

*Shattering*

by

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## Playwright's Preface

A few years ago I heard part of a recording of a South Africa Truth and Reconciliation hearing. A white security officer admitted to torturing and killing the husband and son of an elderly black woman. The judge asked her what justice should be done. The woman replied: "My husband and son were my only family. I want...for Mr. Vanderbrook...to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I may pour out to him whatever love I have remaining with me."

This astounding story dogged me...maybe because I live in Baltimore, shooting site for *Homicide: Life on the Streets*, and *The Wire* (both of which harrowed my heart). In real life, we have a juvenile detention system in crisis, one of the highest murder rates in the country, most of them drug/gang-related, and a tragic lack of respect between the police and the community they are supposed to protect. It's an epidemic that haunts me whenever I open the paper, turn on the TV news, or walk the streets.

This combination inspired me to write *Shattering*. How could anyone be as forgiving as this South African woman? What could be the effects of such forgiveness? How might a relationship between such a woman and her "adopted son" play out?

My research for creating the world of *Shattering* involved reading, viewing, attending anti-racism workshops/events, and interviewing—including conversations with a teacher from the Maryland State Detention Center and an administrator/social worker in the Baltimore Juvenile Detention system. While attending a Dramatists Guild Kennedy Center Playwrights Intensive, I sought input on my initial efforts from Michael Oatman, then Playwright-in-Residence at Karamu Theatre, and later from former Baltimore Center Stage dramaturg James Magruder. Actor and audience feedback at a Dramatists Guild Reading (featuring teen actors from the Baltimore School for the Arts) resulted in further revisions. I shared the script with African-American friends and artist-colleagues and am especially grateful for input from filmmaker Najaa Young and photographer Kay Adler.

The script was a winner of the American Association of Community Theatre NewPlayFest 2020 and consequently premiered at the Tacoma Little Theatre. I attended a week of rehearsals and, after hearing a read-through and getting feedback from the actors, made many edits to the language used by the two teens. I gave this revised version to the director, together with my permission to comply with any subsequent requests for changes made by the actors during rehearsals that would, in their opinion, make the diction more realistic. After the run, I read the stage manager's production book and viewed a tape of the performance to check for changes the actors had made in diction or wording and made more edits to the script. Finally, I sent this post-production script to Steven Butler, Artistic

Director of the Actors' Warehouse and Executive Director of Florida Theatre Conference, and incorporated suggestions he made.

As a white playwright, I fully understand the need for this kind of Cultural Trust, for corrective input at every step of the writing journey from a wide variety of people who know well the terrain I am only briefly visiting. So I am especially grateful for and humbled by the generous support—including questions, criticisms, suggestions and encouragement—given by my African-American colleagues. I hope this resulting script proves worthy of their trust.

### SYNOPSIS

Jonah has just been released from juvenile commitment into the foster care of Jacqueline Dawson, whose estranged son he helped to murder. She witnessed the crime and testified against the other two perpetrators, which resulted in their imprisonment. Now the gang leader who organized that crime wants to teach a lesson about what happens to “snitches.” He orders Jonah to torture and kill Dawson—or be killed himself. The instructions come through Jonah’s girlfriend LaBelle, whose investment in the outcome is intensified by her pregnancy. Jonah and LaBelle plot the murder, even as his relationship with the strict but caring Dawson develops and his imagined visits with her dead son jar his conscience.

### CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jonah, 14, African-American; tough but vulnerable; bright but poorly educated; insolent but sensitive; recently released from juvenile commitment

Jacqueline Dawson (DeeDee), 59, African-American; an astrophysicist and atheist; brittle and brisk; strict but caring; intent, committed; a natural educator; riddled with guilt, regret, grief, determination

LaBelle, 14, African-American, Jonah’s girlfriend; lively, loyal, lovable; determined, hopeful, single-minded; pregnant; a talented singer

Sonny, 24, African-American, DeeDee’s dead son, a Christian Fundamentalist; bright, well-educated, obsessed with words; committed, single-minded; insistently religious, yet unforgiving

### SETTING

Time: The present

Prologue

Scene 1: a Saturday in early April, early evening

Scene 2: the next Saturday, midday

Scene 3: three weeks later; early May, early evening

Scene 4: two weeks later, late evening in mid-May

Scene 5: two weeks later; a Saturday afternoon in early June

Scene 6: thirty-six hours later

Place: DeeDee’s home in an urban neighborhood, U.S.A.

## **SHATTERING**

### **Prologue**

*An electronic hum. A large empty window frame, suspended at an angle. On one side SONNY is being beaten up. He mimes this dance of violence. We do not see his two assailants or hear any of them speak. JONAH stands anxiously by, looking back and forth between the beating and the street corner behind him. On the other side of the frame DEEDEE witnesses this. She is wild with distress, but we do not hear her screams. SONNY is stabbed in the chest, puts a hand to his heart. The hum grows louder. DEEDEE “bangs” on the window “glass” so desperately that her hand goes through it. Sound of violently shattering glass as JONAH and DEEDEE lock eyes, mirroring each other’s desperation. Blackout.*

### **Scene 1**

*The present. A Saturday in early April. Late afternoon.*

*An urban neighborhood. A large park separates an economically impoverished neighborhood of project-housing on one side from a gentrified neighborhood of rows of town houses on the other side. DEEDEE lives in one of these. Her tasteful house has no walls, so the projects are always a presence. There is a large, suspended picture window in the front room, from which a person inside could see—even touch—someone on the sidewalk outside. On the same plane as the window is the entrance, and outside this is a stoop.*

*We see an orderly but welcoming living-dining area: book shelves; a sofa, wooden rocker, and steamer-trunk coffee table; a TV that is not the conspicuous center of attention; a desk with cordless land-line phone and desk-top computer; a small dining table with two chairs. A doorway leads to a kitchen (not visible). A small bedroom with a window—possibly on a higher level.*

*Sound of loud but unintelligible rap music booming from a car going by.*

*DEEDEE and JONAH enter. He has a visible tattoo on his arm—the word “Lords” over the drawing of a knife—and wears a GPS ankle monitor. She wears a small, elastic wrist support. As she crosses to desk to deposit mail, he lights up a cigarette. She sees this, takes a glass coaster from desk, crosses to him, and holds it out to him. He looks at it, pretending not to know what she wants. She raises it. He takes a deep drag, blows the smoke in her face, then puts out the cigarette in the coaster. She puts out her other hand. He stares at her defiantly. She stares back. He slaps the pack of cigarettes and matches down on her hand. She pockets these and puts the coaster down.*

	JONAH
Jesus Fucking Christ!	
	DEEDEE
Please don't do that, Jonah.	
	JONAH
You gonna give me shit about...“taking the Lord's name in vain”?	
	DEEDEE
I don't care about that.	
	JONAH
What then?	
	DEEDEE
It shows a lack of imagination.	
	JONAH
Huh?	
	DEEDEE
What were you feeling when you said that?	
	JONAH
Said what?	<i>(Taunting, thinking she will resist repeating it.)</i>

DEEDEE

*(Matter-of-factly.)*  
Jesus-fucking-christ?

JONAH

I don't know...pissed, screwed?

DEEDEE

*(Takes Thesaurus from shelf, flips its pages at him.  
Teacher mode.)*  
Were you irritated? piqued? nettled? provoked? exasperated? wrathful? mildly annoyed?

JONAH

What you talking about?

DEEDEE

*Roget's Thesaurus.* You could pick the exact word. You have choices, you know.  
*(Thrusts book at him.)*  
Make them.

JONAH

I was just mad. I don't need this shit.  
*(Tosses book.)*  
I made a choice to be mad.

DEEDEE

So you were angry because you don't like having someone else make the rules.

JONAH

Well, duh!

DEEDEE

Then say so.

JONAH

Say what?

DEEDEE

Say: "It makes me angry when I don't get to make the rules."

JONAH

Then what?

DEEDEE

Then...I hear you—I know what you're feeling.

JONAH

So?

DEEDEE

So maybe—maybe this time is different from...before. Maybe—in this house at least—we negotiate the rules.

JONAH

I get to make 'em?

DEEDEE

You get to...suggest...some.

JONAH

One for every one you...“suggest.”

DEEDEE

Fair enough. Let's try.

JONAH

Me first! I get to have my girlfriend come over. She just lives over in the projects...across the park.

DEEDEE

What's her name?

JONAH

LaBelle.

DEEDEE

How old is LaBelle?

JONAH

Fourteen. Same as me.

DEEDEE

Is she a classmate?

JONAH

Yeah.

DEEDEE

Oooo...kay.... Agreed. After you've had a week to settle in, LaBelle may come to visit. Now it's my turn to suggest a rule. LaBelle doesn't spend the night.

JONAH  
That ain't fair!

DEEDEE  
That's "negotiating."

JONAH  
What you got against love?

DEEDEE  
Nothing.

JONAH  
Then why can't she spend the night?

DEEDEE  
Because people should sleep in their own beds. She should spend the night in her own home. With her own family. This is our home—yours and mine. LaBelle may spend the day here on Saturdays if she likes.

JONAH  
Humph. Next time you go first.

DEEDEE  
No TV until after seven.

JONAH  
Except on weekends.  
*(She makes a face.)*  
Football.

DEEDEE  
*(Conceding.)*  
Football.

JONAH  
I get to smoke one pack of cigarettes a day.

DEEDEE  
One cigarette a day—

JONAH  
Half a pack.

DEEDEE  
—the first week. Then nine cigarettes the second week. Then eight—



Whoooooaa!

JONAH

DEEDEE

Then seven, then six.... Then one cigarette the tenth week. Then none.  
*(Waving pack towards door, then putting the cigarettes  
on the windowsill.)*

On the stoop.

JONAH

What kinda “nee-gotiatin” is that?

DEEDEE

The kind with your well-being in mind.

JONAH

*(Beat.)*  
I won’t go to church.

DEEDEE

Me neither.

JONAH

Really?

DEEDEE

Really.

JONAH

Never?

DEEDEE

Does that surprise you?

JONAH

What I care?

DEEDEE

Whoever cooks doesn’t have to clean up.

JONAH

What’s that mean?

DEEDEE

When I cook dinner, you clean up. We take turns. Week at a time.

JONAH

Why I have to cook?

DEEDEE

Because it's fair. Because it's good training in life skills. Everyone needs to learn how to prepare his own food.

*(Pulls cookbook from shelf.)*

JONAH

But I don't know nothing about cooking.

DEEDEE

Haven't you ever boiled a potato?

JONAH

Ain't no potatoes at the Seven-Eleven.

DEEDEE

So what did you eat growing up?

JONAH

When I was little, my mama used to bring home leftovers from where she worked. Meatloaf, chicken stew. Some kinda tuna fish with noodles. Stuff like that. But I never seen her make it.

DEEDEE

And after that?

JONAH

After she...after she don't work no more, we get our food at McDonald's. Sometimes KFC. I never fixed no dinner.

DEEDEE

*(Thrusts cookbook at him.)*

Learn *The Joy of Cooking*.

JONAH

*(Tosses book on sofa. Looks around. Spots silver baby cup on shelf, examines it.)*

What's this for? Silver, right it? Must be worth something.

DEEDEE

Sentimental value only—it's engraved. A baby cup.

JONAH

Awful fancy thing for a baby to drink out of.

*(Puts it back.)*

DEEDEE

It's more for show—a gift to celebrate a birth.

JONAH

*(Indicating sofa.)*

So. This where I sleep?

DEEDEE

No.

*(Crossing to bedroom.)*

You'll have your own room. Come see it.

*(He follows her. It is clearly the bedroom of a teenage boy: football paraphernalia, a bookshelf, a large telescope on a stand by a window.)*

JONAH

Looks like somebody else sleeps here.

DEEDEE

*(Pointedly.)*

Somebody else did.

JONAH

*(Changing the uncomfortable subject.)*

Where's my TV?

DEEDEE

There's only one.

JONAH

What?!

DEEDEE

You saw it in the living room.

JONAH

*One TV? Who has one TV?*

DEEDEE

We do.

JONAH

What about a computer?

DEEDEE

A desktop. Also in the living room. You may use it for your homework.

JONAH

No laptop?

DEEDEE

At work.

JONAH

*(Looking around.)*

So what I sposed to do in here?

DEEDEE

Sleep. Read? Think? Take refuge. Cocoon. Explore the blissful, terrifying terrain of solitude.

