

Bright Gold Promise

by

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DESCRIPTION

The story of Bright Gold Promise is a story about a betrayal that begins with an impulsive act by a young man that ends in pain and retribution.

BACKGROUND

Years before, Jim Sterling had owned a gym, where many kids from the working-class neighborhood, including Michael, Ken, and Jerry, came to learn how to box as well as save their souls from the streets. But what had been a “paradise” of tolerance and friendship skewed under the weight of racial pressure, which led Jerry to side, momentarily, against his love for Jim and with the forces opposing the desegregation of the local schools. Forever despairing over this betrayal, Jerry constantly looks to make what was crooked straight but never finds the way to do it. The play begins on a day when Jim looks to sell his property and retire. If Jim moves away, Jerry believes he will lose any chance to make up for his act of betrayal. Complications arise when Michael finds out exactly what Philip Tremble, the real estate developer who wants to buy Jim’s property, is up to and convinces Jim to hold out for a better offer. Jerry finds himself in a strange alliance with Phil because he believes that by getting Jim to accept Phil’s offer and not follow Michael’s aggressive approach (Michael has his own feud with Phil), he can help Jim. But when Jim is murdered, and evidence surfaces that implicates Jerry, Naheem, Jim’s son, finds himself forced to avenge his father’s death.

CHARACTERS

- JIM STERLING, African American
- NAHEEM STERLING, JIM’s son – African American
- KEN LOUDER, graphic artist
- JERRY ARGENT
- MICHAEL FISH, lawyer
- PHILIP TREMBLE, real estate developer

NOTE ON ACCENTS: KEN, JERRY, and MICHAEL are from the northeast. PHIL’s should be Southern from Virginia, middle- to upper-class. JIM and NAHEEM are originally from Piedmont North Carolina. However, the director and actors are free to find accents that work for them as long as they bring a musicality to the saying of the language.

SETTING/TIME

Jim’s Gym, owned by Jim and Naheem; they also own the building in which the gym exists. There is a diner downstairs -- talked about but never seen. The action takes place entirely in the gym; other scenes take place downstage right, center, and left in areas defined by light. Paraphernalia to suggest a gym, including a large sign on the wall saying “Jim’s Gym” and a table with enough chairs for everyone. Lighting should look as if it comes from single bulbs with

tin shades. There are two doors -- one to the outside, one leading to an office; the office door should open into the gym. The gym is old, full of old sweat and pain.

No digital technologies are available.

MISCELLANEOUS

- KEN also has a sketchbook that he takes out and draws on during the scenes.
- JIM wears a pendant: a shape of Africa in tri-color black, red, and green.
- JERRY has two keys on a visually distinctive key ring that he occasionally takes out of his pocket and plays with: the keys to get into the building and then into the diner. He also has a spare set of keys.
- MICHAEL has a key that he keeps in his wallet -- a key to his parents' house.
- PHIL constantly eats breath mints or pastilles, which he takes from a small tin.

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ACT I, Scene 1

Lights go to black. A strong percussion begins, a la Gene Krupa. The music continues in the darkness, then lights up as it continues. JERRY comes bounding in to the gym space. He is dressed in a dark suit, having just come from a funeral. JERRY begins to shadowbox, and they are the movements of a young and happy man. His movements carry him around the gym.

Suddenly the music stops with a change in lights: JERRY becomes what he is -- in his late forties, out of breath, and looking sad. He looks around and then walks to the closed office door. He is just about to knock on it when KEN enters carrying a bag or satchel; he, too, is dressed as if coming from a funeral. JERRY moves quickly away from the door, but KEN sees him. With an affectionate gesture, KEN embraces JERRY, who reciprocates the affection with a kiss. MICHAEL enters at a brisk pace, notices the embrace, and continues into the room. JERRY breaks away from KEN to follow MICHAEL.

MICHAEL: The brass --

JERRY: Michael --

MICHAEL: -- to bring your face around here.

JERRY: Then you shouldn't have told me.

KEN: You told him because you wanted him to come here.

MICHAEL: No --

KEN: Such a lazy liar, Michael.

JERRY: Michael --

MICHAEL: I do not care about his lost soul -- that's been your unlucky burden.

KEN: Then why --

JERRY: Michael --

KEN: -- did you tell him?

MICHAEL: Because I wanted him to squirm, pine, lament, suffer -- suf-fer. But appear?

JERRY: I need to know more.

MICHAEL: What do you need to know that you don't already know? (to KEN) You should take him home.

JERRY: I won't go -- not if they're really going to sell --

MICHAEL: You've stayed gone for twenty years, Jerry. What's one day more? Jim is not going to want to see you standing there when he comes out.

JERRY: I'm not going away.

MICHAEL: Naheem will bust you up --

JERRY: I'm not --

MICHAEL: -- with pleasure.

JERRY: -- going away.

MICHAEL: Like a bad penny. So stay -- who cares?

KEN: (to JERRY) What did you expect, my love?

MICHAEL takes off his jacket, hangs it on the chair, then takes off his black armband. So does KEN. Throughout KEN will sketch in his sketchbook.

MICHAEL: I am hating these funerals.

MICHAEL throws the armband on the table; so does KEN.

JERRY: You heard --

MICHAEL: More of them from our age.

JERRY: -- them talking --

MICHAEL: We're all dying off.

KEN: (to JERRY) You know you have to wait --

MICHAEL: *(to KEN)* More and more people we know -- gone. And today, Riordan -- who ever thought Riordan Esposito -- rotund Riordan -- belly-up and off he goes before any of us.

JERRY: Tell me what you saw --

MICHAEL: I never liked him much.

JERRY: What --

MICHAEL: I pretended, but I never did. Did you?

JERRY: -- did you see?

KEN: I didn't like him either.

MICHAEL: He appealed to me about like chloroform does to a moth.

KEN: I always felt sorry for him.

MICHAEL: But one of ours, hey?

KEN: Hey!

MICHAEL: And always mourn one of your own -- even a rat like Riordan.

KEN: Riordan the rat.

MICHAEL: And so -- ergo, Esposito finito. *(facing JERRY)* Who's next? You? Ken-man here would mourn -- so at least one person coffin-side.

JERRY: Not you?

MICHAEL: I have done your wills, so I guess I'd have to be there. In matters legal, at least.

JERRY: Matters legal --

MICHAEL: *(to KEN)* How have you done it? How have you lasted twenty years with this man -- one whole score with him?

KEN: Tell him what he wants to know, Michael.

MICHAEL: Twenty years, Jerry -- oh, look at him! -- for twenty years you have parked yourself downstairs, in that crud diner --

KEN: Old news, Michael --

MICHAEL: -- that we have to pass by every time we -- we --

KEN: Very old news --

MICHAEL: -- come to see Jim and Naheem to see if they're all right -- note that the we does not include you --

KEN: Let it go --

MICHAEL: -- serving all those belchers and gulpers and fartars down there -- just down the stairs and around the corner --

KEN: Let it go!

MICHAEL: -- just a little ways away in the crud diner --

JERRY: *(to KEN)* It's all right.

MICHAEL: -- and have done nothing. *(to KEN)* You have tried to explain this to me --

KEN: I have.

MICHAEL: *(to JERRY)* -- some kind of vigil you're keeping --

KEN: Can't help it if you're [dense] --

MICHAEL: -- is that right?

JERRY does not respond.

MICHAEL: Jerry and his vigil -- sinful Jerry -- what sin, Jerry? -- this lawyer's steel-trap mind can't quite --

KEN: The lawyer might shut up then --

JERRY: *(to KEN)* It's all right --

MICHAEL: Vigil?

KEN: It's not --

MICHAEL: Sacred?

KEN: -- all right.

MICHAEL: You?

KEN: I think shutting up --

MICHAEL: What I see, have always seen --

KEN: -- would be a good idea --

MICHAEL: -- standing in that crud diner? Spineless. Weasel. Who has not come through.

KEN: Enough, Michael -- really enough.

MICHAEL: But on this day --

KEN: Michael --

MICHAEL: -- suddenly you are all at the ready for mercy --

KEN: Michael! Time's up! You've already taken your pound. You are talking to, and about, the man I love.

MICHAEL: Will wonders never cease.

KEN: Let's hope so.

MICHAEL: *(to KEN)* I apologize -- to you. Not to make you pay. *(to JERRY)* But you --

KEN: Over a pound, Michael.

MICHAEL: *(indicating KEN)* For love of him, then. Christ. Christ!

MICHAEL picks up the black armband.

MICHAEL: "Dearly beloved" --

MICHAEL throws it to JERRY.

MICHAEL: You know why?

JERRY: Does it matter?

MICHAEL: I look at you -- Jerry Argent -- and much as I dislike and can't forget, I also can't forget all of what used to be --

KEN: One of our own --

MICHAEL: And it makes me -- angry --

KEN: Yes --

MICHAEL: No, not just that -- It makes me so angry -- that this place smells so much, feels so much, like a tomb! Jim's Gym! Christ! I look at you, and I see everyone else who should come here, crawl here, in homage and unending thanks to Jim, to Naheem -- but they don't. No one comes anymore. Too busy. Too involved. On vigils. Too late. Now -- a chance for them to make better -- you should have the grace to just shut up and stay away. I'm a little on edge.

KEN: Noted.

JERRY: Michael --

MICHAEL: What, Jerry?

JERRY: What did you see?

KEN: Two dogs, one bone.

MICHAEL: What did I see --

JERRY: I figured that since the beheading was over you might now talk to me like a human being.

MICHAEL: To you.

JERRY: Even rat Riordan got a pass from you.

MICHAEL: Him dying made that possible.

JERRY: That what you want?

MICHAEL fidgets with the question.

JERRY: You got your humiliation --

KEN: *(to MICHAEL)* Making us pay --

JERRY: Everyone had to pay whenever Mikey-O-Mike got on a rant -- annoying little prick idealist, wasn't he?

KEN: Oh, yes.

JERRY: Weren't you?

KEN: Oh, yes.

JERRY: Endless supply of evils in the world for Mikey-O-Mike's --

MICHAEL: Stop calling --

JERRY: -- crusades and causes --

MICHAEL: -- me that --

KEN: It all came from his reading of the newspaper.

JERRY: Too old before his time.

KEN: Evil thing, that newspaper.

MICHAEL: At least I read.

JERRY: Too old before his time even still. Old man, you said you heard “buyer,” you heard “seller.”

MICHAEL: The voice of the tomb.

JERRY: Whose?

MICHAEL: Clean your goddamn ego out of your ears because I’m only going to say it once.

JERRY: Then say it once and quit the dog-and-pony.

MICHAEL: On my way to the funeral, I poked my head through that very door.

JERRY: Tell me what you saw.

MICHAEL: It’s like you’re reading the guts of a bird.

JERRY: What’s it to you?

MICHAEL: It’s nothing to me.

JERRY: Then it costs you nothing to tell me.

MICHAEL: You think.

JERRY: You saw --

MICHAEL: Jim sitting there -- Naheem there --

JERRY: You said one more.

MICHAEL: The flat back of his head -- he never turned around.

JERRY: But you could tell something --

MICHAEL: Yes. I could tell by the crease in his pants -- a knife crease -- I have seen that crease before --

JERRY: Where?

MICHAEL: A crease that the lean and hungry and powerful wear. Cold.

JERRY: He made you feel cold.

MICHAEL: He felt no need to face me. He could bide his time.

JERRY: You should be in there. You should be --

MICHAEL: Jim did not ask.

JERRY: You know about the law.

MICHAEL: Can't give if not asked.

JERRY: You could have insisted.

MICHAEL: And told Jim what?

JERRY: What you felt.

MICHAEL: That the knife crease leaves me cold.

JERRY: The snakes are in there -- aren't they?

MICHAEL: What's in there --

JERRY: Aren't they?

MICHAEL: What's in there is the bright gold promise of an upward price for the tomb.

JERRY: With the knife crease.

MICHAEL: "Property appreciation" --

JERRY: Listen.

