



Emmett Draft

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Emmett

by

Toni Morrison

Dramaturgy by Edward Love

Cast of Characters

Emmett

Ma

George Harvey

Eustus Spottswood

J. W.

Roy

Carolyn

Black Girl

Time: Right Now

ACT 1

THE CURTAIN IS ALREADY UP AS THE AUDIENCE ENTERS THE THEATRE. A VERY DIM "PRE-SET" LIGHTS THE DOWNSTAGE PLAYING AREA AND CASTS SHADOWS ON A SCRIM WHICH CONCEALS THE SET FROM THE AUDIENCE'S INITIAL VIEW. THE LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK DOWNSTAGE AND COME UP AGAIN ILLUMINATING THE CENTER SECTION OF THE SCAFFOLD-LIKE SET IN SILHOUETTE HIGH ABOVE THE FLOOR. (BEHIND THE SCRIM) EMMETT ENTERS IN SILHOUETTE ON THE PLATFORM ABOVE. WE CANNOT SEE THE PLATFORM, SO HE APPEARS TO BE WALKING ON AIR. HE STANDS STATUE-LIKE AS A SINGLE OVERHEAD SPOT FADES UP SLOWLY ON HIM. HE IS CARRYING A LARGE SAMPLE CASE--THE KIND TRAVELING SALESMEN OF COSMETICS OR FULLER BRUSHES USED TO CARRY. HE IS DRESSED IN A WHITE SHIRT, SLEEVES ROLLED UP, VEST, FIFTIES PEG TROUSERS AND ANKLE-HIGH SNEAKERS. HIS HAIR IS CUT SHORT EXCEPT FOR A SHAFT IN THE FRONT. HE IS HUMMING AS HE POSITIONS THE SAMPLE CASE, OPENS IT SO THAT ITS LID CONCEALS ITS CONTENTS, REMOVES A TABLET OF PAPER FROM HIS POCKET AND A PENCIL FROM THE SAMPLECASE. HE SITS ON THE FLOOR. WRITING.

Emmett:

August 29. 28? No, 29. 1956, Sumner Mississippi.

(Rocking his head and singing)

M I

Crooked letter crooked letter I

Crooked letter crooked letter I

Hump back hump back I Mississippi

Sunflower County

(Rural sounds here with background music)

Where? Where in Sunflower County? Mmmmmmm. Hey! The gin mill. Why not?

(Lights come up showing one section at a time, the interior of a cotton gin mill, disused, full of the gins, binders and all the fangs and blades of that industry.)

Emmett:

Good. That's good. Solid. Yeah.

(Jumping up)

Carolyn! Yo, Carolyn.

(A white woman in her late sixties enters. She is shabby, unattractive seems depressed and befuddled. She hovers near the wings confused about where she is.)

Nope. Nope. Not yet. Get on back.

(He walks about consulting tablet and the details of the machinery. Notices that Carolyn is still lingering at the wings.)

Didn't you hear what I said? Get on back in there till I call you.

(She retreats.)

Damn. Can't do nothing right. Thirty years and still stupid. Lemme see.

(Muses; smiles)

Spottwood, Eustus Spottwood.

(Eustus Spottwood enters. A Black man in his forties, dressed in faded coveralls.)

(Calling)

George Harvey!

(George Harvey enters. A Black man dressed in a business suit. Eustus and George recognize each other and shake hands and embrace as though they had not seen each other for a long time.)

Hey baby!

(Jumping down from a piece of machinery above their heads and landing right in front of them.)

George. Eustus, How you doin?

EUSTUS:

Emmett? Good God. That you?

Emmett:

Damn right.

EUSTUS AND GEORGE:

I'll be damn.

(Noises of excitement, shock, love, hugging, slapping--all excessive and over-acted.)

Emmett:

(Sharply) OK. That's enough.

(Abruptly, George and Eustus stop and wait for direction.)

Enough. I want. . . I want. . . Hey. Let's sing. Remember how it went?

(Singing)

"If I didn't care for you. . ." Come on.

(All three sing the Inkspot favorite and dance the steps that were popular then. At the end of the routine the two older men drop back into neutral.)

