I was very credulous at the time. The years add insight.
ZORA. They better or what else they good for?
LANGSTON. She has the best of intentions. Give her some credit.
ZORA. Why should I?
LANGSTON. All I know is how she treats me.
ZORA. Which is how?
LANGSTON. She tells me I'm the son she never had.
ZORA. She said that.
LANGSTON. Yes.
ZORA. Is the feeling reciprocated?
LANGSTON. I'm very fond of her.
ZORA. That's not what I asked. But I feel you: Just so long as mommy's willing to send you a monthly allowance, you're willing to tell her what she wants to hear.
LANGSTON. That's rich.
ZORA. No, she's rich. Listen, I'm not criticizing you. I'm just trying to understand.
LANGSTON. How did you leave it with her?
ZORA. After a while, she looked at the clock and called in one of her well-dressed negroes. He escorted me out.
LANGSTON. No promises made.
ZORA. I don't want her money.
LANGSTON. Then why'd you go and meet her? Listen, does Godmother have some very old-fashioned ideas about the relationship of the Negro to American society? Yes. Does it bother me from time to time? Yes. But I remind myself that if not for her, I'd still be wearing socks with holes in the toes. And I wouldn't have as much food in my

cupboards. And I wouldn't have the time to write that I have. I'd be back waiting tables. Life's a compromise, Zora.
ZORA. Black life's a compromise, you mean.
LANGSTON. All life is a compromise! Now, despite my occasional ambivalence, I recognize that Godmother cares about me, cares about Negro artists. And I care about *her* too. She's tough but sweet. She believed in me when no one else did. She lets me do what I want, write what I want.
ZORA. She lets you…? Slavery's done over, in case you ain't heard.
LANGSTON. It's *her* money.
ZORA. Yeah, and it's my *time*, my artistry! As far as I'm concerned, she can go ahead and keep her money. I'll keep my integrity, thank you very much! *(Phone rings.)* You think that's her?! Tell her…tell her…
LANGSTON. Let me answer it.
ZORA. Wait! Tell her that I was pleased to make her acquaintance. Tell her all I need is $40 a week. No, make it $30. I can live on 30.
LANGSTON. What happened to your integrity?
ZORA. A woman's got to eat, Langston. Stop looking at me like that and answer the damn phone before she hangs up!
LANGSTON. *(Answering the phone.)* Hello? Godmother, so good to hear from you. We were just— *(Zora gestures to Langston that she—Zora—doesn't want Godmother to know she's in the room.)* I was just thinking about you. I walked in the door five minutes ago… Havana was glorious…Oh, yes, I filled up almost a whole notebook while I was there…What else? Let me see: The novel is at Knopf now; I should get the proofs in the next few weeks…Yes, it's all very exciting…Well, I really have you to thank. You've been such a generous supporter. That's why I was thinking about you. Who knows where I'd be or what I'd be doing—It's true. *(Zora imitates Langston kissing Godmother's ass; he brushes her away.)* Honestly, I'm exhausted, but I wanted to ask you about—(*Louder.*) I said I wanted to ask how your meeting with Zora went…Alright… Alright. *(Zora tries to listen in on the conversation; again, Langston tries to shoo her away, but they get tangled in the phone cord, and he almost falls. To Zora.)* Stop! *(Into phone.)* Not you, my

good lady, the cat. She almost tripped me up…Her name? Oh, the cat's name is, is…
ZORA. Petey.
LANGSTON. (*Into phone.*) Petey! What…? Did I say it was a girl? I meant a—I haven't checked very closely, Godmother. I just like the name, I guess…Yes, she *is* pretty. *(Langston gesticulates that Godmother is referring to Zora, not a cat.)*
ZORA. I'm a pretty pussy…
LANGSTON. (*Into phone.*) No, Godmother, I'm here alone, but I have a scratchy throat. Travel always wears me—So you haven't contacted Zora or—Do you intend to? Well, I—I hadn't really considered that before. I have to think about it—Oh, it's a very intriguing idea, no doubt. I'll let her know…Yes, alright, I'll see you on Monday. I can show you my full journal and the poems I've been working on…Goodbye, sweet Godmother, goodbye. *(He hangs up the phone.)*
ZORA. What did she say?
LANGSTON. She liked you.
ZORA. What's not to like? I'm a charming woman. What else?
LANGSTON. Well, she made us a proposition.
ZORA. Us?
LANGSTON. She wants us to work on something together—collaborate.
ZORA. You and me? You sound surprised.
LANGSTON. I'm typically a soloist.
ZORA. But you're open to it.
LANGSTON. I am if you are.
ZORA. Yes, indeed! I'm always up for an adventure.
LANGSTON. That cinches it, then!
ZORA. This is great news, yay! *(She hugs him.)* But wait.
LANGSTON. What?
ZORA. I'm leaving on a research trip to the Bahamas next week. You think she'll wait a month?
LANGSTON. I don't know.
ZORA. Can you ask her Monday?
LANGSTON. Of course.

ZORA. Did she mention money?
LANGSTON. She's sending you a check for $60.
ZORA. $60.
LANGSTON. Five minutes ago, you were willing to sell your soul for 30.
ZORA. I'm not selling my soul, darling, and I'm under no illusions: The old lady gets another smart darkie to brag about to her high-class friends; I get a regular paycheck to keep me going until I make my bones, after which I can tell said old lady exactly what she can do with her money and her driftwood sculptures.
LANGSTON. Oh, is that how you plan on working it?
ZORA. No other way, really.
LANGSTON. Well, Zora, it sounds like the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

SCENE TWO

Late February 1930. Morning light rises on the parlor. The Victrola plays "Potato Head Blues" by Louis Armstrong. Langston enters wearing a white towel around his waist; another towel is on his head and he's drying off after a bath. He drinks the last of his coffee and exits. The record ends. Langston returns brushing his teeth and begins the record again. He dances a little as he exits again.

Zora, carrying a purse and a bag, appears on the porch holding Langston's mail, including a large envelope, in her hand and knocks. After getting no response, she peers through the screen door. While she watches, Langston dances across the bedroom doorway without his towel, naked. Zora enters and watches as he gets into the music. She places the mail on the table, hides the big envelope beneath a couch cushion, and sits in a chair to watch. Langston enters wearing boxers, face lathered with shaving cream. He goes to a drawer, finds a small mirror, and props it against a wall or book. He again exits. By now, the music has ended.

Zora rises, begins the record again, and hides behind the couch. Langston enters carrying a straight razor. He prepares to shave and then realizes that somehow the music has started again. He shrugs and begins shaving while looking into the mirror. Slowly, quietly, Zora sneaks up on him until she's close enough to speak.

