

(3/13/25)

i.

PURPOSE

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**Dramatis Personae**

SOLOMON JASPER - father

CLAUDINE JASPER - mother

NAZARETH JASPER - youngest

SOLOMON “JUNIOR” JASPER JR.- oldest

MORGAN JASPER - wife of Solomon, Jr.

AZIZA HOUSTON - friend of Nazareth

**Setting**

Jasper family home. Illinois.

**Note**

/ is an overlap.

This is a Steppenwolf Theatre Company commission.

**ACT ONE****1.**

NAZARETH, alone.

**NAZARETH**

That morning, I had woken up in a hotel right on the border of the United States and Canada - Niagara Falls. It was one of those rooms you can really luck out on - that are hard to believe exist - with these pretty unreal views of the actual falls themselves, these wonders of the world. There was also a very delicious free breakfast and a rain shower with a separate whirlpool bathtub. I think it was supposed to be like a honeymoon suite? Except it came with two queen beds. Aziza, who was asleep in the other one, had found it using some sort of last minute hotel app on her phone during her drive up. She needed my sperm. But more on that later.

Now when I woke up that morning, I remember feeling... It's hard to describe even now but... good, basically? But in a way I didn't remember ever feeling before. I want to say... "like myself?" But I know that doesn't really make sense. I thought it had been because this was the first real bed I'd woken up in in a minute. You see, I'm a nature photographer by, I guess, trade - if you can even call it that - this is a pretty recent development - and I was just coming off of a three week shoot in Ontario for a new project involving large format prints of various lakes. There's about a quarter of a million lakes in Ontario. I don't know if you know this but it's actually where about a fifth of the world's fresh water comes from... I know, I know, but stay with me... And I was not just into any old lakes. I was specifically interested in ones where, if you stood on the shore, you could take in the entirety of it. Lakes that were completely consumable in one sitting. I became particularly obsessed with trying to capture them at a certain time in the day, right at daybreak, when there was light enough to see the lake's surface reflecting the new sky like a spotless mirror but also there are still all these very picturesque little clouds of fog and mist everywhere which the water had given off overnight and kind of hung there until they were burned off by the morning sun.. And it was really the fog that interested me - much more than the lakes. The right combination of fog and morning light and the lake reflecting it all was somehow very... spooky and serene at the same time.

But, because of the layout of these specific lakes through the province, this wound up being slightly grueling work. It involved a lot of biking and hiking and camping and getting lost and getting unlost in these backwoods parts of Canada which easily could have been Alabama or Mississippi. For three weeks straight. I can't tell if it sounds crazier or less crazy than it actually feels.

But I thought I had timed out this last trip perfectly.

(MORE)

## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

The plan was for me to be done before Aziza started ovulating but I supposed things just be happening however they want to happen sometimes, so somewhere near the end of my shoot there was this text from her, "Where are you!?"

I told her I was wrapping up but I was also supposed to make a quick stopover in Chicago for the weekend for my brother's... homecoming. But ovulation waits for no man. There was a quick plan made to meet somewhere in the middle - which happened to be Niagara - do a quick... drop off and then the next day she would drive me to Toronto airport where I would catch the early flight to Chicago and that would be that. But then we somehow managed to oversleep. I missed the plane, which was a very expensive flight for me - and so Aziza, in all her kindness - but I think also a little out of guilt? - offered to drive me the eight hours to Chicago and then turn around and take herself home. She liked driving, she said, and I thought to myself: why not? It was Saturday. Neither of us had anything else to be doing. And I was feeling, like I said, good.

Aziza and I were neighbors in Harlem during my shortish-mediumish stint there which happened to overlap in part with a certain worldwide pandemic. Aziza is one of the kindest people I've ever met, a deeply perceptive person and empathetic - almost to a fault. When we saw each other in the hall or bumped into each other in the laundry room, we were friendly but, once lockdown happened, we were talking nearly every day, first on our adjacent balconies overlooking our building's pitiful excuse for a back yard, trading random baked goods and Netflix recommendations, and then on the walks and walks we took around our neighborhood every day where conversations got deeper and deeper. At the time, I was still recovering from what I now refer to as my "Great Disappointment" and, in some ways, she helped me put myself back together. In fact, she was one of the first people with whom I shared my photography and she was actually the one who encouraged me to take the leap and pursue making what, until that point, had really been just a hobby into my profession. And I did, which led me, eventually, to moving away - though we stayed in touch, mostly via text and that time- that friendship - became something almost... sacred, a hinge in my life. So when she called up after I don't even know how many months and asked pretty much out of the blue if I would consider being her donor, I said, "Sure." Gifting her some of my genetic material seemed like the least I could do. Or at least no big deal. What was I doing with it?

For the record, a turkey baster was the method of choice, brand-spanking-new. Williams Sonoma, for the label whores among you; Aziza felt she deserved "the best." Anyway, it was over in like ten minutes and we spent the rest of the night catching up and bingeing some television show involving white people murdering each other, which is, come to think of it, most TV - and probably why we overslept.

Anyway, the drive itself was pleasant. There's not a ton to report, landscape-wise, between Niagara and Chicago. If you've seen Pennsylvania or Ohio once, you've seen it a thousand times. We talked for as long as we felt like talking.

(MORE)

## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

I nodded off once or twice while Aziza listened to about fifty podcasts by these two very intense gay guys very invested in pop culture. I woke up just as we were turning onto the block where my mother and father still made their home and I noticed how the sky was changing. I thought it was merely dusk, but it turns out it was some sort of weather coming down from Canada. And I realized that good feeling I'd felt only hours ago - it was still there. But that's the last time I recall feeling that feeling in its fullness - feeling that self.

And the next thing I knew I was standing in the living room of my childhood home, pretending to choke out my older brother.

The living room of a substantial and tastefully-done home is revealed. Fine, newish furniture joined by a few older pieces, dark and Gothic-looking woodwork which looks like they might be heirlooms: a piano, an old work bench, a rocking chair. Odd ebony sculptures of vaguely Afrocentric subjects are arranged on various surfaces.

The walls are hung with family portraits through the ages, clustered together in little groups; some somewhat vintage editorial-looking photographs of our patriarch Solomon Jasper behind various podiums or shaking hands with various dignitaries of yon; and a smattering of "black art," mostly in a realist mode.

Somewhere prominent is a large painting of Martin Luther King, Jr - a borderline shrine.

JUNIOR, Nazareth's brother, is sitting on the couch, in the middle of wrapping a gift, when NAZARETH comes up behind him and puts him in a headlock. JUNIOR struggles, startled -

JUNIOR

Morgan!

NAZARETH, hearing this, loosens his grip, confused. JUNIOR manages to free himself, leaps up from the couch.

NAZARETH

Morgan?

JUNIOR, seeing NAZARETH, clutches his chest, spooked, and tries to calm down.

JUNIOR

Naz! Man! That shit's not funny!

NAZARETH

... Your wife be grabbing you like that?

JUNIOR

I was calling for help - shut up! Don't you know where I just came from? You can't be sneaking up on a man like that when he's fresh out! You almost got dropped. How did you even get in here / so quietly?

JUNIOR retrieves his half-wrapped gift and inspects it.

NAZARETH

Oh, Lord... / June.

JUNIOR

(re: gift, sucks teeth,)

Now I have to start over - What!?

Beat.

NAZARETH

Why you out here acting like you was just on death row?

JUNIOR

What?

NAZARETH

Like you was on some negro chain gang breaking rocks in the sun like -

NAZARETH sings a fake spiritual in the style of a prisoner on a chain gang. JUNIOR chases him around the room.

JUNIOR

Man, shut up! / Prison is prison!

NAZARETH

You do recall that I came and saw you in that white collar minimum security summer camp with all your golf buddies?

JUNIOR catches him, starts punching his arm.

JUNIOR

Only times you saw me in that place were holidays! You don't know what it was like the rest of the year - Bama COs always pulling shit just like you're doing - and you didn't even see what I went through before that -

NAZARETH

/ I know man - June, I'm joking!

JUNIOR

- in Carolina where / they had me locked up in solitary for five days!

NAZARETH

Alright! Alright! I'm sorry! I shouldn't joke about it.

JUNIOR

Damn right I got myself transferred up into that white boy clubhouse... It's really bad the way they're doing us in there!

NAZARETH

You're right.

(beat,)

But you got so stacked!

JUNIOR

They did have some nice gym facilities.

NAZARETH

Well... Welcome back, nyucka!

JUNIOR

Naz, please stop saying 'nigga' like that! You know I hate it.

They embrace.

NAZARETH

Where *is* Morgan?

JUNIOR

Upstairs.

NAZARETH

With the kids?

JUNIOR

(sighing, then tense,)

No. We left the boys back in DC with her mother.

(off NAZARETH's reaction,)

Morgan insisted.

NAZARETH

Uh oh. Does Mom have feelings about that?

JUNIOR

She sure does.

NAZARETH

Okay... She goes in next week?

JUNIOR

Monday after next.

Over the following, Junior, with great concentration, tries and fails multiple times to wrap his gift.

NAZARETH

(to audience,)

I'm not sure you recognize my brother? Solomon Jasper, Jr? State Senator of a certain state which shall not be named before being found guilty of embezzling campaign funds and a few counts of wire fraud. He was sentenced to 30 months in prison, of which he served 24. His wife, my sister-in-law Morgan, was hit with 12 months for filing false tax returns but, because they have a set of twin boys, one of whom being what we now call "neurodivergent," the judge allowed them to serve their time consecutively. This takes place in that between time. He's just got out. Morgan, wherever she is, is about to go in.

Now it's easy to look at people like my brother and his wife and assume they're bad people for doing what they did but, in truth, I think they were just... stupid. Or that's not the right word: he's just, like most politicians, not my idea of smart. And the truth is, the stuff he got caught doing - half of these clowns are doing every day - and definitely now. He was just dumb enough to get caught, I guess. Or caught while black.

That said, you would think such a public stumble would change him in some way, but every visit it was like the same old June to me, smiling, laughing, and soft-pitching all the ways he was going to spin this little upset into a new chapter. But he's always been like the King of the Pivot. Junior can take any lemon and make... limoncello. And if the mayor of Washington, D.C. could get re-elected after getting caught on camera smoking literal crack with a literal cop acting like a literal hooker, surely there was a constituency out there ready and willing to forgive my brother.

(MORE)



## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

He hadn't actually been bad at his job and, at one point, speculation on just which seat on the Hill was my brother's to fill when the right time came was regular chatter at your average DC cocktail party. Of course, that right time would never come now - because this diagnosis emerged during the course of the investigation against him: Bipolar 1.

And I'll say, at the time, even I had questions about whether or not this was real or somebody's idea of a legal strategy? And if so, whose? I hoped to God it was his, because (a) it didn't seem like it worked and (b) he was the one stuck with it. And I'm not sure enough thought was given on his part to the lengths folks will go to distance themselves from "crazy."

## JUNIOR

Why did Mama say you were just in Canada taking pictures of some lakes?

## NAZARETH

Because I was.

## JUNIOR

When you finally gonna let me see some of this "nature photography?"

## NAZARETH

I'd have to unpack all my gear. I'll show you later.

(re: gift,)

Is that her gift?

## JUNIOR

Yes. What you get her?

## NAZARETH

I got Mom something three weeks ago - on her actual birthday.

## JUNIOR

I was obviously indisposed.

## NAZARETH

Only for you would she "move" the day she was born.

## JUNIOR

Well, I didn't want no whole party for me. Not with Morgan, you know...

## NAZARETH

Right, right, / right...

It didn't feel right...

JUNIOR

Beat.

So what did you get her?

NAZARETH  
(re: the gift,)

Uh, it's... Nonya?

JUNIOR

What's that?

NAZARETH

Nonya Business.

JUNIOR

NAZARETH snatches the present away to inspect it. JUNIOR gives chase. CLAUDINE's voice comes from the kitchen.

Junior, is that you doing all that hollering?

CLAUDINE (O.S.)

Yes, it is!

NAZARETH

Is that Nazareth?

CLAUDINE (O.S.)

/ Hi, Mama!

NAZARETH

Nazareth stop playing games!

JUNIOR

Ooh! Let me get my kiss!

CLAUDINE (O.S.)

CLAUDINE walks in with a fresh arrangement of flowers clipped from her garden.

Mama, come on! I'm not done wrapping your gift!

JUNIOR  
(hurriedly hiding his gift,)

CLAUDINE

Boy, I'm not paying attention to you right now! Why can't you go wrap whatever that is in your bedroom?

JUNIOR

(tense,)

Morgan is taking a nap.

CLAUDINE

(rolling her eyes,)

Seems like Morgan has been napping since y'all got here. Are we sure she's not in a coma?

JUNIOR

I'm trying to give her some space.

CLAUDINE

Why did she even drag herself here if she just wanted to stay in the bedroom all day? Go in the kitchen then.

JUNIOR takes his gift, wrapping papers and tape and exits into the kitchen.

CLAUDINE

(to NAZARETH,)

My weird son, come here!

NAZARETH

Hi, lady.

They embrace.

CLAUDINE

Just in time to help me set out the last of my hydrangeas - with your artistic eye.

They begin to arrange flowers throughout the room over the following.

NAZARETH

(to audience,)

My mother, Claudine Jasper - a walking example of a First Lady, despite my father never having a proper church to First. His, uh, sort of celebrity back in the day turned him into a kind of itinerant preacher, too busy with TV appearances and glad-handing dignitaries to dedicate himself to just one pulpit. Any audience he could find - or found him, I guess - was his flock to shepherd.

(MORE)

## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

So my mother very happily turned her home - this home - into a, well, if not exactly a house of God, at least his piéd à terre. Half of my childhood memories are her playing hostess to whatever and however many diplomats, luminaries or Great Men of the Hour happened to wander within a five mile radius.

As a result, she has cultivated a real... reputation for generosity and elegance and faithfulness and intelligence. In fact, a law degree sits in the corner of an office back there, quietly collecting dust, because she prefers this professional work of the matriarch. She comes from a generation who took that role very seriously. It was a necessity - a calling - and as essential to the family business as my father's. While he was out public intellectualizing slash moralizing someone had to hold down the fort, hold things together - which could mean, occasionally, putting some things and/or people in a headlock and never letting go.

CLAUDINE

Scottie, I thought we were expecting you this morning. What happened?

NAZARETH

Actually missed my flight, got a ride here -

CLAUDINE

Got a ride? All the way from Canada? With whom? I thought it was just you alone in the woods with some lakes.

NAZARETH

A friend drove up and met me.

CLAUDINE

Oh, okay. What kind of a friend? A female friend?

NAZARETH

A friend, Mom, relax. Please!

(to the audience,)

I should have kept my mouth shut.

CLAUDINE

Why do I need to relax? You're the one sounds like they need to relax. I'm merely your mother asking a question about the company that you keep. Is it too much to ask, on my birthday, about the company you keep? You never ever tell us about the people in your life anymore. And I don't know why it needs to be such a mystery. Do we bite? Do we judge? And, you know, mystery is what leads to worry. And I don't like to worry - I don't like to worry about whether or not my children have love in their lives or if they will be alone forever.

NAZARETH

Some people enjoy being alone.

CLAUDINE

Not the right ones. You're still out here "finding yourself," I know, and I'm going to let you do that just a little bit longer but life is a thing that's meant to be shared. And how will you ever wrap your arms around the fullness of it all if you don't experience what it is to find your person, to settle down... maybe start a family...

SOLOMON comes grumbling down the stairs interrupting her rhapsody and NAZARETH tenses up a little.

SOLOMON

Claudine!

Over the following, SOLOMON makes his way over to a coat closet, pulls out a coat, some boots, a kind of mesh helmet - beekeeping attire - and pulls it all on.

CLAUDINE

Sonny, what are you clomping down here like that for?

SOLOMON

I gotta go deal with these daggoned bees. News just said there's a cold snap coming.

CLAUDINE

What?

SOLOMON

I said, there's a cold snap coming! Gotta move the hive some place warmer.

CLAUDINE

Are you going to say hello to your son?

SOLOMON notices NAZARETH standing there for the first time. Beat, in which unfinished business can be detected. Then he goes back to dressing.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

My father, the Honorable Reverend Solomon Jasper. Some of you may be familiar with him, some of you not so much - and that's fine. I guess it depends on how much you care about the American Civil Rights Movement.

(MORE)

## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

That said, he is considered by some - myself included - to be one of the most undersung orators of his time and, at this point, my parents are basically supplementing their retirement with the occasional income of whatever random school or institute or church feels like hearing him speak.

Though, these days, it had become rarer and rarer he speak to *me* unless prompted by my mother to do so. Earlier I referred to "My Great Disappointment" that I had needed to flee from. That disappointment, honestly, belonged to my father. I was merely its vessel. See, my father is a pastor. His father was a pastor. His father before him and so on. I was supposed to assume the mantle and, instead, I put it down. I dropped out of divinity school - his very prestigious alma mater - in my final semester, which quite obviously did not please him. I suppose I had been destined, at least in his eyes, for something else, for something less... worldly than the life in politics he had prepared for my brother and which had always eluded his grasp. And I was an obedient lump of clay until, one day, the clay began to ask questions of the hand.

I wish I could say that it was some sort of conscious rejection that led me to ditch divinity school, like I was willfully defying something or somebody but the truth was that I was just... scared. Jesus was supposed to be giving me strength and, for the first time, he was giving me quite the opposite. And I didn't like being scared like that. It's hard to explain.

## SOLOMON

(nods,)

Son...

