

A STRANGER ON THE BUS

by E. Shockley

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Commissioned by Children's Theatre of Charlotte.

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CHARACTERS
(In order of appearance)

Junior Delaney	Sara Davidson	Monty Davidson
Mary (May) Delaney	Mrs. Davidson	Joseph Delaney
Jim Crow	Liberty Delaney	Professor
Supt. Barnes	Miss Catherine	Mouse/Man
Student Chorus	Joseph (Young)	May (Young)
Margaret (Young)	Monty (Young)	All American Mom
Margaret Davidson	Medic	Faceless Soldiers
Gate Keeper	Reverend	Harry Golden
Plessy	Marshall Thurgood	Ed/Topeka/Kansas
Supreme Court	Librarian	Vendor
Parents #1,2 & 3	Sanders	Captain
Football team	Announcers	Dorothy Counts
Chief	Three Stooges	JCS Protesters
Woolworth's manager	Woolworth patrons	Barbers
Suit	Grady Cole	Johnny Ace
Blackbirds	Black Lawyer	Black Undertaker
Black Councilman	Bailiff	Julius Chambers
Judge McMillan	Integrationist Chorus	Defectors 1,2 & 3
Girl on bus		

PROLOGUE

(A private room in Memorial Hospital.
Liberty is asleep in a hospital bed. Sara and
Junior stand watch over her.)

JUNIOR

I always told myself things were going to be different for my baby sister.

SARA

They will be.

JUNIOR

When?

SARA

Soon.

JUNIOR

They've been saying that since back when mama was a little girl.

SARA

Change doesn't come easy, but it comes.

JUNIOR

I wish I could believe that.

SARA

We're both old enough to remember when your mother wasn't allowed in Memorial Hospital.

JUNIOR

And now my sister is here after getting attacked in an integrated high school riot.

(Sara takes Junior's hand.)

SARA

It's not a perfect world but it's getting better.

(Enter Monty.)

MONTY

Sara.

(Sara let's go of Junior's hand.)

Uncle Monty.

SARA

Hey, Mr. Monty.

JUNIOR

I'm glad to see you again, Junior, though not under these circumstances.

MONTY

That makes two of us.

JUNIOR

How's your sister.

MONTY

Resting.

JUNIOR

They gave her something to help her sleep.

SARA

What do the doctors say?

MONTY

Bruises, maybe a mild concussion.

JUNIOR

Is your mother on the way?

MONTY

Pop went to pick her up.

JUNIOR

So what happened?

MONTY

Didn't you hear about the riot at Harding?

SARA

Let's not use words like riot until we know the facts. We don't want to unduly alarm anyone.

MONTY

JUNIOR

One of the other bus drivers told me there were policemen in gas masks with drawn batons, an angry mob screaming racist filth, a group of blacks kids with chains and two by fours, and even a few Klansman gathered just beyond the school grounds, so you'll have to let me know which part isn't cause for alarm?

(Enter May, Joseph and Mrs. Davidson)

MAY

How's my baby?

JUNIOR

She's a little banged up, that's all.

MONTY

Mother, what are you doing here?

MRS. DAVIDSON

Of course I'm going to come look in on Liberty; I've known this child since back when her mother thought she was just a bad case of indigestion.

JOSEPH

That damn Crow never gets tired of chewing on my children.

MRS. DAVIDSON

I beg your pardon?

JUNIOR

That's just something Pop always says. Every time Crow bites you the world gets smaller.

MONTY

Crow, huh.

JOSEPH

And I been trying to kill that bloodsucker all my life.

MONTY

It does sometimes seem like a living, breathing, flesh eating monster.

JOSEPH

If that's all he wanted then I could take it.

MONTY

I don't understand.

JOSEPH

It's our dreams he's after.

(The voices fades into gibberish as the shadow of Crow grows until it fills the room then a giant black bird appears silhouetted against a confederate flag.)

CROW

Rockabye baby
In the treetops;
When the bow breaks...
Boom shaka laka laka
Boom shaka laka laka
Boom! Gonna rock the house!