ZORA. Missed a spot.
LANGSTON. Oh, Jesus!
ZORA. I like your boxers.
LANGSTON. What are you doing? *(Langston exits. Cont'd off)* I had a razor in my hand! *Langston enters wearing a bathrobe; he has a nick on his chin.)*
ZORA. Let me see.
LANGSTON. It's nothing, forget it.
ZORA. Give me a towel or something.
LANGSTON. No!
ZORA. Don't you trust Dr. Zora? Sit down. I said sit! *(Langston finds a chair and sits; she studies his cut.)* Paper?
LANGSTON. Over there. *(He gestures toward a roll of toilet paper nearby. Zora grabs it and straddles him.)* Hey!
ZORA. Stop! I'm a professional. *(Zora tears off a laughably large piece of toilet paper and binds it to his nicked skin.)* How's that?
LANGSTON. I don't think so. *(Zora removes the large piece of toilet paper, tosses it to the floor. She tears a tiny piece off, attaches it to his cut, and looks for others.)*
ZORA. Better?
LANGSTON. Better.
ZORA. See, I know all about shaving. And those chin cuts bleed the most.
LANGSTON. Shave a lot, do you?
ZORA. Only my legs and pits, twice a summer—don't want to be confused with a Parisian.
LANGSTON. Then how do you know about chins?
ZORA. Let me tell you something, honey: women folk know all about chins. This is not widely known among the male of the species, but

every once in a while we ladies wake up and it seems that almost overnight a long, wiry strand of ugly chin hair has sprouted like a weed after a rainstorm. Got one right now. *(She lifts her chin to him.)* See it?
LANGSTON. Where?
ZORA. You blind, daddy?
LANGSTON. Ah, there it is. Why not pluck it?
ZORA. I can never quite get a hold of it.
LANGSTON. Let me try.
ZORA. Go right ahead. *(Langston sizes up the strand of hair, gets it between two fingers.)*
LANGSTON. Ready?
ZORA. Just do it. *(Langston yanks the hair.)* Ow!
LANGSTON. There you are!
ZORA. My hero! *(She kisses him on the cheek and gets up from his lap.)* I brought you something.
LANGSTON. Chocolate?
ZORA. I'm just about all the chocolate you can handle, sugar.
LANGSTON. So, what is it?
ZORA. It's in here somewhere, but you'll have to find it yourself.
LANGSTON. I don't have time for this.
ZORA. You're very cold. *(Langston moves to another part of the room.)* That's a little warmer. *(Langston moves again, looks in a drawer.)* Cold! *(Langston moves again, gets on all fours.)*
LANGSTON. Warmer, colder?
ZORA. Stay just like that.
LANGSTON. Zora!
ZORA. I'm serious. You're at about the right height. *(Langston crawls toward the sofa.)* Warmer…warmer…I'd even say almost hot. *(Langston looks under the sofa, digs into the sofa cushions.)* Scalding hot, splendidly hot! I'sa don't think I can take much mo of dis… *(Zora fans herself with some mail; Langston finds the large envelope. He looks at the sender's address.)*
LANGSTON. Finally! These are the proofs of my book! *(Langston tears open the envelope.)*
ZORA. Let me see.

LANGSTON. Give me a second. This is big.
ZORA. First novel big! *(Langston places the proofs on the coffee table; the two of them pour over the contents.) Not Without Laughter* by Langston Hughes. You know what this means, don't you?
LANGSTON. What?
ZORA. Book's done, and now I have you all to myself: The great Langston Hughes, poet of the Negro, and Zora Hurston, social climber.
LANGSTON. You're much more than that, Zora, and you know it. I'd have been lost in New Orleans without you.
ZORA. You'd still be trying to find the French Quarter, and that's the easiest place in the world to find.
LANGSTON. I just don't know the South like you do.
ZORA. Born and raised done never forget.
LANGSTON. We should do that again.
ZORA. I offered.
LANGSTON. But I couldn't be away that long, and I get so caught up in it, you know?
ZORA. Like that night in Biloxi…?
LANGSTON. Oh, Lord...We were *supposed* to meet your contact at eight—
ZORA. Sister Beatrice.
LANGSTON. But we got sidetracked by that fish fry.
ZORA. Not just any fish fry. That was a gathering. Half the town was there.
LANGSTON. That old man—Papa Duke—
ZORA. Said he outran the sheriff's dogs by swimming across the Pascagoula River.
LANGSTON. Claimed they could smell fear—
ZORA. But not determination.
LANGSTON. I wrote that down.
ZORA. Notebook on one knee, catfish on the other.
LANGSTON. You were doing the same thing! Notes on napkins, interrogating every grandmother in sight.
ZORA. Those grandmothers know everything worth knowing.
LANGSTON. You were in your element.

ZORA. *We* were in *our* element.
LANGSTON. When we finally got to Sister Beatrice's—
ZORA. She took one look at us and said—
ZORA AND LANGSTON. "Y'all been eatin' good, I can see."
LANGSTON. Talked for hours. Hoodoo, healing—
ZORA. The ancient ways.
LANGSTON. You asked her if she was afraid it would all disappear.
ZORA. She said, "That's why God sent you, child."
LANGSTON. Must have been two in the morning when we got back.
ZORA. Air hanging on you like a wet wool blanket.
LANGSTON. Cicadas screaming—
ZORA. Me talking a mile a minute—
LANGSTON. You were...radiant. *(A moment.)*
ZORA. That was a good night.
LANGSTON. Indeed. So, you're here to work?
ZORA. Yes, sir, but I have some bad news. I've been asking around—telling people what we've been thinking of doing—and I keep getting the same response.
LANGSTON. Which is…?
ZORA. Everybody's saying this play idea of ours sounds like just another melodrama.
LANGSTON. It's not a melodrama; it's a tragedy, after the Greeks. We want something elevated and sophisticated, don't we?
ZORA. I guess…
LANGSTON. A drama of the Deep South in-the-midst of civil war, wherein the sins of the white slaver father are transferred to his mulatto son, who rejects the embrace of the Black world and begs his father to accept him as white, only to be shunned and banished.
ZORA. Sounds too serious to appeal to a wide audience.
LANGSTON. You have a better idea?
ZORA. I don't know. Maybe we change things around, make it a comedy of the people, for the people, and by the people—a Black folk comedy.
LANGSTON. Do you think people need that?