You need practice, man. You had a voice like a angel. What happen? You start smoking?

Eustace:

(Embarrassed) I don't smoke; drink neither.

Emmett:

Drink neither? (Sly) What was in that bottle we hung down the well? Kool-Aid? (Laughing) Holler, that's what it made you do. (Imitates a drunken, teen-aged Eustace.) Uncle Drew threw a hammer at your head. (Sourly) Missed you. Right, George?

George:

Right. Right.

Emmett:

(Coldly) Missed him. That's what made you stop drinking, Eus? Somebody tried to kill you, huh? You never was one for much rough stuff was you? You and Uncle Drew. Oh, he could throw a hammer all right, but he couldn't stop two crackers from snatching me out of his house. Don't that beat all?

(Background sounds of motor of pick-up truck; slamming doors, voices in rage, voices in defense; motor of truck starting up and driving off.)

Throw a hammer at a kid having fun, but can't throw nothing at two crackers dragging his own nephew out the house.

Eustace:

That ain't right what you saying, and it ain't fair.

Emmett:

Not fair?

George:

That was a long time ago, Emmett.

Emmett:

Was it? Hey, you lookin good.

(Touches and arranges George's lapels, etc.)

Put on a light weight though. Not good, George.
Gotta stay lean, fit.

(Shadow boxes and punches George playfully.)

Come on. Come on.

George:

Em, I'm forty-four years old. Forty-four.

Emmett:

(Stops punching; affecting innocence) How's it feel,
forty-four?

George:

Well, it ain't twenty-four. (Laughs)

Emmett:

(With some menace) I wouldn't know. I got stopped.
No forty-four. No thirty-four. No twenty-four.
Not even fifteen. Just fourteen. That's all I
know, George. Fourteen. So you all got to tell me
about the rest. Tell me, Eus, when you get to be
twenty, do you cool down, are the women different?
You got any kids?

Eustace:

(Hesitant) Five.

Emmett:

No shit. How old?

Eustace:

Got a girl 23. 'Nother 18. One is. . .

Emmett:

(Screaming) Older than me! Older than me! My best friend got kids older than me.

(Begins to stroke and handle the machinery in a threatening way)

What they do for fun Eustace? Go to dances and stuff?

(Loud dance music)

Eat smoked pork on saturday, chicken on sunday?

(Slamming around in a rage)

Big old biscuits with jalapeno jelly and Kool-Aid. Sit on the porch and look at lightening bugs?

(Fatigued--music softer)

Drink well water out a gourd? Taste like moss.

(Earnestly)

Does the water taste like moss? Is it cold? It used to be cold. Real, real cold.

(Closes his eyes, remembering the taste of cold well water on a hot day in Mississippi)

Oh well, let's get on with it. Ma! Ma!

(Mrs. Till enters; she is bent and older than her years.)

Oh, Ma. No. Not like that. What'd you do to your

hair? You was--a big woman, wasn't you, Ma? Stand up straight, Ma. Come on, now. Here. . .

(Presses her spine while pressing her stomach to make her stand straight)

Little more, little more, just a li-

(She shakes her head.)

I'm doing that Ma. You have to do what I want you to.

Mrs. Till:

Bobo, I'm awful tired. You know I. . .

Emmett:

(Angry) No! No! Oh shit. Your teeth. You got different teeth, Ma. (Frustrated) OK. OK. Look, just sit. Over there. Sit down and rest.

(She sits. George and Eustace go to her, shake hands, speak to her words we cannot hear. Emmett picks up his table and writes furiously for a moment, then more calmly, singing along with a gospel choir "I am Climbing Jacob's Ladder." At the end of the song, he looks at his mother and the two men engaged in a private conversation. He picks up something and smashes it.)

All right! Here we go! Carolyn!

(Teasing voice)

Oh, Carolyn.

(Carolyn re-enters; sees Emmett and the others. Reacts as though she is in danger and turns to go.)

Uh uh, Carolyn. This is my world, baby. You ain't going nowhere.

Carolyn:

You better let me out of here. Don't you come near me.