(Girl sits up and has the head of a hornet.)

HORNET/GIRL

Oh my god!!

CROW

Boom shaka laka laka
Boom shaka laka laka
Boom! Gonna rock the house!
Wassup!!!

(Crow chases Hornet/Girl off. A bookish looking white professor in black lab coat lectures while Civil War era black caricature slides are shown.)

PROFESSOR

Jim Crow, and this will be on the test, is a mythical agent or symbol, if you will, of oppression and disfranchisement of the American so called Negro. Legend has it that the great traveling minstrel performer Thomas Darmouth Rice saw a gimp legged black stable boy performing an odd little dance. Um...

(The professor dances.)

I spin around, I turn around and jump just so.
Every time I turn around I jump Jim Crow.

(Professor composes himself again.)

Did I mention that this will be on the midterm? Mr. Rice, or "Daddy" as he was called by his admirers, smeared burnt cork onto his face, copied the dance and Jim Crow was born! Mr. Crow remained a relatively harmless buffoon until near the end of the last century when he was adopted by the southern legislature as the official symbol for a system of segregation laws limiting the freedoms of so called Negroes. A landmark Supreme Court case, Plessy versus Ferguson, you all must be very intelligent since no one is taking notes, Plessy v Ferguson established the legal precedent for separation of the races.

PROFESSOR (cont'd)

Buses, railroad cars, public bathrooms, drinking fountains, all were set aside for exclusive use by a single race under a system of apartheid misnamed for a fictitious trickster bird called Jim Crow.

(Jim Crow has been growing out of the floor behind the Professor and eventually covering the slides with his shadow. Crow strikes Professor.)

CROW

(To audience)

Fictitious am I... Excuse us...

(Crow is heard mauling the Professor as limbs and shards of clothing come flying onto the stage.)

And now for our show.

(BLACK)

(LETTERS APPEAR ON A WALL.)

**CHAPTER I: IN THE SHADOW OF A CROW
(ANY COLORED SCHOOL-1932)**

(A door flies open making a great noise.
Superintendent Barnes enters. He has an
enormous white head and is followed by a
black mouse/man and Crow.)

SUPERINTENDENT

What in tarnation is going on here?

(Lights reveal a colored classroom. All of the children are
masked except Young May and Young Joseph.)

CATHERINE

Learning was going on in here until you interrupted.

MOUSE

This is Superintendent Barnes.

CATHERINE

Oh, well I'm glad you're here so now you can demonstrate for my children the proper way
to enter a classroom.

(Pause. Superintendent exits. Knocks.)

Enter.

(Superintendent enters sans the puppet mask.)

SUPERINTENDENT

Hello, uh....??

MOUSE

Catherine.

CATHERINE

Miss Catherine.

SUPERINTENDENT

I'm Superintendent Barnes.

CATHERINE

Welcome to Any Colored School. Say good morning to Superintendent Barnes, children.

EVERYONE

Good morning, Superintendent Barnes.

CATHERINE

He is the man who is going to buy us new textbooks and a pencil sharpener, maps and the like. Now who would like to read for him?

(Hands fly into the air.)

CATHERINE

Joseph.

JOSEPH

Warning, by Langston Hughes.
 Negroes
 Sweet and docile,
 Meek, humble, and kind:
 Beware the day
 They change their mind!

MAY

I knew then and there that I was going to become a teacher. I wanted to talk to white folks like Miss Catherine.

(Miss Catherine steps into a circle of light.)

CATHERINE

Learn, children, learn; knowledge is a ladder.

(Crow turns off her light. The children revolve in their seats and have white faces on the backs of their heads. A book is passed from student to student. Each reads a page and laughs. Finally it reaches Monty.)

MARGARET

What you got there, Montgomery?

(Monty shares the book with Margaret.)

MARGARET

Why would somebody write that in their math book?

MONTY

Cause our old books get sent over to the colored school after we're done with 'em.

MARGARET

They ain't bothering you so why you want to bother them?