SOLOMON, pretty much outfitted, turns on his heels and stalks through the door leading to the kitchen.

## NAZARETH

What just happened?

## CLAUDINE

Oh, your father's taken up beekeeping. He did this thing over the summer where you send away for something called a "starter hive" and then you start your own colony or whatever. It's supposed to be a very relaxing hobby, but your father has managed to turn it into a whole trial in the desert. Every day, every night, something's wrong with these bees. They are not growing and prospering! They're not making enough honey! The hive's gotta move here and now it's gotta move over here! But I'm keeping my mouth shut. He needs new ways to fill his days since he can't be planehopping and globetrotting like he used to.

## NAZARETH

I didn't know that. What's going on?

CLAUDINE

Things are slowing down. It's natural. 80 is right around the corner.... Anyway! I had set you up for the basement but, at the last minute, it was decided my grandchildren didn't need to spend any time with me, so now you can have your old room, if you'd like.

NAZARETH

Why did they leave the kids in D.C.?

CLAUDINE

(tight,)

This was Morgan's decision, so you'll have to ask her. But you look tired. Why don't you go on and lay down for a bit? I'll come bother you when it's almost time for dinner.

NAZARETH

Okay.

(to the audience,)

Don't worry. I will literally be right back in just a moment.

NAZARETH gathers some things and exits upstairs as CLAUDINE continues to arrange and re-arrange her flowers.

The doorbell rings.

CLAUDINE answers it, revealing AZIZA on the front porch, holding a phone charger.

AZIZA

Hi, I'm sorry -

CLAUDINE

Can I help you?

AZIZA

I'm looking for Naz? He left his phone charger in my car.

CLAUDINE

... Oh?... And you are?

AZIZA

Aziza, hi - Are you his...?

CLAUDINE

His mother? Yes, I am.

AZIZA

Hello! It's so nice to meet you! You have a beautiful home! Um, maybe I can just leave this with you, and - ?

AZIZA offers CLAUDINE the phone charger.

CLAUDINE

Hold on. You can give it to him yourself.

(calling out,)

NAZARETH!

AZIZA

Oh, that's really not necessary -

CLAUDINE

No, no. I insist. Come on in here out that cold. Brr. I was just informed that there is bad weather coming.

AZIZA steps inside obediently.

AZIZA

That sky is looking a little purple. Is it supposed to storm?

CLAUDINE

Yes, some sort of global warming cold snap winter flurry ice storm, child...

NAZARETH comes running back downstairs.

NAZARETH

Did you call for me?

CLAUDINE

I sure did. You got a visitor.

NAZARETH sees AZIZA.

NAZARETH

(not thrilled,)

Aziza...

AZIZA

Oh, I'm really not visit... ing... You left your phone charger in my car.



CLAUDINE

Is this the lovely young woman you're trying to hide from your lovely family?

NAZARETH

/ What? No -

CLAUDINE

Why? Why do you lie to your mother?

(to AZIZA,)

Where are you from, Miss Aziza? And don't you lie to me, too, now. I'm not your mother but I could be.

AZIZA

New York, ma'am.

CLAUDINE

Oh, we love a New Yorker but cool it with that 'ma'am' stuff. I'm either Claudine or Mother Jasper to my children's associates.

SOLOMON shuffles in from the kitchen, still in his beekeeper mode, holding a bee smoker which is still burning and filling up the air around him with smoke.

SOLOMON

Claudine -

CLAUDINE

Sonny! What are you doing? You can't have that in here!

SOLOMON

(noticing the smoker in his hand,)

What? Oh? / Sorry -

CLAUDINE

Take that on out of here before you have everything in here smelling / like smoke!

SOLOMON

I came back in here to ask you something and now you've made me forget / with all your fussing!

CLAUDINE

Sonny, you have to take that out of here before you set off the fire alarm! I'll come find you. I'm meeting Nazareth's "friend" Aziza here right now. Say hello.

SOLOMON removes his headgear to better see the guest. AZIZA's jaw falls open at the sight of him. He is famous.

SOLOMON  
(to AZIZA, distracted,)

Hello...

SOLOMON wanders out. CLAUDINE turns and notices AZIZA's face, which is starstruck.

AZIZA

/... I'm sorry, was... ?

NAZARETH  
(to CLAUDINE,)

Mama, Aziza has really got to be getting back on the road.

(taking the phone charger,)

Thank you.

CLAUDINE

What? Hold on, hold on, you're not driving all the way back to New York right now are you? Not with this storm coming? And what time is it? You'll be driving all through the night and the early morning.

AZIZA

I was going to find a hotel -

CLAUDINE

Oh no, no, no. Why aren't you staying right here with us?

NAZARETH

Mom -

CLAUDINE

You could leave out fresh and early tomorrow morning. It's just one night -

AZIZA

No -

CLAUDINE

We happen to have a completely free guest room since my only grandchildren have, for some reason, been left back in Washington. I hope you don't mind a separate bedroom. We are Christians here.

AZIZA

I really appreciate it but -

CLAUDINE

Young lady, I'm going to insist, because I don't know if Nazareth told you but tonight we are celebrating my belated birthday and him bringing home a... friend is about the greatest gift I could have asked for and I also couldn't have it on my conscience you slipping and sliding into some roadside ditch on the way to New York all because my son decided to be withholding. So, as the birthday girl, I'm going to need you to give me what I want. Do you have things in the car? Nazareth, go bring your friend's bags in and set her up in the other guest room upstairs and you can take the basement. I'm gonna go see what your father needs and then I want you to meditate on the commandment of honoring thy father and thy mother.

CLAUDINE exits into the kitchen, leaving  
AZIZA and NAZARETH alone.

AZIZA

Now hold up -

NAZARETH

Aziza, you have to go right now -

AZIZA

Hold up hold up hold up hold up hold up HOLD UP! Your father is Solomon Jasper!?

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

As a general rule, I don't really go around advertising who my father is mostly because, for certain people, he can be a kind of lightning rod, due to his views on specific Middle Eastern entanglements and, like, "Black Capitalism" - and the debates that ensue are deeply uninteresting to me. And then there are huge swaths of people like Aziza who, for whatever reason, see my father's face and think "Famous Black."

AZIZA

There is no way. There can literally be no way your father is Solomon Jasper?! Your father has been Solomon Jasper!? This whole time!? Wait, also: *who is Nazareth?* Your name is Nazareth?!

NAZARETH

What do you want me to say?

AZIZA

I want you to confirm that I did not just straight up hallucinate a goddamned civil rights icon burning incense in some sort of jumpsuit just now. You said your daddy was some sort of reverend but not like this kind of reverend! Not like a I-organize-marches reverend! Not like I-used-to-kick-it-with-Rosa-Parks reverend! Not like a MLK-shrine-in-the-living-room reverend! And didn't his son go to jail - wait, that's your brother... Wait! (grabs her uterus, remembering)

Oh my god... Oh... my god...

JUNIOR re-enters from the kitchen, his gift fully wrapped. AZIZA startles.

JUNIOR

Hello, hello, hello!

AZIZA

... Hi!?..

JUNIOR

Mama just told me Nazareth's got a secret "friend" in the house and I better come in here to make sure he doesn't try to sneak you out.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

I suspect he heard there were fans in the building...

AZIZA

Uh...

JUNIOR

I'm Junior. Hi.

AZIZA

I'm Aziza.

JUNIOR

Aziza. Where are you from, sister?

AZIZA

New York.

JUNIOR

Ooh, okay - and whereabouts?

AZIZA

Harlem born-and-raised...

JUNIOR

No kidding! Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. is one of my personal heroes. Do you know him?

AZIZA

I know the boulevard!

JUNIOR laughs loudly. She follows suit.

JUNIOR

Okay, okay! A real one! You need help getting any bags? I heard you're spending the night. Naz, let's go help your "friend" with her bags.

NAZARETH

Aziza is actually leaving Junior.

JUNIOR

Little brother, no she's not. Mama wants her to stay for dinner. Don't be disrespectful.

(to AZIZA,)

Naz don't ever bring his woman friends home. In fact, we've been worried. You're the first since he was in high school. Would you believe that? He's real secretive about his love life - so this is like a miracle!

NAZARETH

Aziza is not my girlfriend, Junior.

Beat.

JUNIOR

Oh? Then what is this?

Beat, in which AZIZA and NAZARETH share a tense look.

JUNIOR

(slyly,)

A situationship? Uh huh! I know about that!

NAZARETH

We are friends, Junior!

JUNIOR

Well, whatever y'all are, she's company now, because Mama said so. Let me go get these bags, Aziza. My brother here might be the most unchivalrous negro you've ever met. Your car out front? Let me get those keys.

JUNIOR reaches for the keys in AZIZA's hands and she lets them go.

AZIZA

Sure...

JUNIOR exits through the front door to retrieve  
AZIZA's bags. Snow falling can be seen.

AZIZA

(stiff, overdramatic,)

Oh, shoot. That snow is really coming down...

NAZARETH

Aziza.

AZIZA

What?

(looks at him,)

Naz. Really? You want me to go home? Come on! This kind of thing never happens to me! I never meet famous people and you've been famous this whole time!?

NAZARETH

I am not famous.

AZIZA

Yeah, right! You're like a black nepo-baby! What are you so afraid of?

NAZARETH

I'm not afraid of anything.

AZIZA

Okay, because I'm actually afraid of driving home in all that snow in the dark by myself while possibly pregnant with black history. Please don't make me go! I promise I'll be good! And also my mama would kill me if she found out I passed up the chance to spend the night at the house of a Famous Black. She's gonna die when she hears about this. Actually let me send Ms. Roxane a picture and make her guess whose house I'm at!

AZIZA begins to take pictures and selfies  
around the room.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

In retrospect, I probably should have insisted she go, but it was looking very bad outside. And I also, I guess, had kind of an epiphany standing here. We had agreed to keep this arrangement anonymous because it's what made sense for the both of us. I wasn't looking to be nobody's parent. Full stop. But then I sort of realized for the first time that, were she to go ahead and get pregnant, there might come this moment when the child might need to know something about... well, not necessarily me but who... it had come from.

(MORE)

## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

That thought had never crossed my mind before. So I thought maybe it was worth giving Aziza... something, some sort of... impression she could share if need be. Also I was still aware of that good feeling I was feeling, which I guess put me in a generous mood.

(to AZIZA,)

They cannot know what I have done for you, my family.

## AZIZA

Well, obviously. No one is supposed to know.

## NAZARETH

Aziza, they wouldn't understand it. They're very traditional with very traditional ideas about things. And I don't want to be bothered with trying to explain it.

## AZIZA

Neither do I, okay? So you can relax...

The front door opens and JUNIOR pops his head back in.

## JUNIOR

Sister?

## AZIZA

Yes.

## JUNIOR

I'm having some trouble with your trunk?

## AZIZA

You know what, let me just come on out and help. You kinda got to jiggle it -

AZIZA exits out the front door, joining JUNIOR. NAZARETH looks around, a little disoriented, before MORGAN comes down the stairs, dabbing at her eyes with a balled up tissue. She's been crying. She's probably still crying. She walks through the living room, heading straight for the kitchen.

## NAZARETH

(seeing her, solemnly,)

Hi, Morgan...

MORGAN turns, sees him, and simply scowls, without stopping. She exits into the kitchen. Alone, NAZARETH turns to the photo of Martin Luther King, Jr. and interacts with it like, 'did you see that!?' before he turns back to the audience.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

Time passed. Aziza got settled into the guest room upstairs, which used to be my room. Going up to grab my things, I heard her trying to be quiet on the phone with her mom, containing her excitement.

I went down and unpacked in the basement, which had become my father's office in recent years. On his desk, was a pile of books this high on bees and beekeeping, and next to it my grandfather's old rifle that my father would take out from time to time and clean whenever he was feeling nostalgic for his Carolina boyhood. I didn't think much of it. I had no idea how big of a role this metal tube was going to play this weekend. Instead, I stood for a minute at a little window which looked out into our backyard and watched Solomon scurry and stumble around with these big white crates that I figured contained his hives. It was funny seeing my father like this - in such a... tizzy, moving them back and forth, back and forth, trying to find the best place to keep them - first in that hedge, then in the other, then in the tool shed, then another hedge - before deciding to just pop them in the garage. And just in time - because that cold snap snapped and it was no joke.

The sky opened up and battered our little part of the world with snow and rain and a little hail and I began to feel like maybe it was somehow divine intervention that had turned Aziza around. And then, before we knew it, it was almost dinner and that's when things got... well, that's when things got what they got...

## 2.

In the living room, AZIZA snaps a selfie with NAZARETH and SOLOMON - but really SOLOMON, who smiles - albeit uncomfortably.

Throughout the scene, CLAUDINE comes in and out of the kitchen, dropping food off in the dining area.

AZIZA

Thank you so much! I'm so sorry! I promise that's the last one!



SOLOMON

It's quite alright.

AZIZA

It's just my mom is losing her mind right now just like I knew she would. Though what am I talking about? So am I.

AZIZA laughs nervously, manically.

SOLOMON

Please feel free to not do that here. I am but a man.

AZIZA

Sir, you don't get it. I have actual childhood memories of sitting on my daddy's shoulders watching you talk at some rally, maybe? We were always at some rally. And every weekend he was watching you on whatever show that was you used to do where folks just sat around talking about stuff -

SOLOMON

"The Roundtable."

AZIZA

That's right. "The Roundtable." That's how long you've been living up here rent-free!

(points at her head, then,)

And I mean I saw your face every day! Your picture was on my classroom wall for, like, all of elementary school!

AZIZA laughs again.

NAZARETH

What kind of nightmare school was this?

AZIZA

(to SOLOMON,)

It was like an Afro-centric education.

NAZARETH

A what?

SOLOMON

(to NAZARETH,)

One of those Panther schools -

AZIZA

Sort of. More like Panther-adjacent - less Afros, more dreadlocks, less leather, more kente cloth. Like a hippie sort of HBCU for children. All the teachers had, you know, given up their "slave names" for something African or African-*esque* and burned a lot of incense all the time and loved Erykah Badu. And tacked up on the walls around every room were like a million of these posters of famous... Blacks, like you, like all over the place - I guess it was a series? - and they each had a little famous quote or something and of course yours said, "Hope / is right there."

CLAUDINE

(pleased,)

/ "Hope is right there!"

NAZARETH

"Hope is right there!"

SOLOMON

Forgive me if I sound a little competitive but... who else was up on that wall?

AZIZA

Oh *everybody*. I mean, going all the way back to the ancients. Like Queen Nefertiti, Hannibal and his little elephants. Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman, obvi... W.E.B. DuBois was up there, and Madam CJ Walker by the girl's bathroom and Thurgood Marshall, Jesse Owens, Jesse Jackson - double Jesses! - and Mae Jemison -

SOLOMON

Ol' Mae Jemison?! Haven't heard her name in a minute. I wonder what she's been up to?

CLAUDINE

I think we got a card from her last Christmas.

AZIZA

(agog,)

Y'all're friends with the first black woman in space!?

SOLOMON

We're friend/y. Anyway. Who else was up there?

AZIZA

Langston and Zora and Gwendolyn and Mr. Baldwin, uh.. that peanut man -

SOLOMON

"The peanut man?"

AZIZA

Yeah, you know! What's his name? Did all the stuff with peanuts?

JUNIOR comes downstairs and goes up to  
CLAUDINE.

JUNIOR

Morgan's not feeling well.

CLAUDINE

(impatiently,)

What do you mean Morgan is not feeling well?

JUNIOR

She's coming down from a migraine. She wants to know if she can have a plate brought to her in her room.

CLAUDINE

No. Y'all did not fly all the way out here to have plates brought up to your room. This is not a hotel. She needs to come on down here and be with us. Let me go get her.

JUNIOR

Mama -

CLAUDINE

Junior, go on and fellowship with your family.

CLAUDINE exits upstairs, determined.

JUNIOR

Pops, can I get you a refill?

SOLOMON

No you cannot.

Beat.

JUNIOR

What are y'all talking about?

NAZARETH

(clocking the interaction,)

Aziza is trying to remember all the other Famous Blacks with whom our father shared her classroom wall-

JUNIOR

Oooh, okay -

NAZARETH

Who did all that stuff with peanuts?

JUNIOR

George Washington / Carver?

AZIZA

That's right, uh...

JUNIOR

I like this game!

SOLOMON

(shaking his head,)

George Washington Carver not only discovered hundreds of uses for peanuts and sweet potatoes and soy beans but also revolutionized American agriculture. He literally saved the South from starvation by practically shoving crop rotation down their throats - one of the most brilliant scientific minds this country's ever produced and time has turned him into "the peanut man." I don't want to know what they're going to call me when I'm gone.

AZIZA

With all due respect, sir, get out of here with that! You was out there in the cut when you were just a kid with all the legends, marching on Selma with Dr. King and John Lewis and 'nem, marching on Memphis, getting beat down at random diners for just sitting there! And wasn't Dr. King playing catch with you the day before he was murdered or something?

SOLOMON

Uh... half / true -

AZIZA

You are a whole different situation than the... peanut... man - You're like... living history!

SOLOMON groans.

JUNIOR

Come on, pops, that's flattering.

SOLOMON

History is, by definition, a dead thing. Young people these days are too obsessed with being history, making history. History isn't a thing you are in. It's what they call it all after the fact. Back then, we were just living - or trying to live - fighting to live. There wasn't much glory in it. Sometimes I think it's a miracle I'm even here - though now I'm an old man with one foot out the door, watching these clowns in Washington try to undo everything we ever did and wondering if any of that was really worth it -

JUNIOR

Come on, Pops -

SOLOMON

Junior, please stop telling me to come on. Come on what?