MICHAEL: -- about the only appreciation --

JERRY: Listen.

MICHAEL: -- he and Naheem have left. And that's more than --

JERRY: Listen --

MICHAEL: -- any one of us can give them.

JERRY: Listen! There's more, Michael. Mikey-O-Mike. More. Listen: "A buck, a buck, a buck for luck."

MICHAEL: What?

KEN: Mikey-O-Mike -- "A buck, a buck, a buck for luck."

There is a softening in MICHAEL.

MICHAEL: (*softly*) A buck, a buck, a buck for luck.

JERRY: A buck, a buck --

MICHAEL: Buck a week --

JERRY: That's all Jim charged us.

MICHAEL: Ten dimes --

KEN: Twenty nickels --

MICHAEL: -- for a safe place --

JERRY: Michael -- Michael -- c'mon -- not just safe safe.

MICHAEL: No.

JERRY: Paradise safe -- yes?

MICHAEL: Yes.

KEN: Yes.

JERRY: What it felt like to walk up those stairs --

KEN: God, yes!

JERRY: -- and get away from the streets?

KEN: Oh, yes! Yes. Down there, out there -- Out there, in the wilderness, I was the runt --

MICHAEL: It was a --

KEN: -- the fag --

MICHAEL: -- full-time job --

KEN: -- the faggot --

MICHAEL: -- protecting you --

KEN: I was the dog the dog kicked when the dog got kicked!

JERRY: But in here --

KEN: But in here --

JERRY: Safe.

KEN: Safe.

MICHAEL: Where we could all be the sons of Jim.

MICHAEL goes over to KEN and grabs him by the elbow.

MICHAEL: We had to drag the fag, though --

JERRY takes the other elbow, and they lift him off the ground. KEN bicycles his feet.

MICHAEL: Swept off your feet.

KEN: I thought death -- Put me down. I thought you were bringing me to one of my many early deaths. Boxing -- boxing, and me, the mariposa! Whole new meaning to --

KEN begins to shadowbox but in a "limp-wristed" way.

KEN: -- "float like a butterfly" --

KEN falls to the floor, as if he'd been knocked down.

KEN: "8 - 9 - 10 - yer out!" I had a perfect record --

JERRY: Because you never won a fight.

KEN: I never won a fight. But that was my method, smart one that I was. Crapped myself out on the canvas, then someone would always kneel down -- bringing all that sports-approved flesh down to me --

MICHAEL: "You okay, man?"

KEN: Yeah, you're fine -- nope, I mean I'm fine!

JERRY: "Let me give you hand up."

KEN: A hand what? Could you give me two while you're at it?

JERRY gives KEN a hand up.

JERRY: And I always liked giving you a hand what.

KEN: My memoirs of this place will be titled The Call of The Mild.

JERRY: (to MICHAEL) You think I don't care -- don't remember.

MICHAEL: You --

JERRY: Fags and -- (pointing at MICHAEL) -- a poet!

KEN: Put that pentameter down!

MICHAEL: (mock shock) My God!

KEN: He's a poet!

JERRY: His parents --

KEN: What sin have we committed that we should be punished so?

MICHAEL: You'd think I'd masturbated into the chalice.

JERRY: Wearing goat horns.

MICHAEL walks around, touching the equipment, punching the bag, etc., animated.

MICHAEL: Ten years old. First time up those stairs -- ten years old.

KEN: (*overlapping*) -- ten years old. Jim -- huge to me. He loomed!

MICHAEL: Like two ice ages ago.

KEN: Huge, and very black.

MICHAEL: (*to KEN*) There was Africa!

JERRY: By way of North Carolina.

KEN: Did he look that way to you?

MICHAEL: Africa in our neighborhood --

KEN: This pale fag --

MICHAEL: We weren't all infected yet, were we?

KEN: And this huge black man.

MICHAEL: We could still see.

KEN: The only "Africa" we had ever seen was black people in arrest photos. Not Jim.

JERRY: Michael --

KEN: Naheem.

JERRY: What?

KEN: Naheem. Seeing Naheem. Skinny like I was --

MICHAEL: Like all of us --

KEN: -- dark like I was talcum powder, both of us weirded out and walking on eggs -- suddenly Jim didn't loom. No fee, no fie, no foe, no fum -- he had a son --

JERRY: Sons --

KEN: Even rotten Riordan Esposito.

MICHAEL: Jim's straight-forward parable to the rising generation --

KEN: "We all bleed the same."

JERRY: "All equal under the sweat."

MICHAEL: Not infected yet, were we? Just kids being kids. It is so easy to forget --

JERRY: What a paradise --

MICHAEL: (*overlapping*) -- what a paradise it was.

JERRY: Yes.

MICHAEL: Not that you forget, but you don't always keep in mind the way you're supposed to, the way you should.

JERRY: Unless you keep a vigil. Hey?

A reaction from MICHAEL. A reaction by JERRY to MICHAEL.

JERRY: In there the snakes have come to feed, and it is getting colder -- you said so yourself. In there is --

JERRY snaps his fingers.

JERRY: -- another funeral brewing -- and you hate funerals. In there is the Jim who came here when black skin mapped out some real pain, and he bought this brick-pile and rooted a family and saved the three of us, and a million others, from the rat's ass. That deserves attention. As you said. You can. Do something.

JERRY is standing close to MICHAEL and punches, softly but not too softly, his arm.

JERRY: Do something.

JERRY begins to dance around MICHAEL, who refuses to respond -- jabbing, bobbing, and weaving.

JERRY: Bring back the lessons of boyhood, Mikey-O-Mike --

KEN: Jerry --

JERRY: "It is so easy to forget" --

MICHAEL: Stop it.

JERRY: Use what Jim taught you to take the snakes away.

MICHAEL: Enough.

JERRY: Find the seam, and then -- click, click, slam.

KEN: Don't push --

JERRY: You can do it.

MICHAEL: Do it for you?

JERRY stops.

JERRY: You've missed the point. You've let yourself miss the point. All right. All right. You want to let yourself go all dumb on me, that's fine.

Without warning, JERRY really punches MICHAEL hard in the arm.

JERRY: For Jim.

JERRY hits him again, hard.

JERRY: For Naheem. Something now, shyster.

JERRY goes to hit MICHAEL again, and MICHAEL raises his hands as if he's wearing the boxing mitts. JERRY punches one of MICHAEL's palms, and MICHAEL starts backing up.

MICHAEL: From the man with no reflexes.

JERRY goes to punch, but MICHAEL slips through his guard and slaps him, not hard, on the cheek.

MICHAEL: How Jim could slip right through your guard.

Through the next lines, MICHAEL easily slips past to touch JERRY's face -- never very hard.

MICHAEL: Like this -- and this -- this -- Ken, that color commentary thing you always liked to do.

The three are back in Jim's Gym at the age of ten learning the "sweet science." As they move, the door opens and the audience sees JIM. He is wearing his pendant. NAHEEM appears behind him. PHIL is barely visible.

KEN: And Mike the Spike dances. Gerald on the hunt. The Spike counters with cotton hands, which make the Jer-Bear tip into vooom-vooom drive.

JERRY chases MICHAEL, who refuses to be caught, until the whole thing gets a little stupid and the anger drains away. JERRY ends with a really hard jab against MICHAEL's hand and stops.

JIM: (to JERRY) You never could juke out any voltage.

KEN: Jim! Jim!

KEN goes to JIM and embraces him.

JIM: How's my artist?

KEN: Your artist is "in line."

JIM: Dumb jokes as usual -- glad to see nothing's changed. Michael.

MICHAEL embraces him.

JIM: So soon.

MICHAEL: Couldn't keep myself away.

JIM: Say something to me.

MICHAEL: "In the clearing stands a boxer -- "

JIM: Still the poet.

MICHAEL: Only on weekends.

JIM: The poet at the bar.

MICHAEL: That's why they call me the "bard."

JIM: Watch that, or you might get "dis-bard."

KEN: And I thought my jokes were bad.

There is a moment's hesitation, and then JERRY also embraces JIM.

JIM: *(to JERRY)* I tried and tried to teach you how to torque it up, but some got the business end of things, some ain't.

NAHEEM: Especially some "ain't" got it from the neck up.

JERRY: Naheem.

JIM: What are you all doing here? *(to JERRY)* I am mighty surprised by you up here.

JERRY: We came to pay our respects.

NAHEEM: No one's dead yet.

MICHAEL: *(to NAHEEM)* When I said I'd stopped by on the way to Riordan's funeral --

JERRY: Put us, so to speak, in the mode.

NAHEEM: Oh, it did? The mode, then -- *(indicating MICHAEL)* -- he came by -- and then went bye.

JIM: It's all right, Naheem.

NAHEEM: We have business to do, Papa.

JERRY: We just thought we'd stop by.

NAHEEM: So, you've been by. So, bye.

KEN: The homophones are just flying around here, aren't they?

JERRY: So. You've all been talking.

MICHAEL: *(to JERRY)* We should go.

JIM: Last I heard, Jerry, it was still constitutionally protected.

KEN: Jim, what did you think of the two of them, you know, spiraling around?

NAHEEM: The death spiral.

KEN: Smelled like old times, huh?

JIM: You three never did make the sweet science smell any sweeter. It didn't look good -- but it was nice to see it done again. *(to PHIL)* I used to train these yahoos when they were much smaller and most of them were a lot -- a lot -- more honest.

NAHEEM: Papa --

PHIL: How well could they fight?

MICHAEL: Where do I know you from?

PHIL: *(to JIM, but pitched to MICHAEL)* How was their attack, Esquire?

JIM: None of 'em ever made money off it.

MICHAEL: *(to PHIL)* Have we had --

PHIL: Oh, yes. *(to JIM)* Their continued friendship is encouraging.

NAHEEM: "Friends" is never an easy word.

PHIL: Still, it's nice to have friends of any kind.

NAHEEM: I disagree.

PHIL: I won't push the point, then.

JERRY: Michael?

MICHAEL says nothing.

JERRY: Michael?

MICHAEL: No.

JERRY: All right. *(to PHIL)* How much are you offering them?

JIM: Michael --

MICHAEL: I said "buyer," I said "seller."

JERRY: How much?

PHIL: You are bold, aren't you?

KEN: Jerry -- Michael, can you [help] --

JERRY: What's the problem? We all know the topic, we all know each other -- so what's the problem?

JIM: One problem could be respect.

JERRY: I have immense respect for you.

NAHEEM: Then you'll shut up and butt out.

JERRY: I have enough respect to want to say something --

NAHEEM: The mouth of the tomb opens. Talk, then. Go on. Hold forth. Grace us all with your secret knowledge.

JERRY: Jim, could I talk with you?

NAHEEM: I knew you wouldn't.

JIM: You have something to add --

NAHEEM: He has nothing to add.

JIM: *(to NAHEEM)* St. Peter got his three chances.

NAHEEM: He's been sitting on his ass for twenty years at the bottom of those stairs and never, never, made it up here to talk. I think he's used up his chances.

JIM: So I'll give him another one.

NAHEEM: Papa, we've got business --

PHIL: Take your time. This is all very interesting.

JIM: Before the cock crows, Jerry.

JERRY: Jim, can we talk alone --

JIM: Right here, Jerry.

JERRY goes to speak, but the immensity of what he would have to say overwhelms him, especially in public, and he says nothing.

NAHEEM: *(speaking it)* Cock-a-doodle-doo.

JERRY: The building's gone, isn't it?

JIM: The building's still mine.

NAHEEM: Why are you still trying to tend to his business but not your own? This sweat equity ain't about any of you -- it's his, and I'm making sure it pays him back with interest.

JERRY: We all want --

NAHEEM: It doesn't matter what you want.

JERRY: Why do you hate me? Why have you always --

NAHEEM: It's only been since then that I've hated you. Before that I liked you. Before that you were a brother. And you misquote me -- I wouldn't use "hate." I couldn't rise to hate you, Jerry, because -- well, because you can't hate a skunk for being what it is. I don't hate you. I just don't care. *(to KEN)* I never have understood why an angel like you let yourself be taken in.