JONAH

Lady, who you think you talking to? I don't know what them words mean.

DEEDEE

You will. You'll figure them out from the context. That's how one learns new words, develops a vocabulary. I don't believe in talking down to children.

JONAH

I ain't no "children."

DEEDEE

Or to teenagers. I will treat you like a literate adult in the hope that you will eventually become one.

JONAH

What if I don't wanna become your kinda...whatever?

DEEDEE

That will be your choice.

JONAH

Where'd you learn to talk white?

DEEDEE

I don't talk "white." I talk educated. And so can you.

JONAH

And have everybody laugh at me for acting better than them? No way. Nobody I know talks like that.

DEEDEE

There are more people in the world than the ones you know. And you are smarter than most of them.

JONAH

I'm a ninth grader.

DEEDEE

With an I.Q. well above average. I've seen the test scores.

JONAH

Then why I get "D's" all the time?

DEEDEE

We're going to find out. And then we're going to do something about it.

JONAH

*(Dismisses this possibility with a grunt. Then, looking around.)*

What's this thing?

DEEDEE

A telescope.

JONAH

What's it for?

DEEDEE

You'll figure it out.

JONAH

Looks expensive.

DEEDEE

It was. That second one even more than the first.

JONAH

What happened to the first?

DEEDEE

It...got broken.

JONAH

So what I get if I sell it on the street?

DEEDEE

A visit from your parole officer and another stint in the Juvenile Training Center.

JONAH

*(Opening a drawer.)*

Am I sposed to wear these?

DEEDEE

Up to you. If you do, afterwards—

*(Lifting lid of clothes basket.)*

they go in here. You do the laundry every other week.

JONAH

Aw, fuck!

*(She gives him a look.)*

I mean “Shit!”

*(Another look.)*

What am I sposed to say?

DEEDEE

What you feel.

JONAH

I never done no laundry.

DEEDEE

So what do you feel? Inadequate? Incompetent?

JONAH

Stupid. I mean I ain’t no cleaning woman—it’s stupid for me to be doing laundry.

DEEDEE

Is it stupid for you to be wearing clothes?

JONAH

Everybody wear clothes.

DEEDEE

Then everybody can do laundry. At least everybody in this house.

*(Crosses to living room.)*

JONAH

*(Following her.)*

But how do I—?

DEEDEE

It’s not astrophysics.

JONAH

Astro what?

DEEDEE

Machines are in the basement. Directions on the lids. Only thing you need to remember: dark clothes together—in cold water, light clothes in warm. Don't put my blouses in with your jeans.

JONAH

What? I gotta do your dirty clothes too?

DEEDEE

Only if you want me to do yours when it's my turn.

*(He's between a rock and a hard place.)*

Or...I could do my own laundry and you could do yours.

*(Pointedly.)*

Every week.

JONAH

Yeah.

DEEDEE

Yeah, what?

JONAH

Yeah, I do my own.

*(She gives him a look.)*

When I get to it.

DEEDEE

Who did your laundry...before?

JONAH

Before what?

DEEDEE

In your last...where you lived last.

JONAH

Foster mother.

DEEDEE

Did you...did you like her?

JONAH

Yeah.

*(Pointedly.)*

She didn't make lotsa rules.

DEEDEE

So. I'll leave you to...look around.

*(Beat.)*

It's...it's good you came on a Saturday. That gives us the weekend to...get...settled.

JONAH

*(Sarcastic.)*

Yeah. Right.

DEEDEE

The bus comes at eight on school days. You catch it on the corner of Eastern and Park. Bring you back around four. Plenty of time to do your homework.

JONAH

*(Sarcastic.)*

Sure.

DEEDEE

*(Puts hand in pocket.)*

Oh. Here's a key.

*(Extends it to him.)*

JONAH

What's this to?

DEEDEE

The house.

JONAH

*(Taken back by the trust this implies.)*

This house?

DEEDEE

How else you going to get in? I get home around five-thirty or six, most days. Work is close by.

JONAH

*(Taking key.)*

So that's why you live here?



DEEDEE

What do you mean?

JONAH

You got enough...you could live anyplace. I mean this is a nice street and all, with its fixed up, expensive houses, but...

DEEDEE

But the larger neighborhood...this part of the city...has its problems. Yes. I guess I wanted to be part of the solution.

JONAH

*(Turning away.)*

Yeah. We seen how that worked out.

DEEDEE

If you ever need to call me at the lab, the number's on speed dial on the phone in the living room. Number four.

*(Takes slip of paper from pocket, holds it out to him.)*

This is the number. In case you ever need to call me there from school.

JONAH

Can I get a iPhone?

*(Turns back to her. She shakes her head. He grunts, disgusted.)*

DEEDEE

Not my rule. But a good one.

*(He ignores the slip of paper she's holding out.*

*She puts it down.)*

I'll be calling the school twice a day—at ten and two. Just to make sure you're...doing okay.

JONAH

You mean just checking up on me.

DEEDEE

Just while you're on probation.

JONAH

*(Awkward pause.)*

Why...why you doing this?

DEEDEE

I...think.... Maybe I...

*(Shakes her head.)*

I don't really know.

JONAH

You some kinda...wacko?

DEEDEE

I guess we'll find out, won't we?

*(Looks at her watch.)*

Supper's in the Crockpot. Be ready in five minutes. This week I'm cooking.

*(DEEDEE exits. JONAH pockets the key, crosses back to bedroom. He looks around, takes a shirt from drawer and holds it up to him. It is ten years out of style. He tosses it back, goes to telescope, begins to examine how it swivels and pumps, looks into the wrong end. He gets up, runs his hand along books on shelf, pulls off a small spiral notebook, looks inside at handwriting, then tosses it on bed. He takes out the key and plays with it for a moment, then pockets it. He picks up the notebook again, flips it open, reads for a moment. SONNY enters through the wall.)*

SONNY

This is my room.

JONAH

Not for a long time. Them shirts ain't fit you for ten years. Where you been, Sonny Boy?

SONNY

It's a long story.

JONAH

People down at the mission say you good at telling stories.

SONNY

It's not that kind of story. Anyway, this is still my room.

JONAH

Looks like it's mine now.

SONNY

Isn't that ironic?

JONAH

I what?

SONNY

Irony. My favorite word. You'll be coming across it all the time. It's probably on the page you're open to now. "A development in a narrative opposite to and in mockery of the

SONNY (*Cont.*)

expected result.” The opposite of “poetic justice.” Unpoetic justice? Poetic injustice?

JONAH

You sound like the kinda guy don’t need that T-saurus.

SONNY

Ah, well. Mr. Roget and I are long-time comrades. It was...an “arranged friendship.”

JONAH

Bet I know who done the arranging.

SONNY

*(Imitating DEEDEE.)*

“You have choices, you know!” Only you better make the ones she wants.

JONAH

Did you?

SONNY

*(Referring to journal.)*

Read it and find out.

DEEDEE (*O.S.*)

*(Calling.)*

Jonah! Dinner’s ready.

*(JONAH and SONNY study each other. Lights.)*

**Scene 2**

*A week later. Saturday midday. Living room.  
LABELLE, 14, wearing only under wear and a T-shirt,  
but covered by a light-weight throw is asleep on sofa.  
Her jeans and shoes strewn on the floor, as are  
JONAH's shirt and shoes. He sits at the table in his  
jeans, reading a cookbook. She wakes up.*

LABELLE

Ummmm.... I had me a nice little nap...and the best dream ever.  
*(He looks up.)*

I dreamed it was the end of the longest four months of my life and you was out of juvey and you was inside me, coming and coming and coming home. And all the while, Patti LaBelle was singing.

JONAH

What she singing?

*(Imitating the style of her namesake, LABELLE sings just the  
first line of the chorus of "Joy to Have Your Love.")*

LABELLE

Ain't that the sweetest dream ever?

JONAH

Yeah, that dream almost as sweet as you, LaBelle.

LABELLE

*(Putting on her jeans.)*

Songs about falling in love are my favorite. When did you do it?

JONAH

Do what?

LABELLE

Fall in love?

JONAH

With who?

LABELLE

*(Crossing to him.)*

You think I wanna hear about you falling in love with somebody else?

JONAH

I ain't thought about it.

LABELLE

Well think about it now.

JONAH

Let's see.... Was it when you knocked your tray into my lap in the cafeteria? Or maybe when you dropped your book on my foot in math class?

LABELLE

I can't help it you was always in the wrong place. Come on—you just stalling.

JONAH

A'ight, a'ight. It was at the park—the basketball court. You was sitting on the bench drinking a Coke and wearing them red sunglasses that's way too big—cover up your whole face. You was sitting next to Tonya and she musta said something funny 'cause you laughing and falling over silly, not paying no attention to the game. Then I come up for a foul shot. And things get quiet. And I'm bouncing the ball, looking at the hoop, but I'm seeing you out the edge of my eye. And then you call out—

LABELLE

*(Calling out.)*

Hey Bro—stop thinking about how fine you look in them fancy Jordans and bury the damn ball!

JONAH

I know right then I got to get behind them sunglasses.

LABELLE

And that's when you fell in love with me?

JONAH

*(Pulls her onto his lap.)*

No, that happened after. Tonya eat so much junk during the game that she got sick afterwards—threw up all over the bench. But you stayed right there—held onto her the whole time she puked. Reggie come along and made fun of her and you wrapped him upside the head with your Coke bottle so hard he near fell over. I know then I want somebody who would...somebody that loyal...and that fierce...to be there for me.

LABELLE

I am here for you, Jonah. I always will be

*(They kiss.)*

What you reading?

JONAH

Cookbook.

LABELLE

Well, ain't that something? You gonna make me a Patti LaBelle Sweet Potato Pie?

JONAH

Did you know meatloaf ain't nothing but smashed up hamburgers?

LABELLE

What's the matter with hamburgers? Why you want to go and smash 'em up?

JONAH

I don't know. Just for a change.

LABELLE

If meatloaf's the same as hamburgers, where's the change?

JONAH

Well, it ain't exactly the same. It's got onions and tomato sauce and breadcrumbs.  
(*Checks book.*)

And an egg.

LABELLE

Who wants all that stuff in their hamburger?

JONAH

Trouble with you is—

(*Kisses her.*)

you stuck in the old, tired-out way of doing things. You got to think about busting outa your routine and trying something new and dangerous.

LABELLE

(*Getting up.*)

Well, whadda you know? That's just what I'm getting ready to do—bust outa my regular routine.

JONAH

Really?

LABELLE

Yes, sir. I'm about to try the most dangerous thing I ever tried. And you gonna do it too.

JONAH

What's that?

LABELLE

Well...

*(Deep breath.)*

I'm gonna be a mama. And you gonna be a daddy.

JONAH

*(Stands.)*

What you talking about? When?

LABELLE

In four months.

JONAH

Four...you sure?

LABELLE

Don't you think I can count?

JONAH

I mean...you sure I'm the daddy?

*(She slaps him hard.)*

LABELLE

What you think, I'm some kinda ho can't go four months without fucking while my man's locked up? Huh? You and me was doing it all through November—after the Tigers' football games. Don't tell me you don't remember that.

JONAH

I remember. It was right before...what happened out there...

*(Gestures towards window.)*

LABELLE

Then you was in Detention for all of December before the trial. Then three months in juvey. That's five months with no bleeding. Tonya say I got four more and then the baby comes.

JONAH

Four months. That ain't time enough to...

LABELLE

To what? What you need time for?

JONAH

I need time to wrap my head around... I ain't ready for.... How about...? Maybe if you go down to the clinic, they could—

LABELLE

I ain't going to no clinic! It's too late for that. Anyway, why you want me to do that?

JONAH

I don't want you to...I'm just saying...that's one thing you could do. If you want to.

LABELLE

Well, I don't want to, OK? This is your life I got inside me, Jonah. You think I wanna cut that outa me? It'd be like cutting you. You the one good thing in my life, Boy. I ain't cutting out no part of you. So don't be talking about getting rid of it.

JONAH

Then what you gonna do?

LABELLE

What you mean what I gonna do? I gonna be a mama. What you gonna do?

JONAH

How I gonna be a daddy?

LABELLE

Same way I'm gonna be a mama.

JONAH

No! I mean you got something to give a baby.

LABELLE

What?

