

BLACK / OUT STORIES

by

Steve Harper

Draft May 2013
Steve@harpercreates.com

Chris Till
CAA
162 Fifth Avenue 6th Floor
New York NY 10010
(212) 277-9000
ctill@caa.com

(c) 2010

ACT ONE

Note: Everything in Bold is to be spoken by the entire cast. Lights up on the Writer: 40s, youthful, black.

PROJECTION: A photo of James Baldwin.

WRITER

James Baldwin challenged me - to my face. I was in a college production of his play *The Amen Corner*. And I heard the cast would get to meet Baldwin when he came to an event at the university. He'd see the play and talk with us afterwards. He never saw it. His trip was cut short and he had less than an hour with us. Baldwin was short as I recall, dark, with piercing eyes. He said a few words to us as a group and then, the cast lined up, one by one, and Baldwin gave individual blessings. I approached him, my photocopied script in hand. I told him I wanted to be an actor: "Do you really want it?", he asked. "Yes I do." "Then," he said, "go the distance." He pulled out a pen and wrote that on page one of my script. He nodded. I moved aside. (beat) Go the distance.

Lights. In the darkness.

DIGITIZED FEMALE VOICE

Welcome to the conference. Please enter the conference ID followed by the pound key. (a beat) Please enter the conference ID followed by the pound key. (beat). **Thank you.** Guest ID accepted. **For help with Guest options press star zero.**

(Bleep sound.) Music starts playing.
Sounds pop/folky. Music stops.
Projected title above the writer: **"What I've never understood."**

WRITER

(to us)

What I've never understood is - and maybe you can tell me - you're theatre people - I've never understood those plays where people just - come out as gay, as bi, whatever - and everybody is just like "yeah, right." It's like no one cares or ever cared and it's so *safe* to tell people and it's like "on to the next thing". Is that your experience? I have this idea - this projection really - that these playwrights they came from somewhere else to New York and they're operating on the idea that New York is the gay promised land. (beat) That's cute. (beat) I grew up in New York. My mother has lived here all her life. And my parents, when I came out - they were like "What?". Ask a thousand people what they have to say about coming out. And you'll get **a thousand different stories**. I tried it. It changed me. How? Well - you'll know by the end.

PROJECTION: "11 Stories"

WRITER

There are eleven stories I'll share. **One of them is mine.**
That's where we'll start.

PROJECTION: "Story Number 1"

Projected title: **"The Brady Bunch"**

Lights shift.

PROJECTION: A television screen.

WRITER

So. Me: I'm a big... I'm a big television fan. We always had a couple of TVs in our house when I was growing up and my parents, my mother, especially, was big into television. I grew up wanting to be on television. And I was a huge fan of The Brady Bunch. I know, it's actually sort of a ridiculous show, but, I was a huge fan. It was about a really big family. A community. And I wanted in. I wanted to be a Brady kid. And I remember there was an episode... There was an episode with Ken Berry, remember him? He was their neighbor. He moved in next door. And he's got a son, a biological son, and he's adopted two kids of color. There's an Asian kid and a black kid. And the episode mostly focuses on Ken and those kids. And... And one of the kids... Or maybe both of the kids... the kids of color feel like they're not.... **They don't belong.** Because they're - not white. And they run away. I think they might have run over to the Brady house. But I remember watching that episode and being shocked that... that the race of these kids was such a big deal. Because I thought... It was the first time that I thought to myself, holy fuck... Like, *I can't be a Brady kid.* I couldn't just walk into their house and sit next to Jan and Peter and have cereal without it being an issue: **controversial or strange or different or difficult or unusual** or unwanted or... I couldn't - I would be the complication in their life. (beat) And that's the first time I really got it. It's like, wow, I'm a walking issue. (beat) And wanting to... On so many levels to shed that issue. Like it was a coat that I could take off. Like, can't I just...? Are you serious? **Like do I have to really walk around and be cloaked in all this stuff?** I can't just - walk around?

Projected Title: **"Fear of Black People"**

WRITER

I also remember a period of time... I was born in Brooklyn and we moved to Long Island when I was about 5. And my mother would chart the world in terms of strata. She would be sort of... You know there were like: *this* kind of black people and *that* kind of black people and - and you know it was important that we came across as *this* kind of black people.