ZORA. Who doesn't like to laugh? And we want to make something from it, don't we?
LANGSTON. Money, you mean.
ZORA. It's not a dirty word. You get your check this month?
LANGSTON. Cashed it yesterday. She's very consistent.
ZORA. Mine's late.
LANGSTON. That's not like her.
ZORA. Does she send you a letter with the money?
LANGSTON. Always.
ZORA. With me it's just the money—plain and simple.
LANGSTON. She doesn't know you well enough yet.
ZORA. Could be she doesn't want to know me.
LANGSTON. Godmother doesn't send $80 to people she doesn't want to know.
ZORA. She's still sending me 60. Guess I'm not her favorite horse in the stable.
LANGSTON. Give it time. You want some coffee?
ZORA. I want you to put some pants on.
LANGSTON. Your wish is my command. *(Langston exits to bedroom to dress.)*
ZORA. By the way, I took your advice.
LANGSTON. *(Off.)* On what?
ZORA. You told me I might want to bring her back a gift from the islands, so I did.
LANGSTON. *(Off.)* How'd you enjoy your trip?
ZORA. Sun, rum, and half-naked men running around—what's not to like?
LANGSTON. *(Off.)* You're a married woman!
ZORA. Just because you've ordered doesn't mean you can't peruse the menu when the chance arises. The world is my oyster, and I got my knife ready for shucking. *(Zora opens her handbag and retrieves a wood carving of lovers entwined. Langston enters, dressed in pants, suspenders, and a white, sleeveless shirt. Zora holds up a carving.)* See what I got her…?
LANGSTON. Ah-ha.

ZORA. You don't love it.
LANGSTON. She adores pieces done in wood.
ZORA. And…?
LANGSTON. I don't know about the subject matter.
ZORA. What's wrong with the subject matter?
LANGSTON. It's a little…
ZORA. What?
LANGSTON. Explicit. She's in her seventies.
ZORA. She ain't dead. Still, I don't want to offend the lady. She's my lifeline at the moment. I barely have two nickels to rub together. Oh! I brought you a little something too.
LANGSTON. Another island trinket?
ZORA. Better! The subject of our play. *(Zora digs in her purse, finds a notebook or journal.)*
LANGSTON. The comedy idea. Look at you keeping secrets.
ZORA. I collected this story down in Florida a couple of years back, and I just ran across it again.
LANGSTON. I'm listening.
ZORA. Two men shoot at a turkey, argue over who killed it, and when they can't settle the argument, one of them hits the other with the jawbone of a mule.
LANGSTON. I don't get it.
ZORA. It's biblical, epic, comic confrontation at its finest! You don't like it.
LANGSTON. There's nothing funny about it.
ZORA. Sure, there is. Come on, the bone of an ass—ain't it silly? We'll call it "Mule Bone."
LANGSTON. Maybe *I* should work on the plot.
ZORA. But I just gave you the best idea ever! Trust me, Langston, it's going to work like gangbusters.

SCENE THREE

Mid-March 1930. The apartment is empty. After a moment, LOUISE enters alone—let in, or the door was unlocked. She sets down her typing supplies and looks around. She takes in the room: the scattered manuscript pages, the handwritten notes, the coffee cups. She picks up a page, reads a line or two, sets it down carefully. She moves to the Victrola, considers it. She finds a handwritten note—maybe a fragment of dialogue—and reads it. Something makes her smile. She opens her notebook and writes something down quickly, then closes it. She tucks the notebook away just as Langston enters from the bedroom, surprised to find her there.

LANGSTON. Louise!
LOUISE. Been a while.
LANGSTON. Since Aaron's New Year's party.
LOUISE. How've you been?
LANGSTON. Good. Strange, but good.
LOUISE. Strange how?
LANGSTON. All this. The play, Godmother's money, you being here. It's a lot of... arrangement.
LOUISE. It's a job.
LANGSTON. For you, maybe. Anyway, I'm just a little…
LOUISE. You two have been working on this for weeks. You're allowed to be tired.
LANGSTON. Guess you're right.
LOUISE. Can I ask you something? Why me? Godmother must have people she could've hired.
LANGSTON. She does.
LOUISE. So...?
LANGSTON. I requested you.
LOUISE. You did?
LANGSTON. She asked if I had a preference. I said, "If Louise Thompson is available, I'd like her."
LOUISE. Well, thank you.

LANGSTON. That's how it's supposed to work. People helping other people. I figured with you, at least I'd have a friend in the room.
LOUISE. I'm glad it's you and Zora I'm working with. Better than typing for someone I don't know.
LANGSTON. We'll try to keep it interesting.
LOUISE. So, when do we start?
LANGSTON. Zora's coming by next week. We're talking through ideas.
LOUISE. But I'm on the clock. Godmother expects me to be busy—
LANGSTON. For all she knows, you're banging those typewriter keys as we speak. Coffee?
LOUISE. I'd love some. *(Langston heads to kitchen, pours them both some coffee.)*
LANGSTON. You know, this might actually work. The three of us.
LOUISE. Why wouldn't it?
LANGSTON. Never collaborated before. New territory.
LOUISE. We're still Louise and Langston from Harlem, right? Whatever else happens. *(Langston smiles and hands her a cup of coffee.)* Can I ask you something else?
LANGSTON. Go ahead.
LOUISE. What's she like to work with? Really. I only know her from seeing her at parties.
LANGSTON. She's…a force of nature. And she's got an ear I don't have for the way people actually talk down South.
LOUISE. But…?
LANGSTON. She has strong opinions about how things ought to go.
LOUISE. And you don't?
LANGSTON. I'm learning to pick my battles.
LOUISE. What battles you got?
LANGSTON. You'd be surprised. *(Louise looks around the room—at the papers, the handwritten notes, the manuscript pages scattered about.)*
LOUISE. She's already all over this place, isn't she?
LANGSTON. She works here most days now. Easier than hauling everything back and forth.

LOUISE. You know, I used to write. Little bit.
LANGSTON. Is that right. What kind of things?
LOUISE. Nothing like this. Essays mostly. Opinions about things. I had a professor at Berkeley who told me I had a good critical mind.
LANGSTON. That's not nothing.
LOUISE. Turns out a good critical mind doesn't pay the rent in New York City. I'm not complaining. You and Zora giving me a front row seat, and for that, I'm grateful. But I'm under no illusions. I'm here to type. But watching something get made, from the inside...that's not nothing either. Wally says I should have been a lawyer. Said I could argue both sides of any question, and nobody'd be the wiser about how I really feel.
LANGSTON. Maybe you should have been.
LOUISE. The night is young, and I ain't in no hurry! Zora know I'm coming?
LANGSTON. She suggested you.
LOUISE. Did she?
LANGSTON. Well, I suggested you, and she didn't object.
LOUISE. High praise. *(Louise opens her notebook and jots something down quickly, almost reflexively, as if she can't help herself.)*
LANGSTON. What's that?
LOUISE. Nothing. Just collecting my thoughts.
LANGSTON. About what?
LOUISE. *(Closing the notebook.)* About the job.
LANGSTON. See, I knew I picked you for a reason.
LOUISE. What's that?
LANGSTON. You won't miss a word.