JONAH

You got the baby inside you—you giving him—I don't know—a place to grow. You got milk and stuff. What I gonna give a baby?

LABELLE

You gonna be there for him.

JONAH

I ain't finished school.

LABELLE

Plenty of people ain't finished school.

JONAH

I got no job, no money.



LABELLE  
Well then, you just gotta get some.

JONAH  
Where I gonna get money?

LABELLE  
*(Looking around.)*  
She got any money stashed away here?

JONAH  
No.

LABELLE  
How you know?

JONAH  
I looked.

LABELLE  
You check all the pockets in her coats.

JONAH  
Yeah.

LABELLE  
You look in all the drawers?

JONAH  
Yeah.

LABELLE  
What about the cups and cans in the kitchen.

JONAH  
Rich folk don't keep money in cups and cans. They keep it in the bank.

LABELLE  
What about credit cards?

JONAH  
Right. And what's she gonna do when she finds 'em gone? That's the first thing my P.O. warned me about. "Don't even think it," he says. "Soon as she reports it, we gonna be all over you."

LABELLE

Then you just have to get a job.

JONAH

I still got this year and next before I can even drop outa school. Who gonna give me a job?

*(She stomps around the room in frustration.)*

JONAH *(Cont.)*

If you know all this time, why you wait till now to tell me?

LABELLE

I didn't want to tell you while you was in juvey. That ain't no place to be getting news like this. I want to tell you right in front of you so I can see your face and you can see my face, and we can touch each other and plan what we gonna do. But I see you ain't thrilled about the touching part.

JONAH

I am, Baby. I missed you so much when I was in juvey.

*(Pulls her to him and kisses her.)*

LABELLE

*(Still in his arms.)*

Did you really? I mean, did you think about me a lot while you was there?

JONAH

I did.

LABELLE

That's 'cause I was carrying your child and something in you knew it. I truly believe that. I do.

*(They snuggle a bit. He strokes her arms, notices the familiar small scars there, rubs them gently.)*

JONAH

LaBelle?

LABELLE

Yeah?

JONAH

You still got them scars on your arms.

LABELLE

*(Trying to cover the scars.)*

Well, it ain't like scars go away overnight.

JONAH

When you was...when you was cutting yourself...why'd you do it?

LABELLE

*(Pulling away.)*

Why we got to talk about that now? That was a whole year ago.

JONAH

I need to know.

LABELLE

Why?

JONAH

I just do.

LABELLE

If you thinking I might ever do something like that to our baby, you don't need to worry. I would never, never hurt him. He's more precious than life to me. I would never cut him.

JONAH

But...why...why you cut yourself?

LABELLE

*(Beat.)*

I... To let out the pain. The pain come out with the blood. Then I feel better...calm... peaceful. They say I just do it to get attention. But that ain't it. I never cared if they even watch me do it or not. It let out the pain. That's why I done it.

JONAH

But...the pain. Why was it there in the first place?

LABELLE

You asking me that? Don't you know the answer? Ain't you full of pain too?

JONAH

That's my pain. I'm asking about yours.

LABELLE

I don't wanna tell you. You ain't gonna like it.

JONAH

Maybe we let our pain out to each other, it don't hurt as much.

LABELLE

Or maybe the one who hears, then have twice the pain.

JONAH

Try it.

LABELLE

One night, my mama's boyfriend—the one that give me the CD of “Patti LaBelle Love Songs” comes into my room when everybody asleep. Says he can't sleep cause she snoring and keeping him awake. Asks if he can sleep with me, just for a little while.

JONAH

What you say?

LABELLE

What I gonna say? You think saying “no” gonna make a difference? I don't say nothing, but I roll over and face the wall so he sees I ain't crazy about the idea.

JONAH

Then what happen?

LABELLE

He lays down and wraps hisself around me. I try to pull away, but he holds tighter. Then I feel his dick hard against me.

JONAH

Why don't you shout out?

LABELLE

I try to. But he's got his hand over my mouth. Then he's on top of me, fucking away, hurting me bad. I try to bite him but he's got the palm of his hand up tight against my lips, squeezing my cheeks till the bones near break.

*(JONAH makes a fist and rams it into the palm of his hand.)*

When he's done, he tells me not to say nothing cause nobody gonna believe it, and that anyway, me rolling over to make room for him means I wanted it.

JONAH

And did you?

LABELLE

No! Of course I didn't want it!

JONAH

I mean did you tell anybody?

LABELLE

I told my mama. That's where the pain come in.

JONAH

What you mean?

LABELLE

She says I'm making up stories just to get attention. She the one give me the pain I had to cut to let out. He hurt me, but she the one give me that pain.

*(Beat.)*

I was cutting right up till you come along.

JONAH

*(Shaking his head, pacing.)*

I'll kill him.

LABELLE

I told you you wasn't gonna like it.

JONAH

Where is he?

LABELLE

Gone.

JONAH

Where to?

LABELLE

I don't know.

JONAH

The baby—how you know it ain't his?

LABELLE

'Cause that happened over a year ago.

JONAH

And he never come back for more?

LABELLE

Once. I pulled the butcher knife out from under my pillow and told him he come near me, I cut off his fucking dick. I guess he learned to sleep with snoring. After that I don't play my

LABELLE *(Cont.)*

“Love Songs” CD for a long time. Then I think: it ain’t the CD’s fault I got it from his filthy hands. It ain’t evil just ’cause he is. If we don’t take nothing from evil people in this world, then we got nothing.

*(Beat.)*

Why you ask me about the baby’s father? You think I could lie to you?

JONAH

Naw.

LABELLE

You do. You do think it. I see it in your face.

JONAH

Naw. I just.... I didn’t know how you could be sure.

LABELLE

How we gonna be together if you don’t trust me to tell you the truth? How we gonna be a family?

*(Starts to cry.)*

JONAH

*(Reaching out for her.)*

I do trust you, Baby. I do. Come here.

*(They embrace.)*

LABELLE

You the only family I got, Jonah. You and this baby the only family I want.

*(They kiss.)*

JONAH

We’ll work it out. I promise. Now come on and sing me something...something real sweet.

*(LABELLE softly sings. During the song, DEEDEE comes onto the stoop, with a bag of groceries. She hears the singing through the open window, stops and listens, is moved. When the singing is over, she enters.)*

DEEDEE

That was lovely. Sung from the heart...and touching the heart.

*(Extends a hand.)*

I’m DeeDee. You must be...Miss Patti LaBelle.

LABELLE

*(Taken aback by her sudden appearance and the praise, tentatively shakes hand.)*

LaBelle's my name all right. But I ain't got a voice like Miss Patti.

DEEDEE

Sounds like you will have some day. How'd you come to have her name?

LABELLE

*(Cautiously.)*

She...she was my grandma's favorite.

JONAH

She even got some of Patti's old LP's her grandma left her.

LABELLE

Ain't got no record player though.

DEEDEE

Well, we have a turntable here. It's old and hasn't been used for a while. But I think it still works. Why don't you bring them over next time you come to visit? Jonah, would you take this to the kitchen please. The ground beef you need for tomorrow's dinner is in there. Better put it in the fridge.

JONAH

*(Taking bag from her, confidentially.)*

How long you been listening outside?

DEEDEE

Not long.

JONAH

Why didn't you come in? You snooping on us?

DEEDEE

No. I just didn't want to...interrupt.

JONAH

Interrupt?

DEEDEE

The singing.

*(He nods with relief, exits to kitchen.)*

There's some nice sliced ham and Swiss cheese in there. Why don't you make us lunch?

*(To LABELLE.)*

You'll stay, won't you, LaBelle?

DEEDEE (*Cont.*)

*(Calling after JONAH.)*

And you can slice up that cantaloupe. Knife is in the second drawer. Be careful—it's sharp.

*(No response.)*

Jonah?

*(Rattling of utensils.)*

JONAH

Got it.

DEEDEE

*(To LABELLE.)*

It's not in season. But they looked too good to resist.

LABELLE

What?

DEEDEE

Cantaloupe. Hope you like it.

LABELLE

Who don't like cantaloupe?

*(Phone rings.)*

DEEDEE

Excuse me.

*(Crosses to desk, picks up phone.)*

Hello. ... Oh, hello, Officer. .... Everything's going well. ... Yes, he's here. ... No, no problems. ... We're just...settling in. ... No. No, I appreciate your calling.

*(Hangs up. As she turns, JONAH comes in from kitchen, holding up a box of condoms.)*

JONAH

Who the Trojans for?

DEEDEE

I suppose...whoever needs them.

*(JONAH and LABELLE look at each other.)*

*(Lights.)*



**Scene 3**

*Three weeks later. An evening in early May. DEEDEE is at table, setting out candles, cloth napkins. JONAH brings two plates of food in from kitchen.*

JONAH

What's this? You expecting the electricity to go out?

DEEDEE

To celebrate. Your one month of living here. Just a little ritual I like to...used to...just something to help us...focus.

JONAH

Focus on what? Food looks pretty clear to me.

DEEDEE

You'll see.

*(Striking a match and lighting candles.)*

We give thanks for this food as the day unwinds  
and we gather together to share hearts and minds.

*(They sit.)*

JONAH

*(Chowing down.)*

That some kinda weird blessing.

DEEDEE

You think?

JONAH

Who you giving thanks to?

DEEDEE

Well, let's see. We've got the farmers who grow the vegetables and raise the animals, the truckers who bring it to the factories and stores, the workers who package it, the FDA officials who make sure it's safe, the merchants who make it available to us, and—let's not forget—

*(Lifts her water glass to toast him.)*

the cook who prepares it.

JONAH

None of them here to listen.

DEEDEE

Well, the cook is. And a very good chicken stew it is.

JONAH

Crockpot.

DEEDEE

Even so. Somebody had to put in the right ingredients.

JONAH

Cookbook.

DEEDEE

Are you determined not to be complimented?

JONAH

You didn't thank God.

DEEDEE

You noticed.

JONAH

He's gonna be pissed. Or at least

*(Imitating her way of saying it in Scene 1.)*

"mildly annoyed."

DEEDEE

I'll take my chances.

*(Awkward pause.)*

There's a special program on sunspots at the Planetarium Sunday afternoon. If you want, I can get us tickets.

JONAH

I'd rather go to the game at the Civic Center Saturday night.

DEEDEE

You know nighttime events are out. Not my rule.

*(He rocks back from the table in frustration.)*

It won't be for much longer.

*(He gives a sarcastic grunt.)*

You're doing so well, Jonah. Just...hold on.

*(Beat.)*

How was your math test today?

JONAH

Too many trick questions.

Oh? DEEDEE

If a dice is rolled eighteen times— JONAH

A die. Two dice, one die. DEEDEE

Yeah, well, if it's rolled eighteen times, how many times is the number two "expected" to come up? JONAH

So what did you say? DEEDEE

Well, we're sposed to think that if you roll it six times, each side come up once, so if you roll it eighteen times, each side come up three times. JONAH

So where's the trick in that? DEEDEE

Ain't you never played craps? JONAH

Why would you think statistics don't apply to games of chance? DEEDEE

Lady Luck. JONAH

Is just a superstition. DEEDEE

You can think that... 'cause you never been on her bad side. JONAH  
(*Beat.*)

Is anything wrong, Jonah? DEEDEE

Nah. JONAH

DEEDEE

You sure?

*(He nods. They eat in silence for a moment.)*

JONAH

Why'd you tell the cops you wasn't sure about me.

DEEDEE

I wasn't.

JONAH

You was standing right there at that window when Sammy and Lamar was working him over. I'm keeping an eye on the corner, don't even see you there till you start screaming and banging on the glass. Your fist come right through it. Blood all over.

DEEDEE

I didn't....

JONAH

Banging and screaming...looking at him, looking at us, looking at me.

DEEDEE

Yes.

JONAH

And me—too stupid to look away—looking right back at you, looking at your face. You seen me all right. Why didn't you tell the cops what you seen?

DEEDEE

I saw the frightened face of a boy who didn't want to be there. Why didn't you just run away?

JONAH

I couldn't leave my...

DEEDEE

You wanted to help.

JONAH

But I didn't.

DEEDEE

You looked back. When they pulled you away with them, you looked back.

JONAH  
So what?

DEEDEE  
You cared.

JONAH  
I'm a killer...just like them.

