

Shattering

by

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Shattering

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 Jonah’s relationship with the strict but caring Dawson develops and his imagined visits with her dead son jar his conscience. When he has a change of heart, it is too late, and Dawson urges him to go through with the murder.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jonah, 14, African-American, recently released from juvenile commitment

Jacqueline Dawson (DeeDee), 59, African-American, an astrophysicist and atheist

LaBelle, 14, African-American, Jonah’s girlfriend

Sonny, 24, African-American, DeeDee’s dead son, a Christian Fundamentalist

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: A war zone—DeeDee’s home in an urban neighborhood, U.S.A.

SCRIPT HISTORY

Based on this script, the playwright was awarded a month’s residency at the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Woodside, California, and an Individual Artist Award by the Maryland State Arts Council. The script was a semi-finalist in the Bay Area Playwrights Festival and was given a reading in the Baltimore Dramatists Guild Footlight Series.

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 war zone near a large park where high-rise project-housing on one side threatens rows of gentrified town houses on the other side. DEEDEE lives in one of these. Her modest but 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 chairs. A counter presumably has a kitchen (not visible) on the other side. A small bedroom—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, black 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.

Jesus Fucking Christ!	JONAH
Please don't do that, Jonah.	DEEDEE
You gonna give me shit about... (Sing-song-y) “taking the Lord's name in vain”?	JONAH
I don't care about that.	DEEDEE
What then?	JONAH
It shows a lack of imagination.	DEEDEE
Huh?	JONAH
What were you feeling when you said that?	DEEDEE
Said what?	JONAH

DEEDEE
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 'bout?

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
(Defiant.)
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
(Mocking her. Sing-song-y.)
"It makes me angry when I don't get to make the rules." Then what?

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

So?
JONAH

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 live a couple minutes away—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

'Cept 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—

JONAH

Whooooaaa!

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 hafta 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 nothin' 'bout cookin'.

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 use to bring home leftovers from where she worked. Meatloaf, chicken stew. Some kinda tuna fish with noodles. Stuff like that. But I ain't 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 ain't never fix 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, ain't 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. You'll have your own room. Would you like to see it?

(He shrugs. They cross to bedroom. 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 sleep here.

DEEDEE

(Pointedly.)

Somebody else did.

JONAH

(Changing the 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

You ain't got 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 talkin' to? I ain'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 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 talk 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.

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 I sposed to say?

DEEDEE

What you feel.

JONAH

I ain’t never done no laundry.

DEEDEE

So what do you feel? Inadequate? Incompetent?

JONAH

Stupid. I mean I ain’t no cleanin’ woman—it stupid for me to be doin’ 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.

JONAH

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.)

Whenever I get around 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. She didn't make a lotta 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 will come for you 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.

(Hands it to him.)

JONAH

What's this to?

DEEDEE

The house.

JONAH

This house?

DEEDEE

How else you going to get in? I get home from work around five-thirty or six, most days. 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 smart phone?

(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 on the bed.)

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 checkin' 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?

(Beat. She looks at her watch.)

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

(DEEDEE exits. JONAH takes a shirt from drawer and holds it up to him. It is the right size but ten years out of style. He tosses it across the open drawer, goes to telescope, begins to examine how it swivels and pumps, looks into the wrong end, then sits on stool and looks into the right end. But it is not yet dark out. He gets up, runs his hand along books on shelf, pulls off a spiral notebook, looks inside at handwriting, then tosses it on bed. He picks up 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 tellin' 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 expected result." The opposite of "poetic justice." Unpoetic justice? Poetic injustice?

JONAH

You sound like the kinda guy ain't need none of that T-saurus.

SONNY

Ah, well. Mr. Roget and I are long-time best buds. It was...an "arranged friendship."

JONAH

Guess I know who done the arrangin'.

SONNY

(Imitating DEEDEE.)

"You have choices, you know!" Only you better make the ones she wants you to.

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 a top, but covered by a
light-weight throw is asleep on sofa. Her underpants
are on the back of the 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 li'l 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, comin' and comin' and comin' home. And all the while, Patti LaBelle was singin'.

JONAH

What she singin'?

*(Imitating the style of her namesake, LABELLE sings a bit
of "Joy to Have Your Love.")*

LABELLE

Ain't that the sweetest dream ever?