JERRY: Don't talk to --

NAHEEM: *(to JERRY)* But, in the spirit of my father, I'll give you one more chance. Do you have something to say to me? To us? That's a ten-count. Out.

PHIL: Maybe I should part company --

NAHEEM: No, wait. *(to JIM)* We we're going to show him the rest.

JIM: I had lots of boys here --

NAHEEM: Papa --

JIM: Boys and years like a flood.

NAHEEM: Later.

PHIL: You'd mentioned --

JIM: I tried to be a father to all my boys, but some -- like them -- *(indicating KEN and JERRY)* -- needed more because they had lost their fathers.

PHIL: I am sorry to hear that.

NAHEEM: Papa --

JIM: Back-to-back cancers.

KEN: Tag-team wakes -- went from one right down the street to the other --

JERRY: I invited them in, like I invited everyone.

KEN: That he did.

JIM: You see, we had a world here. Made so that maybe they could get in here a little of what they maybe couldn't find out there.

NAHEEM: Papa!

JIM: It's a dark world without a father. I knew their pains. I knew their hungers. (*points to JERRY*) Especially his.

JERRY: It was paradise, Jim, the closest thing.

PHIL: Quite a world. It seems you all got the father you needed.

NAHEEM: Not by a long shot. (*to JIM*) And you embrace him? While I'm doing this for you? (*to JERRY*) Have you ever said it out loud?

PHIL: Said what?

NAHEEM: Have you ever confessed?

JIM: You've done enough, Naheem.

NAHEEM: Ever tell them?

JIM: It doesn't matter any more.

JERRY: Jim --

NAHEEM: Have you ever testified?

JERRY: Jim -- can I talk with you?

JIM: (*to JERRY*) It doesn't matter anymore.

NAHEEM: It's public or nothing.

JERRY: It has to matter, Jim.

PHIL: Perhaps I should go.

JIM: No, Jerry, it doesn't.

JERRY: It has to.

NAHEEM: (to PHIL) No, it'll be over in a second.

JERRY: It has to!

JIM: It has never mattered.

MICHAEL interrupts.

MICHAEL: I knew I knew you.

NAHEEM: Will you shut up!

MICHAEL: What?

NAHEEM: Shut up!

PHIL: Ah, finally.

MICHAEL: Naheem?

PHIL: You were saying?

NAHEEM: You always have to steal the light --

MICHAEL: (to NAHEEM) I don't know what --

PHIL: Esquire?

MICHAEL: Uh, yes -- I was saying, I knew I knew you. Philip Tremble --

PHIL: Yes, Michael Fish --

MICHAEL: But how --

KEN: You two know each other?

MICHAEL: His reputation.

MICHAEL bangs his knuckles together.

MICHAEL: We've never --

PHIL: That would be wrong --

MICHAEL: News to me, then --

PHIL: You fronted for a tenants group about a millennium ago -- condos on the south side?

MICHAEL: The conversion perversion --

PHIL: You stole a lot of money from me.

MICHAEL: Your name never floated up --

PHIL: Layer the limited partnerships, like a river you can bury anything -- especially to a lawyer who didn't have any money.

MICHAEL: You had a stake.

PHIL: I had the stake.

MICHAEL: Sorry they got to keep their apartments. Philip Tremble, everyone -- he never does what his last name says -- at least that's the legend. The iceman cometh -- the junior iceman, actually -- his father was iceman senior, the Arctic in deep winter. Jerry --

JERRY: Yeah?

MICHAEL: Snakes, if the legend is right, are lambs by comparison. And you're dealing with him?

NAHEEM: He came to us.

PHIL: Making my grand rounds --

MICHAEL: Came to you?

NAHEEM: We got a call, a card under our door, another card, a letter, a registered letter, return receipt --

MICHAEL: You must know something -- large.

PHIL: I live large because I do my homework, Counselor.

MICHAEL: *(to NAHEEM)* And this is who you want to deal with? Jim, let me put down a bet with Mr. Tremble.

JIM: Supposed to be a quiet afternoon.

NAHEEM: A bet.

MICHAEL: I would bet -- I would bet that if I spent five minutes in the registry of deeds on a three-block area with Jim as ground zero, I would find you layered all through the indexes -- I have more money now. And I further bet -- sure odds on this one, Mr. Jim -- that you are the last dotted line for signing to complete the kingdom. How much is he going to give you? Whatever it be, triple it, and I'll bet --

PHIL: You bet a lot.

MICHAEL: -- I'll bet you will not hear the whimper of a complaint or a refusal, because even then it's a fire-sale price.

JIM: You say you know this man.

MICHAEL raises his hand, as if an oath.

MICHAEL: I do. I do, I do, more than I want to.

JIM: This true?

PHIL: About?

JIM: Your plantation?

PHIL: My plantation --

JIM: Is what he saying true?

PHIL: Are you taking on the Esquire's services?

NAHEEM: Dad --

JIM: Yes, Naheem.

NAHEEM: *(pained in having to admit)* Maybe -- Maybe we should -- I didn't know --

JIM: But you pushed hard like you knew.

NAHEEM: I pushed hard because I have plans for the money.

JIM: Which seems you aren't fully sharing with me.

NAHEEM: To get us out!

JIM: Which seems made you less than reliable.

NAHEEM: Out of here! And don't talk about me not being reliable --

JIM: Not now, Naheem.

NAHEEM: Home, Papa, home again --

JIM: But we set our own price, Naheem. It won't be much longer. I promise you. *(to MICHAEL)*
You offering your card?

MICHAEL looks at PHIL; JERRY looks at MICHAEL.

MICHAEL: Preliminary consultation's always free, even on funeral days. I think you and I and Naheem can talk -- *(to NAHEEM)* You open?

JERRY: *(with hand gestures)* Click, click, slam.

KEN: *(quietly)* This is not good.

PHIL: Then I should let you all get on with your -- reunion. Something I've found in life, Mr. Sterling: value changes on a daily basis. Stocks rise, stocks fall. The human body -- worth a quarter one day, a quarter billion patented the next -- all depends on the hungers rising to the occasion. We'll be in touch, soon, I hope.

PHIL exits.

JIM: Did you just lose me the deal?

MICHAEL: What was the deal I might have lost you?

JIM: *(laughing slightly)* He had papers in his pocket. Right here.

MICHAEL: Did he say that, or did he show you his?

NAHEEM: Said. No show. Slapped the place but never took 'em out.

MICHAEL: So all you got was air.

JERRY: An odor.

MICHAEL: Surprised? Even a cheap buzz is a buzz. And a good snake -- and, oh, Mr. Tremble is of the first water -- a good snake can massage a cheap buzz any day. You think you lost this deal? Think he won't ooze back around? The blood is in the water.

NAHEEM: You fought him one time?

MICHAEL: I guess I did.

NAHEEM: Condos.

MICHAEL: Good thing I didn't know -- I would've browned-out my shorts.

NAHEEM: Seems he'd have killed you over condos.

MICHAEL: He's got long teeth, yes.

KEN: Fangs a lot.

MICHAEL: A young lawyer -- boy, young! I was just out of night-school-- but I was all they could afford, the grace of ignorance -- if I had known, drowned in flop sweat.

KEN: He didn't forget.

MICHAEL: No.

JERRY: Long teeth, long memory.

JIM: Now you got Teflon underwear?

MICHAEL: Still cotton.

JIM: So, why?

MICHAEL: Why? The click.

JIM: What?

KEN: Click, click, slam.

MICHAEL: C'mon, Jim. You circle -- circle, circle -- bob, weave --

JERRY: Feet in motion --

MICHAEL: Range, ride -- then -- click.

MICHAEL begins to spar with NAHEEM. KEN says his lines like the color commentator, and JERRY stands next to JIM.

MICHAEL: C'mon, Naheem. Unbutton those rusty hinges.

NAHEEM is reluctant.

MICHAEL: Come on.

NAHEEM makes some tentative moves, and the tension is broken.

MICHAEL: It comes on.

NAHEEM: It comes on.

MICHAEL: A switch.

KEN: In the muscles.

NAHEEM: Nerves.

KEN: Eyes.

MICHAEL: You see the chance --

NAHEEM: The slit --

KEN: The lapse --

JIM: And you thread it.

MICHAEL: Leading from the click.

JIM: The click.

MICHAEL: The thing that --

JERRY: -- turns the thought into a risk. That's what you said, over and over, a time long ago.

KEN: More than once.

JERRY: Thought into risk.

JIM: Click.

MICHAEL: Mr. Tremble/I Don't Tremble standing right there, smirk, slapping his lying pockets,
and -- click.

They stop sparring; speaking in rapid succession.

NAHEEM: Click.

KEN: Click.

JERRY: Click.

JIM: Click.

MICHAEL: I watched him, watched him watching you -- and I just couldn't let him slither past.
And this --

MICHAEL pulls out his wallet and extracts a key from it.

MICHAEL: My growing-up home, before I came here. Full of sweetness, it was, it was. Until a
certain developer -- Tremble père -- got permission, through urban removal, to wipe it all
away and put up his high-rise profits. This was all we kept.

MICHAEL puts the key away.

MICHAEL: The click -- it comes from a deep debt.

JIM: But --

MICHAEL: But --

JIM: But always I taught you about seeing for the weakness --

MICHAEL: Yeah?

NAHEEM: So?

MICHAEL: You're asking me if.

NAHEEM: You think he has one?

MICHAEL: "Do you want to sell?" If you hold, if you make him guess, then yes -- because, you see, his weakness -- the leverage -- is hunger. Hunger. He told you himself. So, the question stands, friend: How does your hunger match up to his?

JIM: *(pointing to the office)* The whiskey is warm, glasses ready.

MICHAEL: Your style, Jim -- that slow weave, then make 'em grieve -- always sooo smooth.

JIM: Still is. You in a hurry?

MICHAEL: Not now.

JIM moves toward the office; MICHAEL and NAHEEM follow. JERRY and KEN stay still.

JERRY: Well?

MICHAEL: I'll catch you up at the reception. It'll go on and on for a while.

MICHAEL hesitates, then turns back to JERRY.

MICHAEL: I'm sorry.

JERRY: Maybe you're right.

MICHAEL looks at JERRY quizzically.

MICHAEL: Right?

JIM: Michael.

JERRY: "A buck, a buck --" Don't forget.

MICHAEL: Right.

JERRY: Later.

JIM, NAHEEM, and MICHAEL exit into the office.

KEN: Well. They do have a lot to talk about.

JERRY: I'm sure --

KEN: They have a lot to talk about --

JERRY: Everybody is talking.

KEN: Do you want to go to the reception? Do you want to go home? I can make us some of that --

JERRY grabs his coat.

JERRY: You go home. I'll be home later.

JERRY starts to exit.

KEN: Jerry --

JERRY stops, sees the anxiety in KEN's face. JERRY hesitates, then goes to KEN and hugs him.

JERRY: I know where our home is. Don't worry. I'll be there soon. I just need to --

KEN: Yeah.

JERRY exits. KEN watches until the lights fade out. Strong percussion for scene change.

* * * * *

ACT I, Scene 2

Scene shifts to downstage right or left. A table is set up, with two chairs -- JERRY is there, facing the audience, a beer and a shot in front of him. Also, a pile of napkins, a dish of munchies, etc. PHIL enters, with a styrofoam cup of coffee in his hand. He is free to move around; JERRY is not until he begins his "confession."

JERRY: Look what slithered in. Aren't you supposed to ask me what I'm slamming down and then buy me a refill?

PHIL: Is that what I should do?

JERRY: You're supposed to offer --

PHIL: Because?

JERRY: So I can insult you properly.

PHIL: A protocol.

JERRY: If you're working the street.

PHIL: Insult number one, then.

JERRY: I wouldn't take it, anyway.

PHIL: A true savage noble, you are.

