

No More Prisons

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086

(201) 770-0550; m.bett@verizon.net;

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

(Copyright © by Michael Bettencourt)

No More Prisons

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Clique, a young woman, is on a quest. She has been tagging every available surface with the phrase "No More Prisons." On one of her "outings," she is found by QT, a counselor working with at-risk youth, who has been looking for her to ask her questions about what she is doing and to offer her help. Clique's story unfolds the life of her sister, Johanna, imprisoned for a murder she committed at the age of seventeen.

CHARACTERS

- Clique, a young woman, age 16 or so
- QT, woman, about five or so years older than CLIQUE
- Johanna, CLIQUE's sister, in jail; also, a friend of QT's and about the same age

Note about ethnicity: The characters can be played by actors of any ethnicity.

SETTING

- Urban street -- the director can make it look as maximal or minimal as possible, but there should be something in the scene which CLIQUE can jump up on.
- Hospital room, indicated by several moving screens -- other paraphernalia as needed.

MISCELLANEOUS

- Marker that CLIQUE can use to tag the phrase "No More Prisons"
- In Scene 1, a surface, visible to the audience, where CLIQUE can tag the phrase
- Walkman with headphones
- Cell phone
- Hospital screens
- Cutouts of "No More Prisons" for silhouettes
- Red marker -- washable (or a way of making a red mark on the skin)
- White lab coat and janitor's cart
- A small package, containing a gift of a butterfly artifact. The artifact can be anything as long as it is clearly a butterfly or butterfly motif and can be worn or shown during the final scene
- Three fresh apples
- Chairs

MUSIC

- Music for scene transitions -- up to director/actors

SLIDES

- Scene 4 calls for slides of pictures of prisoners and prison guards -- if these cannot be used, then simply play the scene through without them.

No More Prisons

Scene 1

Lighting oblique, late at night on the street. CLIQUE enters, moving to a tune that she hears on her Walkman. The audience can also hear the music. She drops to the ground and tags a manhole cover with the phrase. She rises, then sees the visible surface and tags that with the phrase, several times.

As she does that, QT enters, watches. CLIQUE finishes one tag, starts on a second one.

QT

Hey.

CLIQUE cannot hear QT because of the music.

QT

(much louder)

Hey!

CLIQUE hears QT and is startled; she spins around, ripping off the headphones. The music for the audience stops but continues on the Walkman through the headphones. QT backs off a step, to show she's not a threat.

CLIQUE

You a cop?

QT

No.

CLIQUE

What?

QT

Shut the music down.

CLIQUE

(not hearing her)

You with the law?

QT indicates to turn the music down; CLIQUE shuts the Walkman off.

CLIQUE

Are you a cop?

QT

No.

CLIQUE
Should I be afraid of you?

QT
No.

CLIQUE
You going to stop me?

QT
No.

CLIQUE
You going to reprimand me?

QT
No.

CLIQUE
Then back off and leave me alone.

CLIQUE goes back to what she has been doing.

QT
You've been tagging.

CLIQUE ignores her.

QT
You've been tagging everywhere. All over
everywhere. No-More-Prisons. People's feet walk
on it. Under their butts when they sit on a
bench. Eye-level at the doorway to the
corporation -- it moves way in, you know?

CLIQUE continues to ignore her.

QT
It moved its way into me. Which is why I have
been looking around for you -- for the artist.

CLIQUE looks at her.

QT
What?

CLIQUE
You're looking for me?

QT
Looking for the artist.

QT

I know your name.

CLIQUE

But you don't know me.

QT

I do know you.

CLIQUE

How?

QT

I know your sister, too.

CLIQUE

How?

QT

Johanna.

CLIQUE

Johanna.

QT

Johanna, sister of Clique. You, Clique, a.k.a. Cassandra, a.k.a. sassie Cassie. You don't remember me, do you?

(pointing to the tag)

I asked around who's been out on this tagging "mission" -- you are known out there, Clique, very well known. You've done hundreds, Clique. Hundreds. Your pulse astonishes people. They can't help but see what you've done, what you're doing, even if they don't like it, even if it offends them. You stick it in their eye -- and that makes you very known. And that made you interesting to me.

QT goes up to the tag and traces it with an index finger. As she does so, she says the words.

QT

"No."

CLIQUE makes a move toward QT.

CLIQUE

Get --

CLIQUE takes a step closer.

QT
"More."

CLIQUE
Get your hand off --

QT
"Prisons."

CLIQUE comes closer but not quite up to QT.

QT
(looks at her finger)
It's dry.

CLIQUE
Supposed to be permanent.

QT
Few thousand years, it'll wash off.

CLIQUE
A few years, I'll be done. Then I'll be done
enough to be dead.

QT
(touching the tag again)
No more prisons --

CLIQUE
Don't -- !

QT
What's it mean?

An incredulous look from CLIQUE.

QT
What's it mean?

CLIQUE
What's it mean.

QT
What's it mean?

CLIQUE
You can't read?

QT
What's it mean to you, Clique? What's it mean to
Johanna, sister of Clique, Cassie, Cassandra?

CLIQUE

You're just trying to break into my head. It's just a tag.

QT

Is it?

CLIQUE

Just a tag!

CLIQUE acts as if she is trying to resist the temptation to do another one, then she gives in and does another tag, quickly. She continues to do them as they talk.

CLIQUE

Yeah. Just a tag. Just a tag. Just a tag.
Just a tag.

QT touches CLIQUE, and this causes her to jerk, which causes a mistake, an errant line, in the tag.

CLIQUE

Fool!

CLIQUE tries to correct it.

CLIQUE

(increasing irritation)

Man! Man! Man!

(gives up the attempt)

Nothing but sad nothing but sad nothing but sad
nothing but sad --

QT

Sorry --

In frustration, CLIQUE rips off another tag as fast as she can and speaks as she does.

CLIQUE

Fool! Fool! Fool! You're a fool!