(No one is.)

Stay the hell away from me!

(Runs toward wings, bumps into "wall." Searches it. No exit. Emmett and the others watch her feeling an invisible wall, touching it at its base, pounding on it, jabbing it, etc. Finally she turns back toward the others, her back edging along the "wall." Mrs. Till recognizes her and slowly, painfully begins to raise herself up from where she is seated. Starts toward Carolyn.)

Emmett:

(Waving) No Ma. It's OK. Just sit. All in good time. All in good time. You like a good time, Carolyn?

(He wiggles his pelvis at her. Wolf-whistles, etc. Then bursts into laughter. Points up the difference between his young, muscular self and her old shapeless self.)

(Still playing with Carolyn)

J. W.! Get in here!

(J. W. Milan enters.)

J. W. Milan, skilled mechanic! Not guilty! Roy Bryant!

(Roy enters.)

Mr. Bryant is a store keeper. Not guilty!

(J. W. and Roy are silent, alert standing close to one another.)

What's the matter? I said not guilty, didn't I? Not guilty, not guilty. You ain't guilty, but you is evil and you also is in danger.

(Giggles. Emmett turns his back to them. Roy pulls out a knife and swishes it toward Emmett's back, just missing. Mrs. Till, George, Eustace jump up.

Carolyn clasps her hands in hope. Emmett turns toward Roy. Roy sticks the knife deep into Emmett's stomach. Others scream. Emmett does not move.)

This is my dream, fucker.

(The men back away slowly; turn to leave; bump into "wall." They search it. Find no exit.)

What you know? Look like somebody kidnapped your ass. Ain't that a hoot?

(He walks over to Carolyn and sings, "In the dark, In the dark, I get such a thrill, when you press your sweet lips to mine, etc.; dances with Carolyn as close as possible--a kind of slow drag. Carolyn is repelled, stiff with rage. Suddenly Emmett stops, steps back and, with a glance at Carolyn's husband, Roy, wolf-whistles at her. J. W. rubs his jaw, flings out a hand to restrain the leap Roy begins to make to defend his wife.)

(To Carolyn)

Did you think I was serious?

(To J. W.)

Did you think I was serious? I was fourteen, man. Fourteen! Did you think I was serious? In the ninth grade. In the ninth grade. Two weeks after you killed me I would have been in high school. You know what, I couldn't wait to go to high school.

(Sighs)

Hey, did you ever meet my mom?

Mrs. Till:

Baby, please.

Emmett:

No. Come on, Ma.

(Introduces them, formally, cheerfully)

Carolyn. My mother.

(The women react.)

What about a little curtsey, Miss Ann?

(Carolyn Curtsies to Mrs. Till.)

You need practice. Practice, I said. Keep practicing till you get it right.

(She continues to curtsey.)

Mrs. Till:

I don't want that. I don't need that.

Emmett:

(Shouting) I want it. I need it!

(To J. W., cordially)

J. W.? You and Roy ever meet my Mom? Mom, this is J. W., skilled mechanic, killer, farmer, jack-of-all-trades, and this is his brother.

(Slapping him on the back)

Roy, ditto, except for skill. Fucker can't even shoot. J. W. here's the marksman. "Shoot the head off a turtle at fifty yards," right? Right!

(Shaking his finger at Carolyn who has stopped curtseying)

Practice. Practice makes perfect.

(She continues, frequently stumbling, but is forced by Emmett's attention to keep it up, until, puppet-like, she establishes a rhythm. Mrs. Till is discomfitted. Eustace and George stay by her to soothe her. George approaches Emmett.)

George:

Look, uh, bobo. I know this is, uh, how you want it
and everything, but, but. . .

Emmett:

But, but. . . ?

George:

Well, things is different now.

Emmett:

Different?

George:

Yeah. Oh yeah. I mean you wouldn't believe Sumner
now. I mean, well, look. . .

Emmett:

(To Carolyn) Practice, bitch.

George:

(Showing a card to Emmett) See this?

Emmett:

What is it?

George:

My registration card. My voter registration card.

Emmett:

(Deadpan) Hot shit.