JERRY: Just careful about the diseases I can catch.

PHIL: Good I didn't offer, then -- to preserve your health.

JERRY raises his glass in a mock salute.

JERRY: What do you want?

PHIL: Where are the others?

JERRY: They have lives.

PHIL: Where's Ken?

JERRY: You can leave him alone.

PHIL: So you're here alone.

JERRY indicates with a gestures that yes, indeed, he is alone.

PHIL: Today must be hard for you, being alone. May I sit down?

JERRY: No more than any other.

PHIL: May I?

JERRY: Why would you want to?

PHIL: Company.

JERRY: I don't think you should.

PHIL: Why?

JERRY: Because we get known by the company we keep.

PHIL: That could be a trade up for you.

JERRY: You are smooth.

PHIL: No -- just interested. And I promise not to pollute your health with the offer of a drink.

JERRY indicates the chair.

JERRY: Doesn't have a lock on it.

PHIL sits.

JERRY: What do you want?

PHIL: Not easy to lose a friend.

JERRY: He wasn't a "friend." What do you want?

PHIL: Not a friend.

JERRY: We just grew up together -- grew around each other.

PHIL: The company you kept, so to speak.

JERRY: What do you want?

PHIL: Still hard, though, even to lose someone just "around" when they've been around for so long.

JERRY: What do you --

PHIL: It's still a loss, no? Yes?

JERRY: Riordan -- Riordan Esposito was a loss, yes. *(less sarcastic)* It was sad, though -- to see him -- disappear.

PHIL: I'm terrible at funerals. I always get that little whisper. Do you ever get it?

PHIL points to his ear.

PHIL: Right here: "When will my ticket come up?"

JERRY: I'll bet a lot of people ask that same question about you: "When will Philip Tremble's ticket get punched?" Do you have a date for us, Mr. Tremble?

PHIL: I'd say about the same time as you. Did anyone happen to ask?

JERRY: Ask me what?

PHIL: Ask you about how you felt about the death of this friend and not-friend.

JERRY: What?

PHIL: What was his name again?

JERRY: Riordan.

PHIL: Riordan.

JERRY: Esposito.

PHIL: Ah.

JERRY: What are you saying?

PHIL: I just asked a question.

JERRY: No.

PHIL: No one?

JERRY: No one asked.

PHIL: Everyone being "hard" about it, I guess.

JERRY: We're all true men around here.

PHIL: Funny coming from you.

JERRY: Ha, ha.

PHIL: But it did touch you, didn't it? Didn't it?

JERRY gets up to go.

JERRY: I'm going to go.

PHIL: You work at the diner downstairs.

JERRY: I'm going.

PHIL: I've seen you in there -- even eaten there and watched you work.

JERRY: You watched me.

PHIL: Sit down. You're the juggler in the crowd -- why not watch? Sit down. Eggs with the right, home fries with the left, cheese at the last moment for the right melt, those plates skidding on the counter --

PHIL gestures as if ringing a bell.

PHIL: -- "ding," order's up, grab the next -- I can tell you've been there for a while -- you are practiced. Why so hard to take a compliment?

JERRY: Not a regular feature of my day.

PHIL: Ding -- compliment's up. Sit down and enjoy.

JERRY sits.

PHIL: I like any kind of skill, and I don't mind telling people when I do. They should know. I'll bet -- I'm beginning to sound like Michael, huh? -- I'll bet no one's ever complimented you on your over-easies. On how up your sunny-sides are.

JERRY laughs at the sound of it but not dismissively.

JERRY: You would win that bet, for what it's worth.

PHIL: So, a compliment, all right?

JERRY: You've paid it.

PHIL: But one thing -- one thing is clear to me, Jerry -- you don't look like you eat your own food.

JERRY: I like my heart.

PHIL: Live longer and prosper-- I knew it. I noticed something about you right off that seemed to make you different -- you had a look, something like a lean and hungry look --

JERRY: I don't know you --

PHIL: I just wonder if anyone --

JERRY: Enough, all right?

PHIL: -- even Jim -- Mr. Sterling -- I just wonder even if he notices that about you. Even notices you. Were you like "lean," like "hungry," when Mr. Sterling was your boxing father?

JERRY: No.

PHIL: Why not?

JERRY: That wasn't what it was for.

PHIL: Then what for, if not bloodsport? Why the black man and the Scotch-Irish man? You obviously respect him --

JERRY: I would do anything for Jim --

PHIL: I have no doubt. But --

JERRY: What?

PHIL: Well -- maybe I'm out of line here.

JERRY: That's a given.

PHIL: Back there -- I had a feeling -- I could be wrong -- but that Jim doesn't feel the same way about you. I hit a nerve. I'm sorry.

JERRY: You're sorry, all right.

PHIL: My unfortunate habit of honesty.

JERRY: You want honest? You weren't expecting Michael, were you? Breeze in, breeze out.

PHIL looks closely at JERRY, amused.

JERRY: What?

PHIL: Nothing. Michael? I do admit -- he was a surprise.

JERRY: You didn't predict him putting us in your way.

PHIL: Us?

JERRY: We talked after you left.

PHIL: You did.

JERRY: Talked and talked and talked and talked.

PHIL: A lot of talk.

JERRY: We strategized.

PHIL: And they included you.

JERRY: Why not?

PHIL: Really?

JERRY: I even came up with the idea, the anti-snake strategy. We have made plans.

PHIL: I'll bite.

JERRY: We are going to buy the building.

PHIL: Don't say.

JERRY: Say.

PHIL: We --

JERRY: A -- (*dragging out the word*) -- con-sore-shee-um. How's that for snake repellent?
Michael has figured out how we can do things coöperatively.

PHIL: Fast work on such a sad Saturday.

JERRY: The press of circumstance.

PHIL: You actually talked this out?

JERRY: Yep.

PHIL: A coöperative?

JERRY: Have you thinking, huh?

PHIL: Have me sore amazed, Jerry, yes, because this still brings me back around --

JERRY: To what?

PHIL: Why would Jim sell to you?

JERRY: His best interest.

PHIL: No, no, not to the con-sore-shee-um. Not to the coöperative plural. To the singular you.

JERRY: Why not?

PHIL: Do you really want me to say it again?

JERRY: Go ahead.

PHIL: Because he doesn't like you. Because he can't stand your entire mortal presence. I'm only stating the obvious. It was so easy to smell, Jerry. Didn't it strike you as odd that Naheem had such a free cut into you? Didn't it hurt when Naheem said, "You can't hate a skunk," and Jim never defended you? Jim never once said, "Stop." Is that what a father would do to a son? I just raise the question.

Silence.

PHIL: There is a secret floating in the air, Jerry, and if that secret could have a sound, it would go like this: "Have you ever confessed?" Now, that word interests me. There's a whole journey in that word.

Silence.

PHIL: I hate to say it, but I think something's wrong with the idea of the consortium. The coöperative.

Silence.

PHIL: Another drink?

Silence.

PHIL: It's not easy to lose a father, Jerry. I've lost one. You lost one -- it saddens me to think you may have lost a second one.

JERRY: I haven't lost Jim.

PHIL: I'm just giving you an impression.

JERRY: That's enough.

PHIL: All right.

JERRY: How could you know anything?

PHIL: I know anything like you know anything: I have lived it.

JERRY: Yeah, well, you didn't live here.

PHIL: I'm not talking about here. I'm talking about another space, another time. I'm talking about "death bed," I'm talking about being at my father's. Were you at yours?

JERRY: My dad died in the hospital -- I was ten. They didn't let me.

PHIL: Understandable -- it's an experience that can humble you to dust. See, I had disappointed him in some way -- there was always this bomb sitting on the breakfast table, in the office, over a late-night bourbon, something I had done that I should not have been done. And I could never figure it out. You want to hear more? I loved my daddy, but a father can be very -- steep, and I hated how high he made me climb. I hated the altitude because on top of any regret he felt, he liked the power of holding over me what I couldn't defend against. He was a nasty man that way. But the deathbed -- that was the equalizer. On that death bed he had no more power, and he knew it: ticket punched. He who had eaten iron for breakfast couldn't even keep down water. You want to hear more?

JERRY: Did he tell you?

PHIL: He did tell me.

JERRY: And what was it?

PHIL: Something so small but had grown cancerous through silence -- being "manly."

JERRY: What was it?

PHIL: Does it matter?

JERRY: Did to you.

PHIL: Not any more. Not after --

JERRY: Not after --

PHIL: Go ahead, say it.

JERRY: Not after he forgave you.

PHIL: That's what you really wanted to know. Yes, he forgave me, and I helped him complete his dying because I forgave him. And off he went. Now, Jerry, back to our four basics. "Have. You. Ever. Confessed?" It hangs, Jerry, it just hangs.

JERRY: Go hang yourself

PHIL: The walls that people erect -- like antibodies! -- they mark the edge of a disease. Why do they feel sinned against? Why won't Jim forgive you a mistake you have made?

JERRY: Why should I tell you anything?

PHIL: I'm going to let that hang for a moment, too. I can help you. I can help you. I can help you get Jim's forgiveness.

JERRY: And why -- would you want -- to [do that] --

PHIL: You tell me.

JERRY: You just want the building.

PHIL: A building's a building.

JERRY: You're such a snake.

PHIL: No, I'm not, Jerry -- let's drop that noun. I am a human being remarkably like you. We are a fraternity of two, Jerry, men who have lost their fathers. I would hate to see that happen a second time to anyone. You tell or don't tell -- it's up to you. You tell me to go, I'll go right now. But I don't think that's what you want. I made you an offer. A release. From over hard, kill the yolks. But there's only ever one way to start the cleansing: you have to offer that story. You have to give it away.

JERRY: Yeah?

PHIL: It's your choice, Jerry. Keep it, or give it away.

JERRY: Back then -- what was going on in this city -- in this neighborhood --

PHIL: Remind me.

JERRY: School desegregation --

PHIL: Right.

JERRY: -- the busing --

PHIL: The changing of the plantation --

JERRY: It was nasty around here.

PHIL: So I heard.

JERRY: The buses -- pelted with everything -- people shit in coffee cans -- And I can still see -- the faces in the windows -- You'd look above ground floor and see people's faces glued to the windows --

PHIL: It must have been hard --

JERRY: -- old folks, pale -- mothers, red-angry -- guys out of work and nothing to do -- just all there, in the windows, like a photo album. And then the buses -- the faces in those windows -- faces against the bus windows watching all of us --

PHIL: -- all of you --

JERRY: -- just throw the hate against them.

PHIL: Yes.

JERRY: I'd see Jim and Naheem on the bus when I saw the buses roll in -- not really, but all the faces in all their shades were them.

PHIL: In sympathy.

JERRY: Seeing with double eyes -- my friends, people I'd come up with, the "code" --

PHIL: -- code words --

JERRY: -- all that on the street -- And then afternoons, in Jim's gym, all colors bleeding the same under the sweat, Jim equaling us all, Naheem right there with us all -- all that in me, too.

PHIL: Yes, yes, but -- so what, in a way -- routine mayhem during social change. The important thing, to me, Jerry, to you: where is Jerry? Where. Is. Jerry? We've come this far. Something you did -- A choice you made --

JERRY: They attacked Jim's place one day.

PHIL: The tribe.

JERRY: Not attacked, really -- but surged. The buses would come down his street, and they'd slow down to take the curve to go up the hill and the high school. And Jim and Naheem were standing on the front steps, watching -- every day, maybe they did it, a vigil -- but the first time I saw them. And one of the buses stalled, or something broke -- dead in the street. Cops in front, cops in back, but nothing in the middle. Like blood in the water. Oozed everywhere.

PHIL: Oozed.

JERRY: People who I knew hadn't tasted daylight for fifteen years --

PHIL: Incited.

JERRY: It built and built -- driver trying to turn the damn thing over, faces behind glass, rocks and garbage and everything. And then it split --

PHIL: Over-ripe.