JONAH

(Crosses to her with book, kisses her.)

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

LABELLE

Songs 'bout fallin' in love are my favorite. When did you do it?

JONAH

Do what?

LABELLE

Fall in love?

JONAH

With who?

LABELLE

You think I wanna hear 'bout you fallin' in love with somebody else?

JONAH

I ain't thought about it.

LABELLE

Well think about it now.

*(He sits on sofa as she reaches for underpants, puts them
on under the throw.)*

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 stallin'.

JONAH

Okay, okay. It was at the park—the basketball court. You was sittin' on the bench drinkin' a Coke and wearin' them red sunglasses that's way too big—cover up your whole face. You was sittin' next to Tonya and she musta said somethin' funny 'cause you laughin' and fallin' over silly, not payin' no attention to the game. Then I come up for a foul shot. And things get a little quiet. And I'm bouncin' the ball, lookin' at the hoop, but I'm seein' you out the edge of my eye. And then you call out—

LABELLE

Hey Bro—stop thinkin' 'bout how fine you is in them fancy Sean John pants and bury the damn ball!

JONAH

I know right then I got to get behind them sunglasses.
(They kiss.)

LABELLE

What you readin'?

JONAH

Cookbook.

LABELLE

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

JONAH

(Ignoring this.)
Did you know that meatloaf ain't nothin' 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 the same as hamburgers, where the change?

JONAH

Well, it ain't exactly the same. It got onions and tomato sauce and breadcrumbs.

(Checks book.)

And a egg.

LABELLE

Who want 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 bustin' outa your routine and trying somethin' new and *dangerous*.

(Snuggles.)

LABELLE

Well, wadda you know? That's just what I be gettin' 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

(Sits up.)

What you talkin' 'bout? When?

LABELLE

In four months.

JONAH

Four...you sure?

LABELLE

Don't you think I can count?

JONAH

I mean...you sure I the daddy?

(She slaps him hard, tosses off the throw, gets up, puts on jeans.)

LABELLE

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

JONAH

I 'member. 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 I ain't had no bleedin'. Tonya say I got four more and then the baby come.

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.... What about...? Maybe if you go down to the clinic, they could—

LABELLE

I ain't goin' to no clinic! Why you want me do that?

JONAH

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

LABELLE

Well, I don't want to. This is your life I got inside me, Jonah. You think I wanna cut that outa me? It'd be like cuttin' you. You the one good thing in my life, Boy. I ain't cuttin' out any part of you. So don't be talkin' 'bout goin' to no clinic.

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 givin' 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 ain't got no job, no money.

LABELLE

Well then, you just gotta get some.

JONAH

Where I gonna get money?

LABELLE

(Looking around.)

The old cow 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 people don't keep they money in cups and cans. They keep it in the bank.

LABELLE

What about credit cards?

JONAH

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

LABELLE

Then you just hafta get a job?

JONAH

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

(She stomps around the room without speaking.)

JONAH (*Cont.*)

Why you wait till now to tell me if you knowed all this time?

LABELLE

I didn't wanna tell you while you was in juvey. That ain't no place to be gettin' news like this. I wanna 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 'bout the touchin' part.

JONAH

I am, Baby. I missed you so much when I was in juvey.
(*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 carryin' your child and somethin' in you knew it. I truly believe that. I do.

JONAH

LaBelle?

LABELLE

Yeah?

JONAH

When you was...when you was cuttin' yourself...why you do it?

LABELLE

(*Pulling away.*)

Why we gotta talk about that now?

JONAH

I need to know.

LABELLE

Why?

JONAH

I just do.

LABELLE

If you thinkin' I might ever do somethin' like that to our baby, you ain'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 ain't cared if they even watch me do it or not. It let the pain out. 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 askin' 'bout 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” come into my room when everybody asleep. Say he can't sleep cause she snoring and keeping him awake. Ask if he can sleep with me, just for a little while.

JONAH

What you say?

LABELLE

What I gonna say? You think sayin' “no” gonna make a difference? I ain't say nothin', but I roll over and face the wall so he see I ain't crazy 'bout 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 ain't you shout out?