George:

And look here. Look. Can you believe this.

(Pulling out another card)

Mastercard. Visa Card. Sears and Roebuck. Exxon.

(Emmett laughs.)

(Angry) What's so funny?

Emmett:

Wallets, man. Wallets are funny. I had a wallet once. It had a place for money, too, just like yours.

(Handles George's wallet)

Yeah, and a place for cards, all kinds of credit cards. But I didn't have none. Money, I mean, and credit cards. But it had this place for pictures, photos. It's one of those things that makes you a man, having a wallet.

(To Carolyn)

Sit down woman. You can't do nothing, learn nothing.

(Fingering the wallet)

Cause when you have a wallet, you can pull it out of your hip pocket and show it to another man. He pulls out his; I pull out mine. He shows me his; I show him mine. See? First thing you did was show me yours. The bullshit you got in here, just like the bullshit I had in mine. You got cards, I had pictures. All bullshit. So another man would know how tough you is. Hey. . .

(Punches George in friendly but manic manner)

Hey, George. You tough? You tough? Yeah, you tough. White folks don't scare you now. You got cards. But seems to me I remember when you didn't have no wallet. Seems to me I was the only one with a wallet. You think that's why you was so scared to meddle some white girl? And why I wasn't? Black Boy with a wallet--he got to have something in it. Don't he, Carolyn? Don't he Roy? What you got in your wallet, J. W.? One of them little Klan Cards, right?

J. W.:

Look boy. Let me tell you something. . .

(Emmett punches J. W. in the stomach, hard, then curbs himself from being enraged and doing more, as if waiting to savor it later. J. W. is bent over, breathless and in pain.)

Emmett:

Speak up, sweetheart. You ain't got all day.

J. W.:

(Gasping) Don't make no difference what you do to me. You a dead nigger and I made you dead. Nothing gonna change that.

Mrs. Till:

(Screaming a loud, pitiful scream) I ain't going through this no more. I am tired!

(George and Eustace try to hold her down.)

Let go of me!

(To Emmett, pleading)

Let me go. Please Bobo, if you ever loved me, let

me go. Please.

Emmett:

(Tenderly) I'm not finished, Ma.

Mrs. Till:

Yes you are, baby. You're finished. I'm finished. These here raggedy white folks--can't you see they finished too?

Emmett:

They can't be finished. You either, least of all me. Nothing is finished, until I finish it. I finish it. Can't nobody finish me. You think cause I'm dead I'm finished. Shit no. Shit no. Oh, it's going to be finished all right. But by me this time. I'm the one didn't get to be grown--didn't get to go to high school.

Mrs. Till:

You call them names. They call you names. What's left to do, baby?

(As he talks and she replies, Emmett walks up to level where his sample case is. Rummages in it and pulls something out.)

Emmett:

One thing more. One thing, before I finish it for good!

(Throws his beaten-up, dried-up corpse down among them. Carolyn screams. Mrs. Till weeps loudly. Eustace covers his nose. George vomits. J. W. and Roy look at the corpse and then turn their backs. Emmett pulls from his sampler a cleaner's garment bag in which is a pale blue suit hanging from a

hanger. Then he pulls out shoes and a hat. With all of this he walks over to Roy and J. W.)

Proper burial in a proper suit.

(They resist.)

(Bellowing) Move!

(The whites, including Carolyn, all set about the task of dressing the corpse in the blue suit. When they falter, Emmett points a finger which makes them jump as though a bolt of electricity has shot through them, and they submit. While they do the shrouding/dressing, Emmett sings and dances a powerful, sexy, rocking song--like Aretha Franklin's "Respect" but of the period he would remember. He is interrupted by a scuffle in the audience. The music fades. A young Black girl climbs up through pit onto the stage.)

Black Girl:

Stop it! Stop it!

(She kicks the corpse out of their hands and continues to kick it until it is off stage.)

I'm not listening to anymore of this mess! What is this?

(To Emmett)

Who the hell do you think you are?

Emmett:

Get outta here! You ain't in my play!

Black Girl:

That's the trouble with it. I'm not in it.