JERRY: They saw black men on the steps and went berserk, even though they knew these people, had lived with them for --

PHIL: (*interrupting*) And where are you during all of this? Where. Is. Jerry? Ah! You are not an innocent bystander.

JERRY: Riordan Esposito -- today's corpse -- He runs up to me, into me, brick in his left hand, brick in his right, hands me the one in the right, gleam in his eye like a gunshot.

PHIL: Yes?

JERRY: "C'mon, man," he starts jittering me, pushing, poking me, "c'mon, man." "I can't," I say. "Cunt," he says. "Niggah lover," he says.

PHIL: Someone from your own neighborhood --

JERRY: No cops anywhere -- can't get a cruiser or a cycle down. Bus dead. Radius expanding. And Reero Esposito knocking me with the brick piece, hashing out names, gunshot in his eye.

PHIL: You took the brick.

JERRY: I took the brick.

PHIL: Taking a brick's not a crime.

JERRY: Yeah.

PHIL: So Reero throws -- And Jerry --

JERRY: The look in Reero's eye --

PHIL: You couldn't back down --

JERRY: As soon as it left my hand --

PHIL: You couldn't call it back --

JERRY: Jim's eye pinned me -- He saw me throw it -- Naheem --

PHIL: Michael? Ken?

JERRY: They were there. I didn't know they were there.

PHIL: Watching.

JERRY: Behind me.

PHIL: Behind you. Watching.

JERRY: Watching. Until the throw spun me --

PHIL: They know.

PHIL: So long ago --

JERRY: Jim saw me --

PHIL: -- and yet it still bleeds --

JERRY: Naheem saw me --

PHIL: -- blood and thunder --

JERRY: They all saw me throw the brick. It did not even come close. Reero zoomed off to do something else -- His eyes, their eyes, right to me -- bam! Like the brick right back in my face. Bam! I died. Right on that spot -- I died. The shame -- it is in my mouth always. Always. It has -- unnerved me.

PHIL: And for your penance -- ah, the irony of the soul! -- you spent twenty years close by -- a vigil -- but taking no action. That was your choice. To bring this back around -- do you want Jim to forgive you? Do you want release? Would you like a drink?

Lights down on bar.

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ACT I, Scene 3

The gym. PHIL stays at the table. The scenes will shift between the gym and the bar, with JERRY carrying messages.

JIM, NAHEEM, KEN, and MICHAEL enter. JERRY joins them, as if he entered with them. MICHAEL's briefcase has lots of papers in it, and he begins laying them out on the table. The others gather around.

MICHAEL: I'm not quite sure what took me over, Jim. Maybe I was just torqued when I saw Mr. No-Tremble, but whatever, once I dug into the registry and then online, chatted up real estate attorneys I knew -- this guy's hunger, man, prints our ticket.

JIM: What's in the oven?

NAHEEM: This is that important to him?

MICHAEL: Want to know his game plan? *(to every one)* Heh? C'mon, ask me. *(to JIM)* You called it "plantation." Recall?

JIM: It fit.

MICHAEL: Fit it did. The man's a classic carpetbagger. I checked ownership of the buildings around here -- long story short, but he's buying up or agreeing to buy up the properties in a very specific pattern. C'mon, ask me: Which one?

JERRY: Which one, Esquire?

MICHAEL: You've all heard about the new convention center going, going, gone in our fair backyard.

JIM: That?

NAHEEM: Plans floated for years. Nothing's ever been definitized --

KEN: "Not in my back yard"! Those lusty meetings --

MICHAEL: But, ah! let me repeat: Have you heard about the new convention center?

NAHEEM: A new new convention center? No.

KEN: Well, the Mayor pinged me on his cell phone just the other day --

JIM: Ken -- (to MICHAEL) You are driving at what?

MICHAEL: My point made -- no one around here has heard -- but -- the ego has landed in the mayor's office. The mayor is angling for world class.

KEN: World class asinine --

MICHAEL: And our Mr. Tremble-who-never-trembles -- C'mon, you know where I'm leading here --

JIM: He's on the inside track.

MICHAEL: And moving up fast.

JIM: The power of the inside word.

MICHAEL: Made fresh. And guess where the convention center Godzilla footprint is expected to land?

MICHAEL slowly lowers his hand to the table but then slams it down.

MICHAEL: "8-9-10 - yer out!"

Freeze. JERRY goes to PHIL at the table.

JERRY: It is true?

JERRY looks around.

JERRY: Where are we?

PHIL: One of my many buildings. It has -- elements.

JERRY: You are going to steal it.

PHIL: I am going to offer Jim a fair price.

JERRY: Fair to whom?

PHIL: Fair all around.

JERRY: Fair to Jim.

PHIL: Fair to both. Mr. Sterling should get what he deserves for his opportunity. Greed is not a good strategy for either of us.

JERRY: But Michael said --

PHIL: You want to make things up with Jim? Help him by helping me: get him to take the best offer possible: my offer. Which will give comfort to his life and safe passage for his family.

JERRY: Safe passage?

PHIL: Go forth.

JERRY moves back into the gym scene.

MICHAEL: Whatever he's offering you -- pocket change with some lint.

JERRY: It's not a bad price, though, huh?

MICHAEL: Jim should get less than it's worth? Than he's worth? The Snake should win?

JERRY: His official name now?

JIM: It looks like Michael has plowed this field deep --

JERRY: He's done his work --

JIM: -- to show me a good otherwise to accepting Mr. Tremble's first offers.

NAHEEM: So what are you saying?

JERRY: We've got a good price.

NAHEEM: Hear that "we"?

MICHAEL: Always a bad price if more can be gotten -- safely, that is. Those are the rules. Tremble knows it. And Jim deserves it.

KEN: He deserves it.

NAHEEM: Safely, Michael.

JERRY: This is not safe.

MICHAEL: I'm not going to do anything that puts anything in danger. But the Snake is not going to win.

NAHEEM: Second time you've said "not going to win." I'm not sure I like the repetition.

MICHAEL: Manner of speaking.

NAHEEM: Are you getting primed, Michael? Are you getting primed for ignition?

MICHAEL: I'm not sure I like that repetition.

NAHEEM: What was my tone?

MICHAEL: It sounded like Thomas and Jesus.

NAHEEM: You have a ruby gleam in your eye, Michael.

MICHAEL: I do?

KEN: Flame-red.

MICHAEL: I do?

NAHEEM: You sure you're not developing a taste for Mr. Tremble's vital parts? Head on a platter, heart on a knife kind of thing?

MICHAEL: I can't deny --

NAHEEM: Deny what?

MICHAEL: That the more I puzzle things together, the more my guts jump.

NAHEEM: The lick of the chase, man -- we have had enough of that in our lives. This is about settling so that we can settle into the future.

MICHAEL: Don't you think that's what I want?

NAHEEM: Is it?

Momentary freeze as they look at each other. JERRY turns to PHIL.

JERRY: It's not going your way.

PHIL: Every way is my way, Jerry.

JERRY turns back. Unfreeze.

NAHEEM: Is it? I hear "thrill" in your voice.

KEN bays like a bloodhound.

KEN: Like a bloodhound.

MICHAEL: That's not true!

KEN bays the word "True!"

MICHAEL: You have cracked --

KEN: You doth protest too much.

KEN draws a STOP sign and holds it up.

NAHEEM: The lick of the chase, man.

KEN: Remember who you are working for.

NAHEEM: I want it more direct, Ken: can we trust you? You've done all this work -- but for who and for what?

Beat -- momentary freeze. JERRY turns to PHIL.

JERRY: It's a moment of doubt.

PHIL: I doubt it.

JERRY: What place is this?

PHIL: Go.

JERRY turns back. Unfreeze.

KEN: The sin of pride, Michael my boy.

JERRY: Ken's right -- you can't beat him.

NAHEEM: You were thinking it --

KEN scrawls a lightning bolt on his pad, making "thunder" noises.

MICHAEL: Did sneak up to the top of my list.

JERRY: You can't --

MICHAEL: You know, just to stick him with a little of his own --

JIM: Michael, I can understand the pull. But Phil the Snake, official name, is going to get this building -- the only real question is terms. You need your mind clear before you slip into the ring.

JERRY edges toward PHIL so that he splits the two groups.

JERRY: (to PHIL) I think you'll get what you want.

JIM: It's too late to talk to the other owners around here. Mr. Phil is the rocket's red glare, and we are -- I am -- out here alone.

PHIL: (to JERRY) You don't know everything I want.

JIM: This is about extracting the most flesh we can from Mr. Phil before the flood tide of change swamps the chance. I can't beat him. You can't beat him.

JERRY: Right.

JIM: And to give you the full weight, I don't -- we don't -- want to beat anyone anymore. He's the only plantation we got right now, and he won't stay still for long.

JERRY: (to PHIL) You may have to pay more -- Michael's fired up.

JIM: So we pick the field bare and move on. (to NAHEEM) Of course I trust him -- we just needed to re-arrange him a little.

PHIL: (to JERRY) The night-school boy -- not an ounce of victory for him.

JERRY: (to PHIL) What?

MICHAEL: So we go for more -- safely.

JERRY: (to JIM) If you want to sell higher.

JIM: It's all about money and motion right now. I might as well ride.

JERRY: You don't have to ride. You can take what's on the table -- what's safe on the table.

NAHEEM: Why are you even here?

JERRY: It's your choice.

NAHEEM: That's exactly what we're saying. But what are you saying?

They all look at JERRY, then freeze. JERRY moves to the table.

JERRY: Michael will take you for more.

PHIL: Encore performance, huh?

JERRY: This place is creepy.

PHIL: Focus.

JERRY: He hates you.

PHIL: He doesn't hate me -- he's high on the chase.

JERRY: But he's got Jim to run with him.

PHIL: And you haven't been able to budge Jim?

JERRY: No one listens --

PHIL: You haven't been able to do what I asked you to do --

JERRY: I've tried!

PHIL: To help your friend get a fair price -- a price fair to him and to me -- so that he can continue his life in a comfortable retirement.

JERRY: No one listens to me.

PHIL: Remember your stake in this, Jerry -- which means you also can lose.

JERRY moves back into the gym.

JERRY: I don't know, Jim. Just that this is tricky.

JIM: Michael here will handle the details.

MICHAEL: (to NAHEEM) And you?

JIM: Naheem?

NAHEEM: I'm going to trust him. If he can get you more money, why not -- and if Mr. Tremble doesn't want to put up the cash, someone else will. Who cares if he can't get his plantation? I just want us to get what we can get and then get away from here.

JIM: Then that's what we'll go out with.

MICHAEL: Done!

KEN: Done!

JERRY: So, who's gonna tell him?

KEN: Jerry --

JIM: You working for him?

JERRY: No.

NAHEEM: Sounds like you're carrying his water.

JERRY: No! I just want to make sure, like everyone else, you get what's coming to you.

NAHEEM: Our best interests at heart.

MICHAEL: I'll get on to the papers.

Lights dim in the "gym" as they exit. As JERRY moves to the table, JIM re-enters in the darkness and watches the scene.

JERRY: I could hardly find this place!

PHIL: It's remote.

JERRY: You've lost.

PHIL: I have?

JERRY: Michael's handling everything.

PHIL: Esquire night-school boy --

JERRY: Jim is going for more.

PHIL: How much?

JERRY: I don't know.

PHIL: And Michael handles everything?

JERRY: Yes.

PHIL: The night-school wonderboy.

JERRY: It's nothing big for you.

PHIL: Not again.

JERRY: It's just Michael.

PHIL: My ingenue.

JERRY: What are you talking about?

PHIL: Listen. Closely. I would hate to see Jim lose what was most precious to him.

JIM: What?

PHIL: Suffer some great unnecessary loss.

JERRY: I've had enough of you.

PHIL: I only have his best interests against my heart. It is time for me to go. And I've had enough of you.

PHIL moves to leave.

PHIL: Actually, that's not true. One more thing.

During the next lines, PHIL puts on a pair of leather gloves and takes out a tin of what looks like black shoe polish -- though, in reality, it is black greasepaint.