CLIQUE speaks to herself, more or less, as she tries again to correct the "mistake."

CLIQUE

Now it ain't going to work -- got to make it work
-- It's my work! It's my work! It's my work!
You don't go messing up a person's work!

QT
What's it mean, Clique?

CLIQUE
Oh, man!

QT
Clique --

CLIQUE
(to herself, as she moves around)
Man oh man oh man oh man --

QT
Clique --

CLIQUE
Not going to work, now it's not going to work at
all.

QT
What's not going to work?

CLIQUE
It's not going to work. It's not going to work.

CLIQUE, agitatedly repeating this phrase, not paying attention to QT, jumps up on something and starts essentially speaking in tongues, not entirely in control of herself.

CLIQUE
Clique, you're so stupid, Clique, you're so
stupid, Clique, you're so stupid, Clique, you're
so stupid, Clique, you're so stupid, Clique,
you're so stupid, Clique, you're so stupid,
Clique, you're so stupid -- long lines, I see the
long lines, chains, blood -- another and another
and another they're going to lock them up and
devour them, eat them whole -- whole people, a
whole people in chains, buried, blood and blood
and blood, drowning in blood, all of us sick in
blood, Johanna, Johanna, Johanna, Johanna --
aaaaahhhh!!! --
(in a long wail, the name JOHANNA)
-- Jooohhhaaannnaa!!!

Suddenly, CLIQUE looks tired, confused, and looks as if she is going to fall off. QT rushes over and catches her just as she slumps. QT lowers her to the ground gently, CLIQUE's body is quivering, unconscious.

QT

Clique, Clique, take it easy, girl -- slow, slow,
slow down. Let me slow you down. There. Rest.
Rest of angels, sweetheart.

QT cradles CLIQUE, and for several moments, it is completely silent on the stage. Then QT pulls a cell phone out of her pocket and pushes a button. As QT waits for the call to go through, the lights go to black. Music for transition added to an EMT siren, all very loud.

* * * * *

Scene 2

Several white hospital screens set up to indicate a hospital room. CLIQUE stands in the middle of the space formed by the screens.

CLIQUE

(out of the darkness)

Jooohhhaaannnaaa!!!

As she speaks, lights come up behind the screens to reveal, written over and over again, "No More Prisons" in silhouette. At the same moment, a tight light on CLIQUE's face, full of fear.

CLIQUE

(softer)

Johanna. Johanna. Johanna.

Out of the darkness comes JOHANNA's voice.

JOHANNA

I'm right here, baby. I'm as here as here can
be.

CLIQUE responds with a mixture of fear and delight. JOHANNA enters, bathed in the reflected light from the screens. CLIQUE sees her and runs to her, embraces her. JOHANNA smooths her hair, rubs her back.

Lighting changes -- logo still in silhouette but also JOHANNA and CLIQUE in brighter light. They sit on the floor, JOHANNA behind CLIQUE.

JOHANNA

You did it again, didn't you?

CLIQUE

I couldn't help it. I can't help it. My hands
just -- go, and I go with them.

JOHANNA

Crying in the wilderness, you are, my lovely
sister.

CLIQUE

You -- all of them --
(knocking her head)
-- up here --

JOHANNA

(with affection)

Crying in the wilderness for all us poor, poor
prisoners, locked down and disposed of. You're
probably the only one in America who cries and
remembers to remember.

CLIQUE

I dream you can't breathe. None of you.

JOHANNA

I know -- I know that you have had those visions.

CLIQUE

You have these stones in your lungs --

JOHANNA

It's okay, it's okay --

CLIQUE

-- and dirt in your eyes --

JOHANNA

It's all right --

CLIQUE

-- all of you -- really deep -- can't breathe,
and then I can't breathe, even when I wake up, I
got stones in my lungs, and it makes me remember
all over -- all over --

(looking at JOHANNA)

I have to go -- I got to keep going on -- got to
--

JOHANNA

The prophet in the desert.

CLIQUE

If I do enough -- Johanna, if I do enough --
(using her hand, she writes on the air)
"No." "More." "Prisons." -- then you can
breathe. "No." "More." "Prisons." Again.
They all can breathe. "No." "More." "Prisons."

It's okay -- I'll make enough, I'll make enough.
I'll put it everywhere.

JOHANNA

Baby, baby --

CLIQUE

And then you'll be free.

CLIQUE again writes on the air, and as she does, JOHANNA tightly embraces her.

JOHANNA

Come back, come back.

CLIQUE struggles in the embrace to continue writing until she just lets go and sinks against JOHANNA.

CLIQUE

Oh, don't let me go, don't let me go, don't let
me go, don't let me go, don't let me go, don't
let me go!

They remain there, for a moment, in silence, holding each other.

JOHANNA

(reluctantly)

That's not it, Clique, honey.

CLIQUE

What?

JOHANNA

You have to let me go.

(JOHANNA opens one arm)

Let.

(JOHANNA opens the other man)

Me.

(rises)

Go.

JOHANNA goes behind the screens and takes down the logos until all the screens are empty. She discards them. The lights come down on the screens, now just ordinary screens. She speaks as she moves, and CLIQUE listens as if in shock.

JOHANNA

My life is not your life, Clique. My life is --
not your life. You have life left for life. I
do not. You have to stop this. I do not want
you to do this anymore.

CLIQUE

They locked you away.

JOHANNA

For something bad I really did.

CLIQUE

Forever.

JOHANNA

Forever it is, because the bad I did will last forever. Which is why you can't make your life mine. You can't turn your life into that forever!

CLIQUE

Johanna -- Johanna -- I miss you so much. I miss you so much.

JOHANNA melts, seeing CLIQUE so devastated.

JOHANNA

Ah, Cassie, Cassie -- Cassie, Cassie, my sassy lassie -- remember -- remember what I did with your hair when you turned eleven, the big One-One?

CLIQUE

Oh, yeah, yeah -- Mom freaked!