And that we stayed away from *that* kind of black people. And...I remember coming to her - I remember coming to her when I was... I don't know, 7, and saying "I'm afraid of black people." You know... "I'm afraid of... I'm afraid of *those* people." (beat) We moved to Long Island - because it would be *safer* - more suburban, but it quickly became a *black neighborhood*. And my brother - he - enjoys hanging out with the guys who want to hang out. Playing basketball and drinking - stuff like that. Which is... has never been my crowd. That was never me. And so, I felt intimidated by those people who - I couldn't get close to. We were raised Catholic. And I was into *telling* on him. He was going to Hell. For *so* many things! And he just stopped wanting to hang out with me. He was just like, no. You're not cool. And so I felt like I've always been - the not cool black guy who was afraid of black people. (beat) So - what are the rules of blackness? What are the rules of gayness? There will be a quiz at the end. **And sharing. And a group hug.** No, that's optional. *I'm a big fan of touching.* But seriously, I'm a junkie for self-revelation. Telling secrets - feels like intimacy. Like - group - intimacy. Do you feel it? If you don't now, you will later.

Lights shift. Granville appears. He's fabulous!

Projected Title: "**Granville**"

GRANVILLE

When did you take on blackness?

WRITER

This is Granville. He comes in later, but he's here early because - well some of the things he wanted to know about me - in our interview - he interviews me - some of those things - might help me tell the story. So - he's here now. And I also didn't want you to think this was a one-person show. (beat) Say hi.

GRANVILLE

How you doing?

Beat.

WRITER

What did you ask?

GRANVILLE

When did you take on blackness?

WRITER

Hmm. Wow, I'm not even sure if I know what that means. I remember my father had - in the early 70s in his art studio, a poster, that said 'black is beautiful, '. On the poster was an incredibly dark woman. It was a close-up of her face.

You could really see her eyes. And I think her hands. And she was smiling.

PROJECTION: Black is Beautiful Image.

GRANVILLE

We had that same poster.

WRITER

Did you? (beat) I just thought, like, what is so fucking beautiful about that? That is like, so... It just really weirded me out. I was like, what does that mean? That's almost scary to me. It's so jarring and so in my face. And I realize - I *lead with the status parts of me*. So I'd rather lead with the Ivy League part and the middle class part. So I won't lead with the gay stuff. I won't lead with the black stuff necessarily.

GRANVILLE

Why don't you give us some history - you growing up. Kind of a greatest hits of your life and times. Just enough so it's not boring and we get to know what your deal is.

Lights shift.

Projected title: "**Elementary School**"

WRITER

My elementary school is named after a saint! And I'm in love. With my teacher: Mrs. Joseph - she's sweet and kind. A white woman - she sees my goodness. Before I graduate that year - 6th Grade, I write her a poem. It went like this: (beat. reciting.) **Mrs. Joseph / Eyes so blue / I wish I didn't have to leave you. / The year has gone and now it's past / The memories will make it last...** (beat) She turned red. I guess I embarrassed her.

Projected Title: "**High school.**"

PROJECTION: A Clown with A Burger.

WRITER

(to us)

High school: I stalked a girl at McDonald's. Sort of. A black girl. I remember my father had this moment. He was angry with me that I didn't get out enough and wasn't dating anyone. And he said to me in a fit of anger, he was like, '**Because if you're not dating women, I know which way you're going.**' Subtle. I guess it was just some sort of tactic. But I kind of figured that that meant that they knew. That they'd figured me out. I'd known for a while, but couldn't articulate it. And I was so young - couldn't things change? I walked into McDonald's a few days later and there's this cute girl behind the counter. Like television commercial cute.

And I know by looking at her that we could make a good couple. So I go up to the counter, I ask her name. She tells me:

CUTE GIRL

Jalessa.

WRITER

but it must be weird to her that I'm asking because she's not very enthused. Not happy to meet me. I stand there for a while - like they do in the movies - trying to be aggressively charming. But she's not giving me anything and she's clearly waiting for the next customer, even though the place is empty. Can't she see I'm nice? Can't she see I'm just as cute as she is? Can't she see that I'm one of the good ones? (beat) I stand there for a while. Get my burger. And leave. I go back the next week (same day) and not only is she not there, they won't tell me anything about her. I go. Defeated. I need some lessons in how to be a man. (beat) I'm 14.