MONTY

Heck, Margaret, it's only niggers.

MARGARET

What happens if I tell momma?

MONTY

I don't know, she's the one who set me wise to the books in the first place.

(Crow appears as Abraham Lincoln. Pictures of segregated life circa 1930's appear.)

CROW

Four score and several years ago, our four fathers set forth upon this continent a new nation conceived in trickery and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal; except on buses, at lunch counters, public restrooms, water fountains and anyplace else where my shadow falls south of Mason's Dixon line.

(Crow laughs like PeeWee Herman. "He's Got The Whole World In His Hands" is sung in choral arrangement. He becomes a bus driver and chants "Boom shaka laka back!" as black riders get on the empty bus. It travels a short distance. Joseph and May are seated in the front of the "Colored section." The white seats are empty while blacks crowd into the back. Monty, Margaret and Mrs. Davidson enter and sit in the whites only section. More whites enter. Monty and Margaret give their seats to elderly white patrons then stand. Crow moves the "Colored" sign two rows back chanting, "Boom shaka laka black." Joseph and May rise. Monty sits.)

MONTY

Sit down, Margaret.

MARGARET

I think I'll stand.

MRS. DAVIDSON

(To driver)

Her father, god bless him, was the same way.

(Crow growls at Margaret while the song: "I'll Put A Spell On You" plays and the lights fade to black.)

**CHAPTER II: IN THE SHADOW OF A HAWK
(WORLD WAR II: 1939-1945)**

(A bell rings signaling the start of a wrestling match. Crow, barelegged, carries a placard announcing "World War II.")

ANNOUNCER

Are you ready to rrrumble? Introducing in the blue corner, fighting for freedom, justice and the American way, undefeated in nineteen sanctioned bouts, the good old U.S. of A!!!!

(Cheers. Mom enters in apron with apple pie.)

And the opponent, in the red corner, fighting for fascism, race purity and the Aryan manifesto, undefeated since the last world war; let's have a rousing welcome for the blitzing Nazi!!!

(Enter Nazi helmeted "cousin It" made all of blond hair and wearing jack boots.)

MOM

I like your hair.

(Combatants square off as pictures of Nazi troops, Pearl Harbor, concentration camps, etc. play in the background.)

MONTY

War!

JOSEPH

War!

MAY

War!

MARGARET

War!

EVERYONE

We all know what we're fighting for!

(Each cycle of the chant concludes with a tableaux interpreting the statement of a solo character.)

MONTY: LIBERTY!

MAY: DIGNITY!

JOSEPH: EQUALITY!

MARGARET: HUMANITY!

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(The chant continues under the scene. Events are counterpointed by blows in the wrestling match reflecting who is empowered by the conditions in society.)

MARGARET

The men were off stopping the Nazi hoard.

MAY

The factories were empty so they opened the doors.

MRS. DAVIDSON

The Davidsons do not work in factories.

MARGARET

It's for the war effort.

MAY

Men...

MARGARET

women...

MAY

black...

MARGARET

white...

MAY

old...

MARGARET

young...

MAY/MARGARET

...working side by side.

(The integrated mill workers pose for a snapshot reminiscent of "Rosie the Riveter." Joseph looks at the picture as he writes to May.)

JOSEPH

Dear May:

Thank you for the picture. I don't know that I could make it through this war without your voice playing in my mind. I thought things would be different but the army is segregated and colored troops get all of the dirty jobs.

MONTY

Second Lieutenant Montgomery Davidson reporting for duty, sir.

JOSEPH

We dig the trenches and latrines.

MAY

(To Margaret)

Would you like to try my homemade pumpkin bread?

(Margaret takes the cake.)

MONTY

Begging your pardon, sir...

MARGARET

(to May)

This is delicious.

MAY

Thank you, Miss Margaret.

MARGARET

Please, just plain Margaret.

MONTY

...The Davidsons have been proud to serve on the front lines in every war since the battle of Hornet Hill...

JOSEPH

We scrape barnacles off battle ship hulls and haul freight...