LABELLE

I try to. But he got his hand over my mouth. Then he on top of me, fuckin' away, hurtin' me bad. I try to bite him but he got the palm of his hand up tight against my lips, squeezing my cheekbones till they near break.

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

When he done, he tell me not to say nothin' cause nobody gonna believe it, and that anyway, me rollin' over to make room for him means I wanted it.

JONAH

And did you?

LABELLE

No! Of course I ain't wanted 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 say I makin' up stories 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 cuttin' 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

He gone now.

JONAH

Where to?

LABELLE

I don't know.

JONAH

The baby—how you know it ain't his?

LABELLE

'Cause that happened 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 fuckin' dick. I guess he learn to sleep with snorin'. After that I ain't played my "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 nothin' from evil people in this world, then we don't have nothin'.

(Beat.)

Why you ask me 'bout 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 and kiss.)

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

(LABELLE softly sings a verse of "The Best Is Yet To Come." During this song, DEEDEE comes onto the stoop, with a bag of groceries. She hears the singing through the open window, leans against the wall of the house, listening, 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 to play 'em on, 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.)

How long you been listenin' on the stoop?

DEEDEE

Not long.

JONAH

Why ain't you come in? You snoopin' on us?

DEEDEE

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

JONAH

Interrupt?

DEEDEE

The singing.

(He heads for 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?

(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 spectin' the 'lectricity 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 blessin'.

DEEDEE

You think?

JONAH

Who you givin' thanks to?

DEEDEE

Well, let's see. There are 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 and clerks who make it available to us, and—let's not forget—

(Lifts her water glass to toast him.)

the cook who prepares it.

JONAH

All them ain't 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

Cook book.

DEEDEE

Are you determined not to be complimented?

JONAH

You ain't thanked God.

DEEDEE

You noticed.

JONAH

He 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 Scarface 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.

DEEDEE

Oh?

JONAH

If a dice is rolled eighteen times—

DEEDEE

Die. Two dice, one die.

JONAH

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

DEEDEE

And what did you say?

JONAH

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.

DEEDEE

So where's the trick in that?

JONAH

Ain't you never played no craps?

DEEDEE

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

JONAH

Lady Luck.

DEEDEE

Is just a superstition.

JONAH

You can think that 'cause you ain't never been on her bad side.

(Beat.)

DEEDEE

Is anything wrong, Jonah?

JONAH

Nah.

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 workin' him over. I'm keepin' an eye on the corner, don't even see you there till you start screamin' and bangin' on the glass. Your fist come right through it.

DEEDEE

I...I didn't think to open it.

JONAH

Blood all over.

DEEDEE

I didn't....

JONAH

Bangin' and screamin'...lookin' at him, lookin' at us, lookin' at me.

DEEDEE

Yes.

JONAH

And me lookin' right back at you, lookin' at your face—too stupid to look away. 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. 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 fork? That's about a centimeter wide—

JONAH

A what?

DEEDEE

A little more than a third of an inch. A row of 100 million atoms would fit across that handle.

JONAH

A hundred million?

(DEEDEE crosses to shelf for paper, returns to table, draws atom.)

DEEDEE

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.

(Drawing a quark.)

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 you do with 'em?

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 seem 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 metaph—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 happenin', stuff goin' 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 dancin'.

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 spendin' your life trying to do this thing and all.

DEEDEE

No. I'll be satisfied I played my part in confirming what's true.

(They eat in silence for a moment.)

JONAH

Where 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 bullying Assyrians to change their wicked ways?

JONAH

I ain’t never paid much attention to the bible.

DEEDEE

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

JONAH

When I’s 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 fork 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 fucking 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 readin' no more of your damn diary.

SONNY

Journal.

JONAH

Whatever. It give me a headache. All them fuckin' words. Ain't you never did nothin' besides talk to yourself? Nothin'...normal?

SONNY

I played football.

(Picks football off shelf, spins it.)

JONAH

Yeah, well you ain't wrote much about that.

SONNY

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

JONAH

Who gonna bully a big 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 gotta share it.

JONAH

What your mama think of that?

SONNY

The football? She didn't mind it.

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

SONNY *(Cont.)*

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 offerin' to get me outa my box?

SONNY

Jesus come out of his box.

(Tossing ball back.)