JOHANNA

Freaky, freaky, freaky, freaked!

CLIQUE

Freaked out!

JOHANNA

The nails --

CLIQUE

The eyes --

JOHANNA

You'd try on my underwear --

CLIQUE

You showed me that dirty picture --

JOHANNA

Which I am sure you never forgot! We'd do that crazy little funky dance routine --

Dance routine -- director/actors free to invent it. Beat.

CLIQUE

Sister of mine.

JOHANNA

Sister of yours.

They do their own invented handshake routine, with sound effects or special chant. They laugh.

CLIQUE

But then --

JOHANNA

I know --

CLIQUE

But then you went away.

JOHANNA

No, no, no, little sister -- this where you need to get on the right path. I didn't "go away."

CLIQUE

You did! You went away!

JOHANNA grabs one of the screens and revolves it around her.

JOHANNA

No, no, no -- I flew! I rocketed! I burned up the sky!

(hiding herself behind the screen)

I -- detached, Cassandra, like those booster rockets that fall away and get burned up.

CLIQUE

Didn't I love you enough? Didn't I? I tried.

JOHANNA slowly replaces the screen.

JOHANNA

Oh, honey, you loved me full throttle, straight out, pedal to the metal --

CLIQUE

-- but it wasn't enough --

JOHANNA

-- and I loved you -- love you -- love you, love you, so very much --

CLIQUE

But it wasn't enough, was it? Answer to me.

JOHANNA

I can't.

As she speaks the next line, CLIQUE does a part of the "funky" sister dance, but now with an edge, with anger.

CLIQUE

Answer. To. Me.

JOHANNA

My Tallahassee Cassie, you could have mainlined your love to me -- direct tube from heart to heart -- but the minute your love touched my scalded veins -- ssstt! off it would have burned like steam, my veins the hot metal of rocket parts flaming through the upper air where no one can breathe, thermonuclear evaporation --

CLIQUE

Stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it! Stop the goddamn slamming and talk to me!

Doing her own part of the "funky" sister dance, but with sadness -- note the rhythm in the next two lines.

JOHANNA

Nobody's love could have saved me from me. Not even your premium mix, Cassandra.

(stops the dance)

Truth? I was empty and hollow and anything anyone put into me ran right out of me. You can't take love in if you can't give it back, and you can't give it back if you can't take it in. Your love of me -- wasted.

CLIQUE

No!

JOHANNA

Oh, very much yes! I wasted it.

CLIQUE

No!

JOHANNA

I wasted it, and knew I wasted it as I did it.

CLIQUE

No!

JOHANNA
(goes to touch her)
Such innocence, that you think you can love
someone like me.

CLIQUE
(slaps her hand away)
Don't little-girl me like you just braided my
hair!

JOHANNA
(goes to touch her again)
Someone got their veins scalded.

CLIQUE slaps her hand away a second time.

CLIQUE
I am out there because I love someone like you.
It doesn't stop for you just because yours
stopped for me. My veins -- as hot as yours.
Always were hot.

JOHANNA
Gemlike flame.

CLIQUE
Difference? I burn you to bring you back, not
like you, burning everything to push everything
away. I refuse to take your "no"! And that's
why!

CLIQUE waits expectantly. JOHANNA goes to touch CLIQUE once again;
this time, CLIQUE lets her.

JOHANNA
Pure. Gemlike. Flame.

CLIQUE
I want --

JOHANNA
What do you want?

CLIQUE
I want to save you, Johanna. I need to --

JOHANNA
Ssshhh. For a moment. Just ssshhh. Cool, cool,
cool.

JOHANNA strokes her hair.

JOHANNA

You want to save me.

CLIQUE

Yes.

JOHANNA

Then you need to know.

CLIQUE

Know what?

JOHANNA

You need to know how much you do not know about what you think you know about me.

CLIQUE

If you love me, you will tell me. If you tell me, you will love me -- again.

JOHANNA

Close your eyes and breathe, little sister.

CLIQUE closes her eyes and breathes deeply. JOHANNA takes a few steps away and look at CLIQUE quizzically, speaking to herself.

JOHANNA

Such innocence -- say it again and again. And does the saying make it possible? Is it possible that she -- could --

CLIQUE

(opening her eyes)

Tell me.

JOHANNA

I had everything -- everything! Loving parents -
- now shattered apart. Loving sister -- who
burns in front of me. No over-sized pains and
hatreds, nothing that could not be comforted.
Except -- Except -- something. This --
something. I haven't been able to name it -- dig
it out -- excavate it -- a shift -- a -- a --

JOHANNA makes some kind of twisting, wrenching motion with her body.

JOHANNA

-- God, I can't grab the word -- the slamming me!
can't grab it -- I have been trying --

(looks at CLIQUE, softens)
Maybe it was just because I was stupid and
seventeen and for a moment, when I was not in any
kind of right mind, when that --
(makes the same twisting, wrenching motion)
-- happened, I was running down the wrong road to
Damascus and had darkness rather than light blind
me.

Low, dark sound. QT appears but dressed differently in order to make
her look more masculine, certainly not QT as in Scene 1. She is now
playing JOHANNA's victim. She carries in a chair, stands and waits.

JOHANNA
Little sister, here is that darkness.

JOHANNA takes the chair and sets it stage center. QT sits in it,
JOHANNA takes QT's hand and puts them up as if on a steering wheel.
The screens light up. JOHANNA pulls CLIQUE close to her.

JOHANNA
We wanted drugs, pure and simple. JB had a gun,
stuffed up in the ceiling of her car, right over
my head, hanging there. We cruised until we
found him --
(pointing to QT)
-- sitting in his car. He was leaving friends
he'd just had dinner with. Just had dinner with
to celebrate his graduation.

JOHANNA pulls out a red marker out of QT's jacket. As she speaks,
JOHANNA puts the marker in CLIQUE's hand and, guiding her hand, has
CLIQUE draw a small dot on QT's left temple and a thick wavy line down
QT's right cheek from the right temple. JOHANNA puts the marker in
her own pocket.

