

***Excerpt***

THE BOILING HOUSE

A play

by

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THE BOILING HOUSE

CHARACTERS

*(Requires 2F and 3M with doubling)*

MAMA AIDA\*, guesthouse owner/manager, African-Caribbean, late 50's

JONNY WILLIAMS, her nephew; entrepreneur, African-Caribbean, 20's

HARRY BRAITHWAITE, retired coal miner, British, white, 60's

ELIAS "ALEEBYE" GREENE\*\*, rap star, African-American,

late 20's/early 30's

KATIE CHENG, software engineer, Asian-American, 30's

DINAH\*, a female slave, African

CUFFEY\*\*, a male slave, African

*\* Played by the same actor \*\*Played by the same actor*

TIME

The present

SETTING

A guesthouse on a small Caribbean island

THE BOILING HOUSE

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

A dark stage. We hear a distant sound of African drumming. Gradually, it is overtaken by another sound: the radio broadcast of an English professional soccer game. It's a climactic moment, and the commentator's voice is frenzied.

COMMENTATOR'S VOICE

The referee looks at his watch. Only seconds left now. One last chance for Barnsley to win it in regulation. Oh, and a lovely ball out to Ecclestone on the right! Are we in for a fairytale finish? A goal here would put Barnsley in the final for the first time in fifty years. Here's the cross, low and hard into the box. It comes to Mackay, oh and he's got space, he turns, he shoots...!—

The radio goes dead as lights come up on the bar-lounge of MAMA AIDA'S guesthouse on a small Caribbean island. The room is simple and bright. There's a bar with stools and liquor bottles on shelves and some wicker tables and chairs. A packet of vegetable seeds is on the bar counter. A "House Rules" notice is pinned to one wall. Behind the bar is a doorway masked by hanging beads that leads to the unseen kitchen. Up center is a screen door that is the outside entrance to the bar-lounge. HARRY BRAITHWAITE sits with a glass of rum punch in his hand. He is crouched over a shortwave radio.

HARRY

(Banging on the radio)

No. NO!

KATIE CHENG enters with a big basket of freshly cut flowers. She is a purposeful, rather intense woman. She is dismayed to see HARRY.

KATIE

(Rebuking him)  
Harry!

HARRY

I don't believe it, I don't bloody believe it.

KATIE

What are you doing here?

HARRY

Energizer fucking Bunny.

KATIE

(Gesturing to the garden outside)  
You said you'd keep her occupied.

HARRY

I know, I know.

KATIE

Well go!

HARRY

(Rising and heading for the door)  
All right, keep your hair on.

KATIE

The seeds?

HARRY

The seeds.

KATIE picks up the packet of vegetable seeds from the bar counter. She glances at it before handing it to him.

KATIE

Brussels sprouts?!

HARRY

(Taking the packet from her)  
Food of the gods them.

KATIE

Brussels Sprouts do not grow in the Caribbean.

HARRY

She's a gardener. She likes a challenge.

KATIE

The idea was to distract her, buy some time—

HARRY

I know, I know—

KATIE

Christ! I need five minutes, that's all, five minutes.

HARRY

I'll do a striptease.

KATIE

GO!

He starts for the door, then turns and drains his glass of rum punch with a satisfied flourish.

NOW!

He exits. KATIE, all business, moves into action. She goes behind the bar and places three vases, already full of water, on the counter. She begins rapidly to arrange the flowers in the vases. Enter JONNY WILLIAMS carrying a cooler and a travel bag. He is lithe and boyishly handsome. He's a cheerful type, but there's a gentle wisdom about him that belies his youth.

JONNY

Hey Katie!

KATIE

There you are, thank God. She's still out in the garden—

JONNY

(Playfully)

I got a surprise for you.

KATIE

(Preoccupied with arranging flowers)

Really?

As if on cue, ELIAS GREENE enters. He wears shades, carries luggage. He is out of breath.

JONNY

Our new guest.

KATIE

(Going to him and extending her hand)

Hi, welcome, you must be Elias.

ELIAS

How you doing?

KATIE

I'm Katie Cheng, I'm a guest here, too.

ELIAS

Good to meet you.

KATIE

It always gets you the first time.

ELIAS

Excuse me?

KATIE

The hill. It's steeper than it looks.

