

American Dream(s)

A play in three acts

By Steven Hill

Synopsis

A mixed racial family struggles to accept their transitioning son and brother. When he goes missing, the Armstrongs are torn by conflict. A mysterious envelope arrives during a snowy Christmas, unlocking secrets that send the family hurtling toward a bitter clash in which identity -- as well as life itself -- is at stake: can we be who we want to be? Can we love who we want to love?

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CHARACTER LIST

(7 characters, minimum 6 actors for a performance)

HAL (HENRY/HANK) ARMSTRONG: 65 years old, husband and father of an inter-racial family with three children. He is a Caucasian, a former civil rights activist, and an auto mechanic by occupation who owned his own garage-businesses that always failed. Those bitter experiences have left him a frustrated believer in the American Dream, even as he has tried to instill his convictions into his inter-racial children.

VAL (VALERIE): 62 year old African American mother and housewife who works as a local librarian. Her father was a university professor, and in her manners and speech she sometimes sounds more refined and educated than Hal, fluidly switching between "black-tois" and "white talk." She sees herself as the rock of her troubled family, and feels guilty about her affair with the next-door-neighbor Louis, prompted by years of alienation from her difficult, combative husband.

HALLIE: (also sometimes called HAL, like her father): 30 year old daughter, oldest child, lighter-toned African American, alpha female, up-and-coming business woman, college-educated, sharp dresser, politically conservative, slightly homophobic, former star athlete, favorite of her father. She's assertive and fit, confident, and can be quickly and harshly judgmental.

MOSES: (a.k.a Mose) 28 year old son, African-American, a cross-dressing transgender and counter-cultural rebel, argued frequently with their father over politics and culture, and has been missing for a year following a heated confrontation during the previous Christmas. Mose is kind, courageous, confused, scared, seeking clarity regarding their identity - in short, they is kind of a mess.

REGGIE: 26 years old, African American from the hip-hopish generation. He is slowly discovering his own alternative sexuality, and has difficulty standing up for himself to his father -- yet now due to his desire to find his missing trans brother Mose, who is a role model as someone who "does his own thing," must do precisely that. He is a recent college graduate, and like his mother fluidly switches between "black" and "white talk." He is a bundle of anxieties, trying to find his voice, and has been in rehab for alcohol abuse.

LOUIS DAVIDSON: next-door neighbor, recent widower, about 65 years old, African American, is a well-spoken Southerner from 'Nawhlins' (New Orleans) who worked at a university and recently retired. He has a somewhat gentlemanly air of calm well-being, which is in contrast to the coarser, abusive Hal; he is having an affair with Val Armstrong.

MR. CERVANTES: gravelly-voiced private detective, African-American, late 50's, a stoic, "Just the facts" kind of guy (*must be played by the same actor as MOSES*).

First Note: This is a loving family. Whatever hardships and misunderstandings they have endured, they still all care deeply about each other. In fact, the tension is made all the more searing because they care. That quality should be present in the actors' performances.

Second Note:

For the actors playing Reggie, Moses and Louis— below are two links, different versions of the same song that is part of those characters' roles in Act II (Reggie and Louis) and Act III (Moses). The actors are humming/scatting (Reggie/Louis) or singing (Moses) the short 15 second chorus for the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd." The Drinking Gourd is the old slave name for the Big Dipper, which points to the North Star and freedom. These two versions of the song are about the right speed (other online versions sing it faster or slower). The lyrics sung by Moses are slightly different from the lyrics in these videos, altered slightly to fit more with Moses' character.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pw6N_eTZP2U

:21 sec mark to :36 sec; :56 - 1:12; 1:30 - 1:46; 2:05 - 2:21

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=souT00mNBSM>

:56 - 1:14; 1:32 -- 1:50; 2:10 - 2:26; 2:45 - 3:02; 3:22 - 3:40

Third Note: in the script, specific formatting (**bold** and/or *italics*) is used for the names of each character to indicate each character's racial identity, so that a reader of the script can better visualize how race is playing out on the stage. These descriptions are meant to be informative for the director and actors, rather than precisely prescriptive.

HAL - white

VAL - **black**

LOUIS DAVIDSON - **black**

HALLIE - half **black**, half white, with lighter complexion

REGGIE - half **black**, half white, with darker complexion

MOSES / MR. CERVANTES - half **black**, half white, with darker complexion

ACT I

Setting: Christmas 2019, Buffalo, NY in the early evening. A working class living room and dining room. Sofa, armchair, credenza, giant screen television, dining table which is half set for a big holiday meal. Open passageway to offstage kitchen and closed door to a bedroom. The setting is decorated for a Catholic Christmas, with an end table showing a white doily and a nativity scene. Nearby is a brick fireplace with a fire burning, and a glittering Christmas tree.

HAL is seated in the armchair, wearing a blue Buffalo Bills cap, Bills sweatshirt, waving a Bills pennant and holding a football. He is cheering on his hometown pro football team on his big screen TV, drink in hand. The cheering sounds and broadcasters' voices of a televised football game can be heard. HAL's wife VAL, wearing a matronly looking Christmas-ey dress, is entering through the kitchen doorway with a platter of dinner rolls.

HAL

(to the TV, holding a football) Come on, come ooon...punch it, punch it...get it over the goal line!

VAL

(entering several seconds later.) Wow, the snow's really coming down out there. Hope Reggie and Hallie make it OK.

HAL

(pre-occupied with the football game) The weatherman said 4 inches.

VAL

(placing the platter on the dining table.) It already looks more than --

HAL

Val, four inches. Stop worrying, would ya?

VAL

(slight pause) No sign of Louis yet?

HAL

Probably waitin' for the cars to pull up. *(shakes the ice in his glass, somewhat irritated.)*

VAL

Wasn't it around Christmas we first met him and Minnie? About 35 years ago. So sad about Minnie.

HAL

Yeah, he said to me, "Nice to meet ya. She your *nanny*?"

VAL

Such a wicked sense of humor. That much hasn't changed.

HAL

Funny to some.

VAL

What time did you tell him to come over?

HAL

(slight annoyance) I don't remember. Whatever time you told me to tell him.

VAL

(slight pause) While I'm bastin' the turkey...since we still have a few minutes...you said three days ago you'd replace the burned out tree bulbs.

HAL

(again shaking the ice in his glass.)
Kee-rist. *(pronounced 'key-rIst')* I'm trying to watch the ball game here. The tree'll be down in a few days...

VAL

Oh Hal...you used to love Christmas.

HAL

Christmas is almost over!

VAL

How can Christmas almost be over on Christmas Day?

HAL

Yeah yeah, Married One.

(Val throws up her hands and exits to the kitchen. Hal slowly stands, shaking the ice in his glass, eyes still riveted on the TV. Suddenly the sounds of cheers increase in volume -- a big play is happening.)

HAL

Go, go, go! (followed a second later by...) Oh my god, oh my god, no, no! What the -?

VAL

(from off-stage) What happened? Did the other team score?

HAL

Aw Jesus Kee-rist! God damn refs!

(Disgusted, Hal shuffles over to the Christmas tree, bends down huffing and puffing and begins fiddling with the string of Christmas lights.)

(mimicking Val) "You used to love Christmas." Yeah, and you used to love me.

(HAL is on all fours when the doorbell rings. REGGIE is in the shadows, ringing the bell.)

HAL

(shouting.) Come in!

(The doorbell sounds again and again.)

(shouting louder) It's open...Come in!...Come IN!...Jeez, is everybody deaf???

(The doorbell keeps ringing, despite HAL's ever-louder shouts. VAL bawls from the kitchen.)

VAL

Hal, can you GET that?

HAL

(shouting) Aw, JESUS!

(HAL struggles to his feet, walks to the front door, opens it. The tinsel Christmas wreath hanging on the door swings hard from the impact. REGGIE is standing there, holding a bushy black lily flower that hides his face.)

HAL

Reggie! Just let yourself in, would ya? You're not a stranger here.

REGGIE (coming in)

(excitedly) Sorry I'm late, Pops. I got held up by the Donut Patrol!

HAL

What??? You OK?

REGGIE

Yeah, no bullet holes. I pulled over to take a call - you know, not drivin' while talkin', like we're supposed to -- and Mr. Officer Race Profiling flashes me his badge. Probably figurin' I was fixin' up a dope deal or something.

(REGGIE puts down the black lily, bangs snow from his shoes and unwraps his scarf.)

HAL

On Christmas? God damn cops! Now, we've talked about the best approach in those situations -

REGGIE

Yeah, yeah, I was all MLK instead of Malcolm X. But man was I tempted.

HAL

When you wear your baseball cap, you know, backwards like that-

REGGIE

Even President Obama wore his backwards!

HAL

--You look more like that 50 Cent character than-

(REGGIE gives his father a look like "Oh, it's my fault?")

HAL

OK OK, well, thank heavens your safe. It's been a while since that happened, I thought maybe it was getting better.

REGGIE

Pops, only a white person could think that. *(in an affected "white" interviewer's voice)* "Other than that, how was the play, Mrs. Lincoln?"