DEEDEE  
No. You're not, Jonah. And you don't have to be. Ever.  
*(Beat. They eat in silence.)*  
I had a good day at the lab.

JONAH  
What kinda lab you work in? It got drugs and stuff?

DEEDEE  
No. No drugs. It's a particle physics lab. We have high-energy accelerators that—

JONAH  
Accelerators? Like in a car?

DEEDEE  
Same principle.  
*(Getting excited.)*  
They make what's inside go faster and faster. They smash atoms, break down particles into their components.

JONAH  
Particles of what?

DEEDEE  
Do you see the handle of your spoon? That's about a centimeter wide—

JONAH  
A what?

DEEDEE  
About a third of an inch. A row of one hundred million atoms would fit across that handle.

JONAH  
A hundred million?

DEEDEE

*(While getting paper from shelf, drawing, showing him.)*

Each atom consists of a cloud of electrons surrounding a small, dense nucleus of protons and neutrons. For a long time scientists thought these were the basic building blocks of the natural world. That everything was made up of them: your fork, this table top, the legs of the chair, your feet.

*(He wiggles his feet.)*

But then they discovered these protons and neutrons are made up of quarks.

JONAH

Quarks? What kinda dumb name is that?

DEEDEE

Well, we had to call them something.

*(Passionate about the subject.)*

The most intriguing thing about quarks is that they're always found in combination—in groups of two or three.

JONAH

Who the boss?

DEEDEE

There isn't any. They seem to exist only in relationships.

JONAH

Like some kinda family?

DEEDEE

Well, I wouldn't go that far. The point is: a single one can't exist by itself.

JONAH

So what do you do with them?

DEEDEE

In my lab, we try to isolate the quarks. We spin them around at incredible speed in huge accelerators, trying to break up the groups into smaller, solitary units.

JONAH

That seems mean.

DEEDEE

They're not sentient.

*(He frowns.)*

They don't have feelings.

JONAH

How you know?

DEEDEE

Well, they don't have nervous systems. If you prick them, they do not bleed.

JONAH

You prick 'em?

DEEDEE

No. I was speaking metaphoric—it was a Shakespeare quo—

*(Reconsiders.)*

Quarks are not complex—not complicated enough to feel anything.

JONAH

Why you wanna break 'em up?

DEEDEE

Just to see if we can.

JONAH

What if you can't?

DEEDEE

If we can't...it will mean that the basic building blocks of the natural world really aren't blocks at all, but more like...bundles of experience.

JONAH

Experience? Like things happening, stuff going on?

DEEDEE

Yes. It will mean that at the heart of the universe is...creative energy. It will mean that...that...

*(She struggles to find the words.)*

JONAH

...that feet don't matter as much as dancing.

DEEDEE

*(Taken aback.)*

Well, that's one way to describe it. In fact, a rather...poetic way.

JONAH

What if you can't bust up the quarks? You gonna feel like a failure? I mean you spending your life trying to do this thing...

DEEDEE

No. I'll be satisfied I played my part in confirming what's true.  
*(They eat in silence for a moment.)*

JONAH

Where'd you get a name like DeeDee?

DEEDEE

Well, my friends call me Jackie. My young colleagues at the lab call me Dr. Dawson, but the student interns shorten that to "D.- D." DeeDee. What about your name? Jonah is biblical, isn't it? Wasn't he a prophet?

JONAH

You mean like somebody that tells the future?

DEEDEE

Somebody who tells the truth to people in power—truth they don't want to hear. In the story, Jonah is called to go to Nineveh and persuade the Assyrians to stop being bullies.

JONAH

Never paid much attention to the bible.

DEEDEE

So your parents weren't religious? Then what about your name?

JONAH

*(Playing this for the laugh it always gets.)*

When I was born, my mama say she wanna name me "Joe." But my daddy say, "Nah!"  
*(They laugh.)*

DEEDEE

Sounds like they have a sense of humor.

JONAH

*(Sobering.)*

I wouldn't know about that.

DEEDEE

Do you...do you still think of her?

*(He puts spoon down, straightens in his chair.)*

I'm sorry. I was only—

JONAH

Can we just eat?

*(She nods. They eat in silence. Lights.)*



**Scene 4**

*Two weeks later. Late evening in Mid-May. JONAH's room. He is sitting on the bed, reading SONNY's spiral-bound journal. Turns page and continues reading for a moment. Finally, he puts the open journal down on the bed and gets up. He crosses to the telescope, sits and looks through it, adjusts it a bit, focusing. Beat. SONNY enters through the wall, unseen by JONAH.*

JONAH

*(Responding to view through telescope.)*

HOLY shit!

SONNY

Yes, it is, isn't it?

JONAH

*(Spinning around.)*

What?

SONNY

Holy.

JONAH

What?

SONNY

The glittering stars. The luminous moon. All the bright, celestial beings. The spinning galaxies. The astounding, confounding, breath-taking, breath-giving universe. All God's ineffable, mysterious creation. Holy.

JONAH

Shut your crazy-talking mouth and leave me alone.

SONNY

*(Laughs cynically. Then, down to business.)*

I know what's the matter.

JONAH

*(Apprehensive.)*

You do?

SONNY

You were careless, Jonah. Unbridled, licentious.

JONAH

I don't need no sermon from—

SONNY

And now you've got to take responsibility for your illicit actions. There's another life at stake—a life you and LaBelle and God created. A divine miracle. Praise him who can— from the sordid and sinful conjunction of ungoverned flesh—call forth the spark of life. Praise him who can turn evil into good, who can—

JONAH

Stop!

SONNY

Listen...I sympathize. You're in a box. A box like a coffin. It's uncomfortable. It's stifling. Strangling. Constrictive. Claustrophobic.

JONAH

God dammit, shut up!

SONNY

Sorry. I can't help myself. I have a verbal addiction. I get a linguistic high. Only without the crash afterwards. Works great for me. But drives everybody else nuts. My conversation partners, I mean. My fellow dialoguers. My sister...intercourse, my—

JONAH

Will you cut it the hell out!

*(Gesturing to book on bed.)*

I can't deal with your shit. Know what? I ain't reading no more of your damn diary.

SONNY

Journal.

JONAH

Whatever. It gives me a headache. All them fucking words. Ain't you never done nothing besides talk to yourself? Nothing...normal?

SONNY

I played football.

*(Picks football off shelf, spins it.)*

JONAH

Yeah, well you didn't write much about that.

SONNY

Didn't really like it. It was just a front. To keep from being ...teased.

JONAH

Who gonna bully a strong guy like you? Look how long it took Lamar and Sammy to take you down.

SONNY

Not bullied. Teased. Ridiculed. Tormented.

JONAH

Why?

SONNY

When you're fourteen, it's hard to be...a witness for the Lord.

JONAH

I wouldn't know.

SONNY

Well I do. Jesus costs.

JONAH

If you say.

SONNY

I do say. I say it's hard to bear witness to adolescents, to get them to acknowledge they need a savior. No teenager wants to hear he needs anybody but himself. They think God is supervenient.

JONAH

Super what?

SONNY

Extraneous. Unnecessary.

JONAH

So why not keep him to yourself?

SONNY

Can't do that. Once you've discovered the secret to salvation—  
*(Tosses football.)*  
 you've got to share it.

JONAH

What your mama think about that?

SONNY

The football? She didn't mind it.

*(JONAH makes a you-know-what-I-mean face and tosses ball back.)*

Even gave me this picture of the stadium to replace the one I bought of Jesus with his crown of thorns.

JONAH

So that's what you offering to get me outa my box?

SONNY

Jesus come out of his box.

*(Tossing ball back.)*

Right out of the tomb.

JONAH

I ain't got the connections he's got.

SONNY

Oh but you do! His daddy is your daddy.

*(Gesturing to telescope.)*

You think the stars you're astonished by take care of themselves? You think the planets are spinning on their own? Everything in that magnificent picture, every awesome thing we see through that lens

*(Gesturing to his eyes.)*

and through these lenses, everything—was created by God. He made it all and keeps it all going. He keeps you going. His eye is on the sparrow.

JONAH

Yeah, well he must be giving all his attention to that damn bird, 'cause he don't seem to have none left for me.

SONNY

He knows the deepest secrets of your heart, Jonah.

JONAH

How the fuck do you know? What you doing here anyway, you creepy bastard?

SONNY

*(Picking up journal, waving it at him.)*

You "texted" me.

*(Tosses journal to JONAH.)*

JONAH

*(Catching journal.)*

Why ain't you in that heaven you yapping about so much in here?

*(Pockets journal.)*

SONNY

I am.... Thanks to Lamar and Sammy...

JONAH

*(Miserable about the state of things, crossing out of bedroom into living room.)*

Aw...damn you to hell! You coulda just give us the money? We was just looking to get some cash. Nothing hardcore. Just go over to Rich Row and take up a collection. That's all Terrel give us to do that night. Grab up a few wallets. Then you come along and...you didn't have to...it didn't have to go down the way it did.

SONNY

*(Following him.)*

So it's my fault?

JONAH

Damn right it is! Why didn't you just give us the money?

SONNY

Because it wasn't mine to give. People gave me that money—most of it at great sacrifice—for the mission. That money belonged to Mercy Mission, not to me.

JONAH

That mission's nothing but a bunch of sorry-ass beggars lined up outside your soup kitchen. Or homeless crazies crawling into your shabby shelter like rats into a trash heap when it gets cold.

SONNY

Those "beggars" and "crazies"—as you call them—would be dead if it weren't for our kitchens and shelters.

JONAH

Aw yeah, they keep us poor folks from dying. But they don't give us life.

SONNY

What do you want us to do then? What could we do to give you life?

JONAH

Nothing. We don't want you high-and-mighty rich folks to give us life. We wanna give our own selves life.

SONNY

And you're going to do that how? By taking the mission money out of my pocket to buy a handful of get-high tabs you can sell for a profit? And that's what gives you life? Stealing? Killing? Getting kids hooked on drugs?

JONAH

I got no choice!

SONNY

You got no...imagination. You can't see farther than  
*(Grabbing JONAH's arm with the tattoo.)*  
 the point of your knife.

JONAH

What I sposed to see? Huh? What I sposed to "imagine"? Some fucking fairy tale you make up about getting a job to put me on easy street. I'll tell you what I seen. I seen my mama give up on making ends meet—and settle for the end of a needle meeting her arm. But before that, before she gives up, she works out there in the grassy green suburbs where all the hope stored up. She takes care of some sick old white guy that pays her minimum wage. Brings home an envelope every week and empties it out on the table. Takes out the money for rent and groceries and carfare, ain't nothing left. I ain't talking nothing left for computers and cars and vacations. I'm talking nothing left for clothes and medicine. She works hard emptying that old bastard's bedpan and fixing his food and cleaning his house. She works as hard in her white uniform as your mama in her white lab coat watching them...quarks of hers spin around. But your mama brings home paper and my mama brings home pennies. That seem fair to you?

SONNY

But you can't compare—

JONAH

Yes, I can! I can compare. 'Cause they both...human beings!

SONNY

Yes, but they have different skills so—

JONAH

And here's two more I can compare! So just shut up and listen! Sammy's old man's always on him about getting a "honest" job. He's a janitor in that tallest building downtown. His job's so "honest" they won't even let him bring home good stuff that gets throwed out in the trash he empties; they got a rule about it. He works on the top floor—cleans the Big Boss's office—the one at the end with all the windows. One night he's cleaning and sees something on the desk—some kinda report about salaries. Top Dog salaries. He can't believe what he's seeing. When he figures it out, the Big Boss makes three hundred times what he makes. He thinks he must be making a mistake. Maybe he got the zeros wrong. So he copies down the number and brings it home for Sammy to do the math. But Sammy comes up with the same figure. Three hundred times as much! So now I ask you: that Big Boss have an "honest" job? He honestly some kinda human being worth three hundred times more than the human being that cleans his office? You tell me!!

SONNY

You're right. It's not fair.

JONAH

And what was you doing about it? Collecting pennies from the poor to stock your food pantry for the poorer.

SONNY

We're all equal in God's eyes. He knows our worth.

JONAH

Yeah, well he's the only one. And he's keeping it a big secret.

SONNY

Maybe not. Maybe he's preparing to send a prophet to Nineveh.

JONAH

What?

SONNY

Someone who will preach to the Assyrian bullies about this injustice, someone with passion... and eloquence.