Beat.

JUNIOR

I just think you're being a little hard on yourself.

SOLOMON

(nonplussed,)

Oh, really?

AZIZA

He's right. Every single thing you did was worth it. I live free in a world you helped to make. So you're a huge deal. All y'all are actually. I can't believe I never put it together that these were the Jaspers Naz came from.

Beat.

SOLOMON

Well, thank you but my youngest son's embarrassment is no fault of yours.

NAZARETH

Embarrassment?

SOLOMON

/ Did I stutter?

AZIZA

Aw, I don't think that was what it was?

SOLOMON

Then why else would our existence be kept such a secret?

AZIZA

Um... Naz is just a... private dude. Discreet. In fact, that's one of my favorite things about him.

JUNIOR

"One of," huh?

AZIZA laughs nervously before sharing a look with NAZARETH.

AZIZA

He was probably just trying to protect you from superfans like me!

JUNIOR

Does this man ever show you the photos he be taking?

AZIZA

What? Of course!

JUNIOR

Really? Because none of us have seen anything he's ever shot.

(off AZIZA's reaction,)

As you've said yourself, our brother here is a very guarded person -

AZIZA reaches for a her phone, starts looking  
for something.

AZIZA

Whaaaaat? Wait, that's crazy. Naz's stuff is great!

NAZARETH

Aziza, what are you doing -

AZIZA

I'm being your agent right now, shh!

(to JUNIOR,)

Here, look -

AZIZA hands her phone to JUNIOR, who  
shares it with SOLOMON.

JUNIOR

I know this magazine. These are Naz?

AZIZA

Yes! He's a big deal!

SOLOMON

"Photography by N. Jasper." Where did the rest of your name go?

AZIZA

Right? I didn't even know his first name was Nazareth until like just now.  
That's a whole series he just did for them! Swipe left.

NAZARETH

Aziza -

AZIZA

Boy, if you don't stop Aziza-ing me!

JUNIOR

I'm not sure I know what I'm looking at? Dirt?

AZIZA

That's a field of ashes. It used to be a whole town that got burned up in a wildfire. And that lake is actually a village that flooded and never recovered. The whole series is about places that used to be other places until we slash climate crisis ruined them and now nature is taking them back - all these places people made lives and memories in that the world will never see again.

SOLOMON takes AZIZA's phone, looks, and doesn't appear to see anything special.

SOLOMON

Hmph. I think folks get a little too precious about this global warming thing.

Beat.

AZIZA

Uh... Do you not believe that it's real?

SOLOMON hands AZIZA her phone back.

SOLOMON

I didn't say that. But the Earth's been a thing changing since the Good Lord set it into motion, so who can say what his plan is -

AZIZA

Okay, but -

JUNIOR stops AZIZA from wasting her breath.

SOLOMON

And I just see people out here getting upset about polar bears and pelicans when our people are still being beaten, and caged, and shot down like dogs on the street. To me, that's the real crisis.

NAZARETH

(to AZIZA,)

My father is not a climate denier. Playing devil's advocate is just like... our love language. Wait until you see / dinner.

SOLOMON

I'm not playing devil's anything. It's just hard for me to get too worked up about the animals when I feel like I'm still out here fighting not to be treated like one...

JUNIOR

(laughing, in his drink,)

Pssssh! Oh, alright, bee man!

SOLOMON

Excuse me?

JUNIOR

... I'm just saying: I saw you getting pretty worked up about them bees just a while ago.

JUNIOR and NAZARETH share a snicker.

SOLOMON shoots them both a look. AZIZA looks at NAZARETH, confused.

NAZARETH

My father has taken up beekeeping in his retirement.

AZIZA

Oh, that's what that little jumpsuit was for!

SOLOMON

Bees are different! That is me connecting to my roots. That's my legacy.

NAZARETH

Roots? What roots?

SOLOMON

Your great grandfather used to keep bees - my granddaddy - hives and hives of them tucked up in the woods on the outskirts of his farm. And what a genius he had. Those bees seemed to trust him instinctively - to love him, even. He would walk right up to his hives and it was like they would just hand him the honey; it was almost supernatural. Our ancestors were in such a deeper communion with God's majesty in a way I fear I've lost - we've lost. And maybe it's old age but all that stuff is suddenly feeling very... appealing to me - all the things folks used to do down home in the country - fishing, beekeeping, hunting. I keep having this urge to go hunting.



JUNIOR

I'll go hunting with you sometime, Dad.

SOLOMON

Thank you, Junior, but that will not be necessary.

JUNIOR

Well, at the very least, you could teach me a little something about these bees.

SOLOMON

I said no thank you... What do I have to teach anyway? I can't even get mine to produce enough honey.

NAZARETH

What I'm doing isn't any different from what you're doing, pops. I'm communing with nature - reconnecting with God's majesty.

SOLOMON

You take pictures of fields full of dirt and sell them to magazines. With my honey, I will feed people. Don't compare what I'm doing to what you're doing. What you've chosen is a path of self-isolation and self-indulgence.

NAZARETH

There is nothing wrong with choosing solitude.

SOLOMON

Humans are social creatures, boy. Everyone knows that. And you clearly wasn't choosing that much solitude with Miss Aziza up there?

AZIZA

(Looking at NAZ.)

Umm... I actually wasn't with Nazareth in the woods. We met up in Niagara Falls.

SOLOMON

Niagara Falls. They used to call that "The Honeymoon Capital of the World." What was it you two were doing up there?

JUNIOR

Yeah, what was up in Niagara Falls?

AZIZA

We just met up, to hang out, just saying hay.

AZIZA giggles, awkwardly.

SOLOMON

You drove all the way up from New York just to say "hay?" ...

AZIZA

(not giggling,)

That's right...

SOLOMON

How long was that drive?

AZIZA

Oh, six and a half hours?

SOLOMON

Six and a half hours? That sounds like a mighty long drive for some "hay."

CLAUDINE comes back down the stairs,  
somewhat triumphant.

CLAUDINE

Okay, she will be down in a minute. Let's everybody go on ahead and gather around the table. Aziza, honey, will you be a sweetheart and grab me some tapers and a lighter out of that top drawer?

CLAUDINE points to a drawer and immediately  
goes around and begins to dim the lights.  
AZIZA springs up.

AZIZA

(escaping the men,)

I sure can!

AZIZA retrieves candles.

NAZARETH

Dining by candlelight...?

CLAUDINE

(slightly indignant,)

Morgan's migraine has got her sensitive to light, so I told her I would go ahead and make it nice and dim for her delicate eyes.

CLAUDINE begins lighting candles as  
everyone makes their way to the table. They all  
stand around, waiting to be seated.

JUNIOR keeps glancing towards the top of the stairs, expectantly, while CLAUDINE finishes lighting the candles.

CLAUDINE (CONT'D)

Now, Aziza, I want you over here sitting next to me. I don't like that Sonny's been hogging you all evening.

Steps on the stairs are heard, followed by MORGAN, who wears sunglasses and a new wig, her clothes extremely casual in contrast to everyone else's.

The room falls silent watching her take her time down the stairs, through the living room, and into the dining area.

JUNIOR

Thank you, honey, for joining us.

MORGAN

(dryly,)

You're welcome.

CLAUDINE

I made the room nice and dark for you, so I don't believe sunglasses are necessary.

MORGAN removes her sunglasses as she goes straight to her seat and sits. Everyone else is still standing.

CLAUDINE (CONT'D)

Isn't this romantic? Let's all be seated.

Everyone joins MORGAN at the table.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

It's worth giving you the heads up that meals with my family can very quickly resemble, like, the Olympics of Doing the Most. In this household, when people weren't sitting around the dinner table debating headlines or each other's life choices, they were declaiming, toasting, praying, just going off. Every meal. It can be a lot. Just a warning.

CLAUDINE

Before we start, I want to thank you for taking time out of your extraordinary and busy lives to come share this home and this table and this meal - and, by the looks of this weather, maybe the next several days! - with each other.

(laughing, then)

Now, you know, in addition to my

(fake coughs,)

"ith" birthday we are also celebrating the official homecoming of my eldest son and, if I had my way, you know this would have been the party for him to end all parties -

JUNIOR

Mom -

CLAUDINE

I know, I know! He didn't want that. But, even though I am the birthday girl, you are our guest of honor...

(beat,)

Junior, I want you to know that we see what you have endured and we celebrate you and we are so proud of you for making it through, and that I am overjoyed at the opportunity to settle even for this intimate gathering. Because every day for last twenty-odd months I have been reminded that there was a time in this country, not too long ago, when the God-given right to family was considered a luxury for those who looked like us - when children were ripped away from their mothers at birth, separated and sold away at a moment's notice, when the lives of father, sons, mothers, and daughters could be taken in cold blood without any recourse to justice. So we must always celebrate the opportunity - to come together like this, to share the same air and see the eyes of our eyes and touch the flesh of our flesh. Family, I realize, is the miracle and beauty of life - the stuff of it - and though I wish my grand babies were here to complete the picture... I praise God for the gift of whatever I can get!

JUNIOR

/ Amen.

SOLOMON

Amen.

CLAUDINE

Now somebody hurry up and bless this food!

Everyone holds hands and bows their heads.

JUNIOR

/ Heavenly Father -

SOLOMON

Heavenly Fa -

Everyone looks up, confused.

JUNIOR

Oops, sorry, pops. Go ahead. I don't why I thought - Go ahead.

SOLOMON

No, son. Why don't you go on ahead? You are apparently the "guest of honor."

JUNIOR

(after a beat,)

No, Father. That was just me on autopilot. You are head of this family.

Beat, before SOLOMON re-bows his head.  
Everyone does the same.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

Buckle up.

SOLOMON

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the blessings which sit before and around us today. You are mighty, Lord, and all providing. We thank you for this roof over our heads. We thank you for the warmth of this home. We thank you for the food we have been given for nourishment and delight. We ask a special blessing to those who prepared this meal with love and care tonight. Thank you for my wife and partner of almost fifty years. Thank you for... these children. Thank you for the fellowship of friends new and old. Father God, many hands made this meal possible. Farmers grew it. Truckers drove it. Grocers sold it. We prepared it. Bless all those hands, and help us always remember our dependence on you. Give us grateful hearts, O Father, for all thy mercies, and make us mindful of the needs of others; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

JUNIOR

/ Amen.

AZIZA

/ Amen!

CLAUDINE

Amen.

NAZARETH

... Amen.

NAZARETH gives the audience a knowing look  
as everyone begins to eat.

AZIZA  
(to MORGAN,)

I'm Aziza, by the way. Hi.

MORGAN  
(indifferent,)

Hi, Aziza...

JUNIOR  
Aziza here is a "friend" of Naz's.

MORGAN  
(still indifferent,)  
Is that so?

JUNIOR  
A "special friend."

NAZARETH  
Special? June, what are you even talking about?

JUNIOR  
A six and a half hour drive just to say "hay" sounds pretty special to me, ain't that right  
pops?

JUNIOR laughs but SOLOMON doesn't take  
the bait.

SOLOMON  
Someone pass me the green beans.

MORGAN  
(To AZIZA,)  
Well, welcome, Aziza... Beware.

CLAUDINE  
What's that, Morgan?

MORGAN  
I said 'beware.' 'Watch out.'

CLAUDINE  
Beware of what?

MORGAN

Just life. Everything.

(to AZIZA,)

Beware. Stay woke.

SOLOMON

Mother, I'm wondering when it was that folks stopped calling each other boyfriend and girlfriend. Were those words... cancelled or whatever?

NAZARETH

People still call each other boyfriend and girlfriend. But Aziza and I are not boyfriend and girlfriend.

SOLOMON

See, Mother? Why do the kids these days want to overcomplicate everything?

AZIZA

I... feel compelled to confirm Nazareth's statement here. We are not... actually dating.

CLAUDINE

... Then what are you doing?

AZIZA

We really are just... friends. In fact, I don't even date men!

Beat.

SOLOMON

What do you mean you don't date men?

AZIZA

I don't... date men... I identify as... a queer woman. Um...

MORGAN, chewing her food, snorts. Beat,  
before everyone else begin to eat in order to  
evade the deafening awkwardness - everyone  
except Claudine.

CLAUDINE

So then what exactly were you all, um... What is it you have been doing with my son?

NAZARETH and AZIZA share a look.

## AZIZA (CONT'D)

Umm...

## NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

And this is sort of around when things became I guess, a nightmare?

(to the family,)

We were hanging out, like I have already said. We are friends. Former neighbors.

Beat, before CLAUDINE goes back to eating her meal, tensely.

## CLAUDINE

Oh, okay... You were hanging out...

Beat, in which everyone tries to eat, silverware squeaking and squawking, etc. SOLOMON, steaming a little with something like embarrassment and annoyance, looks at CLAUDINE, who seems like she's also steaming with something, trying to catch her eye with no success. He shakes his head.

## NAZARETH

The silence was like that of a goddamn graveyard, like a clot in the air. Aziza kept trying to catch my eye but I couldn't look up from my plate. I was trying to tell her without telling her to just... keep quiet, let the storm pass. It'll be over soon. Thank God for Junior.

## JUNIOR

Actually, mother, let me go ahead and get this out of the way!

## CLAUDINE

Get what out of the way?

JUNIOR retrieves his finally-wrapped gift from somewhere hidden and stands at the front of the room.

## JUNIOR

I know you said you didn't want any presents, but I couldn't help myself. And I'm feeling so full of gratitude this evening, it almost feels like Thanksgiving's come early. I am so thankful to see all your faces gathered together, to be in this room, under this roof, breathing this fresh air and smelling all this good food.

(beat,)

(MORE)



## JUNIOR (CONT'D)

I have only been out for a little over a week and I cannot even begin to describe what that experience was like - but I can tell you now that it was some of the darkest hours of my life. I met some of the darkest men in my life. There were times when I felt myself becoming one of these lost souls, but there were always two things that kept me tethered to the light. First and foremost, the Word of God -

CLAUDINE

Amen -

JUNIOR

(explaining,)

That's the Bible, Aziza -

AZIZA

(taken by surprise,)

Uh / I'm aware, thank you?

JUNIOR

Which was my constant companion day and night. And secondly, the words of my beautiful mother, who wrote me a letter every single day of my incarceration, reminding me that I was loved, that I was cared for, and that there was a world and a future waiting for me at the end of this misery. And, now with all of us gathered together for the first time in over two years as witnesses - I want to turn to you now mother and say, Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. And Happy Birthday.

JUNIOR presents the wrapped gift to  
CLAUDINE, who has become slightly  
emotional.

CLAUDINE

Junior! What could this possibly be?

(unwraps it,)

Oh, a... book?

CLAUDINE raises the book up to show  
everyone.

JUNIOR

I had every letter you wrote me typed up and turned into a book, so that you might read back over and be sustained by the joy and sustenance you gave to me. With those letters, you turned my darkest hours into a journey of light and love and learning. They are a testament to your grace as a supermother, who gave life to her oldest son not just once but twice.

CLAUDINE

Oh, Junior. Thank you, honey. This is very sweet.

SOLOMON

Pass that book on down here and let me take a look at it.

CLAUDINE passes the book to AZIZA who  
passes it to NAZARETH who passes it to  
SOLOMON.

AZIZA

Very sweet idea.

JUNIOR  
(to CLAUDINE)

Let me take care of that.

JUNIOR gathers up the discarded giftwrap and  
throws it all away while SOLOMON opens the  
book up to a random page and reads.

SOLOMON  
(reading,)

"Dear Son, I am missing you today. I went to the Whole Foods and did some gardening.  
The Wilsons are coming over, who send their love. We are going to see the Barbie movie.  
Please don't forget to pray! We wait for you. Love, Mother."

(beat, sarcastic,)

Hmph... Powerful...

JUNIOR

They aren't all like that.

SOLOMON

I would hope not. I was looking for a journey of - what was it? - "light and love and  
learning?"

JUNIOR

But you can't underestimate how much even little details like going to the movies and  
grocery shopping mean to brothers on the inside.

SOLOMON  
(eyes rolling,)

Oh, okay. I guess I don't know the first thing about being incarcerated!

Beat.

JUNIOR

Jail is not the same thing as prison.

SOLOMON

(defensive,)

Oh, really? You want to tell me more about that.

JUNIOR

You must know things are different inside now - different from what they've ever been. It's a whole system of oppression and exploitation which has somehow managed to perfect itself while we weren't looking. Folks are serving life sentences for crimes which aren't even considered crimes anymore. Folks are being held hostage inside their very lives. I met a man who'd been in the pen since he was sixteen years old, by the time he's due to get out, he's going to be almost forty. That's over half his life. Not one visitor in fifteen years. Both of his parents died while he was on the inside. The neighborhood he grew up in? Gone. Projects that got razed over a decade ago to put up a bunch of condos and he didn't even know until I told him. That man's gonna get out of there and he's not going to know where he is - much less who he is. And he's not alone. A lot of brothers, when they do get out, they get out with nothing waiting for them, nobody waiting for them. This is more than imprisonment. It's displacement inside your own life. It's cruelty. And this man went in there, wasn't even voting age, and he's going to leave never seeing the inside of a voting booth - not for the whole rest of his whole life. So what does that make him? An American? Or something else? Is that what you and Dr. King were marching for?... His name is Dee Millman, by the way.

AZIZA

...That is so messed up.

JUNIOR

It is, sister. It really is... To be honest, I'm actually feeling called to do something about this. While I still can. I'm hoping... my next chapter might be some advocacy work around prison reform.