HAL

Anyway...Merry Christmas. Come on in, make yourself at home. I'm just watchin' the Bills game here.

REGGIE

Right, isn't it, like, playoffs time or something?

HAL

(with a tone of jovial sarcasm) Is it *playoffs* time?? Lord, how can *my* son not know when its...we Armstrongs are Bills fans to our molten core. The pride of the *real* New York. Our team don't play in no rented stadium in a swamp in Jersey!

REGGIE

OK OK, I won't tug on ya then.

HAL

(pouring himself a drink, while trying to watch the game)
Nah nah, I can chew gum and walk at the same time. What's that called -- multi-tasking? When I had my garage, I called it "running a business." So how's it been goin', haven't seen you in a while.

REGGIE

(coughing hard) Yeah, uhhh, it's the cat's ass, you know, more or less.

HAL

OK, I think I know what that means. How's the job treating you?

REGGIE

(reluctantly). It's cool, it's all good. Well, they been working me to death, honestly but...who the Bills playin'?

HAL

(still focused on the TV) What, overtime for the holidays?

REGGIE

No, just regular stuff -- it's like being squeezed in a blender.
(pointing at the TV) Hey, isn't that what's his name, Harris, who broke the record for--?

HAL

(speaking over Reggie while still watching the game)
Hey, that's the working life Reg, no one ever said it was fun. Unless you're a movie star or hip-hop mogul, but Spielberg and Dr. Dre aren't calling. But you're makin' some darn good moola. More'n I ever dreamed of at your age. Supervisor now, right?

REGGIE

Senior marketing specialist...*that* was the fancy mofo title they gave to my pathetic promotion. These guys are practically gangstas; no pay raise and more work overseeing the junior Joneses writing seductive promos to bling-crazy suckas who are already up to their eyeballs in debt!

HAL

(still watching the TV) Hey, you're climbing the ladder. The old-fashioned way, and good for you. Show that vanilla competition what you're made of. We talked about that. Keep at it, sock away your do-re-mi. That's the trade secret. Maybe you'll retire early, 64, 65.

REGGIE

Sixty five? Hell, I ain't even close to halfway. **At 65**, the average black male only has 4.1 years left.

HAL

You don't know how lucky you got it. *(jovially)* Besides, thanks to yours truly, you're half white, so that'll buy you a few more years.

REGGIE

Great, a few more years to do what I always wanted. What kinda bullshit bargain is that?

HAL

Watch your language, would ya? Your mother won't like it. Now let's see...how old are you?

REGGIE

(coughing hard) Forget it, Pops, it don't matter. The point is, I'm sick of workin'. They treat me like a third nostril. What good was the money if I was too tired to enjoy it?

HAL

(now more attentive) Sick of working? Sick of working? Have you ever heard such talk?

(Hal gestures to his left and right, as if asking for affirmation from an imaginary jury. Reggie grimaces.)

You're forgetting "Hal-Hanky-Henry's First Rule of Success." Remember?

REGGIE

Let's just try and have a good time today, OK?

HAL
"Never...Give...Up." Remember? Hah?

(REGGIE rolls his eyes and turns away.)

If I taught you anything, it's that you can't afford that negative mentality. Not in this one-drop, Polly purebred world.

REGGIE

Right, one-drop world. Here we go. What Success Rule is that...Number 10?

HAL

No, Number 10 is, uh, "Obey all the other rules."

REGGIE

What's next, pull out the coloring book of historical black leaders?

HAL

Ah-ah, we don't do self-pity. Not in this family. That's Rule number--

REGGIE

Pops! Please! Let's just be chill today, OK?

HAL

OK, OK, but I'm talkin' sense here and...*(Hal suddenly looks more closely at Reggie's face)* Hey-- is that lipstick? On your lips?

(Reggie hurriedly wipes his lips, sees red on the back of his hand.)

(leering) Heeeyyy, is that leftover from some hot date? You holdin' out on me? Come on, give your Old Man the low-down, hah? Hah? What's her name?

REGGIE

(embarrassed, wiping with a hanky) Ohmagod, I thought it was chapstick, but it was dark in the car and--

(HAL stares at him with a puzzled expression. The doorbell rings, followed by a loud knock.)

HAL

(shouting) Come IN!...The door's OPEN!...Come IN!...What, is this the American Deaf Society?

(HAL starts walking towards the door. HALLIE, who is mixed race and lighter complexioned, and LOUIS who is black, walk in. Both are dressed in stylish holiday attire.)

HALLIE

Hi-iii, sorry I'm late. *(laughing)* Lookee-here who I found spyin' in the window --

LOUIS

Ho ho ho, Meeerry Christmas.

(VAL enters from the kitchen. They all greet each other, "Merry Christmas Hallie, happy holidays, Louis". The two arrivals take off their coats, scarves, etc.)

REGGIE

(surprising VAL with the black lily). Mama? Merry Christmas.

VAL

(touched) Oh, Reggie...a b-black lily?? *(she tears up)* My favorite. You knew, didn't you?...You're always so thoughtful.

REGGIE *(subdued)*

Yeah, well...it's become kinda tradition, right?

(REGGIE tenderly kisses VAL on the cheek.)

VAL

(still flustered) Let me set it in a nice spot.Right over here.

(VAL sets the black lily on the davenport, admires it a moment, then busily heads back to the kitchen.)

HAL

Lou, you been watchin' the...? *(gestures toward the TV)*

LOUIS

Oh yeah, Bills gonna choke it, just like in '04 *(pronounced 'oh-four')* against the Steelers. What else is new, right?

HAL

Who the hell fumbled it, did you see? It was such a scrambled egg o' arms and legs and--

HALLIE

Morrison. I was listenin' in the car.

HAL

Morrison? Again? Glue factory for that old nag. He's got hands like blocks of ice. I swear, if the Bills blow this one...

HALLIE

They just gotta hang on for eight friggin' minutes. Daddy-o, fix me a drink, would ya?

HAL

(festively) You got it, Hal my Gal. The usual? Lou, how 'bout you? Wet the whistle?

LOUIS

(has settled into a chair, munching on peanuts) Sure, Hal, Honey Jack and Coke, if you got it. Mother's milk of my hometown, New Orleans *(pronounced "Nawhlins")*.

HAL

You got it.

(Hal goes to the liquor cabinet).

LOUIS

(pointing at the TV) Hey, I see you sprung for the big screen. You like it? Is that plasma or LED or...?

HAL

Oh yeah. It's like the cheerleaders practically sitting in your lap!

HALLIE

(embarrassed) Daddieeee...

HAL

OK OK. I got it for Val...for her birthday. She deserved something special. Now she can watch, you know, *Black-ish*, *Atlanta*, all of that, in living hi-def technicolor heaven.

(Hal brings drinks for himself, Hallie and Lou.)

REGGIE

What about me?

HAL

(To Reggie.) Ah-ah, not you. (to the others) OK, now that we're all here... (calling out) Val? It's time for the Christmas toast!

VAL

(from off-stage). All right, I'm a-comin'.

(Val re-enters from the kitchen. She makes a point of not looking at LOUIS, who also seems to avoid her.)

Reggie, here's your ginger ale.

(She gives Reggie a can.)

HAL

Val, where's your glass?

(Val grabs a wine goblet, but her hand is shaking.)

Look at you...shakin' like a blushing girl on her first date.

(HAL pours her wine, leans in for a kiss. VAL catches LOUIS looking at her and turns away.)

VAL

(embarrassed) Well you try slogging in the kitchen all day like a factory girl...and for a holiday you say is already over!

HAL

OK, all for one. Merry--!

(HAL raises his glass for a toast, but LOUIS stops him.)

LOUIS

Wait, Hal, before we...I just wanted to say...thanks for having me over. Y'all are too kind. I won't lie, it's been kinda rough...alone for the first time...on Christmas.

HAL

Nah nah, Lou, none of that. You're more than a neighbor. We're only too happy to... (catches a look at VAL)...Here's to Minnie!

(They all raise their glasses in salute.)

HALLIE

To her memory, Mr. Davidson.

HAL

May we always honor it.

LOUIS

Amen to that. Merry Christmas to all!

(They all raise their glasses and drink. LOUIS watches VAL exit to the kitchen. Reggie stands from his seat and walks downstage. At the stage's edge, he stares out at the audience. Louis sits with Hal around the TV, watching the game. Cheers are heard again, the two start shouting "Go, go!" In the commotion, Reggie takes a swig from his flask. Hallie sees it, walks to him.)

HALLIE

(hushed voice) Reggie? What the heck you doin'? *(pause)* What about your program?

REGGIE

It's just cough medicine. I got a bad cold. The flask is easier, OK?

HALLIE

Cough medicine???

(REGGIE hands the flask to HALLIE, who smells it, raises it to her lips.)

REGGIE

(chuckling) You gonna get my germs.

HALLIE

(declining to drink) OK. But don't let Mama and Daddy see it. It looks suspicious.

REGGIE

C'mon, Hallie...be the good Hal today, would ya?