JONAH

You ain't just dead—you looney. Them big bosses ain't gonna listen to no preaching.

SONNY

What will they listen to?

JONAH

Nothing. They do what they want. Nobody gonna stop 'em from fucking the rest of us over.

SONNY

What if there were rules?

JONAH

What kinda rules?

SONNY

Controls that required them to share the profits with employees?

JONAH

*(Sarcastic.)*

Who gonna make them rules?

SONNY

Who makes the rules for all of us? Who makes us pay taxes and go to school and get a license if we want to drive or get married?

JONAH

The government?

SONNY

Who's the government?

JONAH

Rich dudes in Washington.

SONNY

So preach to them.

JONAH

Why they gonna listen?

SONNY

Find out which one was sent there by the people in your neighborhood and preach to him. Take your mother and Sammy's father with you. All the folks that can vote. Take them all.

JONAH

You know so much about it, why you never go to Washington?

SONNY

Me? Well you see, I was busy here...keeping folks from dying, helping them to hold on till someone could come along to give them life...unless it turns out he's too much of a coward to take that road.

JONAH

*(Raising a fist.)*

Don't you be calling me a coward or I'll—

SONNY

What? Kill me?

JONAH

Aw, dammit, what was you even doing this side of the park? That mission's all the way over in Warrior territory. Why'd you pick that night to come visit your mama? Couldn't you see her any night? Why'd it have to be that damn night?

SONNY

Well, now we're in it deep. Now we've come to the heart of ironic darkness.



JONAH

What you bullshitting about?

SONNY

I couldn't see her any night. I couldn't see her at all. For ten years, we'd been...estranged.

JONAH

What's that mean?

SONNY

It is an odd word, isn't it? "Estranged." How can a mother and son ever be "strangers" to each other? After the intimacy of pregnancy and birth and feeding and bonding and the years of educating and caring? How is that possible? Maybe it would be more accurate to say "alienated." Yes. We live in different worlds—so different and so far apart that we almost need a telescope to see each other. And then when we do, each perceives the other as alien.

JONAH

How'd that happen?

SONNY

Sometimes parents are...disappointed in their children. And sometimes children are disappointed in their parents.

JONAH

Your mama—she ever shoot the rent money up her arm?

SONNY

No.

JONAH.

She ever sell your ass for coke?

SONNY

No.

JONAH

She ever leave you with a neighbor and not come back?

SONNY

No.

JONAH

Then you the whiniest brat I ever seen.

SONNY

Neglect takes many forms. Read the last pages....

*(JONAH takes journal from back pocket, sits, reads. SONNY crosses to bedroom as lights change and we hear an electronic humming. SONNY sits at telescope, becomes fourteen.)*

SONNY *(Cont.)*

Our Father who art in heaven, our Father who art in heaven, our Father who art in heaven...

*(DEEDEE enters; she is ten years younger. The humming fades out.)*

DEEDEE

Sonny? What are you doing?

SONNY

I'm looking at the rings of Saturn. It's an amazing miracle!

DEEDEE

But who were you talking to? I heard you saying something.

SONNY

I was...praying. To my father in heaven.

DEEDEE

Where did you learn to do that?

SONNY

At Daryl's church. Sometimes I go with him on Saturday nights.

DEEDEE

How long has this been going on?

SONNY

A few months.

DEEDEE

Why is this the first I'm hearing of it?

SONNY

I knew you wouldn't like it.

DEEDEE

What I don't like is deception. You told me you and Daryl were going to movies with your friends. And now I find out that isn't true.

SONNY

They have it outdoors. “Worship under the stars,” they call it. It’s cool. They play rock music. And everybody sings and claps and prays. And sometimes people feel the spirit and come forward to accept Jesus as their savior. He saves us from sin and hell. From thinking unclean thoughts and doing the work of Satan.

DEEDEE

Stop it! There is no hell and there is no Satan.

SONNY

Yes, there is! And there’s a God. People have heard him and seen him. And he sent his only son Jesus to die for our sins.

DEEDEE

Sonny! Think about it: What kind of parent would send a son to die?

SONNY

God would. Because Jesus wanted to do it. Because he loved us.

DEEDEE

Jesus! ...was a very good person and radical teacher who criticized hypocrisy and cared about the oppressed. He is to be admired—like Socrates...Ghandi...Abraham Lincoln...Martin Luther King. Like them, he was murdered for his progressive ideas. He did not die for our sins; he lived for our edification.

SONNY

He was more than just a good person. He was divine.

DEEDEE

He was not! Humans have always made gods of their heroes. The Romans, the Egyptians, the Japanese...scores of others have seen their rulers as deities, or descendants of deities. It’s an honor bestowed on them that aggrandizes the whole society. But thinking people today don’t take such deification literally or seriously. It’s irrational.

SONNY

You think everything is “irrational”? What’s so great about reason?

DEEDEE

Reason is our salvation. Reason is what saves us from superstition and from fear of imagined dark forces and fabricated eternal punishment. Reason is something you can trust!

SONNY

What if it’s not enough?

DEEDEE

It has to be enough because it’s all there is.

SONNY

No! There's lots more. You just won't see it. But plenty of other people do. And I want to be one of them. I want to see it! I want to see God. I want to have...a father! And brothers and sisters. I want a family.

DEEDEE

We are a family—you and I.

SONNY

I want a family that laughs and goes to ballgames and picnics and—

DEEDEE

We do those things.

SONNY

*(Ignoring her.)*

And watches lots of stupid TV and has a dog and eats junk food and lets the dirty dishes pile up and doesn't care if the house is clean or stuff gets spilled in the car.

DEEDEE

That's not what you want. You think that until you have it. And then you'd see that—

SONNY

I want a father! Why don't I have one?

DEEDEE

You know why.

SONNY

I know why he didn't want anything to do with you.

DEEDEE

You know nothing about that!

SONNY

I do! I know he hated you so much he wouldn't stay.

DEEDEE

*(Stung.)*

Would you rather I had had an abortion?

SONNY

Yes!

DEEDEE

You don't mean that.

SONNY

Yes, yes, yes, I do!

DEEDEE

You think it's been easy for me to raise you alone, you, peevish little ingrate? To work and worry, and always, every day wonder if I had done the right thing, whether I had been too selfish, too proud, too unreasonably sure I could do right by you.

SONNY

You haven't! You haven't done right by me!

DEEDEE

Listen to me! You have had the benefit of one, devoted parent who has made it her life's work to ensure you get whatever would enrich your life. That is more than most of the world's children get. I think you have a hell of a nerve to complain.

SONNY

*(In her face.)*

I don't give a damn what you think! I hate you!

DEEDEE

I don't care how much you hate me. I am still your mother and I forbid you to go to "worship under the stars" or anyplace else with Daryl, or...

SONNY

Or what?

DEEDEE

Or I'll...take this telescope away from you.

SONNY

I don't care! You can keep your goddam telescope.

*(He hurls it to the floor violently. Sound of shattering glass. Blackout.)*

**Scene 5**

*Two weeks later. A Saturday afternoon in early June. JONAH is folding laundry. LABELLE is dancing to music. But she is preoccupied with the task facing her, loses interest in the music, turns it off, crosses to JONAH.*

Why you gotta do laundry?

LABELLE

Because I wear clothes.

JONAH

Everybody wear clothes.

LABELLE

Then everybody oughta do laundry.

JONAH

The Lords find out you turned into some kinda pussy, they ain't gonna like it.

LABELLE

I ain't no pussy. And I don't care what the Lords think.

JONAH

Well you better.

LABELLE

What's that mean?

JONAH

You find a job yet?

LABELLE

I will in two weeks—soon as school lets out. Get me a summer job over at the warehouse. It don't pay but seven dollars an hour, but they don't care much about permits and papers and stuff. And anyway I'll be fifteen by then.

LABELLE

That ain't even minimum wage.

JONAH

What you want me do? Where am I gonna get something better?

LABELLE

*(Pause, as she toys with the laundry.)*

Terrel give you a job.

JONAH

What?

LABELLE

You heard me.

JONAH

You know I can't have nothing to do with Terrel. That's the first rule of my parole. I break that and I'm back in juvey.

LABELLE

That's why he told me to tell you. He give you a job to do for the Lords. And pay you for it. Big money. Same as Reggie got paid. Enough money to get all the stuff we need for the baby.

JONAH

Yeah, sure. Terrel give me the job that got me into juvey in the first place.

LABELLE

That ain't his fault. If the old snitch wasn't looking out the window just that minute, it woulda went down easy.

JONAH

So what's that mean—it's her fault?

LABELLE

She's the one fingered Lamar and Sammy and you. It's her fault they upstate and you done juvey.

JONAH

She didn't finger me. They fingered me—to get time off.

LABELLE

Cops told them she already picked you out the lineup, so they might as well admit it.

JONAH

She told the cops she couldn't be sure about me. She said, "I don't know about that one." You was there in court. You heard her.

LABELLE

Well, she's sure about Lamar and Sammy. And now they upstate. And T. wants you to do something about it.

JONAH

Do what?

LABELLE

Do what the Lords do to snitches.

JONAH

Shit! I was just jumped in a week before the—

LABELLE

Listen! I'm telling you.

*(Giving directions, slowly.)*

One cut a minute for every Lord—that's twenty-two cuts in twenty-two places. And you wait the minute in between so it hurts longer. And then the last cut—the killing cut—to the heart, for Terrel.

*(He turns away.)*

He says if you do it, everybody that sees the news online or TV—they get the message about snitching. And you be good with the Lords. You get back your respect.

JONAH

My respect?

LABELLE

The respect you lost botching up the other job.

JONAH

I ain't the one turned a robbery into a murder.

LABELLE

I know that. But they say you the lookout and

*(Indicating the window.)*

you don't even see there's somebody watching it go down.

JONAH

And if I don't do the job?

LABELLE

It ain't good to not be respected by the Lords.

JONAH

Terrel don't scare me.

LABELLE

Jo...it ain't...safe. And you ain't the only one not gonna be safe. You gotta be thinking about me and the baby now. We a family.



JONAH

That's what Terrel say about the Lords: we a family.

LABELLE

You believe it?

JONAH

How would I know what a family feels like?

LABELLE

They say you gotta do it...tomorrow night.

JONAH

Damn! If I do it, I go upstate with Lamar and Sammy.

LABELLE

No—

JONAH

Cops'll know I'm the one done it. And where'm I gonna hide they can't find me?

LABELLE

Terrel got that all worked out. You pack up the body, and while it's still dark—by three-thirty a.m.—put it out where the trash go. Only before the garbage truck come early Monday morning, the Lords pick it up and—

JONAH

How they know when I get it out there?

LABELLE

They gonna call you on that phone.

*(Indicates desk.)*

Then they gonna pick the body up and take it to the river.

JONAH

The river? Then how's everybody gonna get the message about snitching?

LABELLE

Well now, it don't stay in the river. Terrel say when the cops can't find it no place else, they go looking for it there. Or it floats up someplace. And even though the blood's all washed away, them twenty-two cuts is still right there. For everybody to see.

JONAH

Yeah. And you know what else everybody gonna see? Me! She don't show up to work Monday morning, and they call here, what I gonna say?

LABELLE

That ain't gonna happen. Cause you gonna be the one to report her missing.

JONAH

Me?

LABELLE

When you wake up Monday morning and she ain't here, you call the police and tell them you worried. You tell them she went out Sunday night to get cigarettes and—

JONAH

She don't smoke.

LABELLE

You tell them she went out to get...some other shit. Or to a movie and—

JONAH

I don't think she'd go to the movies by herself—

LABELLE

Damn it! You think of something—everybody go out for something on a Sunday night! Anyway, you tell 'em you went to bed and didn't know she never come home...until she wasn't here the next morning.

JONAH

And they gonna believe that?

LABELLE

If you tell it good. And make sure ain't no evidence left around here.

JONAH

What kinda crazy plan is this? Think it through, Girl! I'm sposed to cut and kill somebody without leaving a trace and ship her body off to the river, and when it's found, nobody's sposed to think I done it?

LABELLE

It don't matter what people think. It only matters what they can prove.

JONAH

When they see the cuts, they gonna know the Lords did it.

LABELLE

Yeah, but ain't no fingerprints or DNA stuff of yours on that washed-up body. And they can't lock up twenty-two people for what one did. And they won't know which one.