SCENE FOUR

Late April 1930. Lights rise on Louise typing from a handwritten manuscript. Zora enters from the porch, having just arrived.

ZORA. Still in bed?
LOUISE. Umm hmm.

ZORA. Coffee?
LOUISE. In the pot.
ZORA. *(Finding a cup, pouring coffee for herself.)* Want some?
LOUISE. Got some.
ZORA. When'd you get here?
LOUISE. 'Bout an hour ago.
ZORA. Can you read my writing there? Kind of like hieroglyphics…
LOUISE. I can manage.
ZORA. Let me know if I can lend any clarity.
LOUISE. Will do.
ZORA. You see the boss lady this week?
LOUISE. Yesterday.
ZORA. How she doing?
LOUISE. She's fine.
ZORA. That's good. Did she, uh, talk about me?
LOUISE. Not yesterday.
ZORA. But she does.
LOUISE. She mentions you in passing from time to time.
ZORA. Like how, in what context?
LOUISE. I don't take notes.
ZORA. Isn't that what she pays you for?
LOUISE. I mean I don't take notes about those kinds of things. I see her three times a week, and she mentions lots of people in passing.
ZORA. Did she ever say anything about the sculpture, the carving I sent? Because I was expecting some sort of letter, a thank you maybe.
LOUISE. She may have mentioned something about it.
ZORA. Either she did or she didn't, Louise.
LOUISE. Is it the two people?
ZORA. Lovers entwined.
LOUISE. Now I remember. She called it interesting—said primitive people are often captive to their primal urges.
ZORA. By "primitive people" she meant Negroes.
LOUISE. Seems so.
ZORA. And by "primal urges" she meant—
LOUISE. You know what she meant.

ZORA. It's not a dirty word.
LOUISE. I didn't say it was.
ZORA. You know what my mother told me?
LOUISE. About what?
ZORA. Coitus, bumpin' and grindin', the fuckin'!
LOUISE. I should get back to work—
ZORA. I asked her, "Mommy, what all that noise daddy be makin' in your room with the door closed and locked."
LOUISE. There's a lot of dialogue to go through—
ZORA. She say—get this—"You'll find out soon enough, and *you* won't like it." Like it's a punishment or something. Do you see it that way, Louise?
LOUISE. I don't know.
ZORA. Yes, you know; sure, you know.
LOUISE. You're embarrassing me.
ZORA. What's there to be embarrassed about?
LOUISE. I like it myself.
ZORA. What do you like about it?
LOUISE. I like…feeling him on me…
ZORA. Uh huh.
LOUISE. Then I like getting on top, squatting on him, like a frog on a rock.
ZORA. You naughty girl!
LOUISE. Lord, I can't believe I'm telling you this.
ZORA. Say it to me or say it to the wallpaper, honey. Either way it's true.
LOUISE. I like...I like the way he looks at me after. Like I'm the only solid thing in the room. I like the rest of it too. All of it. I don't understand women who deny their husbands. As far as I'm concerned, they don't know what they're missing.
ZORA. You think she ever had primal urges?
LOUISE. Who? Godmother?
ZORA. Sure! You know, somebody that knocked her socks off, made her toes curl, got her so wet she had to wear three pairs of underwear just to keep from showing.

LOUISE. Maybe a long time ago she had something. Maybe with her husband.
ZORA. No way with her husband. I've seen pictures.
LOUISE. Oh, Lord, me too! The man probably never took off his suit and pocket watch a day in his life, even at bedtime.
ZORA. Especially at bedtime! That poor woman.
LOUISE. She found out, and she didn't like it! *(They laugh.)*
ZORA. You're alright, Louise. And that woman's a trip!
LOUISE. She certainly is. In fact, I brought you up last week when she seemed in a good mood, wanted to see how she'd respond.
ZORA. And…?
LOUISE. She said she's keeping the carving, despite her reservations, so I think she likes you.
ZORA. I'm under no illusions: Langston's her favorite, and he loves her back.
LOUISE. At least he used to.
ZORA. What are you saying?
LOUISE. I'm talking out of school.
ZORA. Then keep talking.
LOUISE. Langston's my friend.
ZORA. Mine, too, but you're just talking to Zora. How long's he been chomping at the bit?
LOUISE. I told you I can't.
ZORA. You're already halfway there. And we're friends too, aren't we? I won't say a word.
LOUISE. You promise?
ZORA. You know I do.
LOUISE. It's going on months now. Godmother can be very…
ZORA. What?
LOUISE. Controlling. And she kind of holds Langston to a higher standard—expects more from him, especially since he's become so famous—and I think it's getting to him.
ZORA. He's trying to break the chains, huh?
LOUISE. *(Returning to typing.)* You should wake him up.
ZORA. Let him sleep. Man is bone tired. He's got ambitions.

LOUISE. So do you, sounds like.
ZORA. What's that supposed to mean?
LOUISE. I'm just talking—like we're old friends.
ZORA. I have enough friends.
LOUISE. But you said—
ZORA. It's nothing personal, but there's a time and a place—
LOUISE. You're the one that asked me—
ZORA. You see what I got there?
LOUISE. Where?
ZORA. *(Pointing at the paper in the typewriter.)* Right there. Look how *I* spelled it and look how *you* did.
LOUISE. Did I miss some—
ZORA. You dropped the "r". You can't drop the "r", Louise. The "r" is important. It's what makes the word work.
LOUISE. But it's just a lot of nigger talk.
ZORA. Watch your mouth, darling. Those are my people: the good, the bad, and the snaggle-toothed. Now, keep typing.
LOUISE. But I'm almost done.
ZORA. You didn't fix the "r".
LOUISE. We can write that in.
ZORA. No, you can type it in.
LOUISE. There are at least ten of them on the page like that.
ZORA. Then I guess you're re-typing the page, and any other pages you see your mistake.
LOUISE. That'll take me at least an hour.
ZORA. You got time, and until that boy gets his ass up, what else you got to do? Godmother may pay you, but Langston and me, well, we're the authors of this budding masterpiece. That means when we're in this room, we're the boss. You got that?
LOUISE. Got it! *(Louise rips the piece of paper from the typewriter. She inserts a clean sheet of paper and begins working. Before she does, she pulls out a small notebook from her bag and jots something down quickly before returning to typing. Zora moves to the door of Langston's bedroom, gazes at him.)*
ZORA. Do you tell Godmother what we do? Did you hear me?