(to CLAUDINE,)

And, with your blessing, mother, I would like to start here.

JUNIOR places his hand on the book of letters.

CLAUDINE

My blessing?

JUNIOR

With your permission, I would like to talk to some folks about publishing this as a book.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

All Hail the King of the Pivot.

CLAUDINE

(surprised,)

Oh, oh my...

JUNIOR

I think it could be really impactful. And I'd want to tour to every prison that would have me - and you could come along. We'd do readings together. And half of the entire print run would be donated to prison libraries, so that every single brother - or sister - trapped inside might have access to some sort of expression of love and comfort, however vicarious.

NAZARETH

(to audience,)

When I think back on this moment, I recall being actually kind of impressed by this whole thing. I mean, I had notes, but this pivot felt... well, there was a sort of... substance - a sincerity? - to it that I'd never heard before. It was... fragile. But it was there. Unfortunately, never got to see it again.

CLAUDINE

(shares a look with SOLOMON,)

Well, I really love this for you. I love the idea of this but, to be honest, I don't really recall the content of every little note I wrote you, dear. I'd have to read it -

JUNIOR

I think you'll find that there's nothing exposing or incriminating here -

CLAUDINE

Still, I think this is a family matter and we should have the blessing of everyone in the family -

SOLOMON

Which you're not going to get.

Beat. MORGAN makes a face, quietly  
delighted.

JUNIOR

... And why not, Pops?

## SOLOMON

(gathers himself, then,)

Listen, I am very happy that my oldest is up out of whatever that was, but you are mistaken if you think you are the first, second, third, or even fourth negro to sit across from me at a dinner table and describe what it's like on the inside, and you are, comparatively, a lightweight. Do you think you have made some sort of new discovery about one of the oldest tools of racial oppression in this country?! And why do I recall having to use *my* connections to get *you* transferred to some minimum security playground after four months? So I don't know if I am going to sit here and have you acting like you're some sort of Nelson Mandela, when Nelson Mandela sat in that exact chair - in fact, you were there! - you saw that man's hands! You heard his stories! You are not going to tell me that what you experienced even remotely approached that kind of suffering... Talking about how your new phase in life is supposed to be fighting mass incarceration and blah de blue de blah... How are you going to be the face of prison reform when what got you in there was a bunch of white collar crimes? You were stealing people's hard earned dollars, boy, and spending it on nonsense and let me remind you that many of those dollars were black dollars - and some of them mine!

## JUNIOR

I was sick.

## SOLOMON

Right. "You were sick." Well, what makes you think these people want to hear anything else from a "sick man" like you? People who, as you point out, are victims of actual systemic injustices? Huh? Who are you? Certainly not innocent. What makes you think these people want to hear from you?... Your name?... Or, rather, my name?

(Beat,)

So I think that's what your mother might be referring to. Haven't you made fool enough out of us?

## CLAUDINE

Solomon! That's enough. There is a guest here...

Beat, in which JUNIOR seems to seethe but doesn't back down. MORGAN reaches over and begins to look through the book of letters.

## JUNIOR

Obviously, I am very contrite and I have much to atone for, even still. I was only sharing what I felt called by the Spirit to try and do with myself now that's all. I am simply trying to find my way out of the darkness and into the light again.

## SOLOMON

Well, you can go a little slower. You only been out ten days. Let your eyes adjust.

CLAUDINE

I've had enough of this. I said we will sit down and have this discussion later.

SOLOMON

Claudine, I don't need to have this discussion later. I've said what I needed to say. You two can sit down later and talk about it until your ears fall off, or better yet, write some more letters about it. Get started on the second installment of whatever this is - y'all's little book - but you better figure out a pseudonym because I'll tell you what: I'm done with people thinking they're going to defile this family's name and then continue to profit off it - my name. Uh uh! I'd sooner retire it!

JUNIOR

I didn't name myself. You gave it to me.

SOLOMON

Yes, perhaps the greatest mistake ever made.

JUNIOR

So what am I supposed to do, father? What do you want me to do? Change my name? Go into hiding? Disappear?

SOLOMON

If that's what you need to do, that's what you need to do. It's your atonement. But what you not about to do is take this name on the road and embarrass us with some half-baked prison reform scheme. And certainly not now - not ever! In fact, what you ought to do is see if your brother here can lend you a helping or two of his shame, since he's got so damned much of it, and you could learn a little / something about humility -

NAZARETH

/ Oh Lord, how am I getting dragged into this.

CLAUDINE

Solomon, leave this table and collect yourself!

SOLOMON

I am not leaving this table!

(beat,)

Why don't you leave this table, Claudine? I mean, he brings this woman up in here, practically rubbing it in our face, and what do you have to say, huh?

NAZARETH

/ Rubbing what in your face?

SOLOMON

While you ran around here, pretending its your birthday, chattering on about him finally bringing home a woman. What did you have to say, Claudine?... That's right, nothing.

NAZARETH

What am I rubbing in your face!?

Beat.

SOLOMON

Nazareth, do you have something that you need to say to this family?

NAZARETH

About what?

SOLOMON

About who you are?

(off AZIZA's reaction,)

And before anyone new to this table gets to thinking the wrong things, let me tell you that I actually don't give a crap. Your mother may have different feelings, but I'm too old and I have seen too much and met too many kinds of folks to care about what people want to do with themselves in their private time. But what I do have a problem with - and what I am tired of in this family - is falsehoods! Lies! Deception! It's time for truth now!

Beat.

NAZARETH

Father, we have already talked about this...

CLAUDINE

/ I do not want to discuss this right now -

SOLOMON

And I have told you there is no such thing as "asexual" or "non-sexual" or whatever you're trying to call it. It's one thing to be deceitful to the world, but it's another to deceive yourself.

NAZARETH

I don't know what you want me to tell you.

SOLOMON

It's not about what I want you to tell me. It's about what it's time for you to tell yourself.

AZIZA

I, um...

Beat.

SOLOMON

Yes, young lady?

AZIZA

I feel like I just want to say that... Listen, I know that I'm a guest here, so -  
(bows nervously,)

I thank you - thank you! - for um... opening your home to me - But, again, I feel that I should just affirm my friend's experience here and say that I do not believe Nazareth is necessarily, um, deceiving any of you... You know what? I actually have a degree in social work.

MORGAN

Oh?

AZIZA

Yeah, I guess I could have led with that - I mean, I work with young people really - in a school setting - but I just want to say that - in my experience and just based on my training - I just want to say that asexuality is an actual, well, thing. It's an actual category, as recognized by, I guess, the people who recognize these things? It's just slipping my mind right now y'all got me so nervous... But sexuality really is a spectrum and not a binary and this is supported by a lot of research and, as a queer person myself with many, many friends of many shapes and stripes and I just would like it to be in the room that you consider taking Naz's... self-identification at face value...

Beat.

SOLOMON

Well, Ms. MSW, maybe you could illuminate for me what would inspire a lesbian like you to drive six and a half hours to spend time with an "asexual" in "the Honeymoon Capital of the World?"

Beat, in which AZIZA looks at NAZARETH, a little incensed.

AZIZA

Nazareth is helping me have a baby, actually...

Beat.

SOLOMON

Oh, okay? Well. Now I'm just confused...

MORGAN, who is still reading, snorts again.  
Beat. CLAUDINE notices.



CLAUDINE

Morgan. Is everything alright?

MORGAN

Oh, yes, I'm just over here enjoying these letters.

JUNIOR

Honey, please...

MORGAN closes the book, slides it away from herself, and sits back.

MORGAN

Please what, Junior!? I told you not to bring me here - but you begged me - and, after all this, you really expect me to sit here and pretend I believe anybody in this family truly gives a flying fuck about me?!

AZIZA

Whoa -

CLAUDINE

Morgan!

MORGAN

What?!

CLAUDINE

Believe it or not, this family cares very deeply about you but you are making yourself very difficult to celebrate. And it's one thing to hold my grandchildren hostage but it's another to come here only to hole yourself up in the room all day and then come down here to all this fellowship with an attitude. / This is supposed to be a joyful time!

MORGAN

Wait, wait, wait, back up! Holding *your* grandkids -  
(looks around,)

If there's a hostage here, it's me! Joyful!? I am going to prison! My life is over! I am ruined and none of you mugs - you hucksters seem to have no sense of responsibility or remorse!

CLAUDINE

/ Hucksters?!

MORGAN

And I'm supposed to sit here all prim and patient and devout and watch y'all eat each other alive? And over what? It's ridiculous! You people are out of your rabid-ass minds!  
(MORE)

MORGAN (CONT'D)

(gestures to JUNIOR,)

And I don't seem to recall any deficit of attitude on this one's part before he went in. Instead, I recall the lot of you all coming around petting and pouting and loving all over him while he kicked and screamed and smashed up my whole house. How many hours did I spend nursing and coddling him through every single night and every single step of his goddamn breakdown? But I guess all he needed was your letters to drag him out of it, huh Mother Jasper? And y'all's prayers? Not mine or my lugging two kids up and down the highway, four hours each way to Raleigh, month after month to visit this man before he mouthed off and got himself transferred to Alabama, where / it became a whole goddamned flight -

JUNIOR

Those people had me in solitary for informing other prisoners about their rights -

MORGAN

Yeah, but what about my rights? Where's my book, huh? Do your wife and kids got something coming?

JUNIOR

Morgan, it's not your birthday.

MORGAN

It's not your mother's birthday either!

CLAUDINE

Alright! ALRIGHT! You have a lot of nerve to sit at my table and run your mouth that way about my family!

MORGAN

Your family. As opposed to mine, huh? Because where do I come from?

(beat,)

Do you know how hard my mama and I worked to keep on the right side of life - cleaning every damn house in Montgomery county that would let us - houses exactly like this one - every weekend to put me through how many schools? And now, look?

Didn't do anything but file my damn taxes like the government told me to - not even! - signed a piece of paper *y'all's family accountants* told me to. I wasn't out here buying cashmere drawers and betting on racing pigeons with other peoples' money! I wasn't hiring private jets to deliver me goddamn Japanese snacks! Now I've got no life or career after this because I've spent it all on this one - and the government sure isn't sending me any disability checks for being out of my goddamn mind!

CLAUDINE

Remove yourself from this table.

MORGAN

With pleasure!

(starts making herself a plate,)

Talking about "holding your grandkids hostage." If you all thought I was going to let my children step even a pinky toe in this house ever again, you all have another think coming. Talking about *your* family and him over here talking about "honesty," when y'all done managed to raise a whole entire felon.

(gestures to NAZARETH,)

Meanwhile this one over here about twenty years too late for the obvious autism diagnosis you wouldn't get him,

(gestures to SOLOMON,)

and this man standing there with his fiftyseven other kids scattered all over this damn country! You the one with the nerve -

CLAUDINE reaches across the table and quickly slaps MORGAN across the face. Beat, in which everyone is in shock.

SOLOMON

Claudine.

CLAUDINE

Get a hold of yourself. Because the devil's in your mouth now telling lies!

MORGAN deeply considers CLAUDINE before speaking.

MORGAN

You had one time in your life to do that to me and you just used it up.

CLAUDINE

I told you to remove yourself from this table.

MORGAN starts to leave. JUNIOR follows her.

JUNIOR

Morgan -

MORGAN

Junior, if you don't leave me the hell alone!

(to everyone,)

All y'all better beware actually! All y'all!

JUNIOR

Morgan...

MORGAN storms out of the dining room but JUNIOR stays. Beat, before CLAUDINE turns to AZIZA, apologetically, struggling to hold it together.

CLAUDINE

I am very sorry. This is not how we are around here. I'm very sorry this is how you had to meet us. / I've never been more embarrassed -

AZIZA

It's all right....

JUNIOR returns to the table, seeming very emotional.

JUNIOR

You all... I need - I need to request some prayer.

CLAUDINE

Junior?

JUNIOR

I'd like to ask you all to... pray for... myself and Morgan... for my - for our family and our marriage and my mental health. This whole thing has just put such a strain on us and I'm worse than I've ever been and I'm scared something's going to happen.

CLAUDINE

What's going to happen?

JUNIOR

Morgan... I - I don't know - and I don't know what else to do... So, I'm sorry... I need... I just need strength!

CLAUDINE springs into action, hurries over to her oldest son, and wraps her arms around him.

CLAUDINE

Oh, my son! Everyone, come!... Come, Aziza!

CLAUDINE gestures to everyone at the table to stand up and join her in gathering around a weeping JUNIOR. NAZARETH is the first to stand, goes over, puts his hands on JUNIOR.

Eventually AZIZA gets up, albeit a little awkward, and joins, puts her hands on him. SOLOMON remains at the table. After a beat, he starts eating. CLAUDINE looks around and over at him confused.

CLAUDINE (CONT'D)

Solomon?

SOLOMON

I'm alright.

CLAUDINE

What do you mean you're alright?

SOLOMON

I'm not praying for that. That would be a false prayer. I'm not praying for a falsehood.

JUNIOR

Pops, what?

SOLOMON

I don't think there's anything wrong with you, boy. In fact, I'm worried you just like the attention. If you sick, where did you get it from? Certainly not from me because I was never half as dumb as you to get caught doing half of what you did. So who's it from? Is it from you, Claudine? Who's it, Junior? Which one of us made you "sick?"

(beat,)

You've lied once without repent. How do you expect me or anyone else here to believe anything you ever say again? As for Morgan, I'm going to need her to come on down here and ask for her own prayers. That woman didn't look sick to me. That woman I just saw was fighting for her life and, in fact, I liked some of what she was saying. Nobody made you steal all that money and go messing up your family but you. And not no "sick" you neither. You-you. You! YOU! YOU!

CLAUDINE

Solomon, what do you think you're doing?

SOLOMON

I am picking up your slack, Claudine! I have let you build this house on a foundation of self-deceit and clearly for too long and I may be a day late and a dollar short but I believe in a God who believes in redemption, who believes in salvation, and that, if there is a time for it, that time is now and this is about to be a new era in this family - a new era of truth! Truth!

SOLOMON picks up JUNIOR's book, tosses it in a trashcan, and storms out, angrily.  
CLAUDINE runs after him, distressed.

CLAUDINE

Solomon!... I can't believe you!... Solomon!... Sonny!

She exits. NAZARETH, JUNIOR, and AZIZA  
take each other in.

NAZARETH

(To the audience,)

And that was, uh... that was dinner.

END OF ACT.

**ACT TWO****1.**

NAZARETH, AZIZA, and JUNIOR remain at the dinner table. Moments have passed.

NAZARETH speaks to the audience.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

So, listen. That shit was embarrassing. I couldn't even look at Aziza, who sat glued to the couch staring out at the snow, probably wondering how she had even got here and how the heck she was going to get out. But it was too late. Meanwhile, that good feeling I was telling you about? Uh, it was gone - oh, most definitely. And in its place all I felt was a... numbness which was... not unfamiliar in this house... except everything else felt different. I didn't recognize this. Yes, The Jaspers could be a lot, but I had never experienced this level of chaos before.

For example, we are not a hitting family. Growing up, Junior and I were barely even spanked. I always thought that it was the fact my parents had grown up exposed to so much violence which had led them to shield us from it in the way that they had. My mother had been the same age as the little girls who were murdered in the bombing of 16th street baptist in 1963. My father came of age watching so many of his role models getting gunned down in the street, in their driveways, in their beds. And my mother had seen and met these men's widows - held their hands, prayed with them. And my parents had met in the trenches of the movement, been hosed down, had bones broken, eyes blackened, wrists bruised - seen friends maimed for life or driven to early graves from stress and the wrong ways of coping with it. They were intimate with pain - especially pain inflicted by one's fellow man. They knew the quality of rot in the heart that could result from it. The greatest gift they could give their children would be that rot's opposite.

So you have to imagine the shock I felt watching my mother pop my sister-in-law across the face like that. I had never seen my mother strike another person - let alone woman - in my life. But I had also never seen Morgan so out of pocket, touching every third rail in sight - not the least of which involving an infamous video which had appeared online many years prior to this evening. It featured a young man claiming that my father was his father. His name was Xavier and he also claimed to be speaking for a whole online community of other illegitimate children allegedly sired by my father. Collectively, they were demanding paternity tests. This was, of course, super messy for all of us - before details of this young man's biography began to emerge - including an extensive police record and multiple stints in prison. His mother, the only other corroborating witness, was long dead. Proof of this supposed online community of other Jasper bastards never quite materialized. And so it seemed like one day this man and his video were just... gone.

(MORE)

## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

But rumors, even when disproven, can persist in the heart and still cut to the quick. Case in point: dinner.

And then there was my father refusing his oldest son something as simple as a prayer. "Truth, truth, truth!?" What was he even talking about, I wondered to myself, standing there, stunned, while my brother just... spiraled out -

## JUNIOR

What does that man want from me? Why would I run around pretending I'm sick, Naz? That would be so stupid. What else would make me do all that stuff if I wasn't sick? He doesn't know what's going on inside me! How could he know!? I'm fighting for my life over here! I'm sick! I don't know how I am supposed to prove that to him! If I told him I wasn't sick, then that would be the lie! But you believe me right, little brother? You believe me?

## NAZARETH

Of course -

## AZIZA

(piping up,)

You know what?

(beat, as everyone turns to her,)

I feel like... Do you think everybody's done eating, or...?

## NAZARETH

Yes, I believe dinner is over.

## AZIZA

(gathering plates and exiting,)

Okay, let me just go on help clear this table and get started on some dishes because my mother would beat this behind if she found out I rolled up in here like I didn't know how to act in front of people...