JONAH

They'd have a pretty good idea.

LABELLE

But no proof. If you do this right. That's part of the test.

JONAH

What test?

LABELLE

They test if you steady enough. Here—  
*(Shakes her hand as if palsied.)*  
 and here  
*(Points to her head.)*  
 to be a Lord.

JONAH

Yeah, well I remember when Jamal failed his test when the cop a block away heard him taking a crowbar to the lock on the liquor store.

LABELLE

If he's dumb enough to make all that noise, he deserves to go to jail. Anyway, what about when Reggie took out the traitor Warrior on his own turf? He pulled that off because he was smart about it. And you smarter than him.

JONAH

*(Beat.)*  
 What happens if I don't do it?

LABELLE

You gotta do it.

JONAH

I'm asking you: what happens if I don't?

LABELLE

*(Beat.)*  
 Terrel send somebody else to do it to her. And to you too.

*(He collapses onto sofa. Beat.)*

JONAH

How'd this happen, LaBelle? How'd we get here?

LABELLE

We ain't had nobody looking out for us—that's how. So we gotta let the Lords look out for us.

JONAH

And this is how they do it?

LABELLE

They say they only do it after you prove yourself.

JONAH

You trust the Lords to take care of us?

LABELLE

We got no choice but to trust 'em long enough to get the money for the job. After that...well, you ain't got to stay in the Lords forever.

JONAH

You know better than that.

LABELLE

Just till things settle down after the body's found and the cops say they ain't got evidence to charge nobody. Then we move away from this place, away from the Lords, away from all this fucked up killing...to someplace where we got a chance.

JONAH

Where's that?

LABELLE

I got an aunt with a place in South Carolina. Maybe we can go there.

JONAH

*(Pointing to ankle monitor.)*

I can't go no farther than school with this thing.

LABELLE

Cut it off.

JONAH

That sets off an alarm at the station. My P.O. say won't take 'em five minutes to get here.

LABELLE

Then we wait till your parole's up to leave. When's that?

JONAH

A year from August.

LABELLE

That's a long time. Baby'll be a year old by then.

*(Beat.)*

JONAH

I don't like it, LaBelle. I don't wanna kill her.

LABELLE

You think I like it? It ain't a matter of what we like. We don't have a choice. It's kill or be killed.

JONAH

*(Turns away.)*

The hell with parole. Why can't we just run away without killing her?

LABELLE

Because if you don't kill her, they will. And if you run away, the cops'll come after you for sure. Look at it like this: she gonna get killed either way, if you don't do it, you get killed too. If you do do it, we get the money.

JONAH

I'll steal whatever we need.

LABELLE

You ain't gonna get that kinda money lifting wallets between now and tomorrow night. And anyway, if you don't do the job, the Lords'll find us even before the police do—and kill us both. You know they will.

JONAH

I just...ain't there no other way?

LABELLE

Don't seem like it.

JONAH

It don't seem...fair.

LABELLE

What world you living in? Since when you expect things to be fair?

*(He turns away.)*

How old you think she is?

JONAH

I don't know. Fifty? Sixty?

LABELLE

She's lived a good, long, easy, rich-woman's life, got everything she needed. She ain't seen nothing like the troubles we seen, and we're only fourteen. That seem fair to you?

JONAH

No, I guess not.

LABELLE

So now it's our turn....time for you and me and our baby.... We'll move in with my aunt in South Carolina. Stay with her till we can get jobs and a place of our own. Be a family... raise our boy where it's safe, teach him to be good, to stay away from gangs so he won't never have to do nothing like this.

JONAH

How we gonna raise our boy to be good when we...when we ain't good?

LABELLE

We ain't bad. We just...we just in a bad place. But we gonna get out of it and things is gonna be better. Things is all gonna work out, Jo. You'll see.

*(Lights.)*

Scene 6

AT RISE:

*Thirty-six hours later. Monday, early June, a few hours before dawn. JONAH is outside, smoking, looking at the knife in his hand. DEEDEE is in the living room lit only by streetlight/moonlight, sitting in a straight-back chair or rocker. For several moments we see her caress/interact with a few items she has taken from the trunk, perhaps a stuffed animal, a couple children's books, a model airplane, maybe a trophy or a medal, and a harmonica. This last she puts lovingly to her lips, very gently sucks in the air and closes her eyes, then holds the harmonica against her cheek. JONAH puts out his cigarette and enters.*

JONAH

*(Surprised to see her, quickly concealing the knife behind his back.)*

Oh!

DEEDEE

*(Equally surprised.)*

Oh!

JONAH

*(Turning on the light.)*

I didn't know you were in here.

DEEDEE

I didn't know you were out there.

JONAH

Couldn't sleep.

DEEDEE

What time is it?

JONAH

Way past midnight.

*(Taking in the scattered items.)*

What's all this?

DEEDEE

Just a collection of...I don't know why I...just can't seem to...

JONAH

*(Referring to harmonica.)*

He some kinda musician?

DEEDEE

He went through a cowboy phase at nine. Did you do that?

JONAH

Only cowboy I cared about was Roy Rogers. Biscuit and sausage gravy.

DEEDEE

For his birthday I got him harmonica lessons.

*(Dramatizing what she had said to him then.)*

“A man’s got to have a way to pass the nights on the prairie...lie back on his bedroll and play to the stars.”

JONAH

I been on a horse once. Some rich guy took a bunch of us kids from the hood to his big farm out in the country. Everybody got one ride around this old barn smelled like horse shit. Wasn’t no harmonicas though. He any good at it?

DEEDEE

No. But he wouldn’t give up. He worked hard at being good—at everything. Too hard really. It’s not healthy, that drive for perfection.

JONAH

I wouldn’t know about that.

*(She starts to cry. JONAH indicates the spread of mementos.)*

This why you brought me here—try to make me feel guilty?

*(She shakes her head.)*

I some kinda project? Why you doing something crazy like this?

DEEDEE

Maybe I’m afraid.

JONAH

Of me?

DEEDEE

Of spending the rest of my life consumed by anger and hatred.

JONAH

Why’d you throw him out?



DEEDEE

I didn't. He ran away—at just about your age. Halfway across the country. Left everything. The police couldn't find him so I hired detectives. After four years, one of them finally tracked him down...

*(Lights crossfade to a stained-glass window, suggesting the inside of a chapel or church. In the background—"outside"—children singing a hymn. SONNY sits in the front pew. DEEDEE crosses to him, holds her arms out. He leans away. She drops her arms.)*

DEEDEE

Oh, Sonny—you're so...you're not a boy anymore.

SONNY

No.

DEEDEE

You look...healthy.

SONNY

I am. And happy.

DEEDEE

Do you think we could talk...someplace else?

SONNY

"Christian Kids Camp" is where I live.

DEEDEE

But we could drive someplace—a restaurant, a park. I have a rental car.

SONNY

No.

DEEDEE

Can't we at least talk outside this...church?

SONNY

It's better here.

DEEDEE

*(Resigns herself to the setting.)*

I've missed you so much, Sonny.

SONNY

I'm eighteen now. You can't make me come with you.

DEEDEE

I want us to be a family again.

SONNY

We were never—

DEEDEE

Sonny, please. Come home.

SONNY

This is my home now.

DEEDEE

Do you have any idea what my life has been like these four years—not knowing where you were, if you were dead or alive? Can you even imagine?

SONNY

I'm sorry...I'm sorry it had to be that way.

DEEDEE

Why? Why did it have to be that way?

SONNY

Because if you had found me, you would've made me come home. Wouldn't you?

DEEDEE

Yes. I would have. And I don't understand why the people who run this place didn't. How could they keep a fourteen-year-old who—?

SONNY

I didn't come here till I was sixteen....and told them I was eighteen.

DEEDEE

Where were you the first two years?

SONNY

After I left you, I lived with a family in Daryl's church that was moving out near here.

DEEDEE

What kind of family kidnaps a boy from his mother?

SONNY

One who knows it's an act of mercy to get the boy out of his godless home.

DEEDEE

Were you so miserable in your “godless” home?

SONNY

My soul was in danger.

DEEDEE

What’s the name of this family?

SONNY

I’m not telling you. You’d...persecute them for doing the Lord’s work.

DEEDEE

No. I would not “persecute” them.

SONNY

You’d just have them arrested.

DEEDEE

What mother wouldn’t?

SONNY

How did you find me?

DEEDEE

A detective I hired spotted your face on a camp video. What’s happened to you? What have you been...? What about school?

SONNY

I’ve been home-schooled up till now. Don’t worry. I got good grades.

DEEDEE

And college? You should be starting college this year.

SONNY

I’ve been accepted at Pentecostal Christian University. It’s close by, which is good because I can keep up my work here.

DEEDEE

Couldn’t you...couldn’t you come home and do the same kind of—?

SONNY

No. They need me here. This is the largest, most successful Christian Kids Camp in the country. It’s an honor to be on the staff here.

DEEDEE

Sonny, listen to me: this is not a healthy place. How can you possibly—?

SONNY

Don't! My work here is important.

DEEDEE

Your “work”? Brainwashing kids about the evils of sex and secularism and evolution and...Harry Potter? Giving them nightmares with horror stories of hellfire? Helping eight-year-olds to march in protests with plastic fetuses? Convincing middle-schoolers to snuff out their minds—for Jesus? Your “work” is a betrayal of everything I ever taught you, of everything that's healthy and reasonable. Of everything important to—

SONNY

To you.

DEEDEE

Am I not important to you?

SONNY

*(Indicating his surroundings.)*

“My mother and my brethren are these who hear the word of God and keep it.”

DEEDEE

Stop it! These “brethren” did not nurse you through fevers and flus and broken bones. These “brethren” did not make sure you did your homework. They did not put food in your stomach or clothes on your back or self-confidence in your spirit. They did not, every day for fourteen years, choose your good over their own.

SONNY

You want a medal for being a mother?

DEEDEE

No! I want.... I want you to understand my feelings. People hold mothers responsible for how their children turn out. And so mothers hold themselves responsible. This attitude is idiotic. At least that's what I believed...until I became a mother. How could I not be invested in the outcome, how could I possibly escape its effects? How could I not be...disappointed? I want what's best for you.

*(Beat. Touches him.)*

Sonny, I—

SONNY

*(Pulls away.)*

You have no right—even a mother has no right—to deny me my own search, my own life.

DEEDEE

A mother does have a right—a responsibility—to see that her child thrives, to protect him from—

SONNY

How could I thrive...in your withering disapproval of what was most important to me?

DEEDEE

*(Beat.)*

I thought you Christians were the ones who claimed to practice love and forgiveness.

SONNY

I always wondered why Jesus forgave only one of the thieves crucified with him. Was it because only one repented?

DEEDEE

*(Beat.)*

So what does this mean? How can we...? How will we go on loving each other?

SONNY

If you loved me, you would find a way to accept this.

DEEDEE

If you loved me, you would not abandon the values I taught you.

SONNY

“He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.”

DEEDEE

*(Slapping him.)*

Stop quoting the bible at me! Now come away from this place or I'll...

SONNY

You'll what?

DEEDEE

I'll...I'll sue these Jesus freaks for so much they'll have to shut down!

SONNY

On what grounds?

DEEDEE

On grounds that they harbored a runaway minor. On grounds that they're stupid...and manipulative...and wrong!

SONNY

People have a right to free speech—even when they’re wrong. You taught me that.

DEEDEE

So you admit they’re wrong.

SONNY

I admit you think we’re wrong.

*(Beat.)*

DEEDEE

What can I do, Son, what can I say to persuade you?

SONNY

Nothing.

DEEDEE

I forgive you, Sonny. I forgive you for four long years of sleepless, gut-wrenching anxiety, four years of despairing loneliness, and I beg you—

*(Kneels and throws her arms around him.)*

I beg you to come home.

SONNY

*(Unwrapping her arms.)*

I don’t need your forgiveness. I’ve done nothing bad, nothing but respond to the Savior’s call. I’ve answered that call, praise the Lord. It doesn’t matter what you think.

*(Beat. She cries.)*

DEEDEE

Do you know how hard it is to—?

*(Tries to pull herself together.)*

I’m leaving now. When you come to your...if you change your mind...there will always be a place for you.

*(Lights change as DEEDEE crosses back to JONAH.)*

DEEDEE *(Cont.)*

Six years later, he moved back here to the city and started that...Mercy Mission across the park.

