

## Playwright's Note

The Homestead Act of 1860 offered three hundred and twenty acres of “free” land, stolen from the dwindling populations of Native Americans, to U.S. citizens who were willing to settle the Western states. Although many settlers lived in traditional family groups, by 1890 a quarter of a million unmarried or widowed women were running their own farms and ranches. The farm work was hard and constant, but many of these women were able to survive due to their own physical stamina and determination and the help of their neighbors. Large groups of African-American homesteaders left the South following the Civil War to settle all-black towns.

The so called “Exodus of 1879” saw twenty to forty thousand African- American men, women and children—”Exodusters”—reach Kansas under the guidance of a charismatic leader, Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, who escaped from slavery and claimed later: “I am the whole cause of the Kansas migration!” Crusading black journalist Ida B. Wells’s call to her readers to leave Memphis, Tennessee, after an 1892 lynching and riot, was heeded by over seven thousand black residents of the city, who packed up as many of their belongings as they could carry and headed West in search of a life free from racist violence. Unfortunately, their dreams were shattered, as many Western states enacted Jim Crow laws as cruel as any in the Old Confederacy; these laws effectively destroyed most of the black settlements by the early 1900s. This is a story of some of the black people who went West.

## Character Descriptions

**SOPHIE WASHINGTON** a black woman landowner, born into slavery, determined and independent

**MISS LEAH** 73, a black woman, born into slavery, resilient, possessed of strength and wisdom

**FANNIE DOVE** a black woman, gentle, nurturing, dreams of building a family, in love with Wil

**WIL PARRISH** a black man, born into slavery, stable, dependable, hopeful, ambitious, in love with Fannie

**MINNIE DOVE CHARLES** a black woman, Fannie’s younger sister, newlywed, cosmopolitan

**FRANK CHARLES** a very light-skinned black man, born into slavery, mean, Minnie’s husband, cosmopolitan, struggles with his identity

## SIDES

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# MISS LEAH SIDES

## MISS LEAH: SIDE 1

**MISS LEAH** (Continuing her braiding): I was only thirteen when I got my first one. They wanted me to start early 'cause I was big and strong. Soon as my womanhood came on me, they took me out in the barn and put James on me. He was older than me and big. He already had children by half the women on the place. My James ... (A beat) But that first time, he was hurting me so bad and I was screamin' and carryin' on somethin' awful, and that old overseer just watchin' and laughin' to make sure James really doin' it. He watch us every night for a week and after the third one I hear James tryin' to whisper somethin' to me real quiet while he doin' it. I was so surprised I stopped cryin' for a minute and I hear James sayin', "Leah, Leah, Leah ..." He just kept sayin' my name over and over. (A beat) At the end of the week, I had got my first son. Do you have another ribbon?

(Minnie hands her one from her pocket.)

Fan's gonna skin you about her ribbons, Missy!

## MISS LEAH: SIDE 2

**MISS LEAH:** When they sold my first baby boy offa the place, I felt like I couldn't breathe for three days. After that, I could breathe a little better, but my breasts were so full of milk they'd soak the front of my dress. Overseer kept telling me he was gonna have to see if nigger milk was really chocolate like they said it was, so I had to stay away from him 'til my milk stopped runnin'. And one day I saw James and I told him they had sold the baby, but he already knew it. He had twenty been sold offa our place by that time. Never saw any of 'em. When he told me that, I decided he was gonna at least lay eyes on at least one of his babies came through me. So next time they put us together I told him that I was gonna be sure this time he got to see his chile before Colonel Harrison sold it. But I couldn't. Not that one or the one after or the one after the ones after that. James never saw their faces. Until we got free. Then he couldn't look at 'em long enough. That was a man who loved his children. Hug 'em and kiss 'em and take 'em everywhere he go.

I think when he saw the fever take all five of them, one by

one like that ... racin' each other to heaven ... it just broke him down. He'd waited so long to have his sons and now he was losing them all again. He was like a crazy man just before he died. So I buried him next to his children and I closed the door on that little piece of house we had and I started walkin' west. If I'd had wings, I'd a set out flyin' west. I needed to be some place big enough for all my sons and all my ghost grandbabies to roam around. Big enough for me to think about all that sweetness they had stole from me and James and just holler about it as loud as I want to holler.

### MISS LEAH: SIDE 3

**MISS LEAH:** Am I feelin' all right? If I was you, I'd be worried about folks talkin' 'bout shootin' somebody. That's who I'd be worryin' about. It's a messy business, shootin' folks. It ain't like killing a hog, you know. Sheriff has to come. White folks have to come. All that come with shootin' somebody. But folks die all kinds of ways. Sometimes they be goin' along just as nice as you please and they heart just give out. Just like that. Don't nobody know why. Things just happen. (A beat) One day a little bit before I left the plantation, Colonel Harrison bought him a new cook. Ella. She was a big, strong woman. She didn't make no trouble either. Just worked hard and kept to herself. Ella knew a lot about herbs. What to put in to make it taste good. Colonel Harrison just love the way she cook. He used to let her roam all over the plantation pickin' wild herbs to put in her soups and stews. And she wouldn't tell nobody what she use. Said it was secrets from Africa. White folks didn't need to know. Colonel Harrison just laugh. He was eatin' good and didn't care 'bout where it come from no way. But after a while, that overseer started messin' around her. Tryin' to get Colonel Harrison to let him have his way with her, but Colonel Harrison said no and told him to stay from around her. She belonged in the kitchen. But that ol' overseer still wanted her and everybody knew next time he had a chance, he was gonna get her.