(Margaret gives May a picture.)

MARGARET

That's Martin, we got married right before he went overseas. He doesn't even know that I'm pregnant.

MONTY

I would rather go to the front as a foot soldier than supervise a platoon of coons digging ditches.

MARGARET

That's my brother Monty beside him.

JOSEPH

...building bridges, maintaining supply lines...

(Joseph poses for a photo.)

MAY

That's Joseph, he ain't too happy how they treating him in the service.

MARGARET

Things'll be better when he comes home.

JOSEPH

It's as if they forgot we fought in every war since this country first became a country.

MAY

No matter what happens lets you and I stay friends.

CROW

In coming!!!

(Sound of artillery fire. Monty screams in pain as shrapnel tears his leg and he falls.)

JOSEPH

What I hate most is tagging bodies.

MEDIC

This one's alive.

(Soldiers in faceless black masks enter with a stretcher.)

MONTY

It's hard to hate when you're lying bloody on a beach in Normandy wondering who'll get to you first, the Medics or the sandcrabs. Trust me, if you ever get hung up in a bad way like that, no matter what kind of prejudice life poured into you, you'll be as glad to see a nigra as the next man.

(The faceless blacks pick Monty up. Joseph enters a camp library. Crow hypnotizes the librarian into silence after each statement from Joseph.)

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JOSEPH

I'm not trying to make trouble but it seems to me that if I can die for this country then I ought to be able to take a book out from the camp library to pass a Saturday night.

CROW

Boom shaka laka boom.

JOSEPH

What kind of a fool I got to be to fight for democracy in Europe and let myself get treated worse than a dog here at home?

CROW

Boom shaka laka boom!

JOSEPH

Imagine what would happen if all of us trained colored killers were to take offense at the same time and start to marching through the streets of America pointing our guns at whoever did us dirty?

LIBRARIAN

Will that be one book or two?

**CHAPTER III: IN THE SHADOW OF A DOVE
(V-J DAY 1945)**

(Joyous squeals and paper streamers as characters celebrate V-J Day. "HOW YOU GONNA KEEP 'EM DOWN ON THE FARM..." sung. Pictures of Hiroshima are the backdrop.)

MAY

The war is over!

MARGARET

(Going to soldier)

Martin? Oh, sorry.

MONTY

The world is safe from Nazi racism!

MARGARET

Have you seen private Martin Townes?

MRS. DAVIDSON

Serves the Japs right for Pearl Harbor.

MARGARET

Has anybody seen my husband?

(Crow delivers a telegram to Margaret on a bike.)

Noooo!!!

(May comforts Margaret.)

MONTY

(Talking to Uncle Sam)

Let me get this straight, Sammy. You are telling me that because I took a bullet in the war, you are giving me a first class education...Money to buy a house...Medical...Dental...an honored place in society?

(A key attached to a purple heart is pinned onto his chest. He is carried parade fashion around the stage while "God Bless America" is sung. Joseph tries to join the parade and is stopped by Crow who spreads his arms like a giant swinging door. Whites enter past Joseph. Crow talks and acts like the gatekeeper from the *Wizard of Oz*.)

GATEKEEPER

Yeeessss?

JOSEPH

I want to join the party.

GATEKEEPER

Of course you do.

JOSEPH

I walked the wartime streets of Paris and was treated like a man, a king. Eating where I want to, dancing in the nightclubs, drinking from the public fountains...

GATEKEEPER

Do tell.

JOSEPH

Them Frenchies were so glad to see us after we run off Hitler that they treated us like royalty.

GATEKEEPER

I'm sure...but you're not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy,

CHORUS

...so back of the bus or go to jail.

(Joseph prepares to attack. May stops him.)

JOSEPH

I should have stayed in France.

CROW

Boom shaka laka bye.

(Joseph tears off his epaulets and discards them.)

MARGARET

This doesn't make any sense!

MAY

It doesn't have to, Margaret, he's a Crow.

(May leads Joseph away. Margaret stares at Crow.)