Lights shift.

Projected title: "**College**"

WRITER

(to us)

I'd dated a few women in college (**black women of course**) one of whom became a lesbian. And I was roommates Sophomore year with a guy who was gay from the Los Angeles area. Javier. Fascinating. He was the first person I knew who - owned it - being gay - you know? And I watched him to see how he could be so - clear with who he was. And what that meant. I remember finding his porn. And when I found it: "Wow" - I thought this guy - **he's REALLY gay** - like really. Because his porn? This shit was no joke.

PROJECTION: "Naughty" 70s Porn Image.

WRITER

I mean it was - I had previously seen all this like 70s porn - you know, my father had Playboy and stuff like that - Penthouse - ivory skinned women on bear skin rugs. **Very naughty.**

PROJECTION: "Football player looking guy" gay Porn Image.

WRITER

But when I found Javier's porn - it was - like - the guys were AMAZING looking - big and muscular with beautiful open faces and engaging smiles and they were - *doing* all these things - to each other and themselves. It seemed so - out there. And so normal- in this kind of extraordinary way.

That these guys - these - **beautiful hunky, muscular football player looking guys** were able to let it all hang out - with no shame. I was floored. **This was - revolutionary.** These men were brave and they wanted me to be.

And so - before long - Javier and I were having sex on the top bunk. **How did that happen?** And moaning so loudly that one of our neighbors, through the fire door, heard us. She never looked at me the same again. And my denial was SOOOO strong about the whole sex thing that I, literally, fell asleep the first time we had sex. It was just too much. I kept nodding off. And Javier would shake me awake - laughing - partly with embarrassment - for me I guess. I could barely handle it. So I would pass out - even though - deep down I knew it was - for me - the right mode of sexual expression. (beat) So there I was - first boyfriend, first sex, and my roommate. Who I would see **EVERY DAY. And EVERY NIGHT.** I couldn't handle it. So I did something bad. I went to the dean. And I told her I needed to move. And she pressed me:

Lights up on the dean.

THE DEAN

Why?

WRITER

"We're not getting along. My roommate and I. Javier." And she said -

THE DEAN

Why?

WRITER

And I felt forced, so I betrayed him. "He's gay." I said. Hoping that would be enough - after all she was a preppy upper crusty weathered looking white woman and she ought to be sympathetic and horrified. Right? She wasn't

THE DEAN

"We need to learn to get along with all kinds of people - "

WRITER

"He's coming on to me. And I can't deal with it." (beat) And she moved me. And my relationship with Javier went up in flames. **But I saved myself.** By outing him. And hiding. I felt really terrible about it. And he stopped talking to me. But then I apologized and we made up. And I knew I couldn't escape the gay thing.

Projected title: **"It's the Worst Thing."**

GRANVILLE

So at what age did you come out? Did you ever come out?
And what was that process like for you? Can you tell me when
you came out to your parents?

WRITER

Yeah. I'm at home that summer from college. And I'd watched
an episode of **Oprah**.

PROJECTION: Oprah.

WRITER

I was sitting on my mother's bed. The TV was in her room. And
they were talking, on **Oprah**, about the Institute for Gay and
Lesbian Youth. I wrote down the number. Might be resource.
When **Oprah** ended I went back to my room and was doing some
reading. I didn't realize I'd left the piece of paper on my
mother's bed.

MOM

"Are you Ok?"

WRITER

She came in later, a very sad look on her face. "Sure".

MOM

"I found this."

WRITER

Her tone was like - she discovered some document that linked
me to the KKK. Like she'd found out I was the Grand Dragon
and had been keeping it from her. I admitted the paper was
mine and that I thought people knew. I thought she and dad
knew. There were all those times when my folks had questioned
my social behavior. I didn't have enough black friends. I
didn't have a girlfriend. So I thought they knew. My mom kept
denying that it could be true. That I was gay. She didn't
want it to be true. I said "Mom - it's not a bad thing." And
she countered

MOM

It's the worst thing.

Lights fade on Mom.

WRITER

My father, ever the Catholic, was mystified, but actually,
supportive. He told me he loved me. And proceeded to (over
the next year) go through all my high school friends asking
if they were gay. He wanted to blame it on a lack of male
role models (I'd had all those nuns in elementary school.) He
thought I was overcompensating for something. My mother,
after that first conversation - quietly withdrew. She
disappeared for three days. Went to Atlantic City.