Right out of the tomb.

JONAH

I don't got the same connections he 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 givin' 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 doin' here anyway, you creepy bastard?

SONNY

(Picking up journal, waving it at him.)

You "texted" me.

JONAH

Why ain't you in that heaven you be yappin' 'bout so much in here?

SONNY

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

JONAH

(Miserable about the state of things.)

Aw...damn you to hell! You could have just give us the money? We was just lookin' 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

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. The money belonged to Mercy Mission, not to me.

JONAH

Why you yapping 'bout that mission? Ain't nothin' 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 get 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 from dyin'. But they ain't give us no life.

SONNY

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

JONAH

Nothin'. We don't want you high-and-mighty rich folks give us life. We wanna give our own selves life.

SONNY

Right. 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 turn around and 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
(Gesturing to JONAH's tattoo.)
 the point of your knife.

JONAH

What I sposed to see? Huh? What I sposed to "imagine"? Some fuckin' fairy tale you make up for me 'bout gettin' a job to put me on easy street. I'll tell you what I seen. I seen my mama give up on makin' ends meet—and settle for the end of a needle meetin' her arm. But before that, before she give up, she work out there in the grassy green suburbs where all the hope stored up. She take care of some sick old white guy pay her minimum wage. Bring home a envelope every week and empty it out on the table in front of all us. Take out the money for rent and groceries and carfare, ain't nothin' left. I ain't talkin' nothin' left for computers and cars and vacations. I be talkin' nothin' left for clothes and medicine. She work hard emptyin' that old bastard's bedpan and wipin' his ass and givin' him a bath and fixin' his food and cleanin' his house. She work as hard in her white uniform as your mama in her white lab coat watchin' them...them quarks of hers spin 'round. But my mama bring home pennies and your mama bring home paper. 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 always on him 'bout gettin' a "honest" job. He a janitor in that tallest buildin' downtown. His job 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 work on the top floor—cleans the Big Boss's office—the one at the end with all them windows. One night he cleanin', he sees somethin' on the desk—some kinda report about salaries. Top Dogs' salaries. He can't believe what he seein'. When he figure it out, turns out the Big Boss make three hundred times what he make. He think he must be makin' a mistake. Maybe he got the zeros wrong. So he copy down the number and bring it home for Sammy to do the math. But Sammy come 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 bein' worth three hundred times more than the human bein' that cleans his office? You tell me!!

SONNY

You're right. It's not fair.

JONAH

And what was you doin' about it? Collectin' 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 the only one. And he keepin' 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 preachin'.

SONNY

What will they listen to?

JONAH

Nothin'. They do what they want. Ain't nobody gonna stop 'em from fuckin' 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.)

Yeah, right. 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 guys 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 ain't you went over 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 callin' me no coward or I'll—

SONNY
What? Kill me?

JONAH
Aw, dammit, what was you even doin' this side of the park? That mission be all the way over in Posse territory. Why you pick that night to come visit your mama? Couldn't you see her any night? Why 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.
(Beat.)

JONAH
What you bullshittin' 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

You mean like Yautja?

SONNY

But better looking.

JONAH

How 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. What you got to be disappointed about?

SONNY

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

*(JONAH picks up journal, crosses out of the way with it.
Lights change. 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 other 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 descendents 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

(Raising his arm to slap her.)

Yes, yes, yes, I do!

DEEDEE

(Grabbing his wrist, shaking it.)

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 whether I had done the right thing, whether I had been too selfish, too proud, too unreasonably sure I could do right by you.

SONNY

(Breaking away.)

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

DEEDEE

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

SONNY

(In her face.)

I don't give a damn what you think! I hate you! Now leave me alone!

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 towards her violently. Sound of shattering glass. DEEDEE exits. Lights change. SONNY is 24 again.)

JONAH

(Putting journal down.)

Why she doing this?

SONNY
What?

JONAH
Me.

SONNY
You'll have to ask her.

JONAH
I did. She say she don't know.
(Beat.)

SONNY
Maybe you can help her find out.
(Lights.)

Scene 5

Two weeks later. A Saturday afternoon in early June. JONAH is folding laundry. A Patti LaBelle song is playing on the phonograph. LABELLE is dancing to it. But she is preoccupied, loses interest in the music, turns off the phonograph, crosses to JONAH.