CROW

Shaka boom boom!

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(BLACK)
(Joseph and May appear together.)

JOSEPH

When they finally let us fight all I could think about was getting back here safe to you.

MAY

If you're not careful you're gonna end up with a wife, Joseph Deleany.

JOSEPH

I can think of a whole lot of things could be worse, May Trossman.

MAY

Welcome home.

(May kisses Joseph then turns and begins folding laundry at the Davidson house. Margaret is now visibly pregnant and wears a black maternity dress. Enter Monty who walks with a cane.)

MARGARET

Monty!!

MONTY

Would you look at you!

(They hug.)

MARGARET

Momma! Momma! Monty's home!

MRS. DAVIDSON (off)

Praise the lord!

(Enter Mrs. Davidson)

MRS. DAVIDSON

Why didn't you call, we would've met you at the train!

MONTY

They kept changing my discharge from the hospital and G.I.s were tying up the phones at every whistle stop...

MRS. DAVIDSON

Nevermind, you're here. Let me look at you...Skinny as a sharecroppers's stepson. What were they feeding you in that army?

MONTY

If it wasn't horsemeat it sure tasted like it.

MRS. DAVIDSON

Well, we'll fatten you up before holiday.

MONTY

I heard about Martin, sis. I am so sorry.

MARGARET

I guess the Lord has his own plan.

(They hug again.)

MONTY

Nobody can take his place but I promise to be as good as a father to my little nephew.

MARGARET

Or niece. I think this child is what's keeping me from going to pieces altogether.

MRS. DAVIDSON

We hired a girl to help around the house.

(May is folding laundry, lost in her private thoughts.)

MAY

My dreams of teaching got hung out to dry like an embroidered tablecloth.

MARGARET

This is May.

MONTY

The girl you wrote me about from the factory?

MAY

There weren't many schools that took Negroes.

MARGARET

They laid off all the Negroes and women as soon as the war ended.

MRS. DAVIDSON

I wanted an experienced domestic but Margaret was stuck on this child and you know how your sister can get.

MARGARET

There are things more important than how you fold a napkin.

MAY

Joseph was having a hard time finding work too.

MRS. DAVIDSON

Not when it comes to maids there aren't.

MAY

I guess sometimes you have to make your way as best you can.

MRS. DAVIDSON

May, come meet my son, Montgomery.

(May puts on a smiling mask and joins the group.)

MONTY

Welcome to the Davidson home. I hope you enjoy it here.

(May is taken aback by his sincerity. Meanwhile Joseph is seen going from pillar to post seeking jobs, apartments, etc. Each statement is greeted by a polite, "No." and a hand offering domestic or menial symbols...brooms, shears...et cetera.)

JOSEPH

I gave four years of my life for this country...(No)...The sign says vacancy... (No)...All I want is a chance...(No)... I don't want to have to smile for a living...(No)...It's not fair...(No)...Maybe I'll just run off back to France like some of them other soldiers.

(May places her hand on his shoulder. She wears a wedding gown. Margaret and Monty watch the ceremony.)

**REVEREND/WEDDING PARTY
CHANT**

Love. Love. Love will. Love. Love will. Love will save. Love. Love will save us. Love will. Love will save us. Somehow. Love. Love will. Love will save...Somehow...

CROW

(To audience)

Dearly despised. We are gathered here today in the face hatred, to join together two domestics in holy desperation. If anyone present knows of a reason why these two should not be wed then speak now or forever hold your peace....Okay then I'll object. I mean, considering the fact that they both have dead end jobs, little education, they endure daily humiliations at the hands of...well...me and their nappy headed children don't have cause to hope for anything better for as long as they both shall live in my shadow, I think they might be wiser to go out and toss themselves under the tires of the next segregated bus!

(Crow snaps and the chorus of employers continue.)

CHORUS

Joseph could you...
Over here, boy...
Run this up to...
Take the mop and...
If you want to make tips you have to learn to smile...
Hey, boy...