HALLIE

Whew. As Grammy Ellie used to say, you got the stink of someone with things on his mind.

REGGIE

No, I got the mind of someone who smells somethin' that stinks.

HALLIE

Such holiday cheer.

REGGIE

(rapping like Tupac) "If you can't find somethin' to live for, best find something to die for."

HALLIE

So, we doin' Tupac today? *(pronounced 'Tu-pock')*

(In the next line, 'Six pack' is pronounced 'six pock' to rhyme with Tupac, mimicking a reggae accent.)

REGGIE

Better than a six pack, mon *(defiantly takes another swig of his flask.)* *(regular voice)* You DO realize what day this is? One year ago today...

(HALLIE gives him a blank look.)

REGGIE

Figures. You don't want to remember.

(HALLIE again gives him a blank look, though one that suggests she knows what he means.)

REGGIE

It's not an anniversary I wanna remember either.

(VAL calls out from the kitchen.)

VAL

Reggie, would you do me a big favor?

(Val comes in from the kitchen with another plate of food and places it on the table.)

Could you scratch up two candles for the dining table? Try in the kitchen silverware draw, and if not there, try the credenza. *(hollering as Reggie exits)* And some matches too.

LOUIS

(watching the TV.) Five minutes to go. That's a lifetime with their quarterback, he's got a arm like a cannon.

HAL

Good, a timeout. I need a breather, before I have a friggin' coronary.

LOUIS

Wait, hold on, don't change it...lookee there...my God.

TELEVISION VOICE

"Local authorities are expressing alarm over another murder of a transgender woman, and raising the possibility of a hate crime. With 18 murders this year, the FBI has called it an epidemic of violence against -- "

LOUIS

(Talking over the TV) A black woman. Or is she still a man, I'm not sure how you call that.

(Hallie has walked to the TV, and Val joins Hallie, both looking intensely interested. REGGIE returns from the kitchen, hears the broadcast and stops. Hal stays aloof, and everyone is dead silent.)

TELEVISION VOICE

One woman's body was found inside an abandoned car, burned beyond recognition. Another woman was pulled from a lake at a park, and a third was --"

(Hal, who has been staring intently at LOUIS, changes the channel with the remote and the sound of a laugh track and commercial is heard. Louis exchanges a look with Val, who solemnly heads back to the kitchen, while Reggie stalks to the credenza, visibly upset, and resumes looking for dinner candles. Hal breaks the mood.)

HAL

OK Hal my Gal, during the commercial...what I saw in that newspaper article the other day. Great photo, by the way. Sounds like you and your partners have been knocking down the ten pins lately. Ha? Ha?

HALLIE

Oh Daddy, not now, would you?

HAL

Come on, just give us a taste of it.

REGGIE

(still rummaging in the credenza) Yeah, Hallie, I heard somethin' about you bought the old Morgan building?

HALLIE

Well, yeah, that particular rumor happens to be true.

LOUIS

Sure that's a good investment? That thing's pretty run down.

HALLIE

Let's just say I have some inside-inside information that, candidly, I'm not at liberty to disclose. The Buffalo real estate market is about to explode big time and, well...that's about all I'm gonna say.

HAL

Hah, you see that, Lou? You real estate tycoon types, always tight-lipped. What a champ. A female Donald Trump!

LOUIS

Let's not go *there*.

HAL

OK, OK. But did you ever think one of your neighbor's kids would turn out to be the next Real Estate Queen of Buffalo!

HALLIE

Daaadiee...

LOUIS

Sure, why not. High school basketball star, captain of her college team...

HAL

Honors scholar...and a great beauty besides. No, I mean it, hon. Daddy's girl got the package. Am I right, Lou?

LOUIS

(feeling put on the spot) Sure...I mean, Hallie...you're like your old man, a real self-starter. How many garages did you start, Hal?

HAL

(suspicious that this is perhaps a subtle dig) Don't even go there. Dammit, I know she'll improve on my record.

LOUIS

Hey, it wasn't your fault, the economy changes. Technology takes over. But most of your career, you were your own boss.

HAL

Not anymore. Now I'm just one of the grease monkeys down at Schmidt's. At my age, crawling under the cars again.

LOUIS

Hey, I was a lifer at the same place. A boring university job.

HAL

I wish to God I'd been a lifer somewhere. Look at you, already retired. Son of a--.

(VAL returns carrying bowls of food for the table. Hal switches the TV back to the football game. Reggie finally pulls candles from the credenza drawer, and then he finds a largish white envelope. He stares at it.)

REGGIE

Who opened my mail?

VAL

What mail?

REGGIE

This envelope. I found it in the drawer, it's addressed to me. Somebody done opened it!

VAL

Sorry, dear, I don't know anything about it. *(calling)* Hal?

(Hal is glued once again to the football game. Reggie has begun looking at the envelope's contents.)

REGGIE

How many times have I asked you-- Pops-- please do *not* open my mail. Some people still haven't heard I don't live here anymore.

VAL

Hal? Hal!

(The next two speeches are spoken over each other.)

HAL

I'm watching the ball game here. Jesus Kee-rist!

HALLIE

Can't this wait?

(Suddenly a roar from the TV, sounds of crowd cheers. The next four speeches are spoken over each other.)

HAL

Son-of-a-...Jaguar touchdown?

LOUIS

Sweet Jesus, it's a two point ballgame! With three and a half minutes to go!

HALLIE

Kee-rist, anything can happen with that quarterback.

LOUIS

I'm afraid our hometown gladiators are about to blow it one more time!

(Background sounds of the game continue. Reggie has been looking through the contents of the envelope.)

REGGIE

(to VAL, who has been looking over his shoulder)

Huh. It's just a bunch a postcards...from places like Mount Rushmore ...Grand Canyon... Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. No return address...and a smeared postmark on the envelope. Who knows where it come from.

VAL

Maybe it's some kinda silly ad, we've been bombarded by all sorts a touristy junk mail lately.

REGGIE

In an unmarked envelope? Don't think so, Mama. *(lowering his voice)* Waaaiit a minute...

(Val tries to look blank.)

Come on, you think it's just a coincidence? Arriving now...a year later, at Christmas?

VAL

(suddenly edgy) I can't imagine who--

REGGIE

You know who it's from, Mama. You know. Finally...after no word...for a year.

VAL

(whispering) No...no.

REGGIE

One of you was hiding this from me!

VAL

(beginning to choke up) No, I would never...

REGGIE

Then we know who done did.

(Reggie walks over and stands next to the television.)

REGGIE

You not only opened my mail...you tried to hide *THIS!*

(Reggie holds up the envelope and post cards.)

HALLIE

Reggie, not now, would ya? Jesus Kee-rist.

VAL

Hal? *Hal!* What do you know about this envelope? When did it arrive?

LOUIS

What's going on? Should I leave?

HAL

No, Lou, you stay right there!

(Hal jumps up from his chair, walks to Reggie and snatches the envelope and post cards. He takes the bundle back to his chair, throws it down and sits on top of it.)

HAL

There, end of story. No post cards, no nothin'. My family is right here enjoying holiday time and a Christmas ball game together. Whoever isn't here, it's their own tough luck.

VAL

Hal, don't make this any worse. Not today.

(Reggie is really upset and now steps in front of the TV, blocking their view. He folds his arms across his chest. Hal and Hallie shout in protest.)

HALLIE

Get out of the way!

REGGIE

(to HAL) You're a gangsta bully! That's what you are, everybody knows it. (pointing to the post cards). THEY 'specially knew it.

HALLIE

(furious, trying to see around Reggie) Goddam it, Reg, we'll deal with this later. Now son-of-a-bitch move your--

HAL

(fuming, speaking over Hallie's last words)
I marched and marched, even got arrested, so he would never have to! And look at the thanks I get.

(TV roars with fan noise, a big play is occurring.)

HALLIE

Damn you, Reggie!

VAL

Reggie, I get it. But please, this isn't the way. Not now, not today...

(She gently grabs Reggie's arm and tugs it to remove him from blocking the TV. Reggie stands firm.)

HAL

Get out of the way, Val!

REGGIE

(rapping) "Long live the rose that grew from concrete, when no one else even cared."

HAL

I told you before, that hip hop crap won't cut it. THIS is why you don't get a better promotion, Mr. Wise Guy.

REGGIE

You got that right, I won't ever be gettin' a better promotion, and ya know why? 'Cause I don't work there no more.

(Hal looks mortified. Everyone else stares at him.)

That's right, as of three days ago, I'm done, finished. I tried to tell you earlier, but you wouldn't listen. Like usual. Your son the bum, unemployed. Merry Christmas.

HAL

Hah! Why am I not surprised? The Loser Armstrong is coming out. I told you before, the Armstrong's have a winner side and a loser side. My old man was a drunk loser. Two sides, constantly at war. Your loser side has taken over.

VAL

Reggie, you quit your job?

REGGIE

I didn't say I quit.

HAL

Oh, fired then. An even bigger loser.

REGGIE

Nope, didn't say I was fired, either.

LOUIS

Maybe I should be going.