But she didn't tell us. On the third day we declared her a missing person. And I recall standing in the hallway at my parents house with my dad and some white police officer who was asking us all these questions:

Lights up on a white police officer.

POLICE OFFICER

How tall was she? Did she speak with an accent? Was there anything distinguishing about her? Tattoos? Was she missing any teeth?

WRITER

It was so obvious, he hadn't met her. In our house one of the main lessons was **no matter what the chaos, when you walk out - you must look presentable.** Pristine. Ordered. Upscale. So no - no tattoos. No missing teeth. No gold teeth. Just a woman who had to get away. When my mother came back she said:

MOM

What?

WRITER

After I told my parents, my mother told my aunt and my grandmother and suddenly - **everybody knew.** My cousin's gay too, and we had attended the same prep school. So, naturally, my grandmother said **"Maybe it's the schools they go to."**

PROJECTION: "Maybe it's the schools they go to".

DIGITIZED FEMALE VOICE

Welcome to the conference. Please enter the conference ID followed by the pound key. (beat)

Lights shift.

WRITER

The schools we go to? Um, Gram, don't lump me in with a group I hardly know. I don't know these people! I'm just me. I'm not joining a movement, I'm just - (beat) I feel so - **separate.**

Projected title: "Separate."

WRITER

That night I pray to God. (beat) God, please help Mom and Dad. **Help me.** I want to find - a place that feels - like the right place for me to be. Amen. (beat) But where was that place? Walking distance? Over the years: here are some responses I've encountered upon coming out:

RESPONSE #1

"You're what?"

RESPONSE #2

"Really?"

RESPONSE #3

"Of course."

RESPONSE #4

"What does that mean? Oh. Oh!"

RESPONSE #2

"I finally understand why you and your parents didn't get along."

RESPONSE #1

"You? Come on!"

RESPONSE #5

"Are you sure?"

RESPONSE #6

"Don't tell me that."

RESPONSE #7

"Do you want to be called a Faggot?"

WRITER

Is it always like this? (beat) So I started this interview thing right after I met Shawn.

Lights shift.

Projected titles: **"Meeting the Husband"**

The Husband appears. He's white.

WRITER

(to us)

I just graduated college and had gone back to direct a play at the middle school of my high school. And as a gift they gave me two tickets to *Burn This*. That's a Lanford Wilson play about a woman who falls in love with the twin brother of her gay best friend - for those of you who didn't see it. Which I guess amounts to a guy with fabulous good looks and sensitivity, but he's into women. Hm. (beat) Anyway, I took a friend from college to the show.

PROJECTION: "Broadway" / TKTS image.

HUSBAND

I had been planning to see the play for a while, and that night I was having dinner with Serge, after work and I thought we'd walk over to TKTS to see what they had. *Burn This* was on the board. So we got it.

WRITER

As I came to know about Shawn, he always went to the bathroom right before anything started. And my friend and I had gone to the bathroom and we were coming back up the stairs at this theatre - I think the *Plymouth*. And the stairs are really narrow so we're going up one side, and people are coming down the other side.

HUSBAND

So I look down and there he is. Looking - stunning. Looking up at me.

WRITER

And I look up and see this guy - really handsome and *he's looking at me*. So I look and then I look away.

HUSBAND

And I keep looking over at him and when we're parallel on the stairs -

WRITER

He's looking at me.

HUSBAND

And he looks away again. I'm thinking - what's with that?

WRITER

And I get to the top of the stairs and I'm looking down and he's looking at me from the bottom and I say to my friend, much too loudly "Oh my God, did you see that?" And everybody on the stairs starts looking around and I was so embarrassed.

HUSBAND

After the show Serge and I come out of the theatre and he's waiting there with his friend.

They stand there. Seeing each other for the first time.

PROJECTION: "New York Street" Image.

HUSBAND

Is this a date?

WRITER

No. Is this a date?

HUSBAND

No.

WRITER

I'm Clark.

HUSBAND

Shawn.

WRITER

This is Peyton.

HUSBAND

This is Serge.

WRITER

We're about to get some dessert. You're welcome to come along.

Beat.

HUSBAND

I have to get up for work early tomorrow. But maybe some other time?

WRITER

I should get your number.