LOUISE. I give her an update.
ZORA. So, you're her spy.
LOUISE. I'm not a—
ZORA. You're telling me you don't plan on telling her.
LOUISE. About what?
ZORA. Our little tempest in a tea pot.
LOUISE. Why would I?
ZORA. Why wouldn't you? You got your feelings all hurt.
LOUISE. I thought I was done, could take a break.
ZORA. I didn't say you couldn't. I just want it done right. Let me get you some more coffee.
LOUISE. I can get it myself. *(Louise stands. Zora grabs the pot and moves toward Louise.)*
ZORA. Give me your cup. Come on. No hard feelings. *(Louise extends her cup. Zora pours.)* Sugar?
LOUISE. Black.
ZORA. All I'm saying is that Langston and I need to be able to trust you, and—
LOUISE. Got no time for small talk, Miss Zora. I've got work to do. *(Louise returns to her chair and continues typing.)*

SCENE FIVE

July/August 1930. Lights rise on Louise, sitting at her typewriter, and Langston in his pants, suspenders, and undershirt.

LANGSTON. Read it back, Louise. I want to hear the new dialogue.
LOUISE. What about Zora?
LANGSTON. Who knows when she's getting back.
LOUISE. Her liquor man is just around the corner.
LANGSTON. But we've been working all morning, and I need a nap.
LOUISE. It ain't even one yet.
LANGSTON. *(Fanning himself.)* But this heat…
LOUISE. I never met a man who slept as much as you.
LANGSTON. Let's have it. Come on.

LOUISE. You take a part.
LANGSTON. I'm not an actor.
LOUISE. But these are your words.
LANGSTON. Our words, hers and mine. And she's better at reading than I am. She knows the flavor.
LOUISE. You should too if you're going to put your name on it.
LANGSTON. Alright, fine. Let's go back. Start at the mule part.
LOUISE. She sure likes them mules.
LANGSTON. Okay, lots of different voices here, so why don't we just take turns, one after the other.
LOUISE. You start. *(In the following section, they read the dialogue straight, not as actors.)*
LANGSTON. Right, um, Hambo says, "Been dat long since he been dead?"
LOUISE. "I God, yes. He died de week after I started to cuttin' dat new ground."
LANGSTON. Skip, skip, skip…Teet and Bootsie come in looking all primped and fine; the men give them the once over. Lige says…he says…
LOUISE. *(Pointing Langston to the correct spot in the text.)* Right there.
LANGSTON. Ah! "Them girls done turned out to be right good-looking."
LOUISE. "Teet ain't as pretty now as she was a few years back. She used to be fat as a butter ball wid legs just like two whiskey-kegs." Is that how you prefer your women, Langston: "Legs like two whiskey kegs"?
LANGSTON. What?
LOUISE. How do you like them?
LANGSTON. I don't have a preference particularly.
LOUISE. All men got a preference.
LANGSTON. Do they?
LOUISE. Sure, they do.
LANGSTON. Mine or yours?
LOUISE. Come again?

LANGSTON. One of us has a line. I lost my place…
LOUISE. Your line: right here. *(She points.)*
LANGSTON. Thanks. "Ain't—ain't none of 'em pretty as dat Miss Daisy. God! She's pretty as a speckled pup."
LOUISE. "But she was sho nuff ugly when she was little… She sho has changed since she been away up North. If she ain't pretty now, there ain't a hound dog in Georgy."
LANGSTON. That's good, I think. That's the gist of it.
LOUISE. I like that.
LANGSTON. The scene?
LOUISE. What it says there: "If she ain't pretty now, there ain't a hound dog in Georgy."
LANGSTON. What do you like about it?
LOUISE. I don't know, the way it slides off the tongue, all smooth like. You think that's how Negroes really talk down South?
LANGSTON. That's how I remember it.
LOUISE. Is that Zora's line?
LANGSTON. I think so, but it's hard to tell sometimes. It all sort of runs together. You know, what came from her and what came from me.
LOUISE. Ask you a question? You like working with her?
LANGSTON. She's very talented.
LOUISE. You know, she's too old for you.
LANGSTON. What?
LOUISE. At least ten years older, but she likes to act like she's our age.
LANGSTON. I hadn't really thought of it. And why would she be too old for me? I'm not looking to—
LOUISE. Why'd you pick her?
LANGSTON. I didn't really. We knew each other from before, and I introduced her to Godmother. Artists should help other artists, and Zora has an authentic voice that I thought Godmother would appreciate.
LOUISE. Do you appreciate it?
LANGSTON. Yes, certainly. You don't like her.
LOUISE. I didn't say that.
LANGSTON. I can hear it in your voice.
LOUISE. She can be—I don't know—brusque sometimes.

LANGSTON. What did she say to you?
LOUISE. Nothing I can't handle.
LANGSTON. I don't like the sound of that.
LOUISE. You want to fight my battles for me?
LANGSTON. Only if you, you want me to.
LOUISE. I don't see you as a fighter.
LANGSTON. I can fight. Fought my father all my life. Compared to him, Zora's a pussycat.
LOUISE. I'm not one to complain, and I won't start now.
LANGSTON. You know I value our friendship, Louise. I've always felt you were a good judge of character. If you don't like Zora—
LOUISE. What are you going to do? I like Zora fine. I just don't want her hurting you.
LANGSTON. How can she hurt me?
LOUISE. She's very brash.
LANGSTON. She has a big personality.
LOUISE. Godmother wants to see a draft in two weeks.
LANGSTON. When did she say this?
LOUISE. She told me yesterday. Said you've been working all summer and should have *something* by now—
LANGSTON. Why didn't she call me?
LOUISE. She expects you to be working.
LANGSTON. But if she's set a deadline—
LOUISE. You'll probably hear from her later today. I must say, she's really taken to Zora.
LANGSTON. Has she?
LOUISE. And the sculpture has grown on her—you know, the one Zora brought back.
LANGSTON. The "primal urges" yes, I know.
LOUISE. Godmother says that it's the truest representation of love she's ever seen.
LANGSTON. She said that…?
ZORA'S VOICE. *(Off.)* Who said what? *(Zora enters carrying a brown paper bag.)*
LOUISE. The old woman likes that thing you gave her now.