JERRY: Wait -- I'm busy pulling up my pants.

PHIL: I need one more thing from you.

JERRY: I do not have any flesh left. What are you doing?

PHIL: I have the pound I need. I want one more thing from you.

JERRY: What? What are you doing?

PHIL: I want you to lose your keys.

JERRY: My keys.

PHIL: To the building.

JERRY: To the building.

PHIL taps the table top.

PHIL: Right there.

JERRY: I won't.

PHIL: Won't?

JERRY: I won't do that.

PHIL: "Won't do."

JERRY: No.

PHIL: Hmm. "Won't do" are words only for those without shame. Are you, sitting there, telling me that you are without shame, Jerry? Hmm?

JERRY gets up.

JERRY: I won't do it.

PHIL: And I tell you again: "Won't do" are words only the unshamed can use.

JERRY: I don't feel -- !

PHIL: The coward's answer. The liar's choice. Sit down.

JERRY: Why?

For the first and only time in the play, PHIL speaks commandingly, sharply, and JERRY should believe that he is, in fact, in real danger.

PHIL: Sit down! Sit. Down. Now. Judas. You do not know how deep you're in. How lost you are. You have run out.

JERRY sits. PHIL takes the cap off the tin of shoe polish and gets some on his fingertips.

PHIL: The American story of the black man -- let's see how much you really admire it.

PHIL goes to swipe it across JERRY's forehead. JERRY pulls back.

PHIL: Ah -- no, no, no. This is Ash Wednesday. Stay still.

JERRY stays still.

PHIL: Listen.

PHIL draws a black streak across his forehead: the gesture should be between a caress and rough handling.

PHIL: My gospel to Jim and Naheem and company will go something like this: A long time ago, you all know Jerry Argent made a mistake.

PHIL continues to paint JERRY's face in the same soft/rough way. PHIL can be as "artistic" as he wants in his gestures and thoroughness of application of the minstrel face.

PHIL: An honest mistake, if mistakes can ever really be "honest." He has tried for oh so long to redeem himself for you all through his lonely vigil in that flatulent hell of the diner -- a vigil so noble-sounding and heart-rending: "I just want my father back!" But the truth? Jerry Argent has been a fool. And why? Because he has been a slave to his fears, and that has made him stupid. And how stupid?

PHIL stands back and admires his work.

PHIL: He came and worked for me thinking I would do for him what he should have done for himself a long time ago. He came and worked for me!

JERRY: I don't work for --

PHIL: You came and worked for me hoping against hope that I was not what you knew I was. You convinced yourself to betray Jim by telling yourself you were helping him. How useful your shame has made you to me!

PHIL starts covering JERRY's hands.

PHIL: Have you ever heard about Scorpion and Frog? Scorpion wanted to cross the river, and Frog offered to take him -- but a little nervous. "How do I know you won't sting me

halfway across and we'll both drown?" "Why would I drown myself?", which made sense to Frog. So off they went, and, sure enough, halfway across, Scorpion stings Frog. "Why did you do that?" cried Frog as he was dying. "You knew what I was when you agreed to carry me," said Scorpion. "Why did you think it would be any different?" You carried me knowing. One minor difference, though: only one of us will drown. They will believe it because they marked you a long time ago. That brick did bounce back and hit you right here --

Makes a small sign of the cross on JERRY's forehead.

PHIL: -- your mark of Cain.

JERRY: I won't do it.

PHIL: Once I tell them -- you will have no more paradise to hope for. No more vigil at the diner, no more Ken, probably, who will have reached even his considerable limit of patience, Michael disowning, Naheem enraged, Jim dismissive -- Jerry will be an exile, even more than now, homeless and fatherless and naked and hated all at once -- how does that appeal to you?

JERRY: But you know why --

PHIL: Do I? Human motives are so changeable. You've told me one thing, but you've told me others, too. What should I believe? After all, if you're working for me --

JERRY: I am not working for you --

PHIL: -- you must be like me --

JERRY: I am not like you --

PHIL: -- and I change motives almost hourly.

PHIL steps back to once more admire his work.

PHIL: Now, you are properly dressed to play your part. Here you sit with two choices. Either you give me the keys, and I will keep our little engagement a secret from those you love (who may or may not love you), or I will tell -- I will tell, tell, tell, tell, tell -- and make sure you lose more than your life.

JERRY hesitates. PHIL does a little "touch-up" on JERRY's face.

PHIL: You do not have the stomach for this. They will see it as your grandest betrayal yet. That much I surely do know. Tick-tock, Jerry.

PHIL points to the table. JERRY hesitates again, and without warning, PHIL slaps him across the face, then backhands him just as quickly, as if reprimanding a child. The slap need not be hard, but it should punctuate. Almost as immediately, PHIL caresses JERRY's face.

PHIL: A pickaninny should always do what the master tells him to do.

JERRY takes out the keys.

PHIL: On the table.

The sound of the drum solo begins, very softly.

PHIL: All in the fullness of time, Iscariot. All in the fullness of what we call the march of time.

Lights fade to black as the drum solo comes up and ends with a crash.

INTERMISSION

ACT II, Scene 1

As the houselights dim, strong percussion begins. In synch with the houselights, as the lights go to black, the music stops and the lights bump up to the scene in the gym. It is now a week or so later. The audience hears voices in the hallway arguing. JERRY enters first, as he does in Act I, and there is a brief moment when he is alone in the space while the voices float in from the hallways. Everything looks the same except for the fact that the heavy punching bag is not there, which they do not notice immediately. Thumb-tacked to the door jamb of the office door is an envelope.

Conversation in the hallway while JERRY is alone.

MICHAEL: Naheem -- Naheem -- listen to me, lend me your ears --

NAHEEM: You treat it like a feather --

MICHAEL: Believe me, I do not -- listen --

NAHEEM: -- like it does not really matter.

They enter. MICHAEL is holding a letter. During this conversation, JERRY is clearly not party to the discussion. KEN pulls out his pad to begin drawing. At times KEN also goes to JERRY to see how he is. At points people can even move to where the bag was but not notice it is gone, though they might register some puzzlement. MICHAEL puts his briefcase down. No one notices the envelope.

NAHEEM: What does the letter mean?

MICHAEL: It doesn't mean anything.

NAHEEM: What does the letter mean?

MICHAEL: They just --

NAHEEM: It must mean something if comes certified.

MICHAEL: Look --

NAHEEM: Return receipt requested.

MICHAEL: It "means" what it says --

NAHEEM: Look at what it says!

MICHAEL: -- but it does not mean anything important.

NAHEEM: He wants to sue!

MICHAEL: Yes.

NAHEEM: Not important?

MICHAEL: Blather.

NAHEEM: What?

MICHAEL: Bogus.

NAHEEM: Bogus.

MICHAEL: As in "ain't gonna happen."

NAHEEM: Not inspired when you slip into jive.

MICHAEL: But it ain't!

NAHEEM: Michael!

MICHAEL: He cannot sue what you did not do.

NAHEEM: He can sue, boogaloo, whenever he wants to because we are the ants, he is da shoe, get it?

NAHEEM indicates the letter.

NAHEEM: This, this, is a shoe -- we do not take that lightly.

MICHAEL begins to mock spar with NAHEEM.

MICHAEL: Do the drill with me, Naheem.

NAHEEM: Stop it --

MICHAEL: Step one, step two --

NAHEEM: Stop it --

KEN: Michael --

NAHEEM: What are you on so giddy about?

MICHAEL: He telegraphed --

NAHEEM: Get away from me.

KEN: *(to MICHAEL)* Why not come down a peg --

MICHAEL: He indicated, Kensington -- Tremble trembled.

KEN: What?

MICHAEL: One, two buckle my shoe --

KEN: Michael!

MICHAEL: You never signed anything with him, right? Three, four -- You never signed a thing with him, right?

NAHEEM: Not a god[dam] --

MICHAEL: Not cocktail napkin -- five, six --

NAHEEM: Stop it!

KEN: Stop it!

MICHAEL: -- toilet paper --

NAHEEM: Not a goddam thing! Stop it!

MICHAEL: Nothing that gave exclusive anything to anything -- right?

NAHEEM: Right!

MICHAEL: Seven, eight, lay them straight.

*NAHEEM grabs one of MICHAEL's fists in his own and holds it crushingly tight.
MICHAEL stops.*

NAHEEM: Stop being the fool.

MICHAEL: The hand -- it can be released on its own recognizance.

NAHEEM lets the hand go.

NAHEEM: Not a goddam thing.

MICHAEL: You're sure?

NAHEEM: I do not want to be smoked -- We may have been niggahs from North Carolina -- but we are not stupid! My father is smarter than this leech!

MICHAEL: Okay. Sustained.

NAHEEM: I am sorry we ever dialed for these dollars --

KEN: Tremble trembled?

MICHAEL: So Tremble cannot argue breach of a contract that never happened -- he's nervous -

NAHEEM: All because you asked for more, isn't it?

MICHAEL: We asked for more --

NAHEEM: You rode my father into it --

MICHAEL: We, Naheem.

NAHEEM: Bigger commission for you.

MICHAEL: We all agreed.

NAHEEM: You forced him --

MICHAEL: You agreed --

NAHEEM: You forced me.

MICHAEL: Did what I was asked to do.

NAHEEM: You drove it.

MICHAEL: I advised.

NAHEEM: You pushed.

MICHAEL: I counseled.

NAHEEM: You jerked us --

MICHAEL: Broke no one's knees, Naheem. Free choices freely made.

NAHEEM: And now letters.

MICHAEL: We are in this --

NAHEEM: Now battle lines --

MICHAEL: -- in this together --

NAHEEM: And now I have to worry if this friend -- this so-called friend --

MICHAEL: Go on -- complete the indictment.

NAHEEM: How much this friend -- Money, Michael. Money. The universal solvent. Even you --

KEN: Is that justified?

NAHEEM: Money twists.

KEN: Twists even you, then, if you believe Michael's false.

NAHEEM: I have to worry. That is what this son does for his father.

MICHAEL: And you are not the only son of Jim around here -- man, oh Manishewitz -- I must be one powerful dude! I must be Philip Tremble's love child, can bend an iron will in his bare filthy hands!

KEN: Michael --

MICHAEL: So powerful that I can hoodwink the "niggahs from North Carolina" --

KEN: Michael!

MICHAEL: -- a righteous betrayal.

KEN: Stop it!

MICHAEL: Shut up, Ken. I am so powerful that I took Jim "smarter than this leech" Sterling for a ride -- stay back from me, Naheem, I am dangerous! -- slimy Michael bagging his overweight commission from the dumb-ass black folks -- stay away! -- even though he hasn't been paid dime one yet. Stay away, stay away!

KEN: Michael, stop this now!

KEN physically tries to restrain MICHAEL, not very successfully.

MICHAEL: Or maybe I am getting paid off from Tremble Associates

KEN: Michael --

MICHAEL: Back off, Ken -- double deal dealt right into my bank account.

KEN: Michael --

MICHAEL: *(to KEN)* I'm warning you. *(to NAHEEM)* Do you know how often I got my can handed to me because I was friends with you? Did I ever give you up then? Did I ever do the Judas to you or to Jim? *(to KEN)* Hands off.

KEN: Right --

MICHAEL: I have always been on your side, Naheem. You tell me if I haven't. You tell me if you think all of this has made my bank account fat. Is that how you see it?

KEN: Lower the temperature, Michael --

MICHAEL: Is that how you see it?

NAHEEM: I see it like you want to get him -- that is how it appears to these.

MICHAEL: *(to KEN)* How blind --

NAHEEM: You shoot. He shoots. A duel.

MICHAEL: Pow, pow. With your money.

NAHEEM: With our lives.

KEN: Jerry, say something.

JERRY says nothing.

NAHEEM: With my father as bullseye.

MICHAEL: A duel -- man, oh Manchester, England! You think in the serious cold light I want to cross shots with this man?