ELIAS

Yeah, I thought this place was right on the beach.

KATIE

Close enough.

(Returning to her flowers)

I'm sorry, I need to keep going here. Did Jonny tell you about the...?

ELIAS

Yeah, yeah, he told me.

KATIE

I hope you don't mind, I mean—

ELIAS

You kiddin' me? I love to party!

KATIE

Great. Jonny, have you got the—?

JONNY

(To KATIE)

You know who this is?

KATIE

What?

JONNY

(Indicating ELIAS)

This is the surprise.

KATIE looks puzzled.

JONNY

You don't recognize this guy?

KATIE

I don't know, should I...?

JONNY

Aleebye.

KATIE

Alibi?

JONNY

His real name is Elias Greene, but—

KATIE

Omigod.

JONNY

I told you, big surprise.

KATIE

No shit. Well, I'm very pleased to meet you.

ELIAS

Likewise.

JONNY

The famous rapper come home to his roots! Like Herc and Bam and Flash. Oh man, your shit is tight, man. Soooo tight!

KATIE

Look, I hate to—

JONNY

How crazy is this, huh? The big star, the man of the moment, on our little island! And he come in my boat, MY boat!

KATIE

Jonny—

JONNY

I see him there on the dock, all alone, and I say, that guy there sure look like Aleebye, spitting image, but no, no, it can't be, no way. Where his people, his bodyguards? But you don't fool me, man, with the shades and all, oh no, no, no. I recognize you anywhere, man, anywhere!

ELIAS shrugs. JONNY laughs.

ELIAS

(To KATIE)

What you doing here?

KATIE

Me? Oh, just hanging out.

JONNY

She's a software engineer. Very successful. Got her own company.

ELIAS

Is that right?

KATIE

Boring, boring—

JONNY

But her real passion is birds.

ELIAS

Birds?

JONNY

We got a lot of songbirds migrate through here, all different kinds.

KATIE

Jonny, did you—?

ELIAS

(Looking out over the bay, awestruck)

Man! Will you look at that!

JONNY

Yeah, paradise, man. Remember what I tell you, I got me connections on the big island, sweet connections, whatever your heart desire, man, I take care of it, okay?

KATIE

Jonny!

JONNY

What?

KATIE

Have you got the cake?

JONNY

Have I got the cake? 'Course I got the cake. And pencils for you, and batteries for Harry's radio, and dinner. Nice piece of blue marlin to go with Auntie's special callaloo.

KATIE

(Pointing to the cooler)

The fish is in there? With the cake?

JONNY

No problem, man, it's all wrapped up.

KATIE

Well, take it to the kitchen, please. Hurry! They'll be here any minute.

JONNY

Okay.

JONNY exits to the kitchen with the cooler.

KATIE

Elias, could you give me a hand?

ELIAS

Oh, sure.

KATIE

There are cups and plates in the kitchen, and—

ELIAS

You got it.

Before ELIAS can comply, JONNY bursts through the doorway from the kitchen.

JONNY

They're coming! Quick, quick!

(To ELIAS)

Here, man, here! Get down!

They all crouch down behind the bar out of sight. A slight pause.

MAMA AIDA

(Offstage, approaching)

Don't give me that nonsense. They only like cold and wet. You forget, I lived in England once. Miserable place.

HARRY

(Offstage)

But they're very adaptable are Brussels sprouts—

MAMA AIDA

(As she enters)

You said the same thing about rhubarb.....

Her voice trails off. She is stopped in her tracks by the floral display.

What is going on here?

JONNY, ELIAS and KATIE jump up from behind the bar.

JONNY, ELIAS, KATIE and HARRY

SURPRISE!

MAMA AIDA

Oh Lordy, you scare the hell out of me. What is this?

HARRY

I said she wouldn't remember.

MAMA AIDA

Barnsley won the big game.

HARRY

No, well I don't know, the radio died.

MAMA AIDA

Then what are we celebrating? Jonny?

JONNY smiles and shrugs in mock  
ignorance.

HARRY

Shame on you, love, forgetting your anniversary.

MAMA AIDA

Anniversary? What you talking about?

KATIE

Your twentieth.

MAMA AIDA

Twenty what?

HARRY

Go on, Jonny, put her out of her misery.

JONNY

Twenty years ago today you open this guesthouse.