Why you gotta do laundry?

LABELLE

'Cause I wear clothes.

JONAH

Everybody wear clothes.

LABELLE

Then everybody oughta do laundry.

JONAH

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

LABELLE

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

JONAH

Well you better.

LABELLE

What 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 five dollars an hour, but they don't care much about permits and papers and stuff. And anyway I'll be fifteen by then.

JONAH

That ain't even minimum wage.

LABELLE

What you want me do? Where I'm gonna get somethin' better?

JONAH

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 nothin' 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 bitch wasn't lookin' out the window just that minute, it woulda went down easy.

JONAH

So what's that mean—it's her fault?

LABELLE

She the one fingered Lamar and Sammy and you. It's her fault they be 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 'bout me. My asshole lawyer finally did somethin' right and got her to say so in the court. She say, "I don't know 'bout that one." You was there. Ain't you heard her?

LABELLE

Well, she sure about Lamar and Sammy. And now they upstate. And T. want you to do somethin' 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 tellin' you.

(Giving directions, slowly.)

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

(He turns away.)

He say if you do it, everybody that sees the news on the TV or in the paper—they get the message about snitchin'. And you be good with the Lords. You get back your respect.

JONAH

My respect?

LABELLE

The respect you lost botchin' up the other job.

JONAH

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

LABELLE

You the lookout and you ain't even see there's somebody watchin' 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

I ain't afraid of Terrel.

LABELLE

Jo...it ain't...safe. And you ain't the only one ain't gonna be safe. You gotta be thinkin' 'bout 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 feel like?

LABELLE

You gotta do it...tomorrow night.

JONAH

Damn!

(Beat.)

If I do it, I be upstate with Lamar and Sammy.

LABELLE

No—

JONAH

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

LABELLE

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

JONAH

How they know I get it out there in time?

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 'bout snitchin'?

LABELLE

Well now, it don't stay in the river. Terrel say when the cops can't find it no place else, they go lookin' for it there. Or it floats up someplace. And even though the blood all washed

LABELLE (*Cont.*)

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 mornin', and they call here, what I gonna say?

LABELLE

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

JONAH

Me?

LABELLE

When you wake up Monday mornin' 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 go to the movies by herself—

LABELLE

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

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 spose to cut and kill somebody without leavin' a trace and ship her body off to the river, and when it's found, nobody's spose to think I done it?

LABELLE

It don't matter what people think. It only matter 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 takin' a crowbar to the lock on the liquor store.

LABELLE

He dumb enough to make all that noise, he deserve to go to jail. Anyway, what about when Reggie took out the traitor Possie on his own turf? He pulled that off 'cause 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 askin' 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 lookin' 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 killin'...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 you like. It's kill or be killed.

JONAH

(Turns away.)

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

LABELLE

Because if you don't kill her, they will. And since she gonna get killed either way, we might as well get the money for doin' the job. We need that money.

JONAH

I'll steal whatever we need.

LABELLE

You ain't gonna get that kinda money liftin' wallets between now and tomorrow night. And anyway, if you don't do the job, the Lords'll find us. 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 livin' in? Since when you 'spect things to be fair?

(He turns away.)

How old you think she is?

JONAH

I don't know. Fifty? Sixty?

LABELLE

She old. She lived a good, long, easy, rich-woman's life, got everythin' she needed. She ain't seen nothin' like the troubles we seen, and we 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 nothin' 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, on steps, smoking, looking at the knife in his hand. DEEDEE is in the living room lit only by streetlight/ moonlight, sitting in a straight-back rocker at the open trunk, its contents spread about. For several moments we see her caress/interact with a few of them.. They might include the silver baby cup, a sock monkey, a hand puppet, a few children's books, a truck built with an erector set, a model airplane, a rack of three test tubes from a chemistry set, a plaque for some award, a box with a few medals hanging from ribbons, 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

I didn't know you were in here.

DEEDEE

I didn't know you were out there.

(She gestures to the light switch. He turns it on.)

JONAH

Couldn't sleep. Just sneakin' another smoke.

DEEDEE

What time is it?

JONAH

Way past midnight.