NAHEEM: You beat him once.

KEN: Like lucky dumb luck, Naheem.

MICHAEL: *(to KEN)* Thank you. You don't beat people like Tremble.

MICHAEL indicates the letter.

MICHAEL: Sure, a little glitch -- a little scrap we can use to make a point -- maybe. But you do not beat people like Tremble. You do not beat gods. You get in, get out before you get slapped. You "beat" them by getting out alive. *(with some gentleness)* I want us out alive, Naheem. Intact, alive, with enough money to honor thy father. Any objections to that?

KEN: May I see the letter?

MICHAEL hands it to him. Beat.

MICHAEL: Being scared makes -- us -- talk stupid, Naheem. No more -- deal? We ain't got the time.

NAHEEM: Did you -- did we -- muck up or something?

MICHAEL: A simple letter to him -- you saw it -- stating his first offer was a departure for negotiation, not last call. That is all. Inviting him to continue the discussion. You saw it.

KEN: It sounds serious enough.

MICHAEL: We do need to respond, and I need to talk to Jim.

NAHEEM: Well, talk to him.

MICHAEL: For that, I need to know where he is.

NAHEEM: In the office.

MICHAEL: In the office?

NAHEEM: I thought.

Everyone looks at the office, and for the first time they notice the envelope. Everyone talks as if in normal conversation but clearly aware of the envelope and not sure what it means. All but JERRY move toward the office, slowly, cautiously.

MICHAEL: Then why hasn't he come out?

KEN: On the door?

MICHAEL: We ain't been exactly quiet.

NAHEEM: Well, he is not upstairs, in the house. I just came from there. I don't know.

KEN: So where would he go on a day like today?

NAHEEM: My father doesn't go anywhere. Not like he's a stroller, except to the store for his tonic --

MICHAEL: So, maybe he went --

NAHEEM: His coat is still upstairs. It is not covering his back.

KEN: When did you see him last?

NAHEEM: Last night.

KEN: When last night?

NAHEEM: When I left to go home.

MICHAEL: Could he have left?

NAHEEM: For what? It was late -- after news. Look, I know my father's cranks -- he is not one for a midnight ramble, especially in this neighborhood.

KEN: And this morning?

NAHEEM: I assumed he went to church. But that would be over by now.

KEN: But there is the matter of his coat. Still here.

By this time they are standing at the door, looking at the envelope. JERRY has not moved.

NAHEEM: His coat is still there. The coat he would wear to church --

MICHAEL looks at everyone, then slowly takes down the envelope. He opens it and shakes out JIM's necklace, except that it has been broken in half.

NAHEEM: It's been cracked --

They look at each other, and then around, suddenly frightened.

JERRY: You'll notice --

They all turn to him.

JERRY: You'll notice that the heavy bag is gone.

They notice it. Without a word, MICHAEL opens the office door and the bag, which has been leaning against it, falls into the room. Taped to the bag is another envelope, and it is taped to the end of a piece of duct tape in a way that should suggest that someone pull the tape. NAHEEM opens it, and it's the other half of the broken necklace. NAHEEM tears away the duct tape and looks in the bag. He looks at the others. There is a beat as he puts his hand in the bag and takes it out, bloody; then a long agonized howl of pain. The scene shifts to a sudden blackness, then a bright light on JERRY. Drum solo kicks in.

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ACT II, Scene 2

JERRY in his own bright light, terrified: shaking, shaken. JIM appears in another bright light; JERRY sees him. The lights cut out; drum solo continues. They run two different places -- lights up, then down. Two more times. The effect should be as if JERRY is being pursued. At the final black, JIM exits.

PHIL enters in darkness. He sits in an executive office chair.

* * * * *

ACT II, Scene 3

The drum solo cuts out at the same moment the lights bump up. JERRY seated, as if to a secretary but also as if others are watching him in the reception area.

JERRY: Don't give me the "not in" crap. He's in. I know he's in. Look, I watched him slither -- That's right -- no, no, no, he will see me, Jerry Argent, you just press the right button -- he's in, I know he's in -- c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, I'll take that phone if you don't -- right, right, you call him right now, go on -- that's right, Jerry Argent -- tell him -- what? go down there? his secretary -- aren't you his -- right, right, down to the right, around --

Lights change location; the sound of a fight bell; JERRY sits down.

JERRY: Jerry Argent for Philip Tremble -- no, I don't, but he will see me -- just buzz him on the phone -- go on, go on -- I don't need an appointment -- in fact, he has one with me, required -- go on. Good. Down, down to the left? Aren't you his sec -- left, then a left?

Lights change location; the sound of a fight bell; JERRY sits down.

JERRY: I've got myself more lost than ever -- a maze -- tell him -- oh, so you know, from out front, yes -- tell him it's required -- he owes -- oh, yes, I can wait a minute. A minute -- that's all -- I've got infor[mation] -- I've got --

Lights change to PHIL's office; fight bell. JERRY more or less falls into the office, as if he's been ejected into it. He sits in his chair.

PHIL: Welcome.

JERRY: A maze --

PHIL: Amazing, yes it is, out there. A. Maze. Ing. So, well, now that you have bulled your way in here -- what? You look like a thread in your head is about ready to snap. Hmmm? Speak quickly, Jerry Argent, because I am hungry.

PHIL sniffs the air.

PHIL: I smell agony in the room. I smell a tortured soul.

JERRY: How could you --

PHIL: How could I. All right.

JERRY: Bring yourself --

PHIL: Bring myself. To what?

JERRY: How?

PHIL: To what, my raven?

JERRY: To stuff part of his body --

PHIL: The body of whom?

JERRY: What?

PHIL: The body of whom?

JERRY: Whom? What a piece of -- work you are!

PHIL: We all are of such a piece.

JERRY: You are a piece of --

PHIL: Remember where you are, Mr. Argent --

JERRY: You deny --

PHIL: Deny nothing.

JERRY: You deny that --

PHIL: I deny everything because I have nothing to deny. Remember where you are, Jerry.

PHIL snaps his fingers, gets out of his chair.

PHIL: Ah. You mean -- you must -- that weekend tragedy -- yes, yes, that one -- I read it in today's newspaper. It was below the fold. Metro section. Small box, near the bottom. Small sans serif headline. Continued on the back, after the auto ads. All the notice that a man like that gathers? A shame.

JERRY: You said --

PHIL: Deny.

JERRY: A man of your word.

PHIL: Not that word.

JERRY: Not a man.

PHIL: You came all the way here, through shadow and sadness to say -- I said that?

JERRY: You said --

PHIL: Such anguish.

JERRY: -- directly to me --

PHIL: All because of a false something heard.

JERRY: -- a matter of life and death --

PHIL: Sit down! Now! Sit! It is always -- my buddy -- a matter -- of life and death -- with me. You will really need to become more aware of this -- element -- in my character. Good. Besides, the man --

JERRY: He had a name --

PHIL: -- was practically -- name? yes, Jim, James, Sterling, then -- let us pay a proper honor -- practically my business partner, yes, wouldn't you say?

JERRY: And you had someone --

PHIL: We had dealings, Jerry.

JERRY: You paid someone --

PHIL: We had started dealings. Exchange. Why would I un-deal by, well, whatever you accuse me?

JERRY: You paid someone!

PHIL: I was going to get the building.

JERRY: What?

PHIL: The building -- you remember that?

JERRY: But Michael --

PHIL: Ah, the archangel -- here is the skinny on the archangel. Con. Sore. Shee. Um. Remember that? That flat bit of trickery? That is Michael -- an empty breath. Not worth my breathing. Here is the real word, Jerry Argent: "Ch-ch-ch-changes." Say it with me. "Ch-ch-ch-changes --"

JERRY: I will not.

PHIL: "Ch-ch-ch-changes," Jerry. (*softly*) "Turn and face the stranger -- " "Ch-ch-ch-changes." James Sterling -- rest his black eradicated soul -- is dead. Is he not, Jerry?

JERRY: Yes.

PHIL: He is, isn't he?

JERRY: Yes.

PHIL: Begin for you the laying of him to rest.

JERRY: And you ki[lled] --

PHIL: Ah, ah, ah -- I will damage you.

JERRY: Your hand is all over --

PHIL touches JERRY on the face with his hand. JERRY pulls away.

PHIL: My hand is this, Jerry Argent, laid out flush: James Sterling is dead, and for that I grieve.

JERRY: You grieve the way a stone grieves.

PHIL: But why would I desire him dead? True, I am not above --

JERRY: You are so full of snakes --

PHIL: -- a little escalation in fear -- it concentrates the choices. Jim was in a league not his own. Nor the archangel -- the night school lawyer. They needed to know that. Above their weight class. But death -- Do I smell doubt?

JERRY: You could kill.

PHIL: But did I? Did I?

PHIL looks closely, sniffs.

PHIL: Doubt. And --

PHIL sniffs again.

PHIL: -- a spoor of guilt, a whiff of "Perhaps I had a part -- " After all -- grief can -- disarm a man. Grief will disarm Naheem -- and as cold as it is to say it, that will be to my advantage. This hand continues -- time presses -- "ch-ch-ch-changes," Jerry. Are you done? I read that the funeral is this week. Go. Convey my regrets. I cannot be there. Go. Say goodbye to your friend. Grieve. Go.

JERRY is at where the "door" would be.

PHIL: By the way. One small matter -- one small key item. Almost embarrassed to bring it up.

JERRY: What?

PHIL: You don't happen -- you don't happen to have your keys, do you?

JERRY: What?

PHIL: Your keys? Dawning realization.

JERRY: No. No. I do not.

PHIL: You do not?

JERRY: No.

PHIL: Well, then. I wonder.

JERRY: What?

PHIL: I wonder where they are.

JERRY: You do not have them.

PHIL: I never had them.

JERRY: You used them.

PHIL: I had asked if you had them, true.

JERRY: I gave them to you.

PHIL: You lost them.

JERRY: To get in the building.

PHIL: I cannot say I did that.

JERRY: You never used them?

PHIL: I only came in the building upon Jim's invitation.

JERRY: Did someone else use them?

PHIL: I do not know.

JERRY: But I left them for you.

PHIL: Things get lost.

JERRY: And now you do not?

PHIL: Why would I? And you do not?

JERRY: No. I have my extra set.

PHIL: I am sure they will rise up.

JERRY: What do you mean, "sure"?

PHIL: "Sure" the way things turn -- about. Fair. Play.

JERRY: You know what this means.

PHIL: Do I?

JERRY: You know this means I am floating out there.

PHIL: Do I? I have no more luck reading --

JERRY: A piece of me -- flotsam --

PHIL: -- the future than you do.

JERRY: If those keys turn up --

PHIL: Yes?

JERRY: What am I supposed to say?

PHIL: You're innocent. Say what you like.

JERRY: I am sure they will turn up.

PHIL: You look ashen.

JERRY: They will turn up.

PHIL: Ghostly.

JERRY: They will turn up in a way that --

PHIL: Are you failing?

JERRY: -- will break everything -- broken --

PHIL: Is it Jim's ghost?

JERRY: Ah --

PHIL: Go.

JERRY: You --

PHIL: Ite missa est.

JERRY: You used --

PHIL: I never used the key.

JERRY: Used me.

PHIL: As a good key should be used. Click. Click. Bam. Go. Grieve. You already look overtime.

Lights change. PHIL exits. Chairs off.

* * * * *

ACT II, Scene 4

JERRY in harsh light. JIM behind him in harsh light.

JERRY: What has been done? No -- what have I done? I have done so much everything and so much nothing. In so far -- so far, so deep, so lost. Everything lost. Everything -- Judas.

JIM walks to JERRY's light and gives JERRY the "lost" keys. JERRY takes them and deliberately slices the palm of his hand -- there is blood. Lights fade. JERRY and JIM exit.

