

RETREAT

a play in two acts

by

Tracey Conyer Lee

© 2019 by author

Post audio draft Nov 2020

RETREAT was commissioned by National Black Theatre

for their I Am Soul playwright residency 2018-2020

Contact:

Essay Management

364 West 46th St. Ste #1

New York, NY 10036

212.977.4298

JohnEssay@gmail.com

www.traceyconyerlee.com

RETREAT by Tracey Conyer Lee

CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCEish) ALL ROLES ARE BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN.

Curtis - a gorgeous man in his mid to late 40s. Our way in. Our way out. His body is trapped but his mind and heart are limitless. He is what courage and blind faith look like. But he is human and his pain is real. He is the last person you'd expect to find in prison.

Geo - a sheltered 23 year old seeking his truth. Our hero. A lovable spirit, he is emergence personified. This is his coming of age story, from naive boy to well lived man. Sexually ambiguous yet potent in his desirability.

Madelaine - (MAD uh lynn) a woman equivocating. Early 40s. That may be her only truth. She is Geo's Mama and guards his heart as fiercely as she guards her own. Preoccupied with survival and preservation of certain appearances. Hilariously whoever she needs to be in any moment.

Beverly - a childless woman in her late 50s to 60s. Stanley's wife, she has a penchant for parenting, whether you ask for it or not. Her intuition is both gift and curse, depending who's on the receiving end. Clear and exacting in her desires and intentions.

Stanley - A quiet spirit in his 70s. Beverly's husband. In questionable health, his acceptance of what is is his strength, not a weakness. He is the steady in the storm...until the winds turn. He would be everyone's favorite grandpa. The "I got your nose" type.

Constance - a fiercely independent 25 year old. She's had to fend for herself and has done a darn good job of it. Geo's bestie and, as her name suggests, she is ride or die. She is a young girl trapped in the guise of a truly grown woman.

Bill - a smooth talker in his late 30s to late 50s. On a quest but lost track of "for what". He does remember there's a trophy waiting and does whatever it takes to win. His word game is on point. Sexily disheveled. If he wore a tie, it would never be on straight.

SETTING

Sparse. A table with four chairs. It facilitates working or dining in multiple locations. The chairs can be used throughout the space. The table could be balanced by a corner booth and table from an upscale diner.

Elsewhere, an upholstered armchair with a small end table or ottoman. Elsewhere still, a cot or cheap frame and mattress.

There should be empty playing space as well. Lighting tells the story of those spaces.

NOTES FOR ACTORS I'm one of you. I promise this will help things.

Punctuation matters!!!! See what I did there? The scenes should feel like music. The punctuation will help guide you through the crescendos and decrescendos of each movement. Unless indicated, move through the language, earn those moments of rest.

? means ASK . means SAY ! means EMPLOY A LARGER EMOTIONAL ENERGY

-- means interrupt the person speaking and is also employed in dual storytelling.

... is NOT an interruption OR a trail off. It is a *choice* not to speak/finish. Do not interrupt someone with an ellipses. Let their/your loss of language linger.

// and / means overlap the dialogue. Two actors speak simultaneously beginning at the slash.

... ... is different than the single ellipses. It means physical, rather than verbal, communication. (What might you say? Act *that*.)

NOTES FOR DIRECTORS Y'all inspire me.

CURTIS does not leave the stage. Ever. When not the focus, he is existing as best he can, whatever that entails. Curtis's presence should feel small and, his vocal range narrow. But when he is in the world of his letters he becomes alive with possibility. Vocally. Physically. He is his most expressive self when he isn't quite himself.

The Letters - this is not a dictate, but I see portions of the letters projected in various ways. Curtis's letters to his Pop in carefully scrawled cursive. Letters from the writer in Times New Roman font. And "letters" to Angela not written at all. Not read. Lived.

RETREAT is dedicated to Chester Hollman iii. My inspiration. Thank you, my friend, for changing my humanity by hanging on to yours.

MONTHS AGO IN PENNSYLVANIA

In darkness we hear “Dear Curtis Dear Curtis Dear Curtis Dear Curtis Dear Curtis” in voices both varied and plentiful. A cacophony that dies down to a sparse drizzle of only one or two voices.

Lights up on the cot. Silence.