HAL

You stay right there, Lou. How many ways can you lose your job? You're either fired, or you quit.

REGGIE

I guess you could say...it was sickness.

HAL

Sickness???

REGGIE

Yeah. I was sick of them, and they was sick of me.

HAL

Unbelievable. Look at Hallie here... she's not whinin', she's knockin' 'em dead. Lou, tell 'im. You gotta work, everybody's gotta work.

LOUIS

I'm not inclined to offer career advice on this one.

HALLIE

(holding the remote) Can you PLEASE take this to the kitchen!?

HAL

I told you before...you gotta work *harder* than the majority. I know the crackas I grew up with...it may not be right, but that's how it is.

VAL

(sharper tone) Hal! I warned you not to start that again. I'm warning you!

HAL

Shut up, Val! I'm sick of you always babying this one.

LOUIS

Aw come on, Hal. Do you have to talk to Valerie that way?

(VAL looks away, embarrassed. HAL seems stunned and is unable to speak for the next few moments. From this point forward, VAL is starting to crack, caught between her husband she is estranged from, her neighbor-lover, and her troubled family she feels responsible for.)

REGGIE

(To Hal) Who the hell appointed you the family success guru? Huh? After crashing three businesses!

LOUIS

Now hang on, kiddo. Your Daddy's the best damn mechanic around.

REGGIE

There was Hal's Garage...then Hank's Garage...finally Henry's Motorcars, trying to "capture the BMW market." Henry-Hankie-Hal, all failures.

LOUIS

The problem is, it's all computers today. You gotta be a programmer to fix a car. Anything before 2013, your Daddy could tear through faster than a Indy 500 mechanic.

REGGIE

Well I ain't learnin' from *his* mistakes.

HAL

(as though recovering from a blow) 'NOT learning.' We don't use 'ain't' in this family. Rule Number 9.

REGGIE

And now he's just a grease monkey at Schmidt's. He done said it himself.

LOUIS

Nothin' wrong with getting' your hands dirty, it's honest work. My Daddy cut the sugar cane that sent me to college.

HAL

You're wasting your breath, Lou, Mr. Clean Hands here don't get it. Where's the loyalty today?

VAL

(near tears) OK, that's enough! We just need to move on and move past.

LOUIS

Easy, Valerie, easy.

VAL

(struggling to regain composure)

I'm gonna start bringing the rest of the food out to the table. Hallie, game's almost over?

HALLIE

Two long minutes.

VAL

Reggie? Why don't you give me a hand with the turkey *(tugging on his arm)*. Come on, I'll let you sample the stuffing...

(Reggie pulls away his arm. Val throws up her hands and goes to the kitchen.)

LOUIS

Y'all really should be alone right now. I'm gonna go.

(Lou stands to leave.)

REGGIE

You've lived next door to us my whole life, Mr. Davidson. You heard what goes on here.

LOUIS

I'm just the neighbor, Reg...a wise man approaches that role with humility. Having kids in't easy...but I still wish mine didn't live halfway to Timbuktu.

(Louis starts to exit just as Val walks back into the living room with a platter of food. Louis and Val exchange a look both sad and intimate; Hal notices.)

(Louis to the company) Merry Christmas, everybody.

(He exits through the front door.)

HALLIE

(to REGGIE) Way to go, hot shot.

REGGIE

Must be the ghost of Christmas past, Hallie. One year ago today.

HALLIE

No no, off sides pal. You really stepped over the line.

HAL

Nah, Hallie, what'd ya expect...Bills almost in the playoffs for the first time in years...some people just can't stand to see others happy. Is that all you got?

REGGIE

Just give 'em back, OK? They were addressed to me.

(Hal starts rubbing the center of his chest around his heart region.)

REGGIE

There you go again, rubbing your chest. You are so predictable.

(Hal pulls the envelope and post cards out from under his buttocks and holds them up.)

HAL

This what you want? Hah? Some decisions, there's no going back. You sure you want this?

REGGIE

Yes, sir.

(HAL stands and starts walking towards REGGIE, then veers off and walks to the fireplace. He throws the bundle into the fire. REGGIE glares angrily for a moment, VAL and HALLIE freeze, absorbing this deep tear in the family

fabric. Then Reggie leaps toward the fire, and pulls the charred, destroyed bundle from the flames.)

REGGIE

(fuming) YOU! You're everything *THEY* ever said you were!

HAL

Some day you're gonna thank me for it. And so will *HE* *(pointing to the smoking bundle)*.

REGGIE

Black-eyed Susan's and dead puppies, all around!

HALLIE

(jumping to her feet) OK Reg, you really jumped over the line on that one! Jesus Kee-rist!

REGGIE

The Beast, that's what Mose called you. *(pause.)* That's right, I'm using *their* name. Mose Armstrong. Moses HENRY Armstrong...

(Reggie chokes up. Hal has an angry look of betrayal.)

VAL

(trembling with fragility) Which version tonight, Henry-Hank-Hal? How did we get here *this* time?

HAL

Is that right, 'Valerie'? Look who's talking...split personality...split *loyalty*. Remember when we thought our marriage was a revolution?

(HAL lifts his glass in a mock toast and slugs down his drink. VAL locks eyes with him as his veiled accusation and jealousy sinks in. Hal's angry look quickly changes to that of a hurt and unappreciated husband and father.)

HALLIE

(in desperation, trying to rescue the dinner)
Come on, everybody, lighten up. I'm starved, forget the damn football. *(she clicks off the game)*. Mama, time to start dinner. Let's get it rollin'!

(Silence. HAL resumes rubbing the heart region of his chest, and then starts walking stiffly, almost catatonically, to his offstage bedroom.)

HALLIE

(trying to soothe) Now hold on Daddy, let's not head to the locker room, OK? *(motioning)* Over here, at the head of the table, and say the dinner prayer and --

(HAL closes the bedroom door and lies down on his bed.)

HALLIE

(angrily to Reggie) You are unbelievable! I'll be damned if I'm gonna sit here while you try and ruin everybody's Christmas.

REGGIE

I'm not trying to ruin anything. It's ridiculous he would get so upset over a name.

HALLIE

How can you...you know Daddy forbade Mose's name ever to be mentioned in his house!

REGGIE

That's a dumb rule. I can't believe we ever agreed to it.

HALLIE

(Getting worked up.) I didn't say I agreed with it, but it's Daddy's house. His castle, his rules!

VAL

(near tears) Now, now, everybody, your father can be... sometimes he says to me "Val, I may not be a masterpiece, but I am a finished piece." And he says it proudly.

REGGIE

Yeah, that's him. Stubbornly proud of being proudly stubborn.

VAL

As a plow horse. So please, let's not--

REGGIE

Then he starts rubbing his chest again. What a faker!

HALLIE

(more worked up) That's my FATHER you're talking about!

REGGIE

Sorry - I forgot you got exclusive rights!

VAL

Please, both of you! We should just get on with dinner. Daddy would have a cow if this good food went to waste.

REGGIE

And what about Mose?

HALLIE

(voice rising) What about him?

REGGIE

How long we gonna ignore how this whole thing is tearing at us?

HALLIE

Tearing you, maybe. He made his choices. I hardly think about him anymore. All that hippie-dippie cross-dressing stuff he was doin' at the end was downright creepy. Lipstick, mascara, nail polish and...feather boas??

REGGIE

Oh, so mixed pigment is OK but—

HALLIE

But not mixed gonads, damn right.

REGGIE

THEY (emphasizing 'they') was bein' themself, Hallie. That's called integrity!

HALLIE

Oh, right, integrity through a tube of lipstick? I think I know a thing or two about lipstick.

REGGIE

You always had it in for Mose. Not really from your corporate Caspar Afro-Saxon wing of the tribe, was they?

HALLIE

How dare you!

VAL

Please, let's not fight like this!

REGGIE

You never even done lifted a finger to find them!

HALLIE

You don't know what I did!

VAL

Mercy and tolerance, can we please? (*pleading with Reggie*).
Reggie, this is NOT the time or the place.

REGGIE

When *is*, Mama? We don't even know where they is. You heard the TV -- Mose could be one of those dead ones right now!

HALLIE

You better stop. I'm warning you!

REGGIE

We're supposed to be *family*. There's been too many black eyes in this family already, right Mama? Black eyes and dead puppies and--

(Hallie jumps to her feet and heads toward her coat.)

HALLIE

Enough! I'm outta here.

(VAL tries to stop her, reaching out and nearly stepping into her path.)

VAL

My God, Hallie, please. Not you too!

(HALLIE waves her arms to ward off Val, accidentally knocking VAL backward into a chair. Suddenly they all hear a loud thud and crash. Everyone looks toward the bedroom and freezes. They listen, hearing a loud crash again.)

VAL

In the bedroom!

(Val scrambles to her feet and rushes to the off stage bedroom door, followed by the others. She flips on the light, hesitates in the doorway, then bursts in. Her voice can be heard off stage.)

VAL

Hal? HAL!

(Hallie is right behind her, stands in the doorway then heads into the bedroom. Then Reggie stands in the doorway, nervously trying to decide whether to enter.)