So one day, Colonel Harrison went to town. Gonna be gone all day. So that overseer put some poor colored man in charge of our misery and walked on up to the house like he was the master now 'cause Colonel Harrison gone off for the day. And when he walk up on the back porch, he had one thing on his mind, but Ella had been up early too, and the first thing he saw before he even saw her was a fresh apple pie coolin' in

the window. And it smelled so good, he almost forgot what he come for. And Ella opened the screen door and smile like he the person she wanna see most in this world and she ask him if he'd like a glass of cold milk and a piece of her hot apple pie. Of course he did! What man wouldn't? And he sat down there and she cut him a big ol' piece and she told him it was hot and to be careful not to burn hisself ... And do you know what happened? Well, he didn't even get to finish that piece of pie Ella cut for him so pretty. Heart just stopped right in the middle of a great big bite. By the time the master got back, they had him laid out in the barn and Ella was long gone. (A beat) But she did do one last thing before she left.

She gave me her recipe for apple pie.

# SOPHIE SIDES

## SOPHIE: SIDE 1

**SOPHIE:** Of course I do! I want this town to be a place where a colored woman can be free to live her life like a human being. I want this town to be a place where a colored man can work as hard for himself as we used to work for white folks. I want a town where a colored child can go to anybody's door and be treated like they belong there. It's not paradise yet, but it can be beautiful. The century is going to change in two years. This can be a great time for colored people. We can really be free instead of spending our lives working for the same people that used to own us. How are we ever going to be free if we have to spend all of our time doing somebody else's laundry?

There's nothing wrong with doing laundry until you start thinking that's all you can do. That's why the vote is so important. We have to help each other stay strong. The rule doesn't say they can't sell their land. It says they can't sell it unless they are prepared to look the rest of us in the eye and say who they are selling it to and why. As long as they have to face each other, nobody will have nerve enough to sell to speculators, no matter what they're offering.

If we start selling to speculators, everything will change. We may as well move back to Memphis. And before I do that, I'll get Wil Parrish to teach me how to speak Spanish and move us all to Mexico!

## SOPHIE: SIDE 2

**SOPHIE:** If he wasn't her husband would you care what I did to him for beating her half to death?

You know as well as I do there are no laws that protect a woman from her husband. Josh beat Belle for years and we all knew it. And because the sheriff didn't do anything, none of us did anything either. It wasn't a crime until he killed her! I'm not going to let that happen to Min. I'm going to watch him prance across this yard and then I'm going to step out on my front porch and blow his brains out— Then we'll be doing what free people always have to do if they're going to stay free.

(A beat.)

This morning, while I was standing in that church painting a picture of the future of this town, he beat her and did God knows what else to her in this house. Where she's always been safe. We can't let him do that, Fan. All the dreams we have for Nicodemus, all the churches and schools and libraries we can build don't mean a thing if a colored woman isn't safe in her own house.

# FRANK SIDES

## FRANK: SIDE 1

**FRANK:** I was gambling. A gentleman's game of poker with some of my friends from the train. Ran into them in town. And you know what? I lost. I lost everything. What there was left of it.

Yes, I was gambling with white men—white *gentlemen*, Min. And I lost every dime. And I want to thank you for that. Things were going fine until one of them asked me about the nigger woman who kept following me around the train. I laughed it off, but my luck changed after that, so I know they suspected something. But I should have known better than to depend on you for luck. You're too black to bring me any good luck. All you got to give is misery. Pure D misery and little black pickaninnies just like you.

But the game wasn't a total loss. I found out something interesting. Do you know what I found out?

Your sisters are sitting on a fortune. That white man on the train? He said speculators are paying top dollar for these farms around here.

Of course, I know your sister would never sell this land because she's just like all the other Negroes around here. She's content to live her life like a pack mule out in some backwater town. I never should have let you talk me into bringing you out here. We damn well could have waited in New Orleans like I wanted to. Taking that damn train all the way across the damn prairie. You know what they call your precious town? "Niggerdemus!" Niggerdemus, Kansas. Don't you think that's funny, Min?

## FRANK: SIDE 2

**FRANK:** I'm your husband. Don't you ever tell me no! Don't you ever threaten me as long as you live, do you understand me? Do you?

I'll kill you right now, Min. I'll break your damn neck before your precious sisters can hear you holler. I'll kill everybody in this house, don't you understand that? You want to know who I told those white men you were, Min? You really want to know?

I told them you were a black whore I won in a card game.

## FRANK: SIDE 3

**FRANK:** Well, maybe you'll like your new neighbors better. Ask Min about them. She met them on the train. Well, she didn't really meet them, I didn't introduce her, of course, but she saw us talking. White gentlemen. She'll remember them. She wants to tell you, but she's a little nervous about it.