ZORA. What's not to like? It's beautiful.
LOUISE. Langston and I were just reading the new scene back.
ZORA. How'd it sound?
LANGSTON. Like you!
LOUISE. It's very funny.
ZORA. That's the way people do it in Eatonville.
LANGSTON. I have some ideas about what happens next.
ZORA. I'm all ears, chief.
LOUISE. What'd you bring us?
ZORA. I thought we could use a little pick-me-up.
LOUISE. Langston says he's going to take a nap.
LANGSTON. I don't need a nap now; I need a drink.
ZORA. *(Pulling a bottle of rye from the bag.)* Then you've come to the right place. Any glasses 'round here?
LANGSTON. Comin' right up! *(Langston heads to the kitchen, retrieves glasses.)*
ZORA. I'm also thinking we might have to rewrite the opening scene.
LANGSTON. What? Wait just a minute…
ZORA. I love yours, of course, but it's too intimate—needs something a tad grander for the curtain-raiser.
LANGSTON. *(Returning and handing each a glass.)* I think we stick with what we've got.
ZORA. *(Opening the bottle, pouring a little rye into each glass.)* You've got to have an open mind about these things.
LANGSTON. Do I?
ZORA. This here's a work in progress, ain't it?
LANGSTON. It is.
ZORA. So, what's the harm in listening to my idea? What do you say, Louise?
LOUISE. No harm t'all really. You know, as we sip our drinks.
ZORA. That's what I'm saying. Monsieur Hughes…?
LANGSTON. Fine. But you should know I'm only humoring you.
ZORA. Noted. But first! *(Zora raises her glass; they join her for the toast.)* May we get what we want…
LOUISE. Yes.

ZORA. May we get what we need…
LANGSTON. Here, here!
ZORA. But may we never get what we deserve. *(They laugh. They drink.)*
LOUISE. Woo!
LANGSTON. Goodness gracious.
ZORA. This'll finally put some hair on your chest, Langston.
LANGSTON. I can feel it growing already!
ZORA. Gather 'round, children, while I paint, for you, a picture.
LANGSTON. Paint away, Picasso.
ZORA. It's opening night on Broadway…
LOUISE. The lights, the glamour, the—
LANGSTON. The Great White Way!
ZORA. Not if I can help it. Listen here: We've got all kinds of people filling the seats?
LANGSTON. Who people?
ZORA. Dignitaries, muckety-mucks.
LANGSTON. Ambassadors and prime ministers.
ZORA. If you'd like.
LOUISE. The president maybe.
ZORA. He's there for sure.
LOUISE. Movie stars.
ZORA. Don't mind if they do.
LOUISE. Godmother.
ZORA. 'Course.
LANGSTON. The common people too.
LOUISE. Black and white.
ZORA. Brown, yellow, purple, red—
LANGSTON. A genuine melting pot. *(Langston pours himself and Louise more rye.)*
ZORA. And as they, with bated breath, sit waiting for that red silk curtain to rise, they're talking amongst themselves, anticipating the story that's about to unfold, written by two of the greatest voices of the age. And when it does…Oh, when it does, what is there to greet them…?

LOUISE. Tell us.
LANGSTON. Lay it on us, Zora.
ZORA. Joe Clarke's general store, the pride of Eatonville, where folks come for their various and sundries. We see a porch, the place the men folk gather to chew their cane, their cud, or whatever it is they like to chew. This is scuttlebutt central, where they while away the evening hours after the women folk have fed them and told them to get they asses lost for a few hours. *(Motioning to an empty chair.)* Now, over here we got Deacon Hambo. And next to him is Lum Boger, a town marshal. *(She motions to Langston.)* And where you are, Langston, sits Reverend Simms, the Methodist preacher.
LANGSTON. *(Making the sign of the cross.)* Bless you, children, bless you.
ZORA. And he wants to be the new mayor.
LANGSTON. Who's the mayor now?
ZORA. *(Referring to herself.)* Why, the man, the myth, the proprietor of this humble establishment: Mayor Joe Clarke, at your service! *(Zora bows. Louise applauds.)*
LANGSTON. What makes him so great?
ZORA. He's got a brain and a tenacity rare among men. And this one evening, upon which the curtain rises, isn't like any other.
LANGSTON. Why's that?
ZORA. Because tonight, for the first time, Reverend Simms makes plain his ambition for elected office.
LOUISE. Sounds like we're on the cusp of a skirmish.
ZORA. Indeed, we are, Louise! That's your cue. *(Louise goes to her typewriter and begins typing with Langston's first line as Reverend Simms. Zora continues to Langston.)* Reverend, we await your declaration.
LANGSTON. Oh, right. Makin' plain my ambition…Uh, uh… (*Improvising as Reverend Simms, clearing his throat.*) "Far as I'm concerned this here town might best be lookin' for some new blood to run it—try sumpin' fresh."
LOUISE. *(Typing.)* That's good! Keep going.
ZORA. *(Improvising as Clarke.)* "Uh, looka heah reverend, when Ah

started dis town, Ah walked right up to de white folks an' laid down two hun'ded dollahs wid dis right hand you see befo' you an' got mah papers an' put dis town on de map."
LANGSTON. *(As Simms.)* "Well, whut map did you put it on, Joe, 'cause Ah ain't seed it on no map!"
LOUISE. *(Typing.)* Oh, and you just know the other menfolk are egging the reverend on.
ZORA. *(As Clarke.)* "But ain't I de mayor? Ain't I the storekeeper 'round heah—the postmaster, the Grand Pooh Bah? And I keeps ma eye on the whole lot of rules breakers and long-mouthed troublemakers. I catch 'em, I run 'em straight outta town."
LANGSTON. *(As Simms.)* "Hold your harness there, mistah mayor. Fact of de matter, far as I can see, Eatonville ain't run lak it oughta. Can't run dem all dem criminals outta town, 'else we ain't got nobody left. But if it 'twere me as mayor, I'd jail 'em. Thing is, we ain't got no jail."
ZORA. *(As Clarke.)* "Don't you reckon if de town needed uh jailhouse that Ah would have got one built long befo' now? Thing is, we don't need one no-how."
LANGSTON. *(As Simms.)* "We do so need a jail!"
LOUISE. *(Typing.)* And what does Mayor Clarke say to that?!
ZORA. *(As Clarke.)* "You don't like how things are run 'round heah, reverend, then you welcome ta mosey on down the road apiece and never come back."
LANGSTON. *(As Simms.)* "You tryin' to insult me, mistah mayor?"
ZORA. *(As Clarke.)* "Don't keer how you take it. You can wander in the de wilderness fer all I keer, ya sham of a charlatan, ya false prophet!"
LANGSTON. *(As Simms, jumping to his feet.)* "False prophet?! Them's fightin' words, ya muddy hump!" *(Langston puts up his dukes.)*
LOUISE. Oh, Lord-a-mercy!
LANGSTON. "Come on, ya lily-livered huckster, Ah'll strew yuh all over Orange County! Come on, now, come on! Youse a big see-gar, but Ah kin smoke yuh!"