VAL

(off stage) HAL! HAL! My God, Hallie, call 9-1-1.

HALLIE

(off stage) Hello, operator? Emergency, emergency. My father just collapsed...I think he's...Please send an ambulance to 142 Girard Street...He looks blue, he looks blue...What do we do?

VAL

Does anyone know CPR?

HALLIE

I'll try.

(Reggie is alone on the stage. He picks up one of the framed photos on the credenza. He talks to it.)

REGGIE

Don't worry, he milking it. As you will recall, Pops is absolutely the world's biggest faker.

VAL

(sobbing offstage) Nooo, Hal...Hal! Hallie?

(The wail of an ambulance can be heard in the distance, getting closer. Reggie rifles thru a cabinet of the credenza, finds a fifth of whiskey and takes a big hit.)

REGGIE

Yep, he milking it..extra big-time. Real Oscar-winner. *(Looking at the picture again.)* Where the heck you be, Mose? I'm feeling outnumbered here...

(Reggie takes another swig of the whiskey bottle as a rattle sounds loudly, several times.)

End of Act I

ACT II

A brightly lit hospital waiting room, several hours later. Reggie, Hallie and Val are still dressed in their clothes from dinner, with winter overcoats. Hallie is wearing mannish-looking black rubber galoshes with snaps that clack when she walks. They all look weary and disheveled. The waiting room is decked out with holiday decorations, including a colorful Christmas tapestry on one wall. A wall clock is visible, and a large photo of the Archbishop of the diocese, and the Sisters of Charity Hospital, is hanging prominently on one wall.

Reggie is slumping in a chair with his scarf wrapped around his eyes, trying to doze. Val is pacing. Hallie also is slumped in a chair, tossing wads of crumpled paper torn out of magazines toward a nearby waste basket, like it's a basketball hoop. When she sinks it, she says "SCORE!" A pile of crumpled paper balls is scattered around the wastebasket and several magazines are strewn, with pages torn out. A rattle sounds, and Reggie wakes up, disoriented, lifting the scarf from one eye.

REGGIE

Whoa...didja hear that?

VAL

(Pause) What?

REGGIE

A rattle...I heard a rattle...and saw something wild-looking. Shaggy hair with... with ribbons and feathers and...a wild look in his eyes. Shaking a rattle and...

(Reggie coughs, takes a swig from his flask, removes his scarf, as Hallie launches a paper ball at the basket, saying "Score!")

REGGIE

That ever happen to you? You wake up from a dream, where you're flying or...or in a beautiful place and...and then you realize it's not real. And what is real you wish was a dream...

(Reggie coughs, while Val and Hallie stare at him.)

REGGIE

It's like we're all markers on a giant board game, and...the all-powerful gods are looking down, laughing and pulling our strings and...we all chase each other 'round the board like--

HALLIE

Kee-rist, Reg! If you don't mind...we're trying to stay focused on Daddy right now. OK?

(Reggie coughs, sneaks a swig from his flask. Val is still pacing, Hallie launches more paper balls at the basket.)

HALLIE

Score! *(Or "Damn," if the actor misses the wastebasket.)*

VAL

Doctors sure are takin' a long time. It's been, what *(looks at the clock)*-- three hours! I wish I knew what's going on.

REGGIE

You want me to try again to find a Doc or nurse, Mama?

VAL

I tried telling your father...for years...to cut out the rich foods...and cholesterol and snacks. After the first one -- twelve years ago? -- I finally got him to quit smoking. *That* was a battle. I don't know what else I could have done. He made fun of us goin' to CPR classes and --

HALLIE

(abruptly cutting off Val) Why didn't you stay with him, Mama? He was unconscious when they brought him in. Someone should be in there with him.

VAL

I was, I...we arrived in the ambulance and...the doctor took me to a room and...I didn't know what else to do. How was I to know?

HALLIE

All hospitals care about is lawsuits and liability. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

(HALLIE throws another paper ball, hard. VAL sits down and puts her head in her hands. REGGIE goes and comforts her.)

REGGIE

Easy, Mama, we'll find him. *(to Hallie)* Who knows, maybe they done lost him... swapped him for another patient or something.

HALLIE

Thanks for that cheery thought, Reg.

REGGIE

Hey, I was reading about this lady in the *Buffalo News*, and they put the wrong ID bracelet on her wrist. Surgeon comes in, ready-Eddie to perform a transplant and...you know what happened next?

(Hallie makes a slashing motion across her neck indicating Reggie should stop telling his story because it will upset Val. But Reggie ignores her.)

The friendly Doc says to the lady, "Did you get a good early morning breakfast? I hear the hospital has good food." And the woman says, "Yes, very good. Except for the Kentucky Jelly. I didn't care for the taste." Doc thinks, hmmm, and asks to see the package. So the lady handed him a foil packet labeled - ready for this - "KY Jelly."

(Val laughs, hard, like she's shaking off the trauma.)

REGGIE

I'm not making this up, Mama, this for real.

VAL

Oh, you.

REGGIE

Come on Hallie, it's OK for you to laugh too.

(HALLIE smiles despite herself. Then Reggie pulls out of his coat pocket a turkey drumstick and begins eating it.)

REGGIE

Mm-mm, now that's what I call the butta. I'm hungry as a wolverine. What, Hallie? Why you buggin' now?

(Hallie is glaring at him.)

Hey, since we never got to eat the dinner, I grabbed a few bits from the house. Here, Mama, one for you.

(Reggie pulls of his coat pocket another drumstick and hands it to Val, who starts eating.)

Like you said Mama, no use wasting good food. Could be a looo-ng ass night.

(Hallie is still glaring at him, making a glum face.)

Come on, chill, Hal-Hal. Here, you want some?

(Offers her the drumstick. Hallie resists, then gives in.)

HALLIE

Well, OK, just a bite.

REGGIE

Finish it. We gotta keep up our fizz. See Mama? It's gonna be OK. We'll find Poppy and then we'll all go wait with him, and--

(The waiting room door suddenly pops open and neighbor Lou Davidson pokes in his head, then enters.)

HALLIE

Mr. Davidson???

LOUIS

Wow, am I glad I found you. I've been looking all over the darn place.

REGGIE

Welcome back to the madhouse. Meee-rry Christmas.

LOUIS

What's really mad is that no one who works here seems to have heard of anyone named Armstrong. How about that one?

HALLIE

We've noticed. They seem to specialize in Russian-style bureaucracy around here.

LOUIS

Valerie?

(Louis steps toward her like he wants to hug her but stops short. They exchange a look, then Val turns away.)

How you...holding up? I know how hard this must be...for all of you.

(VAL doesn't respond. HALLIE notices the brief intimacy of their look. The moment is a little awkward.)

LOUIS

So what's the word from the Docs?

HALLIE

When they brought him in, he was unconscious. They put him on life support, that was hours ago. We haven't heard a thing since. F'in ridiculous!

LOUIS

Unbelievable. You gotta look on the golf course today if you wanna find a doctor.

(Reggie has taken out a bottle of nail polish and has begun painting his nails a bright red.)

REGGIE

It's like a really baaad movie, and you can't walk out.

(Reggie holds out one hand to admire his handiwork. Hallie notices.)

HALLIE

What the H are you doing?? *(to Val)* He really is losing it. That's gross, Reg. That's really gross.

REGGIE

Lay off the gas, Hallie, would ya? Ahem, now let me ask you, Mr. D...what do you think happened that night? You're right next door...did you hear anything?

LOUIS

Huh? What night?

REGGIE

One year ago. Pop and Mose done had their big blowout. It musta been more fireworks than usual, 'cause Mose never showed for Christmas dinner. Two days later, they just up and disappears, and now only one of 'em is around to tell. And he ain't sayin'.

LOUIS

Oh, *that* night. OK, well...yeah. I suppose you could say I heard a thing or two.

REGGIE, VAL and *HALLIE*

You did???

LOUIS

I wasn't spying or anything but...well, I'm right next door and...they weren't exactly whispering like church mice.

REGGIE

What did you hear?

LOUIS

Mostly the same ol' same ol' from those two. You know how it was...not like ivory and ebony on the keyboard.

HALLIE

Yeah, Pop and Mose together were more like a blowtorch and gasoline.

LOUIS

Yeah, well this time amped up about ten thousand watts. Here's the thing I'll never forget...

(Louis pauses. The others wait attentively.)

As Mose ran out the back door, he hollered back something that, well...the outdoor light was on, and his wild hair was all a-flying and his feather earrings and boas a-swinging, and suddenly he turns and hollers: "I will have my revenge on you, Henry Armstrong. Your life is a total lie. I will have my revenge."

That's what he said, clear as a bell. Why would he say a thing like that...to his own father? It's sat in my gut all this time, like a ba-aad oyster.

HALLIE

I can believe it. Mose liked to come off all mellow, with his bliss-ninny New Age nonsense about peace and love and all that. But let me tell ya, he was good at pushin' Daddy's buttons. A real pro. He could crucify you with his tongue.