The Husband pulls out a piece of paper and writes his number. He hands it to the writer. The writer pockets it. They smile at each other.

GRANVILLE

So that's when you started doing this?

WRITER

Yeah. Shawn and I - we - it was amazing. He was funny and smart and I felt - like - together we created a sense of home. A place to belong. We'd cook together and watch TV on weekends. Take vacations. (beat) My mother wouldn't call my house, but other than that, life was good. I had the relationship piece - and I wanted an artistic piece to go with it. So - I'd do these interviews on the side. I'm curious. Why not? To hear people's stories. And I thought, I'd eventually write a play. A transition from my acting career.

DIGITIZED FEMALE VOICE

Welcome to the conference. Please enter the conference ID followed by the pound key. (a beat) Please enter the conference ID followed by the pound key. (beat). Thank you. Guest ID accepted. **For help with Guest options press star zero.**

Granville goes. The Husband and the writer at home.

WRITER

I don't know what I'm doing.

HUSBAND

What do you mean, honey?

WRITER

I think this letter sounds all wrong.

HUSBAND

What's wrong about it?

WRITER

It sounds all - I don't know - I guess - heroic or something. I don't mean to sound like that.

HUSBAND

It doesn't sound like that.

WRITER

You're just saying that because you want to sleep with me.

HUSBAND

I already sleep with you. (beat) I like it. (he reads) You're asking people to tell you their stories. And you're including one of yours as an example. What's wrong with that?

WRITER

Nothing. It's -

HUSBAND

What?

WRITER

I don't know what I'm looking for by doing this. (beat) I always thought - I always heard that people should come out. Harvey Milk said it. But it feels - with mom it was painful. So - I've always wanted to know how other people did it.

HUSBAND

That's not enough? Your curiosity is not enough?

WRITER

No, it - yeah - sure. (reads) For me the coming out process can be a challenging one. Yes, I believe it's the right thing to do - an essential act of survival. But is that true most of the time? All of the time? In grocery stores as well as at extended family dinners? With strangers as well as with friends? (beat) Isn't that dramatic?

Beat.

HUSBAND

Well, yes. But that's OK. (beat) People will either want to help you or they won't.

Lights shift. The HUSBAND leaves.

WRITER

Lots of people didn't want to help.

VOICE #1

That's a great - idea. Great idea. Wow. I love it.

WRITER

So - can I interview you?

VOICE #1

No. I don't have a story.

WRITER

What do you mean you don't -

VOICE #1

I don't Ok! Just drop it!

Lights shift.

WRITER

Hey! Thanks for getting back to me.

VOICE #2

Yeah. Yeah, no prob.

WRITER

So - can we schedule something -

VOICE #2

No, I'm not comfortable doing this.

WRITER

I'll change your name.

VOICE #2

Yeah, no - still.

WRITER

But you called me back.

VOICE #2

Well, you mentioned that people just stop emailing you and disappear. I didn't want to be one of those people. But - no. It's not for me. Good luck! It's a great idea.

Beat.

WRITER

Hi!

VOICE #3

Hi! Sounds like an interesting project. But I'm not giving you the rights to my story. I might want to write it later as a feature film.

WRITER

Yeah, you can - do - whatever you want. My release says that I own the story "as you tell it" today. These words on this day. Not that I own it - or the ideas or the circumstances. But that I can put in the play, edit it - shuffle it around - that it becomes part of the project. I don't care if you make a feature film. It's your story. It's your life.

VOICE #3

Huh. Well. No. I'm still not comfortable with that.

Lights fade on #3. The writer is alone.

PROJECTION: "New York Times" Image.

WRITER

I'm giving up. It's not happening. (beat) But then I read an article in the *New York Times* about someone I went to college with who's now on *Broadway*. Fuck! And I pick the project up again. By day I'm auditioning for stuff and writing. At night I'm having dinner with Shawn and watching TV. I feel hope. I get my first interview. This is the sound of the service I use to record my interviews.

DIGITIZED FEMALE VOICE

Welcome to the conference. Please enter the conference ID followed by the pound key. (beat)

(Bleep sound.)

Lights up on GREG, late 50s, black.
Projected title: "**Greg**".