JOHANNA
JB said that he looked like the dealer who had
ripped her off. I could hardly see him -- I had
a smoke of weed and Colt 45 clouding in my head.
"Yeah, yeah, that's him, that's him! The m/f
owes me!" "Not him," I slur out. "Let's go."
"Naw, naw, it's him! It's him!" "Let's go."
"It's him. He's gotta pay." "Go!" "No!"
Suddenly, JB pulls over hard, throws me against
the dashboard. Stars, like in the cartoons.
Suddenly, I have the gun in my hand.
(JOHANNA uses CLIQUE's hand as the gun)
Suddenly, I'm out of the car walking towards his
car. I have the gun in my hand. Suddenly, I am
at his car, yelling at him. Yelling at him about
--

(shouts)
-- drugs and --
(shouts)
-- money and --
(shouts)
-- give them to me, motherfucker! Yelling at him
about his --
(shouts)
-- life. His --
(shouts)
-- life! His -- life. And then, suddenly --

JOHANNA places CLIQUE's finger against the temple that has the dot on it.

JOHANNA
Suddenly, there is no more "suddenly" any more.

Beat -- then QT slumps forward, hands falling off the steering wheel; JOHANNA lets go of CLIQUE and, for a moment, puts a gentle hand on the back of QT's neck. QT then gets up, takes the chair downstage right, places it to one side, and stands on it. The thick red mark should be towards the audience.

QT
Do you know why?

JOHANNA
No.

QT
Do you remember doing it?

JOHANNA
I remember the gun going off.

QT
Did you intend to do it?

CLIQUE
You didn't mean to do it!
(to QT)
She didn't!

JOHANNA
(warningly)
Clique --
(to QT)
I was not human at that moment.
(to CLIQUE)
I wasn't.

QT
You were weed and Colt 45 and your miserable selfishness.

JOHANNA
Yes.

CLIQUE
But you did my hair!
(to QT)
She did my hair!

QT
So?

CLIQUE
We danced!

QT
So what if she used to know what human was?

CLIQUE
She still does!

QT
No.
(to CLIQUE, cold and direct)
Your problem is that you're trying to remember for her. You can't. She killed off fond memories for everybody one mild night in September, and for that she will always be a murderer. A murderer. Of me and you and everything. You cannot be like Jesus Christ breathing on Lazarus because murderers do not come back from their dead. Ever. They are immune to redemption. So get out, little girl, go home, and cut her pictures out of the photo album.

CLIQUE
(lamenting)
We danced and danced and danced --

JOHANNA puts a hand on her to calm her. CLIQUE shudders to a halt. JOHANNA looks at QT.

JOHANNA
Sentence me.
(to CLIQUE)
Watch this, little girl.

QT

(writing the words on the air)

Life. Without. Parole. Until you remember.

JOHANNA

I never forget, especially what I can't remember completely.

QT

(emphasizing the words)

Even better. But it will never be enough. We need you to be the murderer forever so that we can make sense out of your senselessness, so we will never let you go.

JOHANNA

It is the only thing that makes sense of senselessness for me as well.

QT

Wonderful -- we can both damn you together!
Wonderful! Case closed.

JOHANNA goes over to QT and lifts QT off the chair, QT's hands on JOHANNA's shoulders for support, and puts her down. QT then exits. JOHANNA takes the chair and puts it in the same place as when QT sat in it. She takes out the red marker and hands it to CLIQUE, then sits, her hands up on the steering wheel. CLIQUE, understanding, draws a dot on the left temple and a red wavy line on the right cheek from the right temple.

JOHANNA

I stole a man's life for no reason at all. Your loving sister murdered the sweet innocent sleep of a young man, the sweet innocent sleep of his whole family -- and your sweet innocent sleep as well.

JOHANNA reacts as if she has just been shot in the head, then slumps forward, just like QT. CLIQUE kneels in front of JOHANNA and gently lifts her head up.

JOHANNA

Look at me, Clique. How much of anyone's life do I deserve? How much of your life? Nothing, Clique -- you owe me none of yours. You have to find another way.

JOHANNA stand and seats CLIQUE, then stands behind the chair and slightly off to one side or the other. JOHANNA starts a rhythm with her right fist or hand over her heart, similar to the double-beat of a heart. CLIQUE does the same.

JOHANNA
(to the rhythm)
Under the bone is a beating heart
There's a sound track to life
It's the beating heart
And I made one stop.

They both stop. Count to two. JOHANNA begins again; CLIQUE follows.

JOHANNA
I live each day as best I can
But murderer I am
And murderer I'll stay
That is my color, that is my name
No one believes I'll be anything more
Than killer --
Than killer --
Than killer --
Than killer --

They both stop.

JOHANNA
(to CLIQUE)
Than killer.

JOHANNA fondles CLIQUE's hair for a moment, then leaves. CLIQUE turns to watch her, then turns back and closes her eyes; she lets her head drop just as QT and CLIQUE did. Then the lights change to the tight light on her face at the top of the scene. A beat or two, then CLIQUE begins the rhythm, her eyes still closed.

CLIQUE
(2 beats) But you are / (2 beats)
(2 beats) Still a human / (2 beats)
(2 beats) Being / (2 beats)
(2 beats) Human / (2 beats) Being

We are all still human beings.

Lights go to black. Transition music.

* * * * *

Scene 3

It is now the hospital room in real time, and it should be somewhat furnished: table, old magazines, a trash barrel, etc. However, nothing should be hung on the screens. In the dark, QT enters with two chairs, dressed as she was in Scene 1; the red marks are gone.

She puts one chair to one side, and then sits in the second chair. QT hands CLIQUE her Walkman; CLIQUE hangs the headphones around her neck but does not turn on the music. Lights up.

QT is leafing through a magazine, then tosses it on the table -- she is tired and exasperated. CLIQUE is stone-like.