REGGIE

(coughing, taking a sip from his flask.) Oh, right. Mose's tongue against Pop's two-fisted temper?

HALLIE

I watched him do it. He was a master.

VAL

(tearfully) I just hope he's OK. One day he's gonna walk back through that door. I just know it.

(The next four speeches are spoken over each other.)

LOUIS

Easy, Valerie.

VAL

And I'm gonna smother him with all the love and acceptance...

LOUIS

It's not your fault, you've been-

VAL

...that a mother can.

REGGIE

Fathers and sons...just like in the Bible. Holy holy Bible.

(Reggie takes a flask hit and starts humming a specific melody, the song "You Got to Follow the Drinking Gourd")

LOUIS

Hey, what *is* that tune? I've heard it before.

REGGIE

Not sure. I been hearing it in my head lately.

LOUIS

It sounds like...like something I heard when I was a boy. From the old folk *(Louis starts haltingly humming it too)*. Yeah, that's it. Out in the fields, I would hear that song. How did the words go?

(He and REGGIE keep humming it, as REGGIE pulls out a tube of BRIGHT red lipstick and starts applying it to his lips.)

LOUIS

(Trying not to notice Reggie) Anyway, revenge is a awfully strong word. I always wondered what Moses meant by that.

VAL

(trying to hold back tears) I guess he got his revenge...by moving far, far away...

HALLIE

And never contacting anyone. Way to go, Mose!

(Reggie laughs, and for this next sentence only, Reggie sounds "gay.")

REGGIE

Do tell, Archbishop...you'd be surprised, sweethearts...at how many ways...you can get revenge...against hippo-hypocrites.

HALLIE

Whatever, Reg. You think Daddy's the bad guy here. But maybe Mose is out there learning a few *hard* lessons he need to learn. You ever think of that?

REGGIE

Oh, you takin' Pop's place now, as Director of Hard Lessons?

HALLIE

I'm gonna tell you something, and you're not gonna like it—

VAL

Enough you two! This isn't helping. I'm gonna try one more time to find a doctor or a nurse. This has been the worst Christmas of my life!

LOUIS

I'll go with you, Valerie. I'm not gonna referee this one. I just wanted to find you and give y'all a big hug...Valerie?

(Val walks past him, avoiding interaction, and exits. Louis follows closely behind. Hallie's eyes follow with an air of suspicion. Just past the doorway and outside the waiting room, LOUIS impulsively grabs VAL and kisses her. VAL is wide-eyed with shock, lingers for a moment, then pushes LOUIS away. The audience can see this rash act, but HALLIE and REGGIE cannot.)

HALLIE

OK, 'Valerie.' Whatever. You know what the best piece of advice anybody ever gave me was? Do you? I was saying the same things at your age -- "I don't know what I want," "I don't know who I am, or what I wanna do", and someone said to me: "Hallie, don't worry -- *nobody* knows what they want. But they're doing it anyway. So just get on with it." You know who told me that?

(Reggie shakes his head.)

HALLIE

The old man. *(her eyes tearing up)* Yeah, honest to Christ. Poppy can be a real s.o.b., but give him a chance, he's not a bad guy.

(Reggie lowers his head.)

He's had a few rough years. After the first heart attack, things never really got back to baseline. Don't you ever tell him I said this, but...last month? I had to lend him some dough.

REGGIE

Real?

HALLIE

Yeah, real. That's how he got Mama that big screen TV. You shoulda seen the look on his face when he asked --like he was crawling 'cross broken glass. But it was her birthday, you know?

(Reggie nods and bites his lip.)

A guy like Daddy-- you got any idea how main it is to be respected...especially by your own wife and kids? Do you?

REGGIE

OK, but--

HALLIE

And that's not all. *(Pause)* The month before that? *(clearly upset)* He done bought a gun.

REGGIE

No shit. Pops done bought a biscuit?

HALLIE

Yeah. I had to co-sign his Visa application 'cause his credit is so shot. So I see the statements. There it was...a .38 Special from Goldberg's Gun and Ammo.

REGGIE

Oh, no. Not the man with three names.

HALLIE

Yeah, so I asked him 'what up'. He say he's been hearing noises at night. Outside his bedroom window.

REGGIE

He's tried it before, Hallie.

HALLIE

We don't know what that time was.

REGGIE

Yeah, right. Someone just happens to swallow that many -

HALLIE

He said he grabbed the wrong bottle!

REGGIE

Who takes 30 pills of anything, Hallie?

HALLIE

OK, OK.

REGGIE

And right after he lost his third garage. Henry-Hankie-Hal, bankrupt as a strung out MC Hammer.

HALLIE

And now another heart attack...I'm really worried about him.

REGGIE

Manic Man...I thought they got meds for that. Merry goddam Christmas.

HALLIE

That's why this whole thing with Mose really pisses me off, you know? He coulda tried harder to overlook some of Daddy's stuff. He didn't have to escalate it to the point of...of politics. Believe me, I know about Daddy's temper. Hell, I still have a mark on my leg from that whipping I got after I cracked the living room window with the basketball.

REGGIE

It wasn't the only time, Hallie.

HALLIE

I know, I know, but--

REGGIE

Remember Happy? I'll never forget that.

HALLIE

Yeah, OK, OK, Daddy got carried away. Hap peed on the floor and...look, it was my puppy. Hell, I built a crucifix for the little guy, down near the fence.

REGGIE

We've all been on the receiving end of that evil eye suddenly appearin'. And worst of all...Black-eyed Vals, Hallie...deep and purple, like the fragile petals of a black lily.

HALLIE

I'm not gonna go there! Don't forget the times Daddy had our backs too. Whether it was a cashier treating us like little Buckwheat thieves, or a racist teacher. You remember Mr. Smolenski?

REGGIE

Oh yeah. I thought Pop was gonna punch his lights out. Smolenski wore blackface to my seventh grade Halloween Party, and encouraged those marshmallow Carver twins to dress like the KKK. Some history teacher.

HALLIE

And there were good times too. Remember our family trips to Washington DC? And the German Club picnics, you and Daddy in the egg toss?

REGGIE

First place, two years running. Pretty good in the three-legged race, too.

HALLIE

Daddy done had our backs all those times, OK? Trust me, a few years from now, you'll see all this in a new kind o' light. So all I'm saying is--

REGGIE

Mose was different, Hallie. None of us tried to understand them. They had ideals...they represented something.

HALLIE

I'll say. Feather boas and eye makeup? Nail polish and...it still makes my skin crawl.

REGGIE

That's not what I meant. Remember how they used to give a black lily to old Mr. Sharpe on Easter? In memory of Mrs. Sharpe, after she died from the virus. Or how they walked Mrs. Fielding around the block? Took her by her arm, no matter how long it took, her happy, Alzheimer-ey face glowing the whole time.

HALLIE

Yeah, even though she was being escorted by a cross-dressing poofa!

REGGIE

Exactly. None of us did that. Mama and Pops didn't make Mose. They just done it...on they own. Mose gave a black lily to Mama every Christmas too, 'member?

HALLIE

Yeah, yeah, black lilies everywhere -

(As Reggie talks, he has taken out of his pocket two long dangling, showy earrings and has put them on.)

REGGIE

Mose was the black lily, Hallie, trumpetin' rebirth wherever they went. That's the kind of person Mose was. You could look into their eyes and...and see the truth.

HALLIE

His truth maybe.

REGGIE

(emphasizing trans pronouns) They truth. You could see where they stood. There was nothing standing between them and who they really is. Not like the rest of us; we're all liars in the mirror, trying to figure out who others want us to be. Trying to please The Man. Nobody looks like who they really are...

(Hallie pauses. Looks strangely at dressed-up Reggie.)

HALLIE

OK, but...why the hell did he...they...have to go and join the gay pride circus, huh? Bein' mixed race is hard enough. Why didn't...they...just keep it to himself...themselves.

REGGIE

(laughing) Can a peacock hold back its show? Mose, with all their techno-color outfits, feathers, beads and neon headpieces? 'Member that time they impersonated Mr. Hoover and walked through the hallways. Half the school saw their principal flippin' cartwheels. Until the real Hoover showed up and cuffed them..the Master of Disguise, busted!

HALLIE

Yeah, Moses was one clever s.o.b., probably the smartest in the whole family. We coulda accomplished so much together. We coulda

been unbeatable, a winning team -- Armstrongs, Incorporated. The Kennedy's of Buffalo, that's what people woulda called us...

(The next four speeches are spoken over each other.)

REGGIE

Hah, the Jackson Five maybe...

HALLIE

...the goddam Kennedy's of Buffalo.

REGGIE

...or the Kanye-Kardashians. Half and half, like a Oreo cookie.

HALLIE

Real winners.

REGGIE

(Pause.) I don't think Mose liked to win, Hallie.

HALLIE

Ah, that's ridiculous. Everybody likes to win, dog. Hell, what's wrong with winning? The American Dream is for all of us! Like Daddy said, nobody knows what they want, so that means you can do *whatever* you want. See? That's what gets me pumped in the morning. It's kind of liberating.

