

## **Bright Gold Promise**

by

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# Bright Gold Promise

## 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.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

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

## 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. The time is the present, in spring

**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.

# Bright Gold Promise

## 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  
farters 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!  
(picks up the black armband)  
"Dearly beloved" --  
(throws it to JERRY)  
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 --

(snaps his fingers)

-- 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.

(hits him again, hard)

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 voom-voom 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

(to KEN, JERRY, and MICHAEL)

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?

(to everyone)  
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.  
(banging his knuckles together)  
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.

(to everyone)

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

He 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)

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

JIM

(to PHIL)

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  
(to JIM)  
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.

(puts the key away)

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  
(to NAHEEM)  
"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  
(indicating the chair)  
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?

(pointing to his ear)

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 --

(makes as if ringing a bell)  
-- "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 cooperative 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 cooperative.

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 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.

\* \* \* \* \*

### 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 on-line, 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?

(looking around)

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.

Fair to whom? JERRY

Fair all around. PHIL

Fair to Jim. JERRY

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 --

(indicating JIM)

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)  
Like a bloodhound.

MICHAEL

That's not true!

KEN bays the word "True!"

MICHAEL  
(to KEN)

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

(points to the table top)  
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?  
(indicates letter)  
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.  
(indicates the letter)  
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

(indicating the letter)

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

(to NAHEEM)

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.

\* \* \* \* \*

### 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.

(sniffs)

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?  
(looking closely, sniffs)  
Doubt. And --

(sniffs again)

-- 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-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 dockets 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?  
(indicating JERRY)  
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  
(to KEN)  
You do not want. You really don't.  
(snaps his fingers)  
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 looks)

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?

(gestures around him)

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  
(indicating KEN)  
Do you see his face?  
(pounds his heart)  
Aches with disbelief! Right here!  
(spreads his hand over his own breast)  
Already it turns hard.  
(pounds it again)  
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 --  
(to JERRY, indicating KEN)  
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?

(pounds his breast)

Crack, crack, crack! No sign of forced entry.

Jerry, help me.

(holding out the keys)

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.