QT

I hate hospitals -- too many old magazines there.

QT looks at her watch.

QT

Three AM. Three hours. What symmetry. Your tape ran out.

CLIQUE looks at the Walkman, then puts it in her pocket and continues to sit.

QT

(in a little sing-song)

"Three hours in the ER" -- sounds like the title for something.

(continues with the rhythm)

"With old magazines and disinfectant." Are you hungry? You're probably hungry. There are some vending machines --

CLIQUE shakes her head no.

QT

I don't think I have ever sat with someone for three solid hours and not exchanged one word -- after name, rank, serial number to the nurse, that is. I have tried my best social worker moves, Clique, and you have dodged 'em all by just sitting there in the deepest silence I have ever heard. Last time I went to the bathroom, I called your mother again. Well, I left another message at least -- full details again. She can't miss it. Have you remembered me yet?

CLIQUE does not respond.

QT

What else? What else? I already told you about me and Johanna braiding your hair.

(holds up her hand)

That little hand-jive thing you guys made up. Do you remember the half-finger leather gloves I liked to wear? Your sister never liked them --

preferred metal -- things. I am sorry about
Johanna -- what -- happened.

CLIQUE
(turning to face QT)

Alanna.

QT

Right!

CLIQUE

"Alley."

QT

My nickname --

CLIQUE

Right.

QT

Right.

CLIQUE

Now shut up.

CLIQUE jams on the headphones and turns on the Walkman. QT, shut out, remains silent. A beat or two, then JOHANNA enters, now a janitor wearing a white coat and pushing a janitorial cart. She should look very different from Scene 2, older, more tired. QT, hearing her enter, turns to her, thinking it's the doctor. CLIQUE does not notice her. During the scene, JOHANNA can empty the wastebasket, sweep the floor, arrange magazines, etc.

NOTE: JOHANNA has to notice something about CLIQUE from the moment she enters that leads to the line, "She just seems really alone."

QT
(seeing who it is, mutters)

Damn!

JOHANNA

Sorry, not my name.

QT

Sorry, too -- thought you might be a doctor. Or
a nurse.

JOHANNA

No, no, just a lowly janitor.

JOHANNA tears off a sheet of paper towels and hold it up.

JOHANNA

My diploma --

QT

We've been here three hours.

JOHANNA

I know, I know -- it's never easy, is it? Is -- she -- all right?

QT

I'd be guessing if I said yes -- which is why we're here --

JOHANNA

(overlapping)

-- why you're here, yes -- silly question of mine. Though I try to ask it of everyone, just to ease things a bit -- it can get a little cold around here. Well, hopefully they'll be by soon. As for me, I'm on my own grand rounds for garbage -- do you have anything to throw away?

QT

No.

JOHANNA

Her?

QT

Nothing she can put her hands on right away.

JOHANNA

That's an --

QT

Sorry.

JOHANNA

-- odd answer.

QT

I'm sorry -- just tired -- a little too sarcastic.

JOHANNA

No, no, not that, not that at all. Though tired I am sure you are. No, no, you were fine. It's what you said following what I asked you that caught the ear. I hear lots of things around here on my grand rounds, so I get to listen a lot, you know, underneath. I asked you if she

had any actual garbage, and you answered me underneath, which may be true: she can't put a hand on it even if she's got it. Even if it's choking her. If that's the case, then it's a shame in one so young. Social worker, right? Or something in that way?

QT

Spot on.

JOHANNA

Thought so. You listen deep enough long enough -
-

(making a gesture of discovery)

-- metaphor abounds.

QT

You're very philosophical.

JOHANNA

You'd have to be a stump to work here and not be. Though we got our share of stumps, like anywhere, and not all in the janitorial pool. So what dam do you try to keep from breaking open, if I may ask?

QT

(indicating CLIQUE)

At-risk youth.

JOHANNA

What child isn't -- at-risk, that is? I have two of my own at home --

(indicating CLIQUE, elongating the "e" sound)

-- two teenagers. God, if there was ever a [two syllables] curséd species upon this earth.

QT

Oh, I don't know --

JOHANNA

(holding up her hand)

Though I love 'em, love 'em dearly. At least three double-shifts a week dearly, with my husband doing the graveyard stint at UPS to feed the college fund. It's that it's just not made very easy for them, you know -- life. She looks very much like one of my own --

QT

Any idea when a doctor might --

JOHANNA

Right, right, sorry, I don't mean to pry. No, I wouldn't know -- they don't let me do the scheduling. I'd offer you my hook, line, and sinker to grab one when they come by, but they're kinda rare. Like a coelacanth [SEE-la-kanth].

(QT looks confused)

The fossil fish they nabbed in 1938, thinking it'd been dead since Adam and Eve? That's my education -- late-night science shows, educational TV re-runs. Pulling stuff up from the deeps.

(taps her head)

Well, garbage in -- I hope you both go away with what you need.

JOHANNA has finished but hesitates to leave, looks at CLIQUE.

JOHANNA

What do the kids call you?

QT

They call me QT -- "on the q.t."

JOHANNA

Because you give them --

QT

At least I like to think I do.

JOHANNA

That speaks well of you.

QT

I hope so.

JOHANNA

Kids dub those they find to be the knights in their lives with special names -- their underneath way --

QT

Yes. Is there someplace you're leading?

JOHANNA

This is not usual for me, I want you to know, Ms. QT --

QT

Alanna -- adults can call me Alanna.

JOHANNA

Alanna, then. The cleaning crew is here and not here, you know? In, out, gone -- that's our jobs. But we notice a lot and we think a lot -- most of us -- and I'm just standing here thinking -- been thinking this since the minute I walked in here -- my own two kids, thank God, I know are home in bed right now with my mother, their grandmother, probably parked frontside of the TV -- my husband UPS-ing it around the warehouse -- Why --

(hesitating)

Why is she here -- here -- at whatever time it is -- with a social worker? I don't mean to be nosy, and you can just tell me to butt out and be on my way, but --

(indicating CLIQUE)

-- the questions are sitting right there -- looking like one of my own --

QT

I have called her mother.