* * * * *

ACT II, Scene 5

The sound of a snare drum played with brushes, insistent but soft. JIM's funeral. Lights up find JIM sitting on the floor, downstage center. NAHEEM sits to one side on a black box. MICHAEL and KEN sit slightly farther back on black boxes; and further behind them is JERRY, standing, unseen by any of them. Some kind of container holding incense sticks or some substance that creates smoke is placed behind JIM, and in a strong shaft of downlight, the smoke curls upward.

Each actor, except JIM, holds a downy feather: KEN has a blue one, MICHAEL a red one, and NAHEEM a white one. First, KEN takes his box and, placing next to the light, stands on it and releases the feather so that it drifts down in the light. Then he takes his box and exits. MICHAEL does the same thing. NAHEEM speaks.

NAHEEM: Who killed my father. How will there be justice. What must the son do. And not do. For the rest of his life's sentence.

NAHEEM stands on his box and releases his feather. JERRY mimics his gestures, but nothing falls from his hand. Lights out, music goes until lights come up for the next scene.

* * * * *

ACT II, Scene 6

The gym. MICHAEL and KEN enter. KEN, as usual, has his satchel. They are dressed as at the top of the play, in mourning, but no armbands. There are several moments in silence.

KEN: What -- can -- What -- can -- anybody -- Words just -- fail. Just fail completely.

MICHAEL does not respond immediately.

KEN: I really do not like this.

MICHAEL: It just has to be carried.

KEN: Dragged, more like it.

MICHAEL: Dragged, then. Just be quiet about it.

KEN: Strong and dumb -- being so brave in this brave new world. It will freeze our hearts and kill us all.

KEN takes out his pad and begins to draw.

KEN: What happens now?

MICHAEL: Now.

KEN: To everything?

MICHAEL: To everything.

KEN: Legitimate questions.

MICHAEL: Perfectly. Legitimate. Questions.

KEN: Naheem is going to want to --

MICHAEL: Documents and docket must be satisfied. Memories, memorials -- get them done with. Dust to ashes, then on to invoices and court filings. The world -- waits. And wastes. And doesn't wait. And wastes some more.

KEN: What happens?

JERRY shows up in the door, his hand bandaged.

MICHAEL: What happens?

MICHAEL indicates JERRY.

MICHAEL: Well. This, for instance.

JERRY: What?

KEN: You weren't there.

MICHAEL: Hello, Jerry.

JERRY enters the space.

KEN: You weren't there. Your hand.

JERRY: Michael --

KEN: Your hand.

JERRY: Michael --

MICHAEL: Your hand, Jerry. The one who --

JERRY: Michael --

MICHAEL: -- in this world loves you, the only one as far as I can tell, wants to know.

JERRY: Michael -- what happens?

KEN: Where were you?

JERRY: Michael, what happens now?

MICHAEL: You were deep into bird guts once, I heard -- brighten our day, why don't you?

JERRY: I do not know anything.

MICHAEL: You lie.

KEN: Jerry, answer me: where were you? I waited and waited -- I had to leave. Without you.
Where were you? Let me see that.

JERRY: Leave! Leave it alone!

KEN: It's got blood.

MICHAEL: You do not want to touch him.

KEN: It's got blood on it.

JERRY: Leave it alone!

KEN: I just want --

MICHAEL: You do not want. You really don't.

MICHAEL snaps his fingers.

MICHAEL: Click, click, bam.

JERRY: Will Naheem --

MICHAEL: Keep that off me.

JERRY: Will Naheem have to --

MICHAEL: Stay away from me. *(to all)* You want to read Naheem's guts, go ask his permission!

JERRY: But you have all the paperwork --

MICHAEL: Choking on paperwork! The whole world is making me gag, Gerald, the whole world, and that includes you. Over there. I do not want you near me.

KEN: You were not there, Jerry.

MICHAEL: You have been up to something --

KEN: At the funeral of Jim --

MICHAEL: You have not been one hundred percent --

KEN: You were not there.

MICHAEL: Your eyes steam --

KEN: You can't just excuse that away.

JERRY: What do you mean?

MICHAEL: The evasive look, the eyes from the side, the way the air fears for its life when you walk into the room -- we've all smelt it. It riffs off you in waves. Maybe it was good he wasn't at the funeral, Kensington -- he would have cleared the hall.

KEN: I mean, your hand is bleeding.

JERRY: I cut it downstairs.

MICHAEL: Diner's closed on Sundays.

JERRY: On the door.

MICHAEL: When? Just now? A swath of bandage in your pocket -- how Boy Scout of you!

JERRY: Some time --

MICHAEL: I feel a closing circle closing, don't you, Kensington? The lariat, the garrote, the noose.

KEN: Jerry, answer straight. C'mon!

MICHAEL: Circle, circle. Ding-ding, Round One.

KEN: Jerry, what is going on?

MICHAEL: Gerald, look at me. Look at me.

JERRY finally looks.

MICHAEL: I know.

KEN: (to MICHAEL) You know?

NAHEEM appears in the door, slowly. He has been listening to the conversation while standing in the hall. They do not notice him at first. He holds an envelope in his hand.

MICHAEL: (still speaking to JERRY) I stopped in at McMahon's the other day for a drink -- did you think no one would notice? All the meetings?

KEN: Meetings?

MICHAEL: A liaison, Ken. Who, Gerald, was taking up so much of your extra time?

NAHEEM: Tremble.

KEN: Tremble?

MICHAEL: You knew?

NAHEEM: I found out.

KEN: You were meeting with --

MICHAEL: The snake of the first water.

KEN: Why?

MICHAEL: Ding-ding. Last round.

NAHEEM enters the room.

NAHEEM: Didn't see you at the funeral. Care to explain? Actually -- Actually, do not wash your breath over me. Enough profanity on this day for a lifetime of shame -- no need for addition. My dead father. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. Not dead by way of nature -- long life, respect of age, chance to reflect and gather. Nope. He earned murder instead - for what? For what did he deserve extinction?

NAHEEM gestures around him.

NAHEEM: For this. This -- palace of dreams.

NAHEEM takes JERRY's keys out of the envelope.

NAHEEM: For this. This palace of dreams.

KEN: Those are your keys.

NAHEEM: Look at these. Gaze upon them. What are they, Jerry? (*sing-song*) Jerry -- what are they?

JERRY: My keys.

MICHAEL: That's evidence, Naheem.

NAHEEM: Oh, look deeper. Not just keys. Not just keys. A sign.

MICHAEL: Naheem --

NAHEEM: A sign, Jerry. An omen. Ravens and burning stars.

MICHAEL: Naheem, you have to --

NAHEEM: Do you know the emptiness, Jerry? Of absence, Jerry? Of the absence of someone deeply loved, Jerry? Deeply loved and then deleted, Jerry? I cannot hear you, Jerry.

JERRY: My keys, yes.

KEN: Jerry --

NAHEEM: This is a sign. A sign. (*to KEN and MICHAEL*) At the funeral, someone comes up to me, unknown to me, and gives this envelope to me. Distracted, I do not even see his face.

MICHAEL: Give them to me --

NAHEEM: The invisible messenger disappears. But the envelope -- ah, the envelope. It stays. I put it away for later. I must lay my father to his rest. Are you listening, Jerry? Later, I take it out. I read its guts. I -- invade them. They invade me. I know this -- thing. I know its hand. Are you listening, Jerry? Whose keys are these?

JERRY: Mine.

NAHEEM: Why do I have them?

JERRY: I --

NAHEEM: Why don't you have them?

JERRY: I must have lost --

NAHEEM: A sign of trust, isn't it, if you lost them, to tell us? At least tell your boss. We'd have changed the locks -- no problem. Nothing to be ashamed of in the losing.

JERRY: I don't know.

NAHEEM: Convince me, please, that you lost them. Do not let me think --

JERRY: I might have --

NAHEEM: Do not let me think! (*softer*) Do not let me think.

MICHAEL goes to take the keys from NAHEEM's hand, but NAHEEM viciously slaps MICHAEL's hand away.

NAHEEM: Jerry?

JERRY: I can't prove what you want.

NAHEEM: Michael, stay back!

KEN: Jerry --

NAHEEM: It always struck me -- (*to MICHAEL*) I will hurt you! -- God, I do not want to do this, any of it!

MICHAEL: Don't --

NAHEEM: Jerry, convince me, please --

KEN: Jerry, just tell him you lost the keys. Tell him that this is what happened, set his mind to rest --

JERRY: (*to KEN, but also to JIM*) I can't. I can't. The well is dry.

KEN: Jerry!

NAHEEM points at KEN.

NAHEEM: Do you see his face?

NAHEEM pounds his own heart.

NAHEEM: Aches with disbelief! Right here!

NAHEEM spreads his hand over his own breast.

NAHEEM: Already it turns hard.

NAHEEM pounds it again.

NAHEEM: Already it completes -- into -- stone. I do not want -- I have never wanted -- But already it is gone. Dust. (*to KEN*) No, your face still -- pain -- You matter -- love -- a cheat --

NAHEEM faces JERRY as he indicates KEN.

NAHEEM: You are so careless.

MICHAEL: Naheem, give me the keys.

NAHEEM: *(ignoring him)* Conclusion. It always puzzled me -- puzzled the police, too -- how the perpetrator -- the perpetrator -- got into the building.

KEN: Michael --

NAHEEM: It is a very tight building on the outside -- Dad and I buttoned it tight over the years -- *(to himself)* -- the heart crumbles -- no!

MICHAEL: Ken, get Jerry out of here.

NAHEEM: *(to KEN)* You must --

MICHAEL: I'll deal --

NAHEEM: -- witness!

KEN: Jerry could not have done it!

NAHEEM: *(to KEN)* Witness! No sign of forced entry -- *(to JERRY)* -- you know forced entry?

NAHEEM pounds his breast.

NAHEEM: Crack, crack, crack! No sign of forced entry. Jerry, help me.

NAHEEM holds out the keys.

NAHEEM: My only conclusion? Please, no! Please convince me --

JERRY: Say it.

NAHEEM: Say it?

JERRY: Say it. Say it.

NAHEEM: Say it? *(to himself)* Say it? To welcome the snake, then. Say it? Then to be the snake. Say it? But it must be said. In final pieces. *(to KEN)* It must be done. Were you here when the deed was done, Jerry?

JERRY: No.

NAHEEM: Were you around? Did you hear him?

JERRY: No.

NAHEEM: Did he scream, or did he just grunt when they cut his throat? Face surprised or terrified?

JERRY: I was not here.

NAHEEM: Your key in the lock -- easy slide in, easing in. He probably never heard the click of the lock. I can imagine all the spikes of it, Jerry -- the footfall, the killer's dead heart racing, that moment when my father knew -- God, feeling the life drain, knowing -- All of that up here, like nails and thorns.

JERRY: I was not here. I did not do anything.

NAHEEM: Except --

JERRY: Except -- yes.

NAHEEM: Except pass the keys to Mr. Tremble -- true?

KEN: Jerry, you have to tell --

NAHEEM: You gave him these keys, I do not know for why, for what -- and these got passed, and then passed again.

JERRY: I did not kill your father.

NAHEEM: But you did. You did.

JERRY moves to stand in front of KEN; he touches KEN's face. Then he moves to NAHEEM and, standing in front of him, makes a gesture of openness, as if to say, "I am what you say I am."

MICHAEL: Naheem, we've got to let --

NAHEEM: *(laughs)* Not that easy. How can you even begin to feel your emptiness? You have not lost anything. A price has to be paid, boy, a price must be paid in kind.

MICHAEL: Naheem --

Holding one of the keys, NAHEEM unexpectedly grabs KEN around the neck, and with KEN's head held by his arm, he punches JERRY's key into each eye. NAHEEM lets KEN drop to the floor. KEN's eyes are bloody.

NAHEEM: Now you can begin to know.

MICHAEL: Naheem!

JERRY rushes to KEN. NAHEEM presses the key into MICHAEL's hand. MICHAEL responds as if he had just had an ember or nail driven into his palm. NAHEEM drifts to another part of the room. MICHAEL stands in the middle. Lights fade to black as the audience hears lamentation.