NAZARETH watches AZIZA gather plates and things before she disappears into the kitchen. Meanwhile JUNIOR retrieves his book from the trash, assessing it for damage.

## NAZARETH

Junior, you don't need his permission to do nothing. It's your life. Go ahead and publish those letters if you want. Go out there and start speaking! Who cares? / It's your life.



JUNIOR

You and I both know he wouldn't let that happen! He would let people know he didn't approve and undermine it all - undermine me - somehow! I know it. You don't even know how much work went into this. This was all I had and so what now? I mean, what else does he expect me to do with myself - with my life?

NAZARETH

Don't let that man get into your head!

JUNIOR

That man's been in my head, Nazareth. You know, he didn't come see me once the whole time I was in there? Not one letter, not one word, not nothing. Ever since I got here, he's had me on my back foot. I try to reach out, he swats me away. I try to give him space, it feels like it isn't space enough. Now he wants to sit there and embarrass me in front of everyone, talking about getting me transferred, talking about taking my name? What am I supposed to do without a name!? A name that ain't even worth half of what it used to be - and that ain't entirely fault!

NAZARETH

Junior / that man was just talking -

JUNIOR

And then he's gonna stand there and say he liked what *she* was saying?

NAZARETH

/ Morgan?

JUNIOR

That man doesn't even know how much she hates his guts, hates all of us! He doesn't even know what she's been trying to get me to do - but have I done it? No! No I have not! But do I get any credit? No! I get told I'm over here lying! Y'all don't even know what I'm protecting you from!

NAZARETH

What are you protecting us from, Junior?

Beat, in which JUNIOR considers NAZARETH  
before he breaks down -

JUNIOR

Oh, Naz, I'm fucked! I'm so fucked...

NAZARETH approaches and comforts him.

NAZARETH

Junior, I'm going to need you to talk to me and tell me what's going on. How are you fucked? What's Morgan trying to get you to do? What was she talking about just now?

Beat.

JUNIOR

Naz, what am I'm about to tell you - you have to promise me that you're not going to breathe a word of it to anybody. Do you promise?

NAZARETH

Yes. I swear.

Beat.

JUNIOR

Morgan's been trying to get me to get some sort of deal to write a tell-all -

NAZARETH

A tell-all? About what?

JUNIOR

About our family - exposing everything, everyone. She's been on me about it for months, even back when I was inside. She's convinced there'd be a big payday out there for something like that, that it'll set us all up, me, her, the kids -

NAZARETH

Junior -

JUNIOR

But obviously I haven't done it, Naz! I can't! I couldn't do our parents like that - as old as they're getting? What did they ever do to anybody? It's not their fault I... I messed up, right? And isn't that all *they* want us to do - just sell out our people - and for what? For what? After everything they've done for the whole world? But Morgan won't let it go - hasn't let it go - and I even came up with this, thinking I could show her, you know - prove that we don't have to be so... evil about it - but you see that just backfired and now I don't know what's going to happen but... I'm scared, man - I'm scared.

NAZARETH

Scared of what?

JUNIOR

Morgan keeps threatening things. She's been threatening things this whole time.

NAZARETH

Threatening what?

JUNIOR

I don't know! It's always these vague threats. Like what you saw just now. She's been saying to me, "You better do something for this family or *else*." *Or else?! But I don't know what she means by that...* All I can think is that it's got something to do with these... pills?

NAZARETH

Pills?

JUNIOR

(with difficulty,)

I found these pills, Naz - in our bathroom cabinet about a few days ago. It's some sort of prescription she picked up while I was inside. I googled them, found out they were for anxiety - but it seemed like she wasn't taking them, so I thought, "That's good..." But then I kept... seeing these bottles everywhere - in the cupholder in the car, the glove compartment, in the kitchen cabinet. But they were all full. It was like she was refilling the prescriptions but she wasn't taking them. But then, when we got here and I was unpacking our toiletry bag, I noticed she'd... brought the pills. But this bottle felt heavier, for some reason, so I don't know why but I just opened it up and... She packed this bottle to the brim, man. And I thought, "Why would she do that?"

NAZARETH

Junior...

JUNIOR

It's suspicious, right? Like what's she going to do with all those pills? ... For a minute I thought maybe she was gonna try something on me, and the truth is, ever since I got out, Morgan's been like... a whole other person - a stranger... I mean, we've barely even touched each other. The way she talks to me, it's like I stole something. And I keep catching her staring at me from across the room with just like... this like... animal hatred in her eyes. But I've been careful. I don't have to eat anything she cooks, drink anything she hands me.

NAZARETH

Junior... The pills are for her.

JUNIOR

(resigned,)

Yeah... that thought did cross my mind...

NAZARETH

She just stood at the top of the stairs and told us all to "beware." Beware of what? Is she trying to do something to herself this weekend? Is that what Morgan was just talking about?

JUNIOR

I don't know...

NAZARETH

Can you imagine what would happen if she did that here - in this house - the circus that would ensue? You just got your name out of the headlines!

JUNIOR

You really think she would do it?

NAZARETH

You said she goes in next week? And she left the boys back in D.C.? When else would be a better time to do it?

JUNIOR

What am I supposed to do?

NAZARETH

Something! Anything! Talk to her -

JUNIOR

Talk to her about what?

NAZARETH

Tell her that she's not going to do that - not here, not nowhere, not ever - that you're not going to let her! That you're going to call somebody if you have to and they will take her somewhere!

JUNIOR

But what if I'm wrong?

NAZARETH

Then figure out what's going on! At the very least, take those pills away!

Beat, in which JUNIOR stands there,  
processing.

NAZARETH (CONT'D)

And, June, if you can't handle this, we have to tell Mom.

JUNIOR

No! No! It'll just escalate things. It'll make this worse.

NAZARETH

This cannot happen here - not in Mama's house!

JUNIOR

Listen, you're right! You're right, man! I'm going to handle it. I just need to think.

NAZARETH

Think about what -

CLAUDINE (O.S.)

Junior!

JUNIOR

Yes, mother?

CLAUDINE emerges from down a hall.

CLAUDINE

Junior, will you please join me and your father in my office.

JUNIOR

Right now?

CLAUDINE

Yes, right now.

JUNIOR and NAZARETH share a look before  
JUNIOR exits towards the office.

CLAUDINE (CONT'D)

(to NAZARETH,)

He'll be right back....

CLAUDINE follows JUNIOR off.

NAZARETH

There was a chance I had just overreacted about those pills but, try as I might, I couldn't imagine what else they could possibly be for. And, watching Junior disappear, I realized that I had never seen my brother so lost - and so frightened - and so alone. I hadn't fully understood just how much pressure he'd been under all this time, how much was at stake in the pivot. Morgan had always been complicated but I'd never imagined her to be so... manipulative in this way. The idea that, behind closed doors, she was forcing my brother's hand at the threat of suicide - *or else?* It didn't totally make sense to me.

(MORE)

## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

But I've never been sentenced to prison, had my life blown up in that way. I could imagine how that impending appointment could change a person. It was probably hard to be thrilled at the release of your husband when you knew that the closer he got to freedom, the closer you got to the exact opposite. I began to worry about Morgan upstairs, alone, wondering about what she had been doing this whole time, what she was doing now. Then I remembered Junior's other confession, the bit where she hated our guts, tried to convince him to expose the family. Expose what about the family? And was I included in that? What had I ever done to her? And I supposed I began to feel a little defensive. That's really the only excuse I have for the behavior which followed. I'd almost forgotten about Aziza, standing there with my thoughts.

AZIZA re-emerges from the kitchen and re-joins  
NAZARETH.

AZIZA

Is your brother okay?

NAZARETH  
(cold,)

Yes.

AZIZA

I know y'all said y'all like to debate but... Yikes.

(no response,)

... How are you feeling?

NAZARETH

Not great.

AZIZA

I bet. Do you want to talk about it?

NAZARETH  
(explosive,)

No I do not want to talk about it, Aziza!

AZIZA  
(taken aback,)

Whoa, Naz!

NAZARETH

What is wrong with you!?

AZIZA

Are you joking right now?

NAZARETH

No I'm not fucking joking! I specifically told you not to say anything about this arrangement! So why, Aziza? Why did you feel compelled to open up your big mouth just now and ruin my goddamn night?

Beat.

AZIZA

Listen, I'm sorry. I thought - I was trying to help. Your family was really coming for you.

NAZARETH

Who asked for your help? You think I've never sat at this exact dinner table and had my Dad lay into me? You think I don't know how to get through that? Do you think I haven't been in this family my whole life?

AZIZA

You don't have to normalize this -

NAZARETH

Normalize what?

AZIZA

This behavior - Don't you think you deserve better, Naz?

NAZARETH

Better what Aziza? A better family?

AZIZA

Listen, I really thought I was being a friend! This is so / extreme-

NAZARETH

"Thought you were being a friend." You actually thought you were being somebody's school counselor, is what you thought you were doing, coming in here lecturing everybody, judging every- Nobody asked for your input - for your "social work." You showed them my photos, Aziza? Why? They didn't need you to do that - I didn't need you to do that - to defend my life. I am a grown man! These people did not need to know anything about what I have done for you and now you've got me regretting everything - everything!

AZIZA

Everything?

NAZARETH

Saying yes to any of this in the first place - to helping you! Do you know how much of a mess you've just made for me? How much work I have to do now so that people can leave me alone and I can get back to my business?

Beat.

AZIZA

I don't appreciate being talked to like this.

NAZARETH

Well now we both have things we don't appreciate about each other.

AZIZA

Though from the way your family treated me at dinner while you sat there, why am I surprised?

NAZARETH

Excuse me.

AZIZA

Your father's tone with me, your mother's response to me living my life, my truth / - and where were you?

NAZARETH

Aziza, you knew who they were, where they came from - what they believed! What did you think was going to happen?

AZIZA

So that behavior is supposed to be my fault?

NAZARETH

You should have known better.

AZIZA

So was I supposed to sit there and lie about myself? Let them keep thinking I was your fake fucking / girlfriend?

NAZARETH

You weren't supposed to sit there and do anything! I told you to go! You begged me to stay! If anything, all you were supposed to do is sit there and be quiet! Be quiet and shut the fuck up! "Thought you were being a friend." A real friend would have listened to me - just dropped the stupid fucking charger off, turned around and kept going!



AZIZA

(after a beat,)

...Well, if you want, I can go now...

NAZARETH

Aziza!

(to audience,)

I look back on this moment sometimes and ask myself, "Why did I stop her?" It's like I wanted her to stay for some reason.

(to AZIZA,)

Look at the snow. Look at the time. As if you leaving now would make a difference anyway. Stop being so dramatic.

NAZARETH, frustrated, kicks something or knocks something over, which startles her. He seethes at a distance while AZIZA considers him very closely.

AZIZA

(after a beat,)

Morgan just said something about you at the table just now. What was it?

NAZARETH

What?

AZIZA

About some diagnosis you never got?

NAZARETH

I don't know what the fuck Morgan was talking about! Why are you asking me this?

(no response,)

... Aziza!?

AZIZA

Nevermind.

NAZARETH

What do you mean nevermind?

AZIZA

I need... I need to call someone and let them know I might be snowed in... Sorry for... whatever it is you think I did....

AZIZA exits up the stairs.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

I wouldn't see her for the rest of the night. Almost immediately, I didn't feel great about that. I could have managed those feelings better... And of course I knew what Morgan was talking about...

My childhood... I was just what we used to call back then a shy kid. "The weird son," as my mother puts it. That's it. It's not that I didn't care about people. I just really liked being alone - always have. It's the source from which everything in my life seems to flow. And, unfortunately, there was a stretch of my youth when that became a problem for people. Suddenly, there was pressure from everyone else to be different, to be social, to do all this stuff I didn't want to do. Having the father I had - so charismatic and outgoing - didn't exactly help. And that pressure created its own issues, namely anxiety. That anxiety became a tendency to panic. I would explode - scream, yell, throw shit around. And, after enough of these explosions, there were suddenly these school officials making demands - that I be put in a special program. So Mama took me out of that school. But then, at this new school, there was this desire to put me on medication. She took me out of that one, too. It was a whole ordeal. But eventually I found the right situation - a kind of boarding school in the mountains where I got close to all the things I loved in the world, forests and rivers and the skies and the stars... I found my way.

But, years later, when Morgan found one of her boys having certain developmental struggles, these old stories resurfaced. Suddenly, she was calling around, trying to make some sort of connections. Though no one but her thought there were any connections to make. She didn't know what she was talking about. She didn't know me. Neither did Aziza. She was just someone I used to call "neighbor." I thought.

And I was marvelling at how much chaos my sister-in-law had managed to cause when I heard my parents calling for me -

CLAUDINE

Nazareth?

NAZARETH

I'm in here...

SOLOMON and CLAUDINE enter.

CLAUDINE

Your father and I would like to speak with you for a moment.

NAZARETH

Okay, but where is June?

CLAUDINE

Junior is in my office taking a little prayer time for himself. Now, as I'm sure you can imagine, there are many things about what just happened at dinner that are concerning to us, including our behavior, but as you know I am personally inclined to take any and all threats against this family very seriously -

NAZARETH

Yes.

CLAUDINE

That said, we want to talk about your friend, Aziza.

NAZARETH

What about her?

CLAUDINE

As you well know, your brother's ordeal kicked up a lot of dust for us and we are still feeling very vulnerable. We depend on the good faith of our community and our professional networks for our livelihood. We need to be careful not to have our name associated with any kind of casual disregard of certain values - family values... So, before we go any further, we'd like to learn more about what Aziza shared at the table. About your, um, helping her conceive. How was it this arrangement came about?

NAZARETH

... She... called me up one day and asked me if I would consider being her donor?

SOLOMON

Her sperm donor.

NAZARETH

That's right.

CLAUDINE

Is this something that you... have done before?

NAZARETH

No! No, no...

SOLOMON

That's something at least.

CLAUDINE

Do you have any sense of why Aziza chose you, specifically?

NAZARETH

I don't know? Because she likes me? Because she thinks I'm "discreet?"

CLAUDINE

And how sure are you of this fact?

NAZARETH

Aziza is a very trustworthy person. I mean, she didn't even know who you were - who we were? Until tonight.

SOLOMON

And why is this a thing you did not feel the need to tell us about until now?

NAZARETH

Because I wasn't sure it was any of your business?

CLAUDINE

You did not feel potential grandchildren running around the streets of Harlem might be of concern to us?

NAZARETH

That's not how it's supposed to work. They wouldn't be your "grandchildren" technically. It's supposed to be anonymous.

CLAUDINE

Anonymous?

NAZARETH

There was no expectation that the... Aziza's offspring - child would... ever know who I was.

SOLOMON

And how was this anonymity to be enforced?

NAZARETH

Huh?

CLAUDINE

Are there legal arrangements in place between you and Aziza that we should know about?

NAZARETH

No?

SOLOMON

So no protections... And it sounds like your... help... has already taken place?

NAZARETH

Yes - What is happening?

CLAUDINE

Listen, son. While we have enjoyed meeting and perhaps even appreciate Aziza, we don't really know her. And not only is it rather concerning how haphazardly you have gone about... "helping" Aziza, she also just heard and witnessed some things at dinner that we would really prefer not to become a liability -

NAZARETH

A liability - ?

SOLOMON

Your brother has suggested to us that Morgan is preparing to get litigious, that she intends to take away the twins.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

What? Junior didn't mention any of that to me just now.

SOLOMON

So your mother and I have been talking and we feel that it will be in our best interest that we cross our t's and dot our i's here, legally speaking.

CLAUDINE

We cannot let Aziza leave here until we feel protected.

NAZARETH

Okay... And what does that mean?

CLAUDINE

An agreement is going to be drafted which she will need to sign.

NAZARETH

Like an NDA?

CLAUDINE

Well, because of your situation, it's a little more complicated than that. At the very least, we're talking about a letter of intent, outlining a larger agreement to come which would legislate the... parameters of your donorship - and, yes, also contain non-disclosure protections for yourself and for us.

NAZARETH

I'm not sure I can guarantee her compliance.

CLAUDINE

Since she is your guest and your friend, it's up to you to make sure she sits down and complies... Scootie, I know you are eager to get back to your life out there in the world, out there in the woods - but this family really needs you right now. We are working so hard to get just back to... what is normal. Tell me we can count on you. Please.

NAZARETH

Yes, you can count on me.

CLAUDINE

Splendid.

(beat,)

Now your father has something that he would like to speak with you about privately.

CLAUDINE exits quickly, as if she has no idea what's about to happen, leaving SOLOMON and NAZARETH alone.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

The way my mother suddenly fled the room was so crazy and so clearly pre-planned, it took me a second to realize that this was the first time that I had been alone with my father in years. I was kind of taken off guard by the fact it was even happening. I suspected he felt something similar.

SOLOMON

So, Nazareth, you should know your mother and I have been in the midst of a debate since before you arrived and you may have been caught in the crossfire.

NAZARETH

No kidding. You've got to give Junior a break.

SOLOMON

Your brother will get a break when he has earned a break.

NAZARETH

And how will he do that?

SOLOMON

By telling the truth. I will not tolerate such delusions that people are ill when they are not. Your mother would even have you believe that I am losing my marbles. And, listen, I am not going to pretend I'm not getting older - that aging is not a reality - but what happened at dinner was not the pre-senile ravings of some old man. Quite the opposite. If anything, these years have brought me a clarity of focus...