(Beat. 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 was on a horse once. Some rich guy take a bunch of us kids from the hood to his big farm out in the country. Everybody got one ride 'round 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 bring me here—try to make me feel guilty?

(She shakes her head.)

I some kinda project? Why you doin' somethin' 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 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 have 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"? 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 speak in tongues and march in protests with plastic fetuses? Convincing fifth-graders to lay down their lives—and 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.)*

About a month ago, 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 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 you ask him to come over that night?

DEEDEE

I didn't. What makes you think that?

JONAH

Why else he be outside your house?

DEEDEE

He called me. Said he wanted to talk. He asked if he could come over. I said yes, yes, please come.

(Pause.)

JONAH

What about his Daddy?

DEEDEE

Never part of the picture.

JONAH

He leave you?

DEEDEE

I was an "unwed mother"—long before it was "fashionable" for educated people.

JONAH

But...you a doctor and all. You musta knowed how to...I mean you 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 could a...why you ain't get a...

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 behind counter. 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.

(Raises a mug to him. Sets it down.)

What are you going to do about LaBelle?

JONAH

(Alarmed.)

What 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 pretty pissed. Say they 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 his parents are—

JONAH

Stupid?

DEEDEE

Careless.

JONAH

Bet you 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 workin' out, even before...

(Gestures to window.)

what happened out there.

DEEDEE

Why not?

JONAH

They ain't treat me good.

DEEDEE

How did you treat them?

JONAH

They was just doin' it for the money. But you don't need that money. I still don't get it. You sayin' you need to keep yourself busy so you won't, like, die of grief or somethin'. Yeah. I get that. I seen lotsa sons die and lotsa mamas cry. But none of 'em ain't worried 'bout keepin' busy. They be puttin' one foot front of the other, food on the table one meal after the other—that keep 'em plenty busy. I knowed one that come down to the Rec. Center and help out—fore they closed it up. She say 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 takin' into her own home the kid in the other gang that shot her kid. How can you...how can I be...what 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 somethin'?

DEEDEE

No. 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 ain't got no money, ain't got no respect. What kinda fuckin' choice is that?!

DEEDEE

Jonah, please, you have—

JONAH

Ain't no other word for it. It's a fuckin' 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 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 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 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 nothin'! You livin' in some kinda sci-fi dream world—or that lab of yours where everybody wear white coats and plastic gloves and ain't no germs or dirt. The real world—the world I live in—ain't nothin' like that.

DEEDEE

I know you're afraid, Jonah.

JONAH

Who said I afraid? I ain't afraid of nothin'.

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 nothin' 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 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 and no place you can't go when you find that good in yourself, Jonah, when you find it and nurture it, 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? This ain't your genius, bible-kissin', harmonica-sucking son you're talkin' to. This is me—Stupid Jonah—the black boy from Parkside that too stupid to stay out a gang, that too stupid to stay in school, that 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. Because I'm going to be there. I'm going to be there checking your math homework and reading your essays.

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

DEEDEE (*Cont.*)

I'm going to be there when you decide on a science project or pick a hero for your history report. I'm going to be signing your report cards and taking you on field trips. I'm going to be at every PTA meeting, every honors assembly, every graduation.

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

I'm going to be in your muscles when you get out of bed in the morning. I'm going to be in your memory when you're taking tests. I'm going to be in the small of your back when its sore from leaning over your books

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

I'm going to be in your head each time you start to think you can't do any more. And 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. And through all that...through all that, I'm going to be in your heart.... And you're going to be in mine.

(Beat. 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 crosses behind counter. 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.)

DEEDEE (*Cont.*)

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

(*Opens eyes.*)

Sonny? Is that you?... I'm so hap...happy you've 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 ain't fell.

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 doin' here?! You 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 the silver baby cup, 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.

(JONAH looks at him dismissively.)

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.)

SONNY (*Cont.*)

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 wuss!

SONNY

Then do the right thing.

JONAH

You make it sound so...so...you think it 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.)

What you care? You ain't had nothin' 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 up, 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 tellin' 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 run away from....

(Arms still extended, 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? Ain't you hear me bangin'?

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 you ain't 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...I ain't...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 doin'?!

LABELLE

What you think I'm doin'? Them's for Lamar and Sammy. 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 gonna know?