The man on the cot is Curtis, our way in. His presence is unobtrusive even though he is the only person we see. He counts marks on the wall. He stares at old photos. He tries to read a book, but gets distracted, sets it aside. Hangs a sketch on the wall. He waits. We’re not sure for what. Neither is he. All of this takes real time. Then...

A letter is pushed into his space. He studies the envelope. He puts it down, walks away. He picks it up and studies it some more. He smiles through near tears, exhilarated and terrified.

He opens the envelope but does not remove the contents. Instead he acts out what he thinks his physical reaction might be...or what he thinks it might say...or what he might do after he reads it. The action is small, interior. It wouldn’t steal attention from anything else that might happen. But nothing else is happening. And it is the most mentally expansive moment he’s had in years.

Curtis returns quietly to the cot, removes and opens the letter.

CURTIS

“Dear Curtis. Remember me? Is that a weird intro? Honestly, I’m not sure what to say.”

Lights shift to the table.

1. HEAVY LIES THE HEAD...

It’s Wednesday. Late summer in Buford, GA. It’s 90s in the daytime.

An upscale diner in between meal times. A young fella and his mother eat, a little too cozy in the booth. The vibe is wanna-be bourgie.

GEO

That's all you're going to say?

MADELAINE

What do you want me to say?

GEO

"Thank you. I love it. You're a good son."

MADELAINE

You're a good son.

GEO

"Thank you. I love it."

MADELAINE

Mine's better.

GEO

Madelaine Alstead.

MADELAINE

Boy, you better back up.

GEO

Your gift that you got you for your birthday is better--to you--than the gift I--your only child--got you for your birthday?

MADELAINE

My gift that I got me *from you* for my birthday is better than the gift *you* got me from you for my birthday...yes.

GEO

I'm not going on that retreat, Mama.

MADELAINE

It's what I want.

GEO

Why?

MADELAINE
Because I want it.

GEO
Why, Mama?

MADELAINE
Boy, don't question me. What's gotten into you?

GEO
I'm grown.

MADELAINE
What?

GEO
... ..

MADELAINE
Say what you mean, Georgie.

GEO
I don't... I don't think... ..

MADELAINE
See? You don't know. That's what I'm here for.

GEO
I want to go to Media. My trip is a gift.

MADELAINE
Media ain't no gift. A retreat in St. Maarten is a gift. What I got us is a gift. What you got is a family obligation. I got us the Caribbean.

GEO
Take a friend.

MADELAINE
I can't.

GEO
Because you don't have any?

MADELAINE
You are lucky I like to eat at four o'clock so nobody has to see you get embarrassed.

GEO

We eat at four o'clock. I'm already embarrassed.

MADELAINE

I like restaurants when they're empty.

GEO

A. You don't like restaurantSSS. We only eat here. B. You don't like to be *anywhere* there's people.

MADELAINE

I like church.

GEO

The smallest church in Georgia. Ask someone there to go on this retreat.

MADELAINE

It's for parents and their children.

GEO

I'm twenty-three years old.

MADELAINE

Their adult children. They have different kinds of retreats for all kinds of families.

GEO

What kind are we?

MADELAINE

You talk too much. I mean it, what's gotten into you?

GEO

... ..

MADELAINE

Speak, Georgie.

GEO

Please stop calling me that.

MADELAINE

It's your name.

GEO

No, it's not.

MADELAINE

I didn't name you no Geo.

GEO

You didn't name me no Georgie.

MADELAINE

Fine. George. Stop trying to be someone you're not.

GEO

Geo is my pen name.

MADELAINE

It's a lie. What's wrong with the name I gave you? George Washington could not tell a lie, but George Washington Alstead could sell a book.

*

*

GEO

What's in Media, Mama?

MADELAINE

What? Nothing.

GEO

Then why won't you go?

MADELAINE

Because nothing's there.

GEO

What are you running from?

MADELAINE

Boy.

GEO

Or who? Aunt Shelley?

MADELAINE

I love my sister.

GEO

Why don't we visit her?

MADELAINE

She visits us.

GEO
Mama.

MADELAINE
What?!

GEO
You can't keep me shackled to your // side forever.

MADELAINE
Shackled?

GEO
I didn't want to do this on your birthday--

MADELAINE
So don't.

GEO
I need to have some experiences. // How am I going to be a great writer if / I have nothing to say?