ZORA. *(As Clarke.)* "Far as I can tell, reverend, you couldn't smoke a rib." *(At that insult, Langston starts moving his feet and dancing around Zora like a boxer.)*
LANGSTON. *(As Simms.)* "Hold me back, somebody! Somebody, hold me back!" *(Louise goes to Langston and pretends to restrain him. Simms is a chicken, after all.)*
LOUISE. Whoa there, big fella, whoa!
LANGSTON. *(As Simms.)* "That's right, that's right. 'Cause wit dis right hand…wit dis right hand, I'll wind you up real good, I will. In fact, I'll knock that sucker clear into the Okefenokee!" *(By now, Langston and Zora are nearly nose-to-nose. They hold for a moment, and then the three burst out laughing.)*
ZORA. And so, our story begins! *(All three applaud.)*
LOUISE. Now that's a curtain-raiser!
LANGSTON. Smash hit! Deserves another toast! *(Louise quickly jots something in her notebook.)*
ZORA. Nah, nah, nah.
LANGSTON. What?
ZORA. We've got work to do—got to get the rest of this down. Louise, put on a pot of coffee. It's gonna be a long night!

SCENE SIX

Later that night/next morning (still July/August 1930). Louise is asleep in the bedroom. Lights rise on Zora and Langston, bedraggled and tired, around a table. They're both sipping coffee and reading from their play. They read the dialogue straight, not as actors.

LANGSTON. "Gimme that lyin' snake! That snake wasn't but four foot long when you killed him last year and you done grown him ten feet in a year."
ZORA. "Well, I don't know about that. Some of the snakes around here is powerful long. I went out in my front yard yesterday right after the rain and killed a great big ol' cottonmouth."
LANGSTON. "This sho is a snake town."

ZORA. Should we keep it a cottonmouth, you think?
LANGSTON. I like cottonmouth. Why? What were you thinking?
ZORA. Copperhead maybe…?
LANGSTON. You decide.
ZORA. You decide, Langston. How many pages we got?
LANGSTON. *(Looking through the manuscript.)* 21, no, 22!
ZORA. We got a-ways to go, but we're building to something.
LANGSTON. Yes, we are. I looked at those new pages and massaged them a little. Listen to this. Lige asks, "How did you-all make out this evenin', boys?" Then, Jim retorts, "Oh, dem white folks at the party shelled out right well. Kept Dave busy pickin' it up."
ZORA. That's good, that's good, much better than mine.
LANGSTON. I thought so. No offense.
ZORA. None taken.
LANGSTON. I also had another idea.
ZORA. Alright. More coffee?
LANGSTON. No, I'm fine.
ZORA. I need some. Now, go ahead. *(She pours herself more coffee.)*
LANGSTON. So, as it is now, Jim and Dave are fighting over a turkey.
ZORA. Right.
LANGSTON. Why not make it something else, something that makes the stakes much higher?
ZORA. Like what?
LANGSTON. Like a girl.
ZORA. But these are Florida country folk—farmers, chicken, cow, and turkey-raisers.
LANGSTON. But a woman makes it—
ZORA. Like every story I ever heard.
LANGSTON. It's what people want, Zora! Think of your audience.
ZORA. I'm a scholar, an anthropologist, and as my mentor, Dr. Boas, told me—
LANGSTON. Are we conducting a research study or writing a play? Why not make it that Jim hits Dave with the mule bone over a girl—over Daisy. The mule bone was your idea. All I'm asking is that we try it with them fighting over a girl. What do you say?

ZORA. Fine!
LANGSTON. It's just—you know—men being men, fighting over the local looker.
ZORA. Oh, Lord! Do I know from that!
LANGSTON. Who are you fighting off these days?
ZORA. You, I thought.
LANGSTON. No, really.
ZORA. Why you want to know? You jealous?
LANGSTON. Would you like me to be?
ZORA. Maybe a little.
LANGSTON. Okay, then. How about this? *(Langston feigns jealousy, as if acting in a melodrama.)* Who is he, Zora?
ZORA. *(Feigning coyness.)* I can't really say.
LANGSTON. I've had enough of your looking at other men.
ZORA. I've been making passes at you all day and all night, but you never seem to notice. But see, I want you to treat me like a woman is supposed to be treated. *(ZORA moves to LANGSTON.)*
LANGSTON. How's that?
ZORA. Wrap your arms around me and hold me close. Put your mouth on my shoulder, and drag it up my neck, along this creamy mocha skin, until you reach that soft space right below my ear. Kiss me there, in that tender spot until I sigh and put my hand on the back of your head, and then—
LANGSTON. We should stop playing.
ZORA. Are we playing?
LANGSTON. You know we are.
ZORA. Funny to think we got two men fighting over a woman in the play, but here, right now, if you look at it a certain way, you got two women doing the same thing to one man. And Daisy got her eye on you.
LANGSTON. Shhh! *(LANGSTON moves to the bedroom door, which is ajar. He peers inside.)*
ZORA. Still out cold…?
LANGSTON. Like after a round with Jack Johnson. *(He closes the bedroom door.)* But you said two women. You the other one?
ZORA. I'm a married woman.

LANGSTON. You never even see the man you're married to.
ZORA. That's why we're going to last until the end of time. No see, no fight, no problem.
LANGSTON. That doesn't sound like a healthy marriage.
ZORA. You saying that Louise and Wally going to last?
LANGSTON. I know nothing about their marriage.
ZORA. You got eyes, don't you?
LANGSTON. We should get back to work.
ZORA. No more work for me tonight. I'm getting all woozy.
LANGSTON. Godmother is expecting an update.
ZORA. The update is, it's coming along.
LANGSTON. The rules she sets are hard and fast.
ZORA. Doesn't mean you have to play by them. You know, I can talk to her. Maybe if she hears it from me.
LANGSTON. Hears what from you?
ZORA. That you're dissatisfied—
LANGSTON. I am *not* dissatisfied.
ZORA. Yeah, you are. You're chafing against this woman's arbitrary rules, but you're not mad at her. You're mad at yourself for not standing up for yourself.
LANGSTON. How do you know all this?
ZORA. It's plain as day. Something's eating at you.
LANGSTON. I'm just a little tired of, you know, having to answer to her every beck and call and paste a smile on my face as she drones on about the Negro's place in the world. Maybe she's noticed.
ZORA. What makes you think that?
LANGSTON. My check's late.
ZORA. What?
LANGSTON. It'll probably come tomorrow, but I feel like she's toying with me. And since we're behind schedule with the play…
ZORA. You think she's holding onto your check as ransom.
LANGSTON. Could be.
ZORA. But why you, and not me?
LANGSTON. I'm the lead writer.
ZORA. Has she done this before?