LABELLE

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

JONAH

So what?

LABELLE

So. It all go in the police report. And that's what go to the news people on the TV. The Lords want everybody watchin' TV to hear what happened to this Bitch. Everybody need to hear that she be cut twenty-two times before she be "fatally stabbed." Everybody need to know that's what happens to anybody that snitches on the Lords. Plus, we don't get paid for the job if we don't do it right.

JONAH

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

LABELLE

That's why we just be 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 timin' it.

LABELLE

Well, start!

(Takes off DEEDEE's slipper.)

JONAH

What you doin'?

LABELLE

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

(She tries to get the knife into position.)

JONAH

How 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 me 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.)

Stop it!

LABELLE

What's the matter with you?

JONAH

I just don't get it. What's the point of stretchin' it out like this.

LABELLE

The point is torture.

JONAH

She ain't done...she don't deserve this!

LABELLE

Don't get soft on me.

JONAH

Look—we'll do the cuts altogether, 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 rack of test tubes, shattering the glass, then the silver cup, which he starts to hurl.)

Wait! What's that silver thing?

JONAH

You ever knowed any baby drink outa somethin' like this? My mama say that old white bastard she work for born with a silver spoon in his mouth. I guess this cup go with that.

LABELLE

(Grabs it from him.)

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

(Picks up sock monkey and hand puppet. But he violently grabs all three away from her and throws them across the room.)

JONAH

We can't be carryin' all this junk! We gotta be travelin' light!

(She is taken aback by his sudden violence.)

LABELLE

What we gonna put her in? After?

JONAH

A clothes basket.

LABELLE

A basket leaks. Gotta be somethin' don't leak. Somethin' tight. That you can't see through.

(Gesturing to the trunk.)

What about this here thing?

JONAH

That don't look big enough.

LABELLE

Sure it is.

JONAH

Well, let's find out.

LABELLE

You mean put her in now?

JONAH

No. You 'bout her size. See if you fit.

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

Naw. You gotta get down more.

LABELLE

(Trying various positions.)

I don't know. I don't think we can get the lid closed. And we gotta be able to do that.

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 slips the padlock on. 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, 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, picks up the knife and hands it to him.)

Now get to work—'cause me and you and this baby—we a family. This our child and we 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 somethin'. Why not us?

JONAH

Why we gotta believe in somethin'?

LABELLE

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

JONAH

Sometimes...sometimes that's what I feel like doin'.

LABELLE

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

JONAH

That's just it. I ain't got the stomach for this... "work." This old lady—she ain't done nothin' to me. I'm the one done...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 you too. That's the choice. It's self defense. Everybody got a right to defend theirself, ain't they?

JONAH

Yeah, but it ain't right to just go around killin'—

LABELLE

You gotta toughen up, Boy. How you gonna be a father if you don't put your son first? What that gonna say to him, you put somethin' to be more important than what's good for him?

(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

(Into phone.)

Yeah?

(Beat. To JONAH.)

Terrel wanna talk to you.

(Holds phone out to him. He crosses to it slowly.)

JONAH

(Into phone.)

What?

(Beat.)

Where you at?

(Beat.)

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

(Beat.)

No, I ain't. 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. Ain't no need for you to come in. 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, his hand still on the receiver.

SONNY stirs. JONAH looks at him, looks at DEEDEE.)

LABELLE

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 'fore 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.)

There's been a robbery. 2709 Eastern Avenue. Somebody hurt bad. Hurry!
(He hangs up, looks around the room, opens the desk drawers, starts frantically throwing stuff onto the floor. He crosses behind counter and exits the stage for a moment. We hear the sound of a glass pane in a door being broken and drawers being pulled open. He comes back with a dish towel, crosses to desk, wipes handle of 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 you hear?

DEEDEE

Everything.

(He turns away.)

Jonah.

(No response.)

DEEDEE (*Cont.*)

Look at me.

(Slowly he does.)

Do it.

JONAH

What?

DEEDEE

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

JONAH

But how 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 callin' 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 I gonna live with this...with this...?

DEEDEE

It's not going to be murder.

JONAH

Why not?

DEEDEE

Because I am giving you permission. 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 that you...what about me findin' 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 startin' 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 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