MADELAINE
// What kind of experiences? / What's wrong with being a blotter for the church?

GEO
Blogger, Mama. I want to write books. Novels. But I don't *know* anything because we don't *do* anything.

MADELAINE
I am *trying* to take your ungrateful behind to the Caribbean.

GEO
Tell me why.

MADELAINE
It's the Caribbean.

GEO
The truth.

MADELAINE
What?

GEO
Tell the truth. What are we going to do while we're there?

GEO

Would you like that?

MADELAINE

I don't like *her*. I don't understand her.

GEO

I don't know why. You're just alike.

MADELAINE

What?

GEO

What?

MADELAINE

Why don't you ever spend time with that lovely Deirdre? I know she likes you.

GEO

Deirdre is almost forty, Mama.

MADELAINE

She's the right type of girl for you.

Madelaine's phone rings. A moment.

Ring ring. That loud mess that sounds like a 1970s land line.

GEO

You gonna get that?

MADELAINE

I don't recognize the number.

GEO

You answer everything.

MADELAINE

I screen now. Solicitors.

GEO

How do you know? You're screening.

Madelaine sends the call to voicemail.

MADELAINE

Every time you come back from Atlanta you act funny. You better be careful. Constance got you in all sorts of nasty shenanigans and I am not going to-- Ooo there she is!

Geo turns around.

Madelaine waves.

GEO

You invited Deirdre?

MADELAINE

She's my friend.

GEO

No, she's not.

MADELAINE

She's my birthday wish.

Geo gets up.

Where are you going?

GEO

I have wishes too.

Geo offers his Mama a hasty kiss.

As he exits, we hear the clang and drag of a metal gate.

In Curtis's cell, more books are scattered and more art hung as if months have passed, because they have, but also, that's what some days feel like. Curtis frantically searches for his letter. As he reads, he becomes increasingly impassioned, like the writer has inhabited his spirit with her words.

CURTIS

Is that a weird intro? Honestly, I'm not sure what to say. I think about you often. Maybe that's weird too. But I do. I wonder about your life. Your family. Your heart. I don't know if you can listen to podcasts in there. I heard one on your case recently. These *people*, white, with a penchant for true crime, whose job it is to discuss your case in an unbiased retelling of the facts. Fair and impartial journalism they call it. I get that, I'm a writer. Maybe I should have led with that. I'm all over the place. But I thought long and hard about writing this letter and I am not editing it. I just want it to come out.

So...I'm a writer, Curtis. Still single in my mid 40s, no kids. I guess we have that in common for very different reasons. Anyway, these podcasters kept saying your name like you were the answer to some math problem: "So in the case of Curtis...", "Just as we saw in Curtis's case...", "Like we learned in the case of Curtis versus blah blah fucking blah..." They rolled your name off their sushi-stenched tongues like they were recanting a fairy tale. Something unreal. Repeating it with a hint of doubt with no regard for what that doubt does to your credibility, your reputation, your truth, your life. But hey, they were being good storytellers, keeping us in suspense so we stay tuned in. And we, the willing audience, just listen and pity, shaking our heads, offering thoughts and prayers as the grizzly story unfolds. But this story isn't a story at all. Curtis does not equal case. There is a life attached to that name. A life lived on a lie. I have to ask: How do these fancy white strangers get to frame your story when it is still unfolding? There's a beginning, a middle... And it doesn't seem you matter to them beyond this moment. You matter to me. I don't mean to stir the pot, Curtis, but I want to write the end. People read my work, they respond. I could bring some attention to your story. And I need to write a happy ending. Writing a book isn't a quick task, but I'm guessing time isn't something we're counting. Any day short of a life sentence is better than... I don't know. I want to be your happy ending. You deserve that. We all do. Hope to hear from you soon. Your friend...

Curtis closes his letter.

Lights resume on Madelaine. Who is now alone on her birthday. Her phone rings all 1970s.

MADELAINE

Georgie! I knew my sweet boy wouldn't leave me like that. Now get your narrow behind back here. I sent Deirdre home and-- Who is this? How did you get this number? Darn you darn you darn you darn you! Do not call back here. Ever.

Madelaine hangs up her phone. She lays it face down, then picks up the phone, turns it off and puts it in her bag. Lights dance.

Time passes. Days.