JONAH

You don’t like the mission?

DEEDEE

From what I hear...there’s nothing wrong with...it’s good to have a place where young people can get away from gangs and drugs and violence. But I think it would be a lot

DEEDEE (*Cont.*)

better—and more effective—if they weren't fed all that blather about turning their backs on Satan. I don't think that accepting Jesus as their savior should be the price of admission.

JONAH

Why'd you ask him to come over that night?

DEEDEE

I didn't. He called me. Said he wanted to talk. He asked if he could come over. I said yes, yes, please come.

(*Beat.*)

JONAH

What about his Daddy?

DEEDEE

Never part of the picture.

JONAH

He leave you?

DEEDEE

I was a “single mother”—long before it was “fashionable” for educated people.

JONAH

But...you're a doctor and all. You had to know how to...I mean you're a smart woman.

DEEDEE

Smart enough to sleep only with bright, talented, unmarried men. There were plenty of them at my conferences.

JONAH

Conferences?

DEEDEE

Professional meetings for scientists.

JONAH

But you coulda...why didn't you get an abor—

DEEDEE

I wanted a family. I was thirty-five. I wanted a child. I wanted him very much. But his father didn't.

(*Kettle whistles in kitchen. She gets up.*)

I'm making tea. Would you like some?

JONAH

Nah. I ain't thirsty.

DEEDEE

Neither am I. Tea soothes the spirit.

*(She exits. He looks around for a hiding place, then puts the knife in a bookshelf. She comes back with two mugs, tea bag tags hanging over the lips.)*

DEEDEE *(Cont.)*

Just in case you change your mind.

*(Sets his down.)*

What are you going to do about LaBelle?

JONAH

*(Alarmed.)*

What do you mean?

DEEDEE

Anyone can see she's pregnant.

JONAH

I...dunno. I dunno what to do.

DEEDEE

Will she be...safe? Is her family supportive?

JONAH

Her mama's pretty pissed. Says she can't afford no baby.

DEEDEE

When is the baby due?

JONAH

August.

DEEDEE

Has she seen an obstetrician?

JONAH

A what?

DEEDEE

Has she been to a doctor...for pre-natal care?



JONAH

Can't afford no doctor.

DEEDEE

I'll take care of it, make an appointment for her.

JONAH

Why you doing this?

DEEDEE

No baby should have to pay because its parents are—

JONAH

Stupid?

DEEDEE

Careless.

JONAH

Bet you're sorry you ever took me in.

DEEDEE

How could I be? Look what we've become in these two months. What we're becoming still.  
Are you sorry?

*(He looks away.)*

Why did you agree to come here?

JONAH

Where else I gonna go?

DEEDEE

They wouldn't have let me...they wouldn't have allowed it if you hadn't agreed. You could've gone back to your last foster family.

JONAH

Nah. That wasn't working out, even before...

*(Gestures to window.)*

what happened out there.

DEEDEE

Why not?

JONAH

They didn't treat me right.

DEEDEE

How did you treat them?

JONAH

They was only in it for the money. But you don't need that money. I still don't get it. You saying you need to keep yourself busy so you won't, like, die of grief or something. Yeah. I get that. I seen lotsa sons die and lotsa mamas cry. But none of 'em worried about keeping busy. They just putting one foot in front of the other, food on the table one meal after the other—that keeps 'em plenty busy. I knew one that come down to the Rec. Center and help out—before they closed it up. She says her boy gone, killed in a gang fight. She gonna look out for other boys now—see they don't get in with gangs. I get that. But she ain't taking into her own home the kid that shot her kid. How can you...what am I to you but a criminal—somebody helped get your son killed?

DEEDEE

You're a person, Jonah. You have value. As a human being.

JONAH

You mean like the preacher say we all God's children or something?

DEEDEE

You have worth as a person—with or without God. You are worthy of respect. You deserve to be given a chance.

JONAH

A chance to what?

DEEDEE

A chance to choose.

JONAH

To choose?

DEEDEE

To choose to live an honorable life.

JONAH

You make it sound so easy. Like somebody just come to a corner and decide if they wanna go down this street or that street. But my corner ain't like that. I look down one street and I see my homies in the Lords. I look down the other street and I see losers that got no money, got no respect. What kinda fucking choice is that?!

DEEDEE

Jonah, please, you have—

JONAH

No other word for it. It's a fucking choice! And whichever way I make it, I be fucked up!

DEEDEE

No! You have this house on your street. You have your home. Our home. You have me on your corner—in your corner. You have a third choice. You don't have to turn left to a gang or right to poverty. You can...well...go straight.

*(Beat. Then suddenly they both exhale a quiet, mirthless laugh at the corniness of the pun.)*

JONAH

What about LaBelle?

DEEDEE

What about her? She's in your corner too. Isn't she?

JONAH

Yeah. Yeah, she's in my corner all right.

DEEDEE

And when you finish school, you'll be able to get a job, get married, go down a road that's safe...and solid under your feet.

JONAH

It ain't that easy.

DEEDEE

I didn't say it would be easy. I said it would be safe.

JONAH

What do you know about safe for somebody like me?

DEEDEE

I know that you can make choices that will help you stay away from danger.

JONAH

You don't know nothing! You living in some kinda sci-fi dream world—or that lab of yours where everybody wears white coats and plastic gloves and ain't no germs or dirt. The real world—the world I live in—ain't nothing like that.

DEEDEE

I know you're afraid, Jonah.

JONAH

Who said I'm afraid? I ain't afraid of nothing.

DEEDEE

The Lords will come back for you. They'll come to the school yard or the Seven-Eleven or the basketball court. And they'll try to get you back. They'll offer you drugs or money for selling drugs—more money than you've ever seen or imagined. They'll offer you a place in their club—their criminal club—and tell you that belonging to it will make you feel good. But it won't. Because what they won't offer you, what they can't offer you...is hope...hope for any kind of future, for any kind of honorable life.

JONAH

We got a honor you don't know nothing about. The brothers in the Lords honor each other. They loyal to each other. They there for each other. They ready to die for each other. And when you die for a brother, you a man. And you live forever.

DEEDEE

Why die for others when you can live for the good of others? When you can leave the violence and the killing and live an honorable life?

JONAH

What do I care about your "honorable life"? Your honor ain't gonna pay no rent. It ain't gonna buy no clothes, no car. It ain't gonna put no food on the table. What can your honor do for me?

DEEDEE

Help you find the good in yourself and make it grow. Help you bring out the good in other people. Let you hold up your head when you teach your children. There's nothing you can't do, Jonah, when you nurture that good, when you water it with hard work and feed it with faith—faith in your own ability to—

JONAH

*(He starts to pace the room, including behind her, his agitation escalating through his and her next lines.)*

Shut up! I ain't got that faith! Don't you get it, Bitch?

*(Knocks memorabilia off the trunk.)*

This ain't your genius, bible-kissing, harmonica-sucking son you're talking to.

*(Pounding his chest.)*

This is me—Stupid Jonah—the black boy from Parkside that's too stupid to stay out of a gang, that's too stupid to stay in school, that's even too stupid to use a—

DEEDEE

You shut up! You took away my son! And now you've got to be my son! And I'm going to be your mother. And no son of mine is going to be stupid.

*(Focusing on a future she sees before her, she doesn't turn to look at him when he is behind her, retrieving the knife.*

*Building in intensity and pace for the rest of her lines.)*

DEEDEE (*Cont.*)

Because I'm going to be there. I'm going to be there checking your math homework and reading your essays. I'm going to be there when you decide on a science project or pick a hero for your history paper. I'm going to be in your muscles when you get out of bed in the morning, in your memory when you're taking tests, in the small of your back when its sore from leaning over your books. I'm going to be in your head each time you start to think you can't do any more. I'm going to be crying with pride at your graduation.

*(He is standing behind her, holding the knife.)*

Then I'm going to be in your hand when you fill out job applications and in your eyes and ears and mouth when you go for interviews.

*(He closes his eyes and raises the knife, poised to bring it down.)*

And through all that...through all that, I'm going to be in your heart.... And you're going to be in mine.

*(Crying, he turns the knife so that the butt of the handle faces down, then brings it down on her head. Accompanying this gesture is a single sound effect: the shrill distorted blast of a harmonica. With the blow, she loses consciousness. He crosses to window, looks out to check if anyone could have seen him, closes blinds/curtains, cuts off cords in four pieces, uses these to tie her arms and legs to the chair. During this: loud, discordant electronic harmonica music, perhaps some ironic, chaotic, barely recognizable combination of the melodies for "Home on the Range" and "Amazing Grace." Sound fades. He crosses to phone on desk, punches in number.)*

JONAH

*(Into phone.)*

You gotta come over—now. Don't say nothing to nobody. Just get here—fast.

*(Beat.)*

You'll see.

*(Beat.)*

I ain't saying no more now. Just get here.

*(He hangs up. He looks around, slowly taking in the magnitude of his deed. He exits to kitchen. We hear noise of rifling through a cupboard, clank of bottles. He comes out with a half-full bottle of liquor, takes a swig, sets it down. DEEDEE moans, gradually regaining consciousness.)*

DEEDEE

*(Her eyes closed.)*

Uhh...what happened? My head...ouhh...

*(Moans.)*

My hands...heavy...numb...

*(Opens eyes.)*

DEEDEE (*Cont.*)

Sonny? Is that you?... I'm so happy you've come...come home.  
(*Closes eyes. Her head drops. SONNY enters.*)

SONNY

What have you done?

JONAH

She ain't dead.

SONNY

Yet.

JONAH

Don't start.

SONNY

You've got to get her to a hospital.

JONAH

I said: Don't start!

SONNY

Call an ambulance. Number one on the phone.

JONAH

Yeah, right.

SONNY

You can tell them she fell and hit her head.

JONAH

She didn't fall.

SONNY

She doesn't remember what happened. She didn't see you do it.

(*Gesturing to baby cup on floor.*)

If you say she tripped on the cup there and fell, she'll believe you. She...she trusts you.

JONAH

What the fuck you doing here?! You're dead! I seen you go down right outside that window. We killed you for eighty bucks. You don't live here no more! You don't live no place!

SONNY

I came out of my box just like Jesus did—just like you can—and I have eternal life in heaven...and in your head.

JONAH

Well, I don't want you there. So you can just go on back to your box or back to heaven or you can go to hell! Cause I want you outa my head.

*(He takes a swig of liquor.)*

SONNY

You drink enough of that, and I'll be taking up permanent residence.

*(JONAH stomps around the room, accidentally steps on something, then kicks it.)*

JONAH

And pick up your shit off this floor. I got work to do here.

*(Beat.)*

SONNY

Untie her.

JONAH

What?

SONNY

She's not going anyplace. You heard her, didn't you? She doesn't have the strength to do anything.

JONAH

She could call—

SONNY

Tell her you've already called for an ambulance. She'll believe you. You know she will. Untie her.

*(JONAH starts towards her, then turns back.)*

Come on. Why make her suffer more than—

*(JONAH looks at him.)*

JONAH

More than I have to?

SONNY

More than she already has.

*(JONAH wavers, then cuts cords off DEEDEE.)*

That's better.

JONAH

LaBelle ain't gonna think so.

SONNY

You always care so much what LaBelle thinks?

JONAH

She got a...sometimes she got a cooler head than me.

SONNY

Maybe you just have a warmer heart.

JONAH

I ain't no pussy!

SONNY

Then do the right thing.

JONAH

You make it sound so...so...you think it's easy to...it ain't like I can.... Look, I'm drowning in this place...ain't nothing solid for me to stand on here.... The water's up to my chin and I can't breathe! I gotta get out, I gotta get some air!

*(Advancing on him, backing him towards window.)*

You gotta get out my head, Man. I told you that. I don't want you here! I got work to do.

SONNY

That's my mother you're doing your "work" on.

JONAH

*(Jabbing the air in front of SONNY's face.)*

Whata you care? You ain't had nothing to do with her for ten years.

SONNY

How about you, Jonah? You stopped caring about your mother?

JONAH

Shut up!

*(We hear a pounding on the door.)*

LABELLE (O.S.)

Jonah!

JONAH

*(To SONNY.)*

I got other things need caring about now, and you in the way of that.

*(Advances on SONNY.)*



SONNY

No, you in the way of that.