JOHANNA

You've been here three hours?

QT

More, now.

JOHANNA

I see.

QT

She has to come from a distance.

JOHANNA

I see.

QT hesitates, but the hesitation says all.

JOHANNA

I see.

QT

I really can't be talking about her.

JOHANNA

Fine, fine. I get your nudge, and I should be going, anyway. It's just something, though. She just seems really -- this is what struck me, Ms. Alanna -- she just seems really alone.

Hesitating for a moment more, JOHANNA takes the remaining chair, sits next to CLIQUE, and taps her on the knee.

QT

Shouldn't you --

CLIQUE looks up and notices JOHANNA for the first time.

JOHANNA

Hello.

CLIQUE switches off the music and pulls down the headphones.

JOHANNA

Are you doing all right?

CLIQUE looks at JOHANNA, at QT, at the janitor's cart, as if coming out of a dream. CLIQUE then touches JOHANNA's face lightly.

CLIQUE

Johanna?

JOHANNA

Child, who is Johanna?

QT

Her sister, Johanna.

JOHANNA

(to CLIQUE, taking her hand)

No, I'm not Johanna.

CLIQUE

You look like her.

JOHANNA

Do I now?

CLIQUE

Yes.

JOHANNA

Is that good?

CLIQUE

Yes.

JOHANNA

Then I'm glad I look like her. I just wanted to know if you're doing all right.

CLIQUE seems perplexed by the question.

QT

That's probably enough questions.

CLIQUE

No, not around. Are you sure you are not -- ?

QT

Clique --

CLIQUE

Cassandra --

QT

You should probably wait for the doctor.

JOHANNA gesturing to QT to hold for a second.

JOHANNA

Is that why --

(indicating the headphones)

-- like buried?

CLIQUE nods yes.

JOHANNA

I used to do the same thing -- I still do, sometimes. Bury my head in music because I don't want something else to fill it up. Is that something like you?

CLIQUE nods yes.

JOHANNA

So, Cassandra, are you all right with your sister not around?

QT

(to JOHANNA)

You should leave.

CLIQUE looks JOHANNA straight in the eyes for several beats, then gets up and goes to the janitor's cart. She takes a roll of paper towels and tears off at least two connected sheets. She drops to the floor, takes out her marker, and writes on the towel "No More Prisons." She then hands it to JOHANNA. JOHANNA reads it and nods.

JOHANNA

I have seen this. I have seen this. The sidewalks, the walls. All over. You? This is your work? All of it? You have done hundreds,

Cassandra. Like those origami cranes they do for peace.

(holding up the paper)

May I?

CLIQUE nods yes. JOHANNA folds it.

JOHANNA

I will keep this.

QT

And I'm trying to keep her out of trouble.

JOHANNA

It could get you into real trouble, Cassandra -- she's right. Nobody needs that kind of trouble with the police.

QT

No one.

JOHANNA

(to QT)

And it's good that you're doing that --

(to CLIQUE)

-- good friend over there. But, well, hundreds! It must be something powerful to you, I imagine, Cassandra, to drive you like that. Powerful. I'm not one for defacing public and private property -- my father's ghost even now gives me a hard look for thinking anything admirable about it -- but I am impressed by your -- by how bright you shine.

QT

You've done enough -- you should leave.

JOHANNA

(unfolding the paper)

"No. More. Prisons."

QT

Leave.

JOHANNA

And Johanna not here.

QT

Leave! Or I will get a s[ecurity guard] --

CLIQUE

Life without parole.

JOHANNA

I am so sorry.

QT

Clique -- Cassandra -- you don't want to talk about it.

JOHANNA
(to CLIQUE)

I know.

(to QT)

I know precisely where she's broadcasting from. Know the exact frequency. Listen, Cassandra.

JOHANNA moves her chair so that its back faces the audience, and she straddles it. She leans back like a motorcycle rider, perhaps even makes Harley sounds.

JOHANNA

My brother.

JOHANNA leans forward and mock-snorts coke along the top of the chair's back.

JOHANNA

My brother.

JOHANNA stands to the side of the chair and mock-drinks liquor from a bottle.

JOHANNA

My brother.

JOHANNA flips the mock-bottle to catch it by its neck and then smashes it down onto the head of someone, killing him -- at least two blows.

JOHANNA

My brother.

JOHANNA puts the chair back next to CLIQUE.

JOHANNA

My brother, my brother, my brother -- the murderer. Life without parole, too. Life without parole -- and when they get that, that's what we get, too, isn't it?

CLIQUE

How do you live with it?

JOHANNA

How do make sense of the senseless act?

CLIQUE

How do you live with it?

JOHANNA

Why do we keep asking an eye for an eye until we are all blind?

CLIQUE

How do you live with it?

JOHANNA

Sister of mine, there is no magic.

CLIQUE

There has to be.

JOHANNA

Either you decide to, or not to.

CLIQUE

There has to be --

JOHANNA

Everything flies up from that yes or that no.

CLIQUE

How do you live with it?

JOHANNA

I have decided to live with my brother -- and without him.

CLIQUE

And me?

JOHANNA

The hardest work? To live with my brother when he did not want to live with himself. Him telling me how foolish I was to love a corrupt and evil man while I was saying to him, yelling almost, our words slap-dashing over and against each other, pushing my words into his face, "I will love you, damn it, against all the grain!" I don't know if it saved him. I know it didn't kill him to hear that someone could still love his cracked life. And it didn't kill me to have his words shatter themselves against my heart.

CLIQUE

And today?

JOHANNA

He's alive and trying to be as human as he can every day. Doing just what the rest of us are trying to do. He's trying to stay a part of the family.

CLIQUE gets out of her chair and walks to the white screens. Nervously, she begins air-writing the tag, as if she cannot leave any blank space free.