(May comforts Joseph and hands him a smiling mask.
Margaret holds baby Sara and watches horrified.)

MRS. DAVIDSON

May, why don't you give the upstairs windows a good scrub?

(May must desert Joseph, who puts on the mask and starts his life of service. Crow laughs.)

MARGARET

(To May)

My brother could get him a position at his club. At least the pay would be better.

(Monty and Joseph exit together.)

(BLACK)

CHAPTER IV: FIRST LIGHT: 1954

(The image is a lonely candle burning in the darkness. Harry Golden appears with a box of popcorn and 3-D glasses.)

HARRY

I'm Harry Golden editor of the North Carolina Israelite and I introduce for your consideration the Harry Golden White Baby Plan. Let's not bother with the difficult task of integrating public facilities. Negroes have extensive access to resources as baby sitters; white families need childcare; put the two together and the deed is done. Want to see Clark Gable? Get a white baby. Want to eat at Woolworth's? Get a white baby. Want to whisper in the ear of a city bus driver? Get a white baby. And if there aren't ample infants to go around then some enterprising souls could manufacture and market plastic facsimiles for odd hours or short notice. I'm Harry Golden and that's how I see it.

(The scene begins at a swing in the park. May is pregnant. All the children are white, all the caregivers are black.)

SARA

May?

MAY

Yes, Sara?

SARA

Why are you so fat?

MAY

Child, the things you say. I'm about to have a baby.

SARA

But you already have a baby.

MAY

Junior is too big to be a baby anymore. He's going into the third grade.

SARA

I'm in third grade too.

MAY

I know.

SARA

Do you think he'd like to go to school with me? We could be in the same class and you could pick us both up after school and we could do homework together while you made cookies...

MAY

It sure sounds nice.

SARA

Well?

MAY

Well what, Sara?

SARA

Can he come to my school?

MAY

It's not up to me.

SARA

I know it would be okay with momma.

MAY

I'm sure it would be but it's not her decision either.

SARA

Then who gets to decide where we go to school?

MAY

Well, there's this great big old evil bird that shows up everywhere that colored people and white people meet and he tries really hard to keep us from becoming close.

SARA

Why?

MAY

Here come your momma, why don't you ask her that question.

(Enter Margaret)

SARA

Mommy! Mommy!

(They hug.)

MAY

Are you sure you should be out and about?

MARGARET

If fresh air and baby hugs aren't good for me then I'm not long for this world.

SARA

Why won't the bird let me go to school with Junior?

MARGARET

The bird, huh?

MAY

If you got a better way to tell it I'm all ears.

MARGARET

Well, this mean old Crow figures that if he can keep us apart then we won't ever find out how much we are alike and start working together to pluck his feathers.

SARA

Somebody needs to shoot that old bird.

MARGARET

There're a whole lot of good people trying.

SARA

Like who?

MARGARET

You pluck a feather every time you're nice to little Joseph Junior.

MAY

And there's a lawyer named Thurgood Marshall who just won a big case against the Board of Ed in Topeka Kansas where he got a colored girl named Brown, into a white school?

SARA

Is he a Marshall like in the serial movies?

MARGARET

(To May)

You started it.

MAY

Well, he's a lawyer and that's a type of a lawman.

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(Spaghetti Western music. Enter Marshall Thurgood while headlines of Thurgood Marshall's N.A.A.C.P. exploits play in the background.)

MARSHALL

Hear tell you boys is looking for me.

PLESSY

If you be Marshall Thurgood, you heard right.

MARGARET

And I guess you can say he's been killing a whole gang of bad laws all over the country.

PLESSY

This is the Topeka Kid. One of the Ed brothers out of Kansas.

TOPEKA

That's right. You been gunning down my kin all over the country.

MARSHALL

And once I lay you and Plessy here to rest, colored folks everywhere'll be free to go to school where ever they please.

PLESSY

You talking mighty big for a fella who's out numbered and outgunned.

TOPEKA

Either you're awful good, or you know something we don't know.

MARSHALL

I'm awful good; and I know something you don't know.

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