LANGSTON. Just once, when she didn't think I was paying the proper respect— saying the right things in the way she wanted me to.
ZORA. Sometimes that's the price of admission.
LANGSTON. It's getting harder.
ZORA. But you need the money.
LANGSTON. Yes, I need the money, but she's like family to me.
ZORA. She ain't no family.
LANGSTON. She's a friend.
ZORA. She's a patron.
LANGSTON. And she has the power.
ZORA. And you have the talent.
LANGSTON. Is that how you talk to her? Like equals?
ZORA. We've all got to mind our manners around her. But I play her game. I temper my impulse and don't take it all too seriously. But if you're going to play the game, you've got to play it.
LANGSTON. I wanted to ask you something.
ZORA. Hold that thought; I've got to pee. *(Zora exits to bathroom; Langston rises, paces, pours himself another glass of booze and slugs it. The phone rings, and he picks it up.)*
LANGSTON. *(Into phone.)* Hello? Godmother! Zora and I were just talking about you, saying how supportive you've been on this play we're working…Another week, maybe two, and we'll have a complete first draft…It's coming along gloriously, really…Oh, yes, she has a real ear for the Negro vernacular of the South…It's so good to hear your voice; it's been so long…Well, thank you. I try. *(Zora re-enters. Langston motions to her about who is on the phone. Zora approaches Langston and listens in on the conversation.)* Oh, yes, I'm always anxious to get your perspective. *(Zora falls to her knees and pleads in an exaggerated manner. Langston tries to shoo her away and speaks to Zora.)* Stop! *(Into phone.)* I look forward to speaking to you again soon…What's that? Money's always tight, but I'm managing.
ZORA. Sell your soul, brother man. Sell it!
LANGSTON. *(Into phone.)* Not yet, but…Oh, thank you. I'm sure it'll be here any day…No problem at all. These things happen…Is there

anything else I need…? I can't, I can't think of— (*Zora grabs the phone and speaks into it using a deeper voice.)*
ZORA. *(Grabbing the phone and speaking into it in a deeper voice.)* More money! *(Langston grabs the phone back from her.)*
LANGSTON. I…I did want to buy a new shirt for the reading I'm doing next week. So, if you can spare—That extra money would be put to good use, I can tell you. Yes, Godmother, thank you. Thank you! Goodbye. *(Zora grabs the phone back from him and hangs it up. To Zora.)* What are you trying to do?
ZORA. Get you paid!
LANGSTON. But she probably thinks—
ZORA. She doesn't "think" anything. You can pay your rent this month. You're welcome! Now, what did you want to talk to me about?
LANGSTON. I wanted to talk about Louise.
ZORA. What did she do?
LANGSTON. She didn't do anything.
ZORA. I don't trust her.
LANGSTON. Why not?
ZORA. She's a double agent: She works for Godmother; she works for us.
LANGSTON. Well, if it's her loyalty that concerns you, I have a solution.
ZORA. I'm listening.
LANGSTON. Cut her in.
ZORA. In on what?
LANGSTON. On the play.
ZORA. How you mean?
LANGSTON. Give her a percentage. You know, of the royalties once it's produced.
ZORA. You're joking.
LANGSTON. No, I'm—
ZORA. She's a typist, Langston.
LANGSTON. She's an educated woman.
ZORA. Then let her write her own play.
LANGSTON. But as an editor—

ZORA. We're the editors.
LANGSTON. We're the writers, and there's nothing wrong with perspective.
ZORA. You and I bring all the perspective we need.
LANGSTON. What about a third eye.
ZORA. Anybody's but hers.
LANGSTON. Why?
ZORA. This was her idea, wasn't it?
LANGSTON. What? No!
ZORA. There's no way you came up with this scheme.
LANGSTON. What scheme? It's a business arrangement.
ZORA. It's not and never will be.
LANGSTON. The woman works hard—
ZORA. We all work hard, but the division of labor here is clear as an August afternoon in the Everglades: You, me: writers. Louise: typist. You got that?
LANGSTON. You don't have to get so sore about it.
ZORA. Anybody try to take money out of my pocket and food out of my mouth, I get sore.
LANGSTON. She only made a suggestion.
ZORA. What did you say?
LANGSTON. I said that I was just making a suggestion.
ZORA. You said *she* made a suggestion.
LANGSTON. No, I didn't.
ZORA. I heard you.
LANGSTON. What difference does it make anyway?
ZORA. It makes all the difference in the world. See, this play of ours is my coming-out, Langston—my grand entrance. I didn't arrive with an inheritance or a patron or a silk dress laid out waiting. I arrived with five dollars, a beat-up suitcase, and a hankerin' for pig's feet. But this…this is my ball. My introduction to the world. And do you know who I'm stepping out with? The great and glorious Langston Hughes. So, if you think I'm going to let some purse-carrying pickaninny ruin my moment, you can think again.
LANGSTON. She's not going to ruin anything.

ZORA. You know what she's doing, don't you? She's using you.
LANGSTON. Why would she—
ZORA. I don't know yet, but I'm going to find out.
LANGSTON. Leave Louise alone!
ZORA. I'm just trying to save you from yourself.
LANGSTON. Save *me*? I'm the one who saved *you*, remember? I got you in the room in the first place. You're here because I allowed you to be.
ZORA. Allowed me, huh? Like I don't belong.
LANGSTON. That's not what I said.
ZORA. That's what you meant.
LANGSTON. It is *not* what I meant. But if I want to give her part of my half—
ZORA. Then you're a fool, but that's your prerogative. But she gets one sliver of a percentage off my half, and it's all over. I'll drop all this like a hot potato.
LANGSTON. You can't do that.
ZORA. Watch me. *(Zora exits, slamming the door. After a moment, she reenters, grabs the bottle of booze, and exits again. A car honks and brakes screech to a halt outside. Zora yells at the driver, off.)* There's a stop sign there, stupid cracker! *(A beat, and then Louise, abruptly woken, peeks her head out of the bedroom looking for the cause of the commotion.)*

THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—ORDER A COPY AT WWW.NEXTSTAGEPRESS.COM