(MORE)

## SOLOMON (CONT'D)

When you get as far down the road as I have, you become very aware that there's a time approaching when many things will become irreparable and so you must set out to repair them as quickly as you can, before it's too late.

## NAZARETH

Okay...?

## SOLOMON

I imagine I haven't been the easiest father to be the son of. That was obviously never my intention - but the work I have been called to - who could have predicted its costs? And I think that we have all in this family benefitted to some degree or another - but I know that other things have been lost in the melee... And, truthfully, Nazareth, the shame that has arisen from that... it's become a bit much for me to bear. It's been difficult enough for me to reckon with my having raised a *thief* - a child for whom I have provided every single opportunity and luxury I myself was denied. But to feel that both of your children might be so fully engaged in a kind of self-deceit... Well, it makes you wonder if it is you who might bear some responsibility. Therefore, I have decided... Well, it wouldn't be fair for me to call for a new era of accountability and not own up to my own... transgressions. As your father, I must be a model for what I ask of you. So...

(clears throat,)

I feel it's important that you know that, though your mother would really rather I did not, there's a certain person with whom I am going to engage directly...

## NAZARETH

... Xavier?

(to audience,)

The young man with the video.

Beat.

## SOLOMON

No.

(beat,)

Someone else has come forward. A young woman. Her name is Erica.

## NAZARETH

(to SOLOMON)

Erica?

(to the audience,)

Who the fuck was Erica?

Beat.

SOLOMON

Yes. She has reached out discreetly through lawyers with some details that are... compelling enough... and I am choosing, on my own, to engage with her because I feel I ought to. Your mother has fears about what might happen if this goes public but I can't care about that anymore. I am ready now to accept that the work of my life in that sense has come to a close, that it is behind me - but still I must live in the present. And I must continue to live with myself in it. And I have lived with my shame long enough and I am very ready to be accountable - accountable for all things.

(beat,)

Now, I'm sure you have your questions and I am ready to answer them, but first I want to give you the opportunity to make an offering in kind. Can you be in this new reality with me?

NAZARETH

An offering like what?

SOLOMON

So you really want me to believe that you believe you are truly... without sexuality?

(no response,)

How can that be true? Desire, sexual desire sits at the heart of human life..

NAZARETH

Human life or just your life?

(no response, beat,)

How many are there?

SOLOMON

How many what?

NAZARETH

Uh, siblings?

Beat, in which SOLOMON bristles slightly,  
clearly unsatisfied.

SOLOMON

I'm just engaging a young woman who has come forward, Nazareth. That's all. There could be one. There could be none. There could be many. I don't know, Nazareth, and I have no way of truly knowing. And that's my cross to bear, alright?

(beat,)

Listen, your mother may have been right. This might be a bit too much to take in so late in the day. Perhaps I'll give you the night to sleep on it. We'll talk again in the morning.

SOLOMON starts to exit before NAZARETH  
stops him.



NAZARETH

Does Junior know about this?

SOLOMON

Everyone knows, Nazareth.

SOLOMON exits.

NAZARETH

It's interesting to feel like the last person to know anything in a family. Your instinct is to speak to someone but, to be honest, I was annoyed. They've all been processing it long before you. And between this and Junior somehow misleading or minimizing the threat of Morgan, my trust in folks was too shaken to be bothered. I suddenly had this strong desire to be alone and so I fled to the basement and climbed into the sofa bed. I thought passing the eff out would be just the form of escape I needed but I was up out of bed after only a couple hours, my mind racing with everything I had just learned, this new portrait of my family which was emerging. I decided to distract myself with some work - color correction on the shots from my lake sessions - but the wi-fi down there was terrible, so I eventually came up the steps and stumbled into a conversation I probably wasn't supposed to...

The living room is revealed again. JUNIOR and CLAUDINE, pajama'd, are present. JUNIOR sits on the couch which he has turned into a makeshift bed with sheets and pillows.

CLAUDINE

No, Junior! I'm going to need you to get up right now and go back on upstairs and be with your wife! She is not to be left alone!

JUNIOR

Mama, please, I am telling you, it's fine.

CLAUDINE

No, Junior, it is not fine! You told us that woman was preparing to take us to court and I just heard her on the phone with someone and you need to go figure out who - who in the world would she be calling this time of night!

NAZARETH

(to audience,)

I was relieved to hear Morgan was still alive.

CLAUDINE

We are not going to sit back and let her have her way with us! Get up and go figure out who she's talking to!

JUNIOR

Mama, it's probably just her mother, please -

CLAUDINE

Well 'probably' isn't going to cut it. You just said you thought the woman was trying to take away your kids and you are acting very relaxed about that fact which has me wondering if there's something you are not telling me.

JUNIOR

No, but me being around her only makes things worse!

Beat.

CLAUDINE

... If I didn't know any better, I'd think I was hearing cowardice in your voice. Is that what I'm hearing?

JUNIOR

No, Mama!

CLAUDINE rips the sheets off the bed.

CLAUDINE

Then get up! I don't care how you make her feel. I'm not asking you to make her feel good. I'm asking you to stand watch. You asked us to pray for your family and your marriage and I did but if, by some chance, your father was right when he accused you of crying wolf, then too bad, because now you're on wolf watch until that sun comes up, the airports open, and we can get this heifer packed up and out of this house -

(sniffs,)

And what am I smelling on you? Junior! Why are you lying over here drunk as a skunk -

JUNIOR

Mama, let me sleep! Please just let me sleep!

CLAUDINE startles at the sight of  
NAZARETH lurking.

CLAUDINE

Nazareth, what are you doing?

NAZARETH

I was trying to get some... work done... What are y'all doing?

CLAUDINE

I came down here and found your brother had decided, for some reason, to sleep on the couch and this is not a sleeping couch, so we are having a conversation about it.

JUNIOR, hiding tears, heads towards the kitchen.

CLAUDINE (CONT'D)

Where are you going!?

JUNIOR

I'm getting some water!

CLAUDINE

June -

CLAUDINE starts to head after JUNIOR but NAZARETH stops her.

NAZARETH

Mama!

CLAUDINE

Morgan is upstairs alone and I do not feel comfortable, Nazareth! If your brother can't keep an eye on her, I'm going to have to call someone here who will because I need help! That woman is dangerous - unstable! And I can't be the only one trying to keep this family from falling apart! I can't be the only one doing everything in this house! It's bad enough your father is losing his mind and wants to make a fool out of me! I need help, Nazareth!

NAZARETH

Go on back upstairs to bed and let me talk to him. You don't need to be getting your blood pressure up like this.

Beat.

CLAUDINE

Okay. But you must do something. This is very serious.

NAZARETH

Good night, mama.

CLAUDINE

Good night... Please don't let me find nobody sleeping on that couch when I'm back down in here making breakfast in a few hours...

CLAUDINE exits, reluctantly. JUNIOR eventually emerges from the kitchen, draining his water glass, having witnessed the end of that. He makes his way over to his father's liquor cabinet and pours himself a fresh drink.

NAZARETH

Junior -

JUNIOR

Don't judge me, man. I'm just trying to get to sleep.

NAZARETH

Nobody's judging you, but you told them Morgan's trying to divorce you?

JUNIOR

They were asking about her. I had to tell them something.

NAZARETH

Well, what happened with Morgan? Did you talk to her?

JUNIOR

... No.

NAZARETH

No?... Well, where are the pills? Did you get them?

(no response,)

Oh, June...

JUNIOR

Naz, listen... I'm going to be honest with you. I was thinking, what if - what if it's not for us to decide?

NAZARETH

What?

JUNIOR

Whether or not she does it.

NAZARETH

What are you talking / about?!

JUNIOR

Hear me out, hear me out - I was already worried about what prison would do to her, if she would make it, you know? I bet she's thinking the same things, that she isn't really...  
(MORE)

## JUNIOR (CONT'D)

built for something like that. So what if this is the best thing for her? It's her life, you know what I mean? What if I - what if we... just let her do it, you know?

## NAZARETH

Junior, you are talking crazy - stop it!

JUNIOR hangs his head in his hands.

## JUNIOR

You're right, you're right, you're right... And Mama's right... I'm a coward - a coward... And that's why I can't go on up there, Nazareth, because I'm scared I might go on and do it myself.

## NAZARETH

Do what?

## JUNIOR

Take her out.

## NAZARETH

/ Junior -

## JUNIOR

I want her gone, man. I think I want her dead.

## NAZARETH

Come on -

## JUNIOR

Honestly, I can't stop thinking... about how much easier it would be if Morgan... if she just went on and did it. If Morgan was gone... at least I'd be... I could still be a husband, you know? A husband in mourning - a survivor. It would make sense. I would make sense. I could still be a father...

## NAZARETH

Junior, I said stop talking like that!

## JUNIOR

Naz, man, you don't get it! You are not married. They make you get up there in front of God and everybody and say, "Til' death do you part." "Til' death," man! "Til' death!?" That's all you've got. Until then, you've got no other way out... And I just want to make sense again. I need to make sense...

Beat.

NAZARETH

I'll talk to Morgan.

JUNIOR

You will?

NAZARETH

Yes. Go take my bed in the basement. You just need to lay down somewhere quiet and sleep this off.

JUNIOR

... I can't do that. I don't want to put you out like that.

NAZARETH

It's okay. I'm not so tired.

JUNIOR

... But what about Mama?

NAZARETH

I'll handle Mama, too.

JUNIOR considers NAZARETH for a moment  
before embracing him.

JUNIOR

Thank you, little brother.

(beat, still in the embrace,)

And for the record I'm gonna accept you for whoever you... want to be, dude. It's alright with me. Love whoever you wanna love. I don't care.

Beat, in which Nazareth extracts himself.

NAZARETH

Did Dad talk to you about this Erica woman?

JUNIOR

What do you mean? When?

NAZARETH

When they called you in the office earlier?

JUNIOR

No. But what about her?

NAZARETH

Dad said you knew about her?

JUNIOR

Of course I did. She was the one I couldn't make go away. Bane of my existence...

NAZARETH

The one?

JUNIOR

Yeah. I didn't have the pull I used to - the connections. I used to be able to make certain calls and -

(snaps his fingers,)

Like with that punk-ass Xavier boy. Some of my best work. But now no one picks up.

NAZARETH

Wait a minute. I need to understand this. Are you saying Dad was making you make stuff disappear?

JUNIOR

No, no - Mama.

(off NAZARETH's reaction,)

Or she wasn't *making* me, but... it was *for* Pops. It was "maintenance," you know? We did it all for him - to protect him and his work. You didn't know any of this?

NAZARETH

No?

JUNIOR

Wow. I thought it was all for him but I guess we were protecting you, too, huh? You and your little pictures... Though what does it matter now? I don't know what that man expects me to do. Doesn't he see it's not the same for us? We don't got no "movement" like he had! Ain't nothing out here calling me to be a part of it but this - and I'm trying to be a part of it, man, and he won't let me? I'm already a laughingstock - I'm a joke! I can't be no joke for the rest of my life...

NAZARETH

Junior, go to bed.

JUNIOR

I'm trying to do good, Naz. I promise you.

NAZARETH

I know.

JUNIOR

How come he couldn't give you his name - make you the politician, so I could be the holy man?

JUNIOR exits downstairs.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

Why do men name their sons after themselves? I could never look at my brother again without wondering that, wondering about the person behind his name - our father's name. I wonder about how he might have been different if he had grown up being called something else. I wonder about what that man would have been like, what he would have worried about - the same things? Maybe worried about himself instead of some family "brand." Though Junior made me think somehow everything he'd done was... some individual act of love - an act of protection. Meanwhile, what had I done? Run away? Hide away? Then I remembered Morgan, the promise I'd made to him.

I pulled out my phone and texted my sister in law, "Are you awake? I need to speak to you. About Junior. I'm downstairs." There was no reply for a long while but I sat here, in the dark, trying not to imagine the worst. I didn't even notice her walk in.

MORGAN enters down the stairs.

MORGAN

You rang?

NAZARETH

Hi, Morgan.

MORGAN

Hi, Nazareth.

MORGAN, without stopping, crosses to the birthday cake, which she begins to slice.

NAZARETH

What are you doing?

MORGAN

I'm having me a slice of this here cake. I don't know if you recall, but I didn't exactly get to enjoy my dinner... I'm still hungry... Where is your brother?

NAZARETH

He's in the basement. Asleep.



MORGAN

Hmm... So what do you want?

Beat.

NAZARETH

So Junior tells me he... found some pills.

Beat.

MORGAN

... What pills?

NAZARETH

Your pills. In your toiletry case... and said there are a lot of them. And I'm just curious.

MORGAN

...Curious about what?

NAZARETH

He's worried, Morgan. So am I. He says you've been making threats. I know things are bad, but they're not worth your life...

Beat.

MORGAN

... Who said those pills are for me?

NAZARETH

You're telling me you're out here trying to poison somebody?

(no response,)

This is serious, Morgan.

MORGAN

That's my legal prescription upstairs, Nazareth with which I am allowed to do whatever I want. And I don't need you standing there, trying to scold me for something I haven't done. You don't think if I wanted to, I wouldn't have done something already - took a knife out that kitchen to a warm bath and cut up these pretty little wrists, bludgeoned myself to death with one of these ugly ass statues? You think I don't know where your father keeps his daddy's guns downstairs? So why don't you relax? Those pills were a test for your brother and his ass failed. Big time.

NAZARETH

A test?

MORGAN

You think I lived with Junior as long as I have and I don't know how to get inside that man's mind - make him notice what I need him to notice? That dummy fell right into the trap and now I know all I need to know.

NAZARETH

Which is what?

MORGAN

That, even if it came down to my living or dying, that man would choose you people.

NAZARETH

What do you mean?

MORGAN

Those pills are still up there, Nazareth. Still in that bag where he left them. Didn't take them away. Didn't say anything to me. Never even asked about them. And I left them mofos everywhere in our house. But he went and told you all about it, didn't he?

NAZARETH

...He wasn't sure -

MORGAN

"He wasn't sure?"

NAZARETH

What you were doing.

MORGAN

So he got you over here confronting me on his behalf?

(beat,)

If he wasn't sure, he should have asked me. If he wanted to stop me, he would have stopped me. That man doesn't care about me... And, look, I get it. You Jaspers are a very seductive bunch. I certainly fell for it. Earlier I heard your friend Aziza down here just falling all over herself in your father's presence - *your father*... And I thought, "Lord, I recognize that." Being all dazzled by all the Symbolic Blackness before you - so blinded by the Black Excellence, Black Power, Black Righteousness you can't see the old man standing there in front you just scratching his ass. And I know I was my own little symbol up in here, a model wife in some "Black power couple" - brown but not *too brown*, pretty but non-threatening - charming, dignified, put together, but "real." Your brother just loved my "realness" - my "origins" - loved to tell people all about them - every party, every dinner, trotting out all the details of my "humble background," the little girl who pulled herself up out of the projects mopping people's floors. A walking example of all the folks your Daddy and all his friends had been marching for. Oh, I was a real catch - a trophy.

(MORE)

## MORGAN (CONT'D)

He made everything about me sound so golden, so precious, so valuable - and I was convinced that was him loving me, that that was love, Nazareth. But that was just politics. Politics all the way down. He never loved me. My dumbass...

(beat,)

Because he sure wasn't thinking of me and my "origins" when he did all the things he did. And he knew whole branches of my family have been in and out of prison. My mama moved us to Maryland to get away from all that and now look where I've landed. Where is all that Black power-couple power now? That investigation came down and suddenly I couldn't find a lick of it. My house was full of closed doors to rooms I wasn't allowed in anymore - my own house - all these men camped out making plans, strategizing, telling tales - all without a word of input from me. Meanwhile, I was just left to wander my hallways, being moved from room to room like a piece of furniture. But I was just furniture this whole time - a prop.

## NAZARETH

I'm sorry about what's happened to you.

Beat.

## MORGAN

Thank you, Nazareth.

## NAZARETH

...But I don't think those pills were just a test.

Beat.

## MORGAN

You know what, you're right. At one time, maybe the thought did cross my mind to end this. But I'll tell you what I realized. I have given this man children. I have brought life into this world for him and let him throw his last name on them but what he doesn't understand is that those lives are still *my flesh*. They are me and *my matter*. I can't go nowhere and leave my flesh behind to become no props. I owe them that. And, if you were really sorry, you would help me.

## NAZARETH

...Help you how?

Beat.

## MORGAN

You got to help us get on up out of this family. But the only way that's going to happen is if you are willing to testify on my behalf.

NAZARETH

Testify... to what?

MORGAN

I'm divorcing your brother the minute I can. I have to - especially now. But the way your family tied me up in this damn prenup - I can't get what I'm owed unless I can prove I was defrauded here and you know I was. I didn't have nothing to do with what your brother was doing. When I get out, I will have nothing and I don't come from money. I've been disbarred for this. The only marketable skill I have left is cleaning houses. I can't be like my mama, have my kids running around behind me, cleaning houses...

(beat,)

I see you. I know you feel the same way I do in this family - the same kind of trapped. I saw you growing up in all this. I know why you be running around out there in those woods. I know you want to be left alone. So do I. And I promise I'll make it as painless as I can - but I need to get me and my kids out. You just got to tell me you'll help me.

NAZARETH

You told us all to beware... Why? What were you - What are you going to do?

Beat.

MORGAN

I was just talking, Nazareth. You know I don't have anything else I can do at this point but talk.

Beat.

NAZARETH

I can't help you, Morgan. You know that. I don't want to lie to you. I'm sorry.