WRITER

I have to connect to a website that processes my interview recording through a conference call for a monthly fee. I've got my tools: my list of questions, my note pad and my curiosity. (beat) I call in ahead of time to log into the service. At the top of it, I'm just waiting - And suddenly, he's there.

GREG

Hello?

PROJECTION: "Story Number 2".

WRITER

Hi. Greg. Hi. (beat) Um - So tell me about a, your, a personal coming out story that stands out for you.

GREG

There's the thing about the bar. Before I came out to my parents. I told them I was going to this bar.

PROJECTION: "Gay Bar" Image.

WRITER

That's a pretty bold move I think, to tell your parents that you were going to a bar. Did you think it was bold at the time?

GREG

No, because um well, when they asked me what bar I was going to, well, I didn't volunteer the name of the bar. I was just going out. If they asked me I figured I'd just tell them, so it was called Goodnight Martha's. Goodnight Martha was the name of the bar. And I knew that my mother didn't know anything about what was a gay bar and what wasn't, she wasn't the type of person to go out and I wasn't, I didn't know if my father knew or not and I didn't really even care. And so, heh, oddly enough, a day I was in Midnight Mary's in Utica, all of a sudden I'm at the bar and I feel something, some paper being pushed into my hand. I was standing at the bar talking to the bar maid, who I used to go out with when I was in high school. She was now going out with the female owner of this bar. (laughs) And I felt, I felt some paper being pushed in my hand, something crinkly, and I didn't look to see who was doing it. I put my hand up at the bar and there was a 20 dollar bill in it and I turned around to look and it was my father on his way out from the bar waving.

WRITER

Wow (laughs)

GREG

He was going next door and then when, that's when, Bri-Anne was the girl's name who was the bar maid, told me that, oh yeah, that's your father? He comes in here every once in a while and talks to me and then he'll go next door.

WRITER

That must have been a surprise.

GREG

That was a little bit of a surprise, but the bigger surprise was one day when I was at the bar and my father happened to be in the bar at the same time talking to Bri-Anne, and um I didn't realize it at the time. I was talking to this very effeminate friend of mine at the time who's name was J.D., and he was talking about some guy at the bar who was, you know, he said, mmmhmm, that man's in here again (laughs) and I said "who are you talking about J.D.?" And he said the one over there. The one over there talking to Bri-Anne. And I said yeah and he said, mmm, that man's got some good dick.

And I thought to myself, I was like, there were so many things that went through my mind and I said "J.D., I hate to tell you this but that's my father." And he thought I was lying cause you see, my father's half Italian and half black, so he looks kind of like a Ricky Ricardo kind of guy -

PROJECTION: Ricky Ricardo Image.

GREG

and I look more black, so J.D. thought, he thought I was joking. I said no, I'm serious. Let him sit up here. That is my father. If you don't believe me, go ask Bri-Anne. And then all of a sudden his face just broke and he said oh shit, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean, and I'm like, it's not a problem, we are both in the same place. I mean inside I was thinking wow, I never knew that, you know, that my father would go there, but apparently him and my mother and I never talked about this as apparently, probably depending on about how much he had to drink and whether he got lucky that night with a woman, he might have gone over there and you know, cause, he, an effeminate guy wouldn't, would have been fine with him as long as he got off. Now, he didn't seem to be the type that would get into like all the cuddling or kissing or anything like that, but to have somebody give him a blow job or something like that, it was um, that wouldn't have surprised me.

Lights shift.

WRITER

(to us)

This guy's voice is deep, sexy, attractive. I'm curious what he looks like. And I love the notion of listening. This feels - intimate to me. Just Greg and me on the phone like this. (beat) I purposely don't ask anything about these people I'm interviewing. I don't record age or geographic location, or religious background. That's the experiment: to learn what I can from what the people say. (beat. To Greg:) What did that feel like for you to have, to have made that discovery about your father?

GREG

You know, I, it's strange, it it, just made me wonder, but it didn't, I certainly wasn't hurt by it and um, there was nothing ever in my life that would make me think he would've done that, but knowing that he was in the same bar tells me that he didn't mind coming in there, kind of like letting me know that, well it happened, it could happen, cause I know an experience I had myself with a guy which was supposedly, quote unquote, straight you know, from my own dealing with you know, my home town. A lot of the guys had wives, you know, things like that, but they were running around and they needed to have a little something something on the side, so you know I had. (beat) You know, it's like, uh huh;