MAMA AIDA

No, no, it's not possible, no.

JONNY

This very day.

MAMA AIDA

(Indicating JONNY)

How come my nephew knows all about this, and I don't?

HARRY

Age. We forget things.

MAMA AIDA

You got that right.

HARRY

But you wear it well, love. Except for the crow's feet and the spare tire.  
And your varicose veins.

MAMA AIDA

Harry Braithwaite, you the rudest man I know!

KATIE beckons JONNY and they exit to the kitchen.

ELIAS

Mama Aida, I want to introduce myself. I'm Elias Greene.

MAMA AIDA

Ah, Mister Greene, welcome.

ELIAS

It's great to be here.

MAMA AIDA

You beat the storm. We got a storm coming.

ELIAS

I heard.

MAMA AIDA

It's that time of year. But it's quiet here off-season. One month ago this place was buzzing. Crazy! But they all up and gone now except Harry and Katie. And you.

ELIAS

Yeah, well, I'm looking forward to kicking back, let me tell you. And you got a beautiful place here. I mean, I ain't never seen anything like this, this is amazing. I been all kinds of places, but this is special. You got the ocean, the view, and the flowers everywhere—that's your garden, right?

MAMA AIDA

My pride and joy.

ELIAS

Beautiful! I love flowers, the colors, the bounty of the Earth, all of that. This is perfect, just perfect. I tell you, I'm already feeling like, man, where you been, what took you so long?

HARRY

(Offering his hand)  
I'm Harry Braithwaite by the way.

ELIAS

Hey Harry. Elias. What's up?

MAMA AIDA

Jonny show you your cabin?

ELIAS

Not yet.

MAMA AIDA

Come with me.

ELIAS

You kiddin' me? You got a party here.

MAMA AIDA

A big fuss for nothing.

HARRY

What do you mean, love? It's a milestone.

MAMA AIDA

Too many damn miles. Come.

ELIAS

Really, it's okay, no rush.

MAMA AIDA

As you wish.

ELIAS

Your family here?

MAMA AIDA

Just Jonny. My kids are all grown and gone. Scattered to the four winds.

ELIAS

Is that right?

MAMA AIDA

England and America.

HARRY

Brixton, Birmingham and Brooklyn. Where hurricanes hardly happen.

ELIAS

Excuse me?

JONNY enters with the cake. Applause.  
KATIE follows with a tray of rum punches.

HARRY

Bravo!

MAMA AIDA

Is that what I think it is?

JONNY

Chocolate with hazelnut cream filling.

MAMA AIDA

From Melinda's?

JONNY

Where else.

MAMA AIDA

Oh, sinful. Sinful.

(She bursts out laughing)

HARRY

(Escorting MAMA AIDA to her favorite chair)

Here, love, let's get you situated.

JONNY cuts pieces of cake.

KATIE

(Handing round the drinks)  
And we have tonic, too!  
(To ELIAS)  
Mama Aida's famous rum punch.

HARRY

(To ELIAS)  
Put hairs on your chest, that will. Or in your ears if you're my age.  
(To MAMA AIDA, in a posh English voice)  
Your throne, ma'am.

MAMA AIDA

(In a posh voice also)  
Thank you, my good man. But where is my crown?

HARRY

Allow me, ma'am.

HARRY takes a couple of flowers from a vase and puts them in her hair.

If I may say so, ma'am, you look delectable—  
(Reverting to his regular Yorkshire accent)  
Ooo, in't she a bloody knockout, eh? Move over Cleopatra. I propose a toast.

KATIE

A toast!

HARRY

But first, I'd like to say a few words.

JONNY

(Sarcastically)  
A few?

Laughter.

HARRY

Now strictly speaking what we're celebrating today is this place. A haven for the happy few. The best-kept secret in the whole bloody Caribbean. Twenty years it's been here, in all its unpretentious glory, catering to lucky bastards like us. And you know something? Every day I wake up

and I pinch myself, I do—in all the right places—and I say to myself:  
Harry Braithwaite, you jammy bugger, what in God's name have you done

HARRY (CONT.)

to deserve this? It's so bloody beautiful it takes your breath away, the sun  
shines every day, guaranteed—and after twenty-seven years  
down pit I can't begin to tell you what that means, not to mention the fact  
that we don't have sun in South Yorkshire—

JONNY

(Imitating HARRY'S Yorkshire accent)

Only weather!