MORGAN

(after a beat, chillier,)

Well... You let me know if something other than sorry comes to you... And you better pray I don't get some real help in the meantime... in which case, you really better watch out.

MORGAN exits upstairs with her plate.

NAZARETH

After that, what else was I going to do but lay my black ass down? I closed my eyes and tried to will sleep upon myself. Instead, it was one of those half-in-half-out things, where maybe my body rested, but not my mind. I didn't know what to do. And, eventually, the sun began to rise and the next thing I knew I was hearing a combination of things I hadn't heard in... decades: bacon sizzling under the sound of my father playing piano.

## 2.

NAZARETH, on the couch. SOLOMON, at the piano.

NAZARETH

Back when I was a kid, piano was the first thing that woke us up on any given Sunday, how we knew it was Sunday. It was my father's way of summoning us into wakefulness, calling us downstairs to the family dining room for Sunday breakfast before church, and, often, how he let us know he was home. No matter where he was in the world, he always made it a requirement that he be home by Sunday morning, be back and sitting at these keys to play us awake. Sometimes it was the only time we saw him... Lying here, I thought about what he'd shared with me last night, if he was really expecting us to pick up where we left off. But then I opened my eyes, and my mother was standing over me, staring.

CLAUDINE is revealed, looming over  
NAZARETH on the couch, some sort of kitchen  
utensil in-hand.

CLAUDINE

What did I say about that couch?

NAZARETH

It was an accident. I nodded off.

CLAUDINE

Uh huh... Well, as long as you're not your brother. Did you eat a slice of my birthday cake?

NAZARETH

No...

CLAUDINE

Then who did?

NAZARETH

I don't know.

CLAUDINE

It was Junior, wasn't it? I was really looking forward to that cake.

NAZARETH

Can't you still eat it?

CLAUDINE

Of course but I wanted to blow out the candles, have the first slice. Otherwise, it's not your birthday and, after all that last night, I still feel like I haven't been properly feted...How long did it take you to get him back upstairs?

NAZARETH

(lying,)

Um... I don't remember.

CLAUDINE

You don't remember... What did you all talk about?

NAZARETH

Mom...

CLAUDINE

What? I'm just asking. You don't have to tell me. I just hope that little girl didn't try anything in the middle of the night...Have you spoken to your friend Aziza?

NAZARETH

I haven't seen her yet.

CLAUDINE

Well, I heard her in her room, messing around. Maybe you should go talk to her. I got something started for her to sign before she leaves. I know she wanted to head back today and the roads don't seem as bad as they were expecting. I'll make you some coffee...

CLAUDINE exits to back into the kitchen.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

I watched my mother pad into the kitchen and heard the clinking of crockery as she put on a fresh pot and I quickly checked for Junior in the basement. He wasn't there and I thought for a moment maybe he had somehow found the courage to wind up back upstairs after all. Then, listening to my father's playing, I thought about Aziza rustling around in my old room upstairs, doing God Knows What - avoiding me? I had been waiting for enough courage to show up to go upstairs and talk to her but I couldn't do it. Then, as if she'd been reading my mind, she was coming down the stairs, trying to sneak out.

AZIZA enters from upstairs, her day bag in tow,  
and he watches her.

NAZARETH (CONT'D)

Aziza.

SOLOMON, hearing this, stops playing, and gets up from the piano to confirm AZIZA's presence.

AZIZA  
(caught,)

Oh, hi...

NAZARETH  
Hi. Are you leaving?

AZIZA  
Yes, I saw the salt trucks pass by and I thought I would go ahead and take my chances -

SOLOMON  
Good morning.

AZIZA  
Good morning, Father Jasper.

SOLOMON exits into the kitchen to retrieve CLAUDINE.

AZIZA (CONT'D)  
Was that him playing the piano?

NAZARETH  
Yes...

AZIZA  
Not him also being a decent / pianist -

NAZARETH  
Listen. I need to talk to you about last night, Aziza, and apologize. I owe you some context about what was happening with me -

AZIZA  
Actually I need to talk to you about something -

SOLOMON and CLAUDINE enter with a cup of coffee.

CLAUDINE  
Aziza, good morning!

AZIZA

Good morning, Mother Jasper -

CLAUDINE, handing one cup of coffee to  
NAZARETH, clocks AZIZA's bags.

CLAUDINE

You're not heading out *already*!?

CLAUDINE makes eyes at NAZARETH like,  
"Did you ask her?" NAZARETH shakes his  
head. CLAUDINE rolls her eyes in  
disappointment.

AZIZA

I was just saying to Naz here that I thought I should go ahead and take my chances. I've got to be back in the city for work by tomorrow morning.

CLAUDINE

Oh, no, no, Aziza, no! I cannot let you get on that road for twelve-plus hours without at least a little something in your stomach. Stay! I think we might even have to have birthday cake for breakfast. Wouldn't that be something?

AZIZA

It's quite alright...

CLAUDINE

I am begging you to give us a chance to redeem ourselves after that circus last night. I can't have you going back to New York and talking about us.

AZIZA

(laughs politely,)

Oh, don't worry. I mean, you don't want to see dinner at my mom's place.

CLAUDINE

Is that so? You are so fascinating! There are so many things I'm still dying to know about you, Aziza. Do you drink coffee?

AZIZA

I do.

CLAUDINE gives NAZARETH's coffee to  
AZIZA.



CLAUDINE

Sonny, come join us?

CLAUDINE takes AZIZA by the arm and sits.

CLAUDINE (CONT'D)

So! Aziza! My husband and I were very intrigued by the revelation yesterday that Nazareth here was *helping you* to conceive -

AZIZA

(glances at NAZARETH,)

Yes...

CLAUDINE

That's just not something that ever really happened when I was your age. The world today is full of so many new-fangled ideas and things and people. It's truly marvelous... How did you... How did you know that this was something you wanted to do? When did you know?

AZIZA

Um, well, actually it was during lockdown -

CLAUDINE

During the pandemic?

AZIZA

Yes, that's right, the summer of 2020 - which was also... well people used to call it the "uprising." I don't know what people refer to that time as now - or if people even remember it honestly.

CLAUDINE

Oh, I remember. We had some of that here, too.

AZIZA

Well, I was one of those people marching every single day, you know?

CLAUDINE

Every day?

AZIZA

Yes, because it truly felt like the end of the world and it was all I felt like I could do with myself. By that point, I'd been laid off my job. My old landlord was being insane. We were walking around all the time worrying about dying - and some of us did die - and then the police were just kneeling on peoples' necks and taking lives with impunity.

(MORE)

AZIZA (CONT'D)

And once the marches started there would always come a moment, near the end, when the police came out and I had to think myself, "Is this the night? Is this the last one I get on this Earth?" Because you really had to think that way.

SOLOMON

Yes, I know that feeling...

AZIZA

Right? People really don't talk about it anymore but it was a very traumatic period. And I don't know what it was exactly - maybe it was all the chanting I was doing all day, every day. You know, you say things enough times, you start to hear them differently. You start somehow seeing inside words or between the words and, with all this chanting about black lives mattering, I was suddenly in some trance or something - walking around with all these new thoughts about life and life mattering and what made it matter -

CLAUDINE

Hmph...

AZIZA

(self-conscious,)

I know this doesn't completely make sense -

CLAUDINE

I was actually just thinking about... how familiar this all sounded... Obviously we, too, have had our share of marches - of chanting. I know what you mean.

SOLOMON

That language really works its way inside you.

AZIZA

That's right. I guess that's the whole point. But soon it felt like marching and chanting wasn't enough. I wanted to - I *had to* show life how much it mattered to me. So I one day just woke up and started saying to myself, "Aziza, you're having a baby. If you survive this, you're having a baby no matter what." That whole period I actually felt very... in tune with my self. I was journaling a lot, it was a whole thing. But I suddenly didn't know what I had been waiting for.

CLAUDINE

So you're planning to do this on your own? I thought you might have had a... friend or something.

AZIZA

No, I am not partnered, but, I mean, I wouldn't be completely alone. My mother is still alive. I have a sister in Connecticut. She's got two kids.

(MORE)

AZIZA (CONT'D)

And, you know, I'm relatively privileged. I have a very nice place, which I own thank you very much, I have a good steady job, good neighbors, a community. And all kinds of mothers have been raising babies since the beginning of time with less - multiple babies. What's just one, I figured. Especially one that I'm *choosing* - one that's wanted.

Beat.

SOLOMON

I know this isn't any of my business and I hope you don't mind my asking but Nazareth tells me you wanted to keep his donorship... anonymous?

AZIZA

Well, not exactly.

SOLOMON

Not exactly?

AZIZA

It's what we agreed on, what made us both comfortable. Like I thought it might be nice if the child could have the option if, you know, he or she ever became... curious. Like leaving a door open, just in case anyone got curious... But I get it now, I mean, knowing you all are who you all are....

CLAUDINE

Do you have a living will?

AZIZA

Not yet...

CLAUDINE

Aziza, you cannot have a child without a living will! Truly anything could happen - God forbid! Did you and Nazareth have any sort of... agreement in place? Any kind of arrangement?

AZIZA

Um, not really. It just felt like counting chicks before they hatched or something.

CLAUDINE

I don't know if my son told you but I actually practice a little law from time to time.

AZIZA

Oh?

CLAUDINE

Just part-time. Though it would really be an honor for me to help you draft something up - for the two of you - just as a kind of insurance? In case anything were to happen. Until you can have something more fully fleshed out. Which of course I could help you write - pro bono, obviously!

AZIZA

Oh that's okay...

CLAUDINE

... "That's okay?"

AZIZA

I have actually changed my mind. I was just about to tell Nazareth here that it's unlikely I am going to go through with this arrangement - this specific arrangement.

NAZARETH

... What does that mean?

AZIZA

I think I'm going to pursue another donor.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

I felt something around this moment that... really took me by surprise. It was like... the closest thing I can say is it was like... a string snapping... somewhere deep inside me. A string I didn't notice was even there. I still don't know how else to describe it.

(to AZIZA,)

I guess... I want to ask... why?

CLAUDINE

Yes, what happened?

AZIZA

Nothing, uh, *happened*. I just worry I may have, as you've suggested, rushed into a decision that probably needed more thought.

SOLOMON

I thought the deed's already been done?

AZIZA

Well, we don't know if it was successful. Getting pregnant is never a sure thing.

NAZARETH

But what if it was-

AZIZA

Nazareth. Do you really need to ask me that right now?

SOLOMON

Wow...

Beat, in which SOLOMON crosses back to the piano, sits, and starts to play before CLAUDINE stops him.

CLAUDINE

Solomon, I don't want to hear any more piano.

(to AZIZA,)

What happened, Aziza?

AZIZA

Listen: I'm really not trying to be disrespectful. It's really just me. I promise. Nazareth is an amazing person. You are amazing people. It's been such an honor to spend this time with you.

CLAUDINE

But something has changed your mind. What?

AZIZA

I just want to be a little more intentional.

CLAUDINE

Intentional how?

AZIZA

Like I should have asked about things -

CLAUDINE

Things like what?

AZIZA

His... his family's - medical history -

CLAUDINE

What would you like to know?

Beat.

AZIZA

I... I'm really not trying to insult anyone.

CLAUDINE

Aziza, I have fed you and given you shelter for the night and I think been very courteous throughout, so I am asking, woman to woman, for you to do me the courtesy of telling me what it is you think wrong with my son? Please.

Beat.

AZIZA

It's not that anything's wrong with him...

CLAUDINE

Then why is he no longer a viable candidate for you?

AZIZA

There's mental illness in the family, right?

CLAUDINE

Excuse me?

AZIZA

I mean Junior...

CLAUDINE

There are competing theories about why Junior is what he is -

AZIZA

Okay, but also isn't one of your grandchildren... neurodivergent?

CLAUDINE

....According to his mother... Whose genes are also in play here, not just ours.

AZIZA

That is a fair point - but I just think I'm allowed to take these things seriously...

CLAUDINE

And do you feel I do not take these things seriously? Do you think I've never seen a developmentally challenged child before? And I mean seriously challenged, can't take care of themselves, can't walk, can't talk -

AZIZA

Nazareth is an awkward communicator... I always thought he was just a very laid back person but we had a very explosive encounter yesterday, which frightened me and has made me reconsider some things. He has a very difficult time with change - this is something I noticed back in New York but I'm seeing it here in a different context and I've seen him be hyperfocused - obsessive with his interests - like his photography - and you know... there's sometimes a link between the spectrum... and his sexual type.

(MORE)

## AZIZA (CONT'D)

And I'm not saying that they are actual symptoms of anything! I'm not a doctor! But these are just things that I'm unsure of - that together paint a picture that is just making me feel unsure... and I just don't want to feel unsure.

## CLAUDINE

This is one of these new-fangled developments I was alluding to. Where I came from, you do not dare think you could design your children. That's God's job. Back in my day, it was understood that a child was a gift, and that gift came wrapped, and when you accepted that gift, you accepted whatever was inside, because you may choose to start a family but the child chooses you. That is what makes this the gift it is. That's what you were signing up for - the risk you were taking, stepping into this life, this privilege, this exercise in faith and patience, this prolonged meditation on the mysteries of life and time's passage. That is what made it holy. Your task is only to hold space for these souls, guard and protect them and their growth from this flip world of fleeting, arbitrary opinions and its ever-changing roster of "syndromes" and "disabilities." Meanwhile, I have watched this person standing here literally put himself together, build his mind before he knew there was even a mind to build, wrap his mouth around language and its power, pull himself off the ground and begin to scoot, walk, run, fly - fly away from home and fly back. And if I know one thing in this world I know that there is nothing - *nothing* wrong with this man.

(gestures to NAZARETH,)

And I wish you a similar depth of knowing. Aziza, I hope that you do get to bear witness to the tremendous miracle of motherhood, because that is the only way you will truly *know* what a person is, what a *life* is. And I hope that, on your journey, you are not so blessed with a child that the whole world wants to have an opinion about, but I suspect, given you seem to be in the market for a brown one, that fate may be unavoidable.

Beat.

## AZIZA

I just - I think the point of making the choice is I get to choose what's... right for me.

MORGAN enters from upstairs, struggling with some luggage, looking for AZIZA.

## MORGAN

Aziza?

## AZIZA

Oh, hi. Sorry. Got caught up in a conversation. Thank you, Mother Jasper. Did you text me?

## MORGAN

Yes, but it's fine...

MORGAN carefully continues on her way down the stairs.

CLAUDINE

What is going on here?

AZIZA

Morgan just asked me for a ride to the airport.

CLAUDINE

(realizing,)

You've been talking to Morgan...

MORGAN

I'm leaving Claudine. I thought you'd be happy. I'm leaving your house for once and for all.

CLAUDINE

(to AZIZA,)

This little girl has been in your ear, hasn't she? She's poisoned your mind. What has she been saying to you?

AZIZA

She hasn't been saying anything...

CLAUDINE

(to MORGAN,)

Where is Junior?

MORGAN

I have no idea where Junior is. He isn't downstairs in the basement?

CLAUDINE

In the basement?

MORGAN

(to AZIZA,)

I'll wait in the car if you want to unlock it...

CLAUDINE

No, you stay right there...

(calling out,)

Solomon! Morgan is trying to leave with Aziza. Can you go find Junior? Maybe he's in the basement!



SOLOMON exits into the basement, looking for Junior.

CLAUDINE (CONT'D)

Aziza, I must say I am concerned for your well-being.

SOLOMON (O.S.)

Junior!

AZIZA

/ What?

CLAUDINE

I'm going to insist that you speak with me in my office before you go.

AZIZA

For what?

MORGAN

Don't do it / Aziza. She's gonna make you sign something -

CLAUDINE

This woman is / very dangerous -

AZIZA

What?

MORGAN

A non-disclosure agreement. Don't do it. / Let's go.

CLAUDINE

Morgan, I am not talking to you!

(to AZIZA,)

She is trying to pull you into something that you do not want to be involved in / and

MORGAN

No I am not!

CLAUDINE

- it's important that you allow me to help you protect yourself -

MORGAN

Don't do it, Aziza! Don't wind up like me! / They'll make you sign away everything - sign away every little right you've got to speak, to think - don't do it, let's go!

CLAUDINE

Morgan, be quiet! She is going to try to subpoena you to testify in something that you do not want to be involved in -

(to MORGAN,)

/ Be quiet, be quiet, BE QUIET!

MORGAN pulls out her cell phone and begins to record CLAUDINE.

MORGAN

Don't you come one step closer to me, Claudine! / Not one step closer!

CLAUDINE

Morgan, put that phone down! You do not have the right to record me in my own / home!

JUNIOR enters in the bee suit, carrying a small bucket brimming with honeycomb.

JUNIOR

Hey, hey, hey! Why is everybody screaming again?! Come on you two!

CLAUDINE

Junior...

MORGAN

(seeing JUNIOR,)

What the hell...

JUNIOR

Morgan, Mama, please, can you two just... give each other space? Please?

(sees MORGAN's things,)

Where are you going?

CLAUDINE

Junior, Junior - you're dripping all over the floor - What are you -

JUNIOR

I can put it down in the kitchen, here let me -

SOLOMON re-enters, seeing JUNIOR in the bee suit and is horrified.

SOLOMON

Junior... what... are you doing?

JUNIOR

Pops, look! You said the bees didn't make enough honey, but look! Look!

SOLOMON

What!?