REGGIE

(rising voice) Look, I just think we need to find them, OK? That's all I'm saying. What if we, like, hired a private detective or something? I'd put money towards that.

HALLIE

Sure, now that you're unemployed. Detectives aren't exactly cheap, dog.

REGGIE

I saved some scratch. This is... unnatural...to have a family member just up and disappear, and do nothing to find them. I need to know they's OK. Aren't you at all concerned? Or at least curious?

HALLIE

Contrary to your opinion of me, I am not some cold-hearted Republican bitch. I tried to find Mose a few months after he disappeared. Contacted all his friends that I knew, and his old boss at the firm...

REGGIE

I contacted 'em too! We coulda teamed up.

HALLIE

Then you know...nobody knew anything. *They* done covered their tracks damn good. They didn't want to be found.

REGGIE

But did we do enough? Shouldn't we try again?

HALLIE

I know he and Daddy had their battles. But to not contact anyone, for a whole year? Mose gotta know that Mama's worried sick. I know what he thought of me and Daddy, but what about you and Mama? Doesn't that tell you something?

REGGIE

Maybe Mose got his reasons. Maybe Mose knows something that--

HALLIE

Yeah yeah, maybe maybe. At this point, if we find him? I'm not sure I'm gonna like what I see. Moses thought the way to live is "celebrate freedom" and "love what you do," blah blah blah. That's about the most shallow piece o'...it sounds like a tampon commercial: (in deeper voice) "New freedom to love what you do."

REGGIE

You the tampon expert--

HALLIE

I don't give a friggin' fig about loving what I do. I wanna love the things I *BUY* from what I do.

REGGIE

Clever Hal, clever. I almost admire you. I'm amazed at how you manage to turn this mulatto shit pile of a marble cheesecake into something so triumphant.

HALLIE

Hey, I figure I got half of each...so I can enjoy the best of each. Success with white real estate moola, hip-hopping to Jay-Z and Motown. I'm entitled like anyone else. Why not?

REGGIE

Because there is no such thing as being half-white, Hallie! If you got even a pepper pinch of black, you black. Just ask Thomas Jefferson's children! Ask Homer Plessy!

HALLIE

Oooo, that really deep, Reg.

REGGIE

I'm serious! Didja ever notice...if you mix white with black, you still always end up black. It's like white people got some kinda magic juju, their own special gravity, that refuses to mix with the rest o' the human race.

HALLIE

I will not be defined by others. Maybe I can't change their mindsets, but I can change my own.

REGGIE

Ha, you know who you sound like? Mose! You two alchemists, changing tar babies to ice cream. Your talent somehow has eluded me. In my life, 50% black has always equaled 100% nigga—

HALLIE

(cutting off Reggie) Do NOT use that word! You will NOT use that sell-out plantation cracka word around me! We aren't some flunky rappers demeaning our own kind on the way to the cashbox.

REGGIE

(sarcastically) Yeah, we gonna be...the Kennedy's of Buffalo.

(Hallie flips off Reggie, who laughs and coughs, takes a nip from his flask. He hums the melody again, "Got to Follow the Drinking Gourd".)

I don't know where that tune come from, do you know it? It's digging in my brain like a ice pick. Weird.

(He takes another swig of his flask.)

HALLIE

You sure do like that cough medicine.

REGGIE

(giggling.) OK, true confessions, Hal my Gal. Before leaving the house, I took a bit more than drumsticks. I performed a little alchemy switcheroo myself.

HALLIE

(upset) Great Reg, f'in great! Now's the perfect time for falling off the wagon! Did it occur to you for even a Manhattan second that Poppa and Mama need us right now? Hah?

REGGIE

And you're avoiding the question...finding our lost brother.

HALLIE

Listen, he'll turn up, one of these days. When *THEY* wants something, they'll show.

(Reggie gets explosively angry.)

REGGIE

Look, it's like this, see! I wasn't a high school basketball star and Homecoming Queen, like you. Some people live under a lucky star, all pure and light and bright...

(Reggie laughs crazily; Hallie realizes he is drunk.)

But not me. I was like this BIG ZEEERROO.

(Reggie uses the lipstick to draw a bright red zero on his forehead.)

A nobody, a nothin'...

HALLIE

Jesus Reg, easy...easy.

REGGIE

Don't' worry, I ain't no psychopath...ha, I'm more like a normio-path. Pathologically normal.

HALLIE

Normal??? (she gestures to indicate "The way you look?".)

REGGIE

Yeah, OK, normally I'm normal...just go with me here for a sec, would ya?

HALLIE

Look, none of that matters, Reg. What matters is what you do with what you got. Look at Oprah, and that guy who invented Facebook, what's his name. Both college dropouts. Complete losers. Until they weren't.

(Reggie takes a hit from his flask, Hallie looks alarmed.)

REGGIE

But it's all a big lie, Hallie, don't you see? Nobody's normal. We all a mixed bag of percentages. A little of this, a bit of that, all shaken in the blender.

(Pause, like he's weighing his words: then speaks sadly, nostalgically)

Bobby Hamlin. That was his name. In kindergarten, I...I had a huge crush on him. I admit it now, this little white boy with dimples and a pointy blonde curl like a Mr. Softy ice cream cone. I felt such dread...such warm desire, and fear all over my body, all of it stewin' together...afraid I'd be found out, Hallie, ya see? If I told Bobby - told anybody - I probably woulda got my ass whupped. By the other boys, or the teacher - probably even by Pops. Fear and dread, that's my whole life. Ya see?

(A long pause. Hallie remains silent, her body language indicating discomfort over things she'd rather not hear. Reggie swigs from his flask again.)

REGGIE

Last swig, I promise. Sometimes I feel this...this incredible urge to...to punch my gas pedal to the floor and...push my rust-crusted Corolla to the outer limits...roaring through the streets like a rocket ship that isn't bound by the normal everyday laws of gravity and traffic signals. Zoom off and ride the crest of the wave, you know? Maybe chuck everything into the back seat and head to California, and take anyone I want. It shouldn't be nobody's business, right? But I don't got Mose's guts, ya see? I don't got what it takes to...to make that leap when...I don't even know where I'm leaping to. I go crazy at night, trying to figure it out!

HALLIE

Look, I go crazy trying to figure certain things out too. I got white loan officers who only see black, and black men who treat me white as mayonnaise 'cause I'm light like Beyonce and they don't wanna deal with a woman who knows her own mind. I gotta fight for my place everywhere I go, Reg. So don't be tellin' me about 'Fear and Loathing in Kindergarten Class.' That's normal. That's just life.

REGGIE

OK Hallie, normal is as normal does.

HALLIE

You can't hide from it, that's what Mose never figured out.

REGGIE

(Loudly, drunkenly) But don't ya see Hal-Hal! Maybe God is whisperin' in my ear, about the secrets of the universal divine; or maybe it's the lowest hum of the Planet Earth, throbbin' at an E flat 47 octaves below middle C --

HALLIE

E-Easy, Reggie, OK? They probably got security cameras here.

REGGIE

Or...or maybe it's the echo of ancient African ancestors, looking for their long lost children, and--

HALLIE

(simultaneously) Reggie...Reggie...earth to Reggie...

REGGIE

-- and if I just listen hard enough, if I just put my ear to the air, I - *(suddenly realizing)* Believe in yourself or die, that's the choice, in't it, Saint Hallie?

HALLIE

(grasping his shoulders hard) Reg! You gotta hold it together. Mama and Pops need us. And Moses too--

REGGIE

(pulling away, shouting drunkenly) LOOK AT ME, Hallie! LOOK AT ME! *(quieter)* What do you see, hah? *(louder)* What do you see???

HALLIE

Someone's gonna hear you...

REGGIE

(REGGIE applies more lipstick). You see wild streamers of life and energy, jetting out from my being...a colorful rainbow, vibrant and infinite, like a giant peacock, beautifully iridescent. Each streamer a pathway forward into a beautiful future...just waiting for me to step onto that path and follow it, all the way to the end. A possibility of a possibility of a possibility, that's what I am...Shouldn't we all have streamers, Hallie? Isn't that our *real* birthright?

HALLIE

OK, OK sure. But do you gotta go all RuPaul on me? Kee-rist, doesn't anyone just wanna be normal anymore?

(Hallie pushes Reggie back into a chair, in a big sister sort of way. She bends to Reggie's level, sounding weary and for the first time sympathetic.)

HALLIE

OK, Reg, OK. Mama gonna be back soon with news and...just chill with me here, OK?

(Reggie speaks with great solemnity and sad, drunken emotion.)

REGGIE

Don't you see, Hallie...if there's no place for someone like MOSE in this world...if there's no room for weird and different ...Mose is the North Star, they's pointin' the way to...to...you can be anything you want. It's kind o'...liberating!

There's got to be something else out there, Hallie... between the winning and the losing...between the rise and the fall...

HALLIE

You really wanna find him, don't you?

(Hallie reaches for Reggie's flask, who gives it to her. She takes a slow draw, looking steadily at him.)