JOHANNA

(to QT)

Why is she here tonight? This night, of all nights?

QT

She fainted. Had a seizure of some sort.

JOHANNA

Doing that?

QT

Yes.

JOHANNA

And you just happened to be around?

While QT speaks, JOHANNA goes to CLIQUE and embraces her. Then she has CLIQUE put the imaginary marker into her, JOHANNA's, hand and guide the hand in "writing" the tag on the screens.

QT

I was actually looking for her. I'd seen the tag everywhere, just like you, and so dug around. Wasn't hard to find out who. So I'd go to where I thought she'd go, follow the trail of the tags, seeing her pattern, so I could "bring her in" before she got into trouble. I found her. She fainted.

JOHANNA

You couldn't find her at home, could you?

QT

Like I said, home is a distance.

JOHANNA has finished with the screens and now has CLIQUE writing the tag on the air. JOHANNA uses this to guide CLIQUE back to the chair. As she sits CLIQUE down, she keeps the imaginary marker, which stops

CLIQUE for a moment from writing. CLIQUE speaks while JOHANNA guides her back to the chair.

CLIQUE
If I do enough -- If I do enough -- "No."
"More." "Prisons." -- "No." "More." "Prisons."
-- then she can breathe.

JOHANNA
(to QT)
Like this?

QT
Yes.

CLIQUE
Breathe again. They all can breathe again.

JOHANNA sits CLIQUE down.

CLIQUE
(to JOHANNA)
I will make enough.

JOHANNA
Angel, you will never do enough.

CLIQUE
I will make enough! I will put them everywhere.

JOHANNA
There is not enough everywhere to put them.

With great agitation, CLIQUE bursts out of her chair. Note: because this takes place in a public space, the voicing should be fierce yet restrained -- go for playing the words and feelings with restraint rather than overplaying them. Throughout, JOHANNA and QT look for places they can physically intervene, but CLIQUE should play this so that she gives them no opportunity to stop her, i.e., she does not rant or scream but tries to argue them into understanding. She is not out of control but she is also in the control of her strong feelings.

CLIQUE
Don't, don't, don't! It's grace, it's grace,
it's all about grace. I do them, one by one by
one. It's my work! People see them, they read
the words -- no more prisons -- again and again
and again -- no more prisons, no more prisons, no
more prisons -- and it drives into the cracks of
their brains and it stirs up the juices and they
see them again and then again and they're all
over the place and eventually something's got to

cut through that fog -- that hatred -- that hatred --

(changing tack)

You see, that's why, that's why -- they hate them, hate them all -- hate Johanna! Hate Johanna! Not my sister! They can't! To them, just animals, beasts -- "not like me, I wouldn't ever do that!" -- and so --

(clap of the hands or some other gesture)

-- bury them! Turn them into animals and bury them! Out of sight -- out of mind! Bury them.

(hissing the words)

Murderer! Killer! Criminal! Animal! Animal!
Not my sister!

CLIQUE drops the level of her voice for this next part, tense but also intimate.

CLIQUE

I have these -- dreams. Stones in my lungs. Dirt stuffed in my eyes. And I can't breathe! And she can't breathe -- in my mind's eye, up here, I see her turn into death. I see them all turn into death. And then I see all of them out there -- "good folks" -- turn my sister into death, turn all of them into death, those ones, the ones we can piss on because you can always piss on dirt and get away with it. I know what she did. I know what she did! She took away a life. She is a murderer. But still -- Out of sight, maybe -- but not out of mind, not out of mind, not out of mind --

JOHANNA embraces her, and, interrupted, CLIQUE suddenly looks lost and confused.

CLIQUE

I am so tired --

Through the next lines, CLIQUE tries to write the phrase one more time but can only write, and say, "No." "More." Her arm then falls, exhausted.

JOHANNA

I know.

(to QT)

Could you go find a nurse?

QT

I shouldn't leave --

JOHANNA

Nurses -- by the station. Tell them that
Cassandra has collapsed again.

CLIQUE

No more forgetting.

CLIQUE trails off, letting her weight fall against JOHANNA.

JOHANNA

She'll be fine with me for the short time.

QT still hesitates.

JOHANNA

We've come this far and shown this much, Ms.
Alanna. Trust.

QT exits. JOHANNA holds CLIQUE, speaks with affectionate fierceness.

JOHANNA

I know you can't hear this, but you will. You're
wrong, angel -- noble, praiseworthy, misguided
angel. "Martyr" is not what your sister needs,
nor my brother, not even the victims, even though
their hearts feel crucified and as brute as coal.
The grace for which you hunger -- never by magic
-- not by tags numbered as many as the stars.
How? Angel, listen to this -- the grace -- the
grace is only found in the sweet connection with
other souls deep enough in this fragile bluster
of pain we call "life" to go deep enough for
peace and silence.

QT re-enters.

QT

Nurse is coming.

JOHANNA

(low-voiced)

In time, sweet angel, I will show you how. Sweet
angel, in time I will show you what your life can
do.

Lights come down; transition music.

* * * * *

Scene 4

Some time later. JOHANNA is discovered on stage wearing headphones and sweeping, cleaning, etc. CLIQUE enters with QT.

JOHANNA
(pulling off the headphones)
Hey, hey, hey! If it isn't our own St. Joan
D'Arc of the taggers. Come, come, give me your
arms.

CLIQUE embraces her.

JOHANNA
You, too, Ms. Alanna. Where I come from, we are
not shy about being sweet.

QT embraces her.

JOHANNA
This is, I take it, a non-emergency visit?

CLIQUE
Non-emergency.

JOHANNA
I like those so much better.
(to QT)
You told me she was getting along much better,
and I see you've told me the truth.

QT
What a difference a month makes.

CLIQUE
Five weeks.

JOHANNA
A stickler, I see. So, "whazup"?

CLIQUE takes a small package out of her jacket pocket and hands it to JOHANNA.

