

Bright Gold Promise

by

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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.

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: I have a preference for Southern-sounding accents, but none heavy or twangy; in fact, KEN, JERRY, and MICHAEL's can be very mild. PHIL's should be very gentle and soothing: Virginia middle- to upper-class. JIM and NAHEEM are originally from piedmont North Carolina. However, the director and actors are free to find accents that work for them as long as they bring a musicality to the saying of the language.

SETTING/TIME

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

look as if it comes from single bulbs with tin shades. There are two doors -- one to the outside, one leading to an office; the office door should open into the gym. The gym is old, full of old sweat and pain. 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

(miming the appropriate actions with the words)
Because I wanted him to squirm, pine, lament,
suffer --

(emphasizing the syllables)

suf-fer.

(to JERRY)

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 --
(snaps fingers)

-- 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

(ignoring JERRY)

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

(ignoring JERRY)

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

(to JERRY, 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

(indicating JERRY)

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 --

(to JERRY)

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
Dying off made that possible.

JERRY
That what you want?

MICHAEL fidgets with the question, clearly unable and unwilling to say
"yes."

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.

(indicates for them to kneel down)

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 gives JERRY a "look," halfway between his previous anger and a thanks for helping him remember what they are remembering. JERRY smiles.

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.

[Play continues]