*(Holds his arms out, palms front, offering no defense.)*

Why do you think I'm here? You need me. You called me to come.

*(More pounding on the door.)*

JONAH

And now I'm telling you to go. Get the fuck outa my head!

*(Backing him up against the window.)*

Get the fuck outa...my life!

SONNY

No...Jonah...don't do it. Don't...do it.

*(Arms still extended, as if riddled by JONAH's eyes, he slides down the window to the floor in a heap.*

*More pounding. JONAH crosses to door, opens it to LABELLE.)*

LABELLE

Why didn't you let me in? Didn't you hear me banging?

JONAH

I was...busy.

LABELLE

*(Coming into the room, seeing DEEDEE.)*

Yeah. I see. You ain't killed her yet, have you?

JONAH

No.

LABELLE

Why ain't you got her tied up?

JONAH

She don't need it. She's too weak to...she's out of it anyhow.

LABELLE

How many cuts you done?

JONAH

I ain't...done none yet.

LABELLE

None!

*(She takes the knife and quickly crosses to back of DEEDEE, makes a small cut on the back of each shoulder. DEEDEE calls out in pain, then her head goes limp again.)*

JONAH

What you doing?!

LABELLE

What you think I'm doing? I'm starting with two cuts—for Lamar and Sammy—to make up for the time you wasted.

JONAH

How can you do that? I mean just start cutting a person's body?

LABELLE

I've had practice.

JONAH

But—

LABELLE

I just try thinking she's got some pain I'm letting out. Everybody got pain, don't they? Maybe even rich people. Now we just got to do twenty more.

JONAH

Wait a minute, will you?! Just...just hold on. We need to think this through.

LABELLE

We already done that.

JONAH

Why we gotta go so fast?

LABELLE

'Cause we got a lot to do. It gonna take twenty minutes just to do the cuts and then—

JONAH

Why can't we do the cuts after she's dead? Who's gonna know?

LABELLE

Ain't you never watch CSI or them other shows where the M.E. tells the police: "No, this gunshot's not what killed him. He was already dead before that." They know what comes when.

JONAH

So what?

LABELLE

So. It all goes in the police report. And that's what goes to the news people on the TV. The Lords want everybody watching TV to hear what happened her. Everybody needs to hear that she was cut twenty-two times before she was "fatally stabbed." Everybody needs to know that's what happens to snitches. That's our orders.

JONAH

What if she bleeds to death before we even get to ten?

LABELLE

That's why we just making little cuts. We got to save her for the "fatal stab." Is it time?

JONAH

What?

LABELLE

Is a minute up yet?

JONAH

How do I know? I...I wasn't timing it.

LABELLE

Well, start!

*(Takes off DEEDEE's slipper.)*

JONAH

What're you doing?

LABELLE

I'm cutting her foot so she can't run away.

*(She tries to get the knife into position.)*

JONAH

How's she gonna run away? She ain't even conscious.

LABELLE

Damn, it's hard to do with a big knife like this. Wish I had a razor.

*(She cuts. DEEDEE whimpers. So does SONNY. LABELLE doesn't hear him but JONAH does and puts his hands over his ears. Then...)*

JONAH

*(Grabbing the knife away from her, throwing it on the floor.)*

Stop it!

LABELLE

What's the matter with you?

JONAH

What's the point of stretching it out like this. She ain't done nothing...she don't deserve this!

LABELLE

Don't get soft on me.

JONAH

Look—we'll do the cuts all together, right at the last minute, just before...the end.

LABELLE

Well, "the end" better be soon because it's after three o'clock already.  
*(JONAH starts pacing, picks up the harmonica, hurls it across the room, then the other things, lastly the silver cup, which he starts to hurl.)*

Wait! What's that silver thing?

JONAH

You ever know any baby drink outa something like this? My mama say that old white bastard she work for was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. I guess this cup goes with that.

LABELLE

*(Grabs it from him.)*

I'm gonna take this for our baby. And this other stuff too.

*(Picks up other things, but he violently grabs them away from her and throws them across the room.)*

JONAH

We can't be carrying all this junk! We gotta be traveling light!

*(She is taken aback by his sudden violence.)*

LABELLE

What we gonna put her in? After?

JONAH

A clothes basket?

LABELLE

Gotta be something don't leak. Something tight. That you can't see through.

*(Gesturing to the trunk.)*

What about this thing?

JONAH

That don't look big enough.

LABELLE

Sure it is.

JONAH

Well, let's find out. You get in.

LABELLE

What?

JONAH

Go ahead—see if you can fit.

*(He gestures to LABELLE to get in. She steps into it and sits down.)*

You gotta get down more.

LABELLE

*(Trying various positions.)*

I don't know. I don't think we can get the lid closed.

JONAH

*(Bending over, mimicking fetal position.)*

Get down like this and face the bottom.

*(She does this.)*

Tighter. Flatten out your feet.

*(She compresses more. He slams the lid down and flips the latch. SONNY stirs. JONAH looks around, frantic, paces, then crosses to phone on the desk. LABELLE bangs on the inside of the trunk. JONAH is paralyzed for a moment, then slowly picks up the phone.)*

LABELLE

Jonah! Let me outa here! What's the matter with you? We ain't got time for foolishness.

*(He is frozen.)*

I got your baby in here with me and he wants out!

*(Banging.)*

Jonah!

*(Beat. JONAH hangs up phone, opens the trunk. LABELLE gets out.)*

LABELLE (*Cont.*)

You crazy or something? What you doing locking me in there? This ain't no time to be playing games! And no time to be having second thoughts.

*(Picks up the knife and hands it to him.)*

Now get to work—'cause me and you and this baby—we're a family. This is our child and we're his parents. We gonna be good parents. We gonna love this baby and raise him on my aunt's place in South Carolina.

JONAH

You talk like...how can you be so sure of everything?

LABELLE

We gotta believe in something. Why not us?

JONAH

Why we gotta believe in something?

LABELLE

'Cause if we don't, we might as well just lay down and die.

JONAH

Sometimes...that's what I feel like doing.

LABELLE

Jonah! Get holda yourself. We ain't got time for no whining—we got work to do.

JONAH

That's just it. I ain't got the stomach for this... "work." DeeDee—she ain't done nothing to me. She even...

LABELLE

That ain't the point. It ain't a matter of you kill her or you don't. It's a matter of you kill her or the Lords kill her—and kill us too. That's the choice. It's self-defense. Everybody got a right to defend theirselves, don't they?

JONAH

Yeah, but it ain't right to just go around killing.

*(Throws the knife down.)*

LABELLE

You gotta toughen up, Boy. How you gonna be a father if you don't put your son first?

*(Gesturing to DEEDEE.)*

How you gonna explain you choose her over him? How you gonna hold up your head when you tell him that?

*(The phone on the desk rings. LABELLE gestures for him to answer it, but he is paralyzed. Finally, she picks up.)*

LABELLE (*Cont.*)

*(Into phone.)*

Yeah?

*(Beat. To JONAH.)*

Terrel wanna talk to you.

*(He crosses to her slowly; she hands him the phone and crosses away.)*

JONAH

*(Into phone.)*

What?

*(Beat.)*

Where you at?

*(Beat.)*

But it's just...yeah, I know how it's sposed to go down. It ain't three-thirty yet.

*(Beat.)*

No, no.... We got it all worked out. We doing the job, but we ain't got all the—

*(Beat.)*

Five minutes? Yeah. Sure. We be done in five minutes.

*(Beat.)*

No. No need to come inside. Just be ready to...just have the doors open.

*(Beat.)*

I know the deal. I told you. Five minutes.

*(Hangs up, looks at the phone. LABELLE stares at him. SONNY stands slowly. JONAH looks at him, looks at DEEDEE. SONNY—unseen/unheard by LABELLE—approaches JONAH. They lock eyes.)*

SONNY

This is it, Jonah. What will it be? Last chance...or lost chance?

*(Beat. JONAH stares at SONNY, then nods his head. SONNY exits through wall.)*

LABELLE

What you waiting for?! They almost here?

JONAH

Get out!

LABELLE

What?

JONAH

Get outa here! I don't want you be any part of this.

LABELLE

Why?

JONAH

I don't want my boy be a killer before he's even born.

LABELLE

But you gonna need me to help put the—

JONAH

I can do it alone.

LABELLE

But—

JONAH

Get out!

*(She looks at him. He crosses to where the knife is, picks it up.)*

Go on!

*(LABELLE goes out the door. JONAH crosses back to the phone, puts the knife on the desk, presses 911 on the phone pad. Beat. Into phone.)*

JONAH (Cont.)

Somebody's been attacked. 2709 Eastern Avenue. She's hurt bad. Come fast!

*(He hangs up, looks around the room, turns chairs over, opens the desk drawers, starts frantically throwing stuff onto the floor. He exits to kitchen. We hear the sound of a door being opened and a glass pane being broken. He comes back with a dish towel, crosses to desk, wipes LaBelle's prints off the handle of the knife, picks up liquor bottle, wipes it down, takes bottle and towel to kitchen, returns, carefully picks up knife, crosses to DEEDEE, looks down at her for a moment, then stoops to check out her face. He is stunned to see her eyes meet his gaze.)*

DEEDEE

They won't get here in time.



JONAH

Who?

DEEDEE

The police. The ambulance. They won't get here in five minutes. They never do.

*(He looks around, frantic. Then gets an idea. He uses the knife to cut the strap on his ankle monitor.)*

JONAH

How long you been...awake?

DEEDEE

Long enough.

JONAH

What'd you hear?

DEEDEE

Everything.

*(He turns away.)*

Jonah.

*(No response.)*

Look at me.

*(Slowly he does.)*

Do it.

JONAH

What?

DEEDEE

If you don't, they'll kill us both.

JONAH

But how am I gonna—?

DEEDEE

The Lords will see you've done it. By the time they try to help you get my body into the... When they hear the siren, they'll leave in a hurry. You stay behind. Wipe your prints off the bloody knife. Let the police in. Tell them you came home and found them doing this and called.

JONAH

How could I be calling the cops while they're here? They'd kill me first.

DEEDEE

When you discovered them here, you pretended to go along with what they were doing, but then called for help from the kitchen without their knowing it.

JONAH

Why the cops gonna believe that?

DEEDEE

Because you didn't run. Because you'll give them the names of those who did. Because you didn't have a motive.

*(Beat.)*

Did you?

*(JONAH shakes his head, looks away, stands up straight, walks towards window, turns back.)*

JONAH

I...I can't do it.

DEEDEE

Yes. You can.

JONAH

How?

DEEDEE

Think of it as...an act of mercy.

JONAH

But I'm the one that...I shoulda gone to the police when LaBelle first told me...

DEEDEE

Yes. You should have. And in the best of all possible worlds, that would have assured a better outcome. But I guess we don't live in that world...yet.

JONAH

I'm not...I'm not a murderer.

DEEDEE

I know.

JONAH

I never wanted to...your son...I didn't know what to do.

DEEDEE

I know. I know.

JONAH

But this is...how can I...how am I gonna live with this...with this...?

DEEDEE

It's not going to be murder.

JONAH

Why not?

DEEDEE

Because I am asking you to do this. You are granting my dying request. I would rather be killed instantly by someone who loves me than killed slowly by someone who hates me.

JONAH

What about all that stuff you...what about me finding the good in myself?

DEEDEE

You have found it. Or we wouldn't be having this conversation.

JONAH

It don't seem right.

DEEDEE

It isn't.

JONAH

*(Kneeling in front of her.)*

We was just...you and me, DeeDee...we was just starting to...

DEEDEE

Yes. I'm thankful for that.

JONAH

Let's just wait. Maybe the police will come first. Let's just listen for the siren.

*(He sits back on his knees. They are like this for a moment as we all listen for the siren. Then, instead, we hear a car pull up, the engine is turned off, doors open. Men talking. JONAH lifts his head, looks at DEEDEE. She nods. He picks up the knife, looks at it, looks at her. Beat. He takes a protective position in front of her, his back to her, facing the kitchen. We hear a sudden, loud siren announcing the arrival of a police car whose siren had been deliberately silenced until now. Car doors open quickly. Shouting. JONAH throws the knife aside, puts his head in DEEDEE's lap, cries. She strokes it, looks out.)*

*(Long fade to black. Shattering of glass.)*

*End of Play*