You can see why. You've raised her to think this place is practically holy ground. She didn't even want to talk about selling it at first, but she came around.

Well, you let her tell you. I figured under the circumstances, I would spend the night in town. I'm sure I'll have our share sold before tomorrow. Hope the sale doesn't hurt your chances in the vote next week. *(Laughs)* You know you're getting off easy when you think about it, Sister Sophie. I could stick around here and take over your precious town if I wanted to. You ever see a group of colored people who didn't put the lightest one in charge?



# MINNIE SIDES

## MINNIE: SIDE 1

**MINNIE:** Me too. (A beat) Everything has changed. Everything. When Frank and I went to London, it was like a fairy tale. I felt so free! I could do anything, go anywhere, buy anything. And Frank was always there to show me something I had never seen before or tell me something I'd been waiting to hear all my life ... and I loved to look at him. But then he changed ... He was mad all the time. Mad at everybody. But mostly me, I guess. I don't know why! I think he just started hating colored people. We'd be walking down the street and he'd say: "Look at those niggers. No wonder nobody wants to be around them." When his father died and his brothers stopped sending money, it just got worse and worse. It was almost like he couldn't stand to look at me...

## MINNIE: SIDE 2

**MINNIE:** What happened to my face?

It's so silly.

*(They wait in silence.)*

I bought a new dress for the trip ... and I ... I wanted to show it to Frank ... and I ... the train ... I stumbled in the train compartment. You know how clumsy I am. I bumped my head so hard I saw stars! And this is what I've got to show for it. Frank made me promise to be more careful. He worries so about me.

*(An awkward pause. They don't believe her.)*

I told him I used to be much worse. Remember that time I almost fell off the roof? I would have killed myself if it hadn't been for Sophie.

Don't look so worried. I'll be careful. It was just an accident.

# FANNIE SIDES

## FANNIE: SIDE 1

**FANNIE:** My mother loved flowers. Roses were her favorites. My father used to say, "Colored women ain't got no time to be foolin' with no roses," and my mother would say, as long as colored men had time to worry about how colored women spent their time, she guessed she had time enough to grow some roses.

Sophie likes sunflowers, but they're too big to put inside the house. They belong outside. (*A beat*) It's lonely out here without flowers. Sophie laughed the first time everything I planted around the house came into bloom. She said I had planted so many flowers there wasn't any room for the beans and tomatoes.

Sophie found her laugh out here. I don't remember ever hearing her laugh the whole time we were in Memphis. But everything in Kansas was funny to her. Sometimes when we first got here, she'd laugh so hard she'd start crying, but she didn't care. One time, she was laughing so hard I was afraid she was going to have a stroke. She scared me to death. When she calmed down, I asked her, well, why didn't you ever laugh like that in Memphis? And she said her laugh was too free to come out in a place where a colored woman's life wasn't worth two cents on the dollar. What kind of fool would find that funny, she asked me. She was right, too. Sophie's always right.

## FANNIE: SIDE 2

**FANNIE:** Frank is going through a bad time, that's all, but he's still Frank. He's still that man that swept you off your feet. The man you want to be the father of your children, isn't he? You know who else had a terrible temper?

Daddy. You were too young to remember it, but he did. And Daddy was a good man, but he had that temper and sometimes it would get the better of him. Just like your Frank. Sometimes he used to ... not all the time, but ... one time they woke me up, fussing about something, and Mama didn't hear me call her, so I went to the top of the stairs where I could see them without them seeing me. I always sat there ... Daddy was sitting by the fireplace and Mama was talking a mile a

minute. I could tell he didn't like what she was saying, and then he got up real fast and grabbed her arm and he just shook her and shook her ... I was so scared I ran back to bed, but I could still hear everything ... Sometimes we have to be stronger than they are, Baby Sister. We have to understand and be patient.

Mama always said she was biding her time until we could get these white folks off our backs so she could get colored men straightened out on a thing or two a little bit closer to home, but until then, she said she'd give him the benefit of the doubt.

## WIL/FANNIE SIDE

**WIL:** I guess I'd have to say the weather more than anything. I miss that Mexican sunshine. Makes everything warm. You know how cold these creeks are when you want to take a swim? Well, I like to swim, bein' from Florida and all, so I close my eyes and jump in real quick! But that water would nigh 'bout kill a Mexican. They don't know nothin' 'bout no cold. They even eat their food hot!

I ate a Mexican hot pepper one time.  
It looked just like a Louisiana hot pepper, but when I bit into it, it nigh 'bout lifted the top of my head off. Them Mexicans were laughing so hard they couldn't even bring me no water. I like to died!

Miss Fannie, sometimes I really do miss it, I surely do. But I know Baker needs somebody to keep an eye on things for him until he gets back. He swears they'll be back this spring.  
And now I got Miss Leah's place to look in on too.

I know Miss Sophie doesn't think they're strong enough for this life. But sometimes people are a lot stronger than you can tell by just lookin' at 'em. He said the baby is fat and healthy and looks just like him, poor little thing!

(A beat.)

You know what else I like? I mean about Mexico?  
I like Mexicans.