JUNIOR

Man, I couldn't get to sleep last night so I got to reading some of those books you have downstairs. Made me so curious, I'm telling you, I wound up having all these dreams about them! So I got up early before the sun came up and thought, "Let me see these bugs." Suited up, took myself out to the garage. Man, those things are fascinating! I get why you love them, Pop! And then I saw there was some honey inside - you missed some! - I went ahead and got it for you! It took me a minute but I figured it out -

SOLOMON

What have you done?!

JUNIOR

... What do you mean?

SOLOMON

They're gonna die! You've killed them!

JUNIOR

No, I haven't. They're still in there -

SOLOMON

But that's their food! You just took their food!

JUNIOR

But can't they just make more?

SOLOMON

Do you see any goddamn flowers outside, Junior?! Where are they supposed to get pollen to make honey? When you harvest the honey, you don't take it all! You leave some for the bees! That's how they get through the winter! My God! You've killed them! Seriously, Junior?

NAZARETH

Dad, don't you see he's sick?

SOLOMON

This is not sick! This is just stupid! Read half a book and suddenly you're a goddamn entomol-

(MORE)

## SOLOMON (CONT'D)

(to JUNIOR,)

You're not going to let me have one thing!? Not one thing, huh? Not one source of... pride or dignity in my life! Not my name, not my family, not my dreams, not even my bees, not nothing! You're just going to / rub it all out, huh? Work and fight my whole life and this is what I get?! This is what I end up with?! / God, what is the lesson here?! Tell me: what is the lesson?!

## JUNIOR

I didn't know that... I... asked you to teach me... You never taught me. / I wanted you to teach me -

## SOLOMON

Oh my God! Get that boy away from me, Claudine!

CLAUDINE restrains SOLOMON.

## CLAUDINE

Solomon, will you stop it! They're just bees! / You can get more bees!

## SOLOMON

Claudine, please, / Claudine... Claudine... Claudine...

SOLOMON throws himself down somewhere, and begins to weep into his hands. CLAUDINE half-holds, half-restrains him.

## JUNIOR

I asked you to teach me.... I was just trying to get back to... something - to myself. I was trying to reconnect with... with... my roots... I'm sorry... I didn't know. How was I supposed to know if... if you were never going to teach me? You tell me... to take responsibility. "You-you." "Me-me?" But who is that? You never told me who that was... Me? Who is that? Who am I?... Pops?... Who am I?

JUNIOR, getting no response, looks around for support. MORGAN looks away. CLAUDINE deals with SOLOMON.

## NAZARETH

It's alright, June...

Beat, before JUNIOR runs downstairs.

## CLAUDINE

Morgan, will you just go after him!? Please go after him!

MORGAN

No! You go after him! I'm done going after him! I'm punching out! Y'all can come after me - Aziza, I'm ready to go -

The sound of a GUNSHOT from downstairs.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

I don't know if you've ever heard the sound of a gunshot going off in your house before - or any house. It sounds very... unreal. It takes a moment for you to realize that what you're hearing is what you're hearing. Time slows down... And, if someone else is around, you look at each other, and you can sort of watch reality dawn on someone else's face. It's an interesting sight, seeing a person go from unknowing to knowing to panic -

CLAUDINE

(calling out,)

JUNIOR!?

No response.

MORGAN

JUNIOR!?

CLAUDINE, NAZARETH, and MORGAN spring into action. SOLOMON and AZIZA are stunned, sharing an empty look.

NAZARETH is at the door first, looks downstairs, sees something -

NAZARETH

JUNE!?

NAZARETH runs downstairs. MORGAN follows him. CLAUDINE remains near the top of the stairs.

MORGAN (O.S.)

JUNIOR!? JUNIOR!?

CLAUDINE

Is he okay?! Is he okay?! Is he okay?! Is he okay?!... Is he okay?!... IS HE OKAY?!... WHY IS NOBODY ANSWERING -

(sees something, steps away,)

Jesus, please, Jesus, please, Jesus, please, Jesus...

SOLOMON  
(finally speaking,)

What... happened?

NAZARETH and MORGAN emerge from the basement with a weeping, pained JUNIOR between them. NAZARETH is carrying a gun, which he has just managed to get out of JUNIOR's hands. CLAUDINE sees it all and screams. JUNIOR collapses to the floor. CLAUDINE rushes to him and examines him.

NAZARETH

He missed - /

MORGAN  
(pulling Junior up,)

/ Come on, come on, let's sit down.

SOLOMON

/ He missed?

CLAUDINE

Is there blood!? Where is the blood!? Where is the blood!?

NAZARETH

He missed. He shot the wall. I got it away from him before he could try again.

JUNIOR

How come I couldn't even do that right? I couldn't even do that right...

CLAUDINE  
(upset,)

Why, Junior! Why?! / Why!?

JUNIOR

How come nobody ever taught me how to hunt...?

SOLOMON rushes over, angrily.

SOLOMON

What the hell is wrong with you, boy? / Get a grip! GET A GRIP!

CLAUDINE comes between them.

CLAUDINE

SOLOMON WILL YOU STOP! STOP IT!

SOLOMON stops.

CLAUDINE (CONT'D)

The boy is sick can't you see?! And it's you! It's you who's done it to him - doing it to him - to all of us! Driving us crazy! You're doing this! Can't you see?! Or, I guess to see it, you'd have to know what you were looking at, huh?! You'd have to have been around to watch the sickness take hold - and I can't do it anymore! You're blind and I'm not shouldering it - not anymore! I can't stand it! I won't! "Working and fighting" your whole life and I'm trying to keep this boy alive!

JUNIOR

I'm sorry... I'm sorry....

MORGAN crosses to comfort JUNIOR.

CLAUDINE

Go somewhere, Solomon! Talking about picking up my slack - you wouldn't even know where to begin! I said go somewhere! Be somewhere else like you've always been while I'm trying to keep these boys alive!

Beat, in which SOLOMON stands there, unable to speak, boiling.

NAZARETH

It's okay, Dad. Just go somewhere. Go somewhere, please...

SOLOMON, leaves, reluctantly.

CLAUDINE notices AZIZA, hiding wherever she's hiding, watching, stunned.

CLAUDINE

(angered,)

And I don't need you standing there, looking at me like that - with your eyes like that! Do you think I would choose this - that I chose this?! Does this look like a choice to you?! The whole world is out to get these men and I'm fighting every day to keep them feeling whole! What would you do? What would you do?

Beat, in which CLAUDINE cries for a bit.

AZIZA

I really don't think I should stay, here...

NAZARETH

You shouldn't...

AZIZA

Okay...

AZIZA starts to leave but CLAUDINE, pulling herself together quickly, stops her.

CLAUDINE

Wait, wait, wait! Aziza, please, please I am begging you. Just come into my office with me. Please. Let me show you what I'm asking for. It is very simple.

AZIZA

Are you serious?

CLAUDINE

Yes -

NAZARETH

(stern,)

If you're really calling it off, what difference does it make to you... What difference does anything you saw or heard make to you...

AZIZA

Is this a threat?

NAZARETH

No. I'm just asking you to please leave me alone. Leave us alone. If you were ever a real friend to me, just... Forget any of this ever happened. Please...

Beat.

AZIZA

Mother Jasper, please show me to your office.

CLAUDINE

Sure. This way.

CLAUDINE mouths "thank you" to  
NAZARETH and leads AZIZA off.

NAZARETH

(to the audience,)

Aziza and I... Those were the last things we ever said to each other. We never spoke again - ever again... She disappeared in my mother's office and, I guess, wound up sneaking out through the garage...

(MORE)



## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

Morgan and I stayed with June, trying to get him to stop crying, but then eventually Morgan excused the two of them and took him upstairs, where I guess she did what she claimed she was always having to do - nurse him out of something.

At a loss for anything to do, I disappeared into the basement, which felt haunted now by... what could have been. I sat on the edge of the sofa bed, staring at a hole in the wall that hadn't been there the night before and I'm not sure if it was what had just happened or the night leading up to it, I crashed. When I woke up, it was only a few hours later, but the house was so quiet. My father was there at the piano again, playing. For a moment, I thought I had dreamed the whole thing or that the day had somehow reset itself, but I knew it wasn't true. His piano music hadn't summoned anyone but me - and we were alone.

## 3.

SOLOMON is revealed at the piano again. He noticed NAZARETH watching and he stops.

NAZARETH

Where is everyone?

Beat.

SOLOMON

They're at church.

NAZARETH

They went to church?!

SOLOMON

Yes. Everyone.

NAZARETH

And nobody woke me?

SOLOMON

They tried. You were dead to the world. No one could wake you.

NAZARETH

... And you didn't go?

SOLOMON

No, I did not....I might take myself later. To second service.

Beat.

NAZARETH

How is... Junior doing?

SOLOMON

I think he is doing as well as can be doing, given the situation. I'm supposed to pass on their goodbyes, by the way. They are going straight to the airport right after church... He really wanted to be with the twins...

NAZARETH

Aha... How are you feeling?

SOLOMON

I feel... many things. I feel... bad. I feel sadness. I feel confusion. Your brother was suffering and I didn't see it. For some reason I couldn't see it. But also I feel... a little in mourning.

NAZARETH

In mourning?

SOLOMON

This is going to sound ridiculous and I don't intend it to but... I really loved those bees... They're such extraordinary creatures... In a hive, you know, they are all related and they are literally born with a role to play. They emerge from their cells with no confusion as to their purpose. And there's not a hive you will find anywhere on the planet that doesn't adhere to some version of these rules. It's one of those things I find that, if you think about it long enough, you can't help but wonder at God's power - his supreme intelligence and majesty... And honey never ever spoils. Did you know that? Everything else anybody or anything can make in the world spoils... but not honey. And bees just... make that. And to think that I could, in some small way, participate in the miracle of honey, a sweetness everlasting... It gave me... purpose. Yes. A small sense of purpose. Which was always something I needed. Because, without it, there is just despair. There is just emptiness....

You've heard me say it a thousand times but the Movement was... There was such an extraordinary sense of God's presence then - everywhere you looked. Purpose. And we felt as organized as a hive. Everybody knew their role, knew their potential, that common goal and how to achieve it - and we were all walking through the world just glowing with God. And when that world began to change... there was nothing like it, no feeling like it. The vision of the better place we all carried with us - it was coming true. And I saw us all in it - Claudine, myself, my family. I was to sire a dynasty worthy of the nation of giants from which we are descended. My namesake, he would forge the path through the halls of power, become royal - a king. And, you, named for the home of all salvation, would set folks free in their spirits. That was the design! When I close my eyes, I can still almost... see it... like a map. My faith never felt stronger. I can swear to you I felt God with me the whole way.

(MORE)

## SOLOMON (CONT'D)

But then when your brother's... behavior was brought to light, that faith was shaken. And then when, soon after, you had turned your back on that life of the spirit, the faith crumbled, Nazareth. It crumbled a little. And I'm still putting it together. I close my eyes and where there once was a vision suddenly there is nothing.. I had gotten something so wrong... but what was it? What had that vision in my mind been? Where had it come from? Was it just... vanity? Had the devil put it there?

But I want my faith back, Nazareth. I want to feel myself walking in his steps again - in his light. This wasn't the world I saw myself in. I want to find where I strayed from the path.

## NAZARETH

If there was ever a path to begin with.

## SOLOMON

What?

## NAZARETH

What if there is no path? What if all steps are His path? What if there is no one direction but all directions and that each one contains its own... glory to be found, its own purpose. Or what if purpose is simply... to commit to stepping, to taking the path, to seeing what it contains for you and... finding God there... Or... I don't know...

Beat.

## SOLOMON

Why in the world did you leave divinity school?

## NAZARETH

I... I just didn't get it. I was afraid to admit that I didn't get it.

## SOLOMON

What do you mean you didn't get it?

## NAZARETH

The things I was reading, the things I was being taught, the conversations I was told to be having... I just didn't get it. I didn't think that they were wrong - these people and these books. In fact, it seemed very right, but it just didn't match up with my insides - with what I was feeling...

(beat,)

Or maybe I was just burned out on school...

Beat.

SOLOMON

I guess it's never too late to go back. If you wanted to.

NAZARETH

No... it's not.

SOLOMON

Maybe I could go back...

NAZARETH

Yeah, right...

SOLOMON

Yeah. "Yeah, right." Perhaps I must simply re-find God in this path down which I have found myself...

(beat,)

What's to become of you and Aziza?

NAZARETH

Silence, I imagine. Legally enforced. Mama had her sign something. Didn't you two talk about it?

SOLOMON

We did. I wasn't sure if it was something you wanted or not. I thought maybe you might... reconsider...

(beat,)

I did like her. She made me think. Very few people are capable of that these days and she seemed to think she knew what she was talking about when she spoke of a "spectrum of sexuality," etc. And I'm not sure I bought everything she was selling me - but it made me think. I remembered that there was actually a time when "celibacy" or abstinent behavior was seen as... a sign of holiness and religious conviction. And that squared a bit with what I've always thought of you. You've always burned with a kind of quiet, inner light that you sometimes see in men touched with the divine. I thought about the countless hordes of monks and nuns and ascetics - the Desert Fathers - to whom we owe so much of our knowledge and understanding of faith. Who knows why they chose to renounce what they renounce - and if it had actually been so difficult for them? Perhaps they were like you, folks who just... desired solitude, who were called to it for whatever reason. And I began to find myself warming up to the notion of it.

NAZARETH

So you... believe me now?

SOLOMON

I am open to the possibility of believing you. But I do have one perhaps rather provocative circle of thought I'm having a hard time closing up...

NAZARETH

Which is...?

SOLOMON

If in fact, as you have claimed you are without sexual attraction for any person - regardless of gender - how in the world did you provide this young woman with your... genetic material?

Beat. NAZARETH sighs.

NAZARETH

Well it's not like the machinery is broken, Dad. I just don't feel... that desire for people. I don't look at someone and go, "That's someone I want to touch or be intimate with. That's someone I want to spend the rest of my life with." I just don't have that.

SOLOMON

Then what do you have?

NAZARETH

What do you mean?

SOLOMON

When it came time for you to provide your friend with your... seed, what did you do?

NAZARETH

Are you serious right now?

SOLOMON

Dead serious, son. Did you touch her?

NAZARETH

No. I took myself to the bathroom.

SOLOMON

And did what?

NAZARETH

I used my imagination.

SOLOMON

And what did you imagine?

NAZARETH

I imagined... lakes.

SOLOMON

Excuse me?

NAZARETH

I imagined the lakes, the lakes I'd just seen. All the sunrises and the sunsets I'd witnessed, the most beautiful things ever. Big stupid skies filled with a million colors - so many colors happening in the sky its hard to believe it's real, that this view happens every night right there, even when there's no one there to see. I imagined the sounds the forests make all around me, the frogs, the crickets. I imagined the raw smell of the water. The feeling of this mist that comes off the water at night, the feeling on your skin when you walk through and it holds you like a cold breath. I imagined, you know... the earth. All that life there teeming with its private needs. Every single piece of it I could think of, I imagined it... and then, you know, when I think about that - all that... power and mystery and design... it creates a feeling in me and then... it can happen.

Beat.

SOLOMON

Okay... Well, that is certainly... unique... I think I want to take a look at those pictures of yours, whenever they're ready...

NAZARETH

Uh...

SOLOMON

Or maybe I don't actually!... Perhaps your sister-in-law was correct in her assessment and we are all, as a family, out of our rabid-ass minds... I'm going to fix myself a bite to eat before I head out. Would you like something?

NAZARETH

Okay.

(beat,)

I think about this conversation with my father all the time. Nothing like it has happened between us since - or nothing that went as deep or felt as naked. I'm not sure why. Sometimes I wonder if it was something I had hallucinated. But something about it has stayed with me, lodged itself within me - deeply... Not the words necessarily but... seeing my father... questioning. This man who I have only ever associated with surety, confidence, Godliness, and knowing. He had admitted to me that so much of his life had been driven, he felt, by some miscalculation, some error in his judgement... and yet here we still were. In life. And here I was, living...

(MORE)

## NAZARETH (CONT'D)

The result of an error...

My brother and sister-in-law stepped out the rest of their path and parted ways eventually. Morgan went in, as was planned, and only wound up serving a healthy fraction of her full sentence. The day after she got out, my brother filed for divorce - though it seems like that might have been something mutually agreed upon. I can see Morgan going, "What difference does it make?" I suspect she held my brother's attempt on his life in her back pocket and he knew it, because she did get everything she asked for - though, by that point, there wasn't much to ask for - except full custody.

My mother and father continue on together. They see their grandkids - but that means that they have to travel to see them. The kids don't come to them. My parents get old - or older. The events of this weekend become, oddly enough, a new third rail. I'm pretty sure my father engages with Erica, but it's unclear if the engagement amounts to much. If it does, it's between them. I never see it.

And I learn from Aziza's socials, which I have managed to lurk on, that she does... have a child. A beautiful boy who she names Kamau. I don't know who the father is but I catch myself looking at his birthday and counting backwards... It is a little over 10 months after the weekend at my parents'... right on the edge of possibility... but unlikely, right? Though I ask myself, How could she have found another nyucka so fast?

I'm afraid to ask her though. I don't think I want to know. But I do want to know... But I can't know. I can't...

So I just... wonder... I wonder all the time.

I comb through my memories of this weekend again and again and again, trying to make sense of what went wrong, looking for any signs Aziza might have done differently than she claimed. I look at the pictures of the boy she posts and squint and trick myself into thinking I see things which are probably not there. And I ask myself if there was God on this path... and I had just missed it? Was I not paying close enough attention?

Did I miss it, Aziza?... Am I still missing it? Were you holding some door open for me and I missed it?

BLACKOUT.

**END OF PLAY.**