JOHANNA
What's this?

CLIQUE
I'm bringing it as a thank you.

JOHANNA

Now, a "thank you" for being a natural human being is not something we get a lot of around here.

(indicating the package)

For me, really?

CLIQUE nods yes. JOHANNA opens it and takes out a butterfly. JOHANNA holds it up.

CLIQUE

It's a symbol of transformation.

JOHANNA

So I have heard.

QT

Those late-night TV shows, huh?

JOHANNA

Metaphor everywhere.

(to CLIQUE)

Transformation --

CLIQUE

I know what you're going to say!

JOHANNA

Whose?

CLIQUE

Knew it.

JOHANNA

Yours?

(to QT)

Hers? Mine -- not that I need much, being the highly evolved creature that I am.

CLIQUE

I figured a little to go around for everybody.

JOHANNA

(to QT)

Is she getting wise all of a sudden?

QT

(indicating JOHANNA)

Comes from hanging with the philosopher.

CLIQUE

Not wise. Just beginning at the beginning.

JOHANNA

Well, wise enough for now.
(holding up the butterfly)
Thanks right back to you.

CLIQUE

No --

JOHANNA

What do you mean, "no"? I can't thank the
thanker?

CLIQUE

(a little ironic)

Thanker?

JOHANNA

Making it up on the spot -- it's late in my
shift.

CLIQUE

Well, "thankee" --

JOHANNA

(mock-impressed)

"Thankee."

CLIQUE

-- it's not like Christmas, you know, I give, you
give, and we do this little dance like "thank
you," "no, thank you," "no, thank you." Dum-dee-
dum-dee-dum-dee-dum. I can't take thanks back
yet. You both talked me down, you both talked me
through -- both of you stayed. Both of you hung
in and hung out with me. I think that's worth a
lot more thanks than I can pay out at the moment.

JOHANNA

What we did is we "tagged" you --

(to QT)

-- right, eh?

QT

Right.

JOHANNA

Like one of those endangered wolves let free into
the wilderness. So we can track you.

QT

So we can keep you honest!

JOHANNA

So we can find you when you need to be found.

(tags CLIQUE)

"Tag, you're it." Keep track of who's in the family.

(tags QT)

"Tag, you're it." So no one gets completely lost.

(tags herself)

"Tag, I'm it." Bring them all back in.

(taking CLIQUE's hand)

You have some different tagging to do now.

CLIQUE

It still itches, you know, to make --

JOHANNA

(still holding on to the hand)

So, when it does, you take this hand and go

(presses CLIQUE's hand against QT in a "tag")

-- go ahead, say it --

CLIQUE

Tag, you're it.

JOHANNA

And to me --

(does the same with CLIQUE's hand to herself)

-- c'mon --

CLIQUE

Tag, you're it.

JOHANNA

And, most especially --

Presses CLIQUE's hand against CLIQUE.

CLIQUE

Tag, I'm it.

JOHANNA

And now, St. Joan, we're all keeping track of each other's tracks.

At this point, the actors move to either downstage right or left, and the lights shift to their new location. From this time on until the end of the play, rear-projected slides will be shown on the hospital screens of both prisoners and prison guards, public officials, etc., male and female -- in short, all in the "family."

NOTE: If the slides cannot be done, then simply continue with the scene.

JOHANNA

(holding up the butterfly, to QT)
What'd she give to you?

QT

I already got my gift -- she's coming to work for me.

JOHANNA

Yeah?

QT

She starts an internship next week, at the agency.

JOHANNA

Yeah?

QT

Tell her.

CLIQUE

Working with the outreach coördinator --

QT

Youth outreach coördinator --

CLIQUE

Youth outreach coördinator -- on prison issues.

QT

We have so many kids --

JOHANNA

(holding up a hand)
Already know it -- you slam a couple a million into prison, a lot of families are going to get the ripple effect.

CLIQUE

It's only part-time.

JOHANNA

Only in hours.

CLIQUE

Yeah.

QT

Go ahead -- ask her.

JOHANNA

What?

QT

Go on.

CLIQUE

Would you come and talk at some point about --

JOHANNA

My murder-man brother?

CLIQUE

Yeah.

JOHANNA

I'll do you even better. I got my own links -- lot of us may be under the radar and banished from the public eye -- kind of like janitors, don't you know? -- but that doesn't mean we ain't organized. You just made your first professional networking connection. Got a business card?

QT

Order form's been signed and sent.

JOHANNA

I want one fresh off the press when they come.

CLIQUE

Deal.

JOHANNA

And one more "tag, you're it": your mama?

CLIQUE

(writing the phrase on the air)

I got her to write it. Once.

JOHANNA

"Once" is a start -- so good for her. You keep it up with her --

(with a nod to QT)

-- she's got a long distance to come. And your sister?

CLIQUE

And your brother?

JOHANNA

I saw him last week -- he's put on weight, lost some hair. Seeking. Finding. Johanna?

CLIQUE

I saw her for the first time since.

JOHANNA

First time?

CLIQUE

Yes.

JOHANNA

Brave. And good.

CLIQUE

QT came with me.

QT

I needed to make my own peace as well.

CLIQUE

I will be seeing her again soon.

JOHANNA

Even better. The long road begins, eh? Meanwhile, I have to earn the bread that keeps my children fed. Bring me that card as soon as it comes and we'll set dates.

CLIQUE

Okay.

JOHANNA

Oh, wait.

JOHANNA reaches into her pocket and pulls out three apples.

JOHANNA

Got these from the cafeteria -- fresh Empires. No bruises, faults, or corruptions, as the man at the register told me. For a buck.

JOHANNA hands each of them an apple, and as they eat, they turn upstage to watch the slides as the lights fade to blackness on them. For several seconds after the blackout the slides continue, holding for a few seconds on a final face, and then blackout.

NOTE: If no slides are used, then simply fade the lights as they eat and laugh.