Laughter.

HARRY

Plus, we get fed like the bloody royals—

ELIAS

(To MAMA AIDA)

Your famous home cooking, right?—

HARRY

AND there are unlimited quantities of a certain tonic with exceptional  
medicinal qualities—

JONNY

(Imitating HARRY'S Yorkshire accent)

To which some folk I know are quite partial.

Laughter.

HARRY

BUT! But. Be that as it may, what we're really celebrating today is not a  
place but a person. A very special person.

(Looking at MAMA AIDA)

Every day, rain or shine, we are bathed in that radiant smile, that sunny  
disposition, that tender embrace. God knows how you put up with us, love,  
but you do. And you take care of us. And you make this feel like home.

(Raising his glass in a toast)

I give you Mama Aida, Queen of Sunshine!

ALL EXCEPT MAMA AIDA

Mama Aida, Queen of Sunshine!

KATIE

Time for cake.

Not yet.  
HARRY

HARRY goes behind the bar and returns with a gift-wrapped package.

MAMA AIDA  
Oh Lord, what you go do now?

KATIE  
A little token of our appreciation.

HARRY  
(Handing over the gift)  
I'll give you a clue. It's a cookbook.

KATIE  
Containing all his favorite dishes.

MAMA AIDA starts to remove the wrapping.

HARRY  
One hundred recipes for Brussels sprouts.

JONNY  
Not rhubarb?

HARRY  
She should be so lucky.

The gift is revealed. It's a landscape painting with the nearby ruins of the old sugar mill in the background. MAMA AIDA looks at it. A slight pause.

Oh dear.

MAMA AIDA  
No, no, it's good. Very colorful. Who paint it?

KATIE  
Gloria.

MAMA AIDA

Ah Gloria, yes, I see now, yes.

KATIE

(To ELIAS)

She was a guest here.

HARRY

I commissioned it. On our behalf.

KATIE

Everyone loves that view from the top of the hill.

MAMA AIDA

Yes.

KATIE

We thought it would look great on this wall.

(She takes the painting and holds it up against the wall.)

Or maybe a little further over...

(She shifts it.)

ELIAS

(Pointing at the picture)

That's the old sugar mill, right?

MAMA AIDA

You know about that?

ELIAS

I read about it.

KATIE

(As she holds up the picture)

So? What do you think?

A slight, awkward pause.

HARRY

(To MAMA AIDA)

It's okay, love, we're mortally offended but we'll get over it.

MAMA AIDA

No, not at all, I just think it don't quite belong there.

JONNY

Too big.

KATIE

Really?

HARRY

Well, we don't have to decide now. As my Dad used to say, never make a major decision after three o'clock in the afternoon. Unless it involves drink or women. Now then—

ELIAS

I got something.

He crosses to his bags.

MAMA AIDA

Oh no, please, you don't need to do this.

ELIAS

Why not? This is a big deal.

MAMA AIDA

For some people.

ELIAS

It's my pleasure. Really.

He hands her a beautifully wrapped package.

MAMA AIDA

Thank you. You are very kind.

ELIAS

(To JONNY)  
And this is for you, man.

He hands JONNY a CD.

JONNY

(Excitedly)  
Oh man. Is this—?

ELIAS

Better than that. "Got Me My Aleebye". Special limited edition.

JONNY  
You serious?

ELIAS  
Autographed.

JONNY  
Oh man!  
(To MAMA AIDA)  
Auntie, Elias is a big rap star in America.

MAMA AIDA  
(Unwrapping her gift)  
Oh yes?

ELIAS  
(To JONNY)  
That's like five-star Courvoisier, man. Only two hundred copies made.

JONNY  
Really?

ELIAS  
One sold on E-Bay for ten grand. Unsigned.

JONNY  
Man, this is....thank you. Thank you so much.

ELIAS  
My pleasure, man, enjoy.

MAMA AIDA  
(Looking at her gift)  
Oh my Lord.

She holds up a large and exquisite piece of  
Kente cloth.

Kente.

ELIAS  
That's from Ghana, the real thing. What the royalty wore.

He takes the cloth from MAMA AIDA and  
drapes it over her shoulders.