OK Reg, sure, what the hell. Let's roll the dice. Let's hire a private detective.

REGGIE

Real?

HALLIE

Yeah, real. If he - they -- doesn't wanna come back to the family, at least we'll know. We'll settle it, once and for all.

REGGIE

Now...you're...talking, Hallie Gallie. All for Armstrongs, Armstrongs for all.

(They both take a swig.)

You're the bestest oldest sister east of the Mississippi and north of the Mason Dixon line.

HALLIE

But Reg...you think you wanna find Mose...you dream of some glorious family reunion...be careful what you ask for.

(REGGIE blinks and stares, losing his bravado.)

You may find that our marvelous brother, our own flesh and blood, is not some high-minded, freedom-loving Frederick Douglas in drag, but just another aimless low-life...a tramp without a cause. Maybe then you'll open your eyes, to how this world really works.

(Reggie pauses and blinks, swaying drunkenly.)

Uh-huh. You better wipe all that swish off your face, 'fore Mama come back.

REGGIE

Okee dokee. Your wish is my command, Hallie. But...it's still me, no matter how I'm stitched up. Your little brother. The clothes don't make the man...or the woman (*giggles*). The judge will please instruct the jury in that fashion.

HALLIE

Kee-rist, Reg. What you know 'bout being a woman?

(HALLIE slumps in the chair and covers her eyes with a magazine. REGGIE takes a hit from his flask and keeps humming his familiar melody, dancing slow, as he cleans up the waiting room. The lights fade.)

End of Act II (INTERMISSION)

ACT III

It's a month after Christmas. Hal Armstrong returned home four days ago after four weeks in the hospital. The scene opens on the same scene as Act I: Armstrong's dining/living room, Christmas tree and decorations, with the bedroom offstage right, kitchen offstage at the back of the living room. VAL is in the dining room talking on the phone. She's wearing an apron. The audience hears the sound of an ominous-sounding rattle, but VAL doesn't seem to hear it.

VAL

Yes Doctor, I know, I know. Honestly, he's more trouble than...Um hm, um hm, I keep tellin' him what you said but... Yes, yes, absolutely. The pink ones every three hours and the limey green ones every fourth, like clockwork...Um hm, um hmm, yes, well, he's just, uh, different today, I don't know how else to put it...Sure, who knows. Honestly I wonder if all those machines he was hooked up to didn't fry his brain or...Um hm, um hm...that's probably true. Being in a coma for four weeks and coming that close to you know what--

(Hal calls out sickly from the bedroom.)

HAL

Va-aaal? Val!

VAL

He's calling me again, for the thousandth time. OK Doctor Shea, I better go. My son's coming over for lunch and...I know it, he's only been home four days, and keeps insisting he's ready to go back to work!...No, I'm not kidding, and other strange things too, I --

HAL

(Suddenly shouting.) VAL! VAL! Quick!

VAL

My goodness, now he's shouting. OK, thank you Doctor...You too, yes, it's really coming down out there!

HAL

(shouting louder, frantic) VAAAAA-LL!!

(Val hangs up, sees HAL lumbering into the living room from his bedroom. Hal is in his pajamas, looking stricken. In

his conversation, mental capacity and presentation, he displays a feebleness and signs of distorted thinking.)

VAL

Hal, for heaven's sakes, back to bed! You know what the doctor said.

HAL

I just saw a face! Looking through my window!

(sound of a rattle.)

VAL

What???

(Val runs into the bedroom, calls from offstage.)

I don't see anything!

HAL

Get away from there, you crazy? Get my gun! I saw a wild looking face. Long, shaggy hair and...and feathers and beads...like a Indian or something.

(VAL comes back into the living/dining room.)

VAL

Oh Hal, what kind of person would be out there in weather like this?

HAL

A crazy one. I heard a...a rattling sound, and then...he had frantic eyes, like a caged animal, lunging to get out. Get my gun Val. Better safe than sorry.

VAL

I told you, I don't like that gun. Especially in the bedroom.

HAL

It's the perfect place. Most robberies happen in the middle of the night. That's what the news said.

VAL

Well, whatever you think you saw, it's not there anymore. My my, since you returned from the hospital you--

(Hal sits down frailly on the living room chair.)

Henry Armstrong...you know the doctor's orders. Another four days in bed. Back to the bedroom! *(pointing toward bedroom)*

HAL

At least my chair misses me. Look, it holds my lard-ass shape perfectly.

(HAL stares up at her.)

What, am I supposed to live like an invalid? We can't afford that. We both know it.

VAL

You're gonna do *exactly* as the doctor says. We don't want any ambulance repeats. I mean it -- back to bed!

(Val points to the bedroom. Hal grunts, doesn't move.)

Hal, honestly...sometimes you are your own worst enemy.

(Val stalks off to the kitchen and returns with a cup of hot cocoa, hands it to Hal who takes a sip. He stares at Val, following her movements as she straightens the room.)

VAL

Here's your cocoa. And don't forget, Reggie's coming for lunch. He's *(looks at her wristwatch)*...heavens, 20 minutes late! I hope he's OK. *(Looking out the curtains)* The weatherman said another seven inches.

HAL

Val?

VAL

What is it now?

HAL

Val...I just wanted to say that...well...there's something about coming that close to, you know...that close to...it was like a long dark tunnel...with nightmares and voices, and all these strange faces and...coming that close makes you feel kind of...Val?

VAL

Yes, Hal.

HAL

I...I...I love you.

(Silence. Val freezes, has difficulty responding)

VAL

Yes...um...you too. *(Val busies herself.)* Remember what the doctor said, plenty of rest and --

HAL

No Val, I'm serious. I know sometimes I'm kinda bossy. Hell, I haven't always treated you right, I know that. I've become... I've become like my father, Val. Mean. The bastard I once evicted moved back in. And I never noticed...when did it happen?

(Val can't find the words to respond.)

When I woke in the hospital, time was playing tricks. Suddenly, I felt like...a boy all over again. Lying in bed, sounds of my mother in the kitchen...cooking smells, bless her.

And then...I was lyin' in bed with you, Val...that first heavenly morning after we got married, 'member? Sunlight was streaming through the pretty lace curtains in the hotel room--

VAL

That we eloped to. We eloped, Hal. Because your father didn't approve - for all the usual reasons - and I was -

HAL

You were glowing gloriously...I had never seen a woman more beautiful or--

VAL

Knocked up. I was three months pregnant, Hal. At the age of 19. We did what we had to...

HAL

I dropped out of State to get a job; I'm glad you finished though.

VAL

With money from *my* father...

HAL

You were the smartest in our whole American Lit class...

VAL

Thank God he was an educated man...a university professor with a firm and fair mind. I was his... 'Valerie.'

HAL

He called us the Zebra team, 'member? Black and white together...two reluctant revolutionaries, for *those* times.

VAL

That was such a long time ago. When we still thought...the world could change.

HAL

(Tearing up, nodding) It was probably better...that we lost that first one. We were too young, Val - weren't we?

(Pause.)

But we had three more...I haven't regretted a day. And you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever...*(looking deeply at her)* and well...I just want...you to know how...how much I really care for you, Val. No, how much I love you. *(choking up)* I love you, Val.

(Val gulps. She hurries to straighten up the room.)

VAL

It's OK, Hal. The Kleenex is right there. We've been through setbacks before. We'll get through this one.

HAL

That's not what I meant, I--

VAL

Hal, now listen to me. I've been thinking...just listen, before you react.

(pause.) I think I...should pick up some extra hours at the library. It's not like the last time, just listen. The kids are all grown up now and...there's no earthly reason why--

HAL

No, Val. No. Overtime? Your health hasn't been so good either. Hypertension, on the insulin list.No wife o' mine's gonna-

VAL

Oh Hal, that knight in shining armor routine isn't helpful right now. My health is fine enough, a little bit of overtime won't--

HAL

It won't take long, I'll be back on my feet. Back at Schmidt's. You wait and see.

VAL

We can't afford to wait. We almost lost the house last time, and had to take a second loan with boo-coup interest. Remember?

HAL

(starting to sob) Don't do this, Val. Please? If only my last garage had worked out. It was going so well for a few years. I still don't know what happened.

VAL

Life happened. You worked hard - damn hard -- but running your own business is...some people win, others lose.

HAL

Did I ever win? Even once?

VAL

Oh don't go down that rabbit hole, not now. It's all a gamble, Hal. Life's a gamble. That's why they invented insurance.

HAL

Speaking of insurance...is the life insurance paid up?

VAL

Now what kind of a question is that?

HAL

It's good to be prepared. Two heart attacks -- my batting average isn't so good. When it's your time, it's your time, Val. I don't wanna stick around as no vegetable. That's the last thing I would want to inflict on you and the kids.

VAL

Oh, Henry Armstrong. Weren't you always the "no self pity" guy? Let's talk about living instead of dying, OK? After 35 years, we're almost fully paid on the mortgage. That's why you haven't retired yet. Finally, we'll own the whole plantation. Look at Louis, already retired. We can't afford another setback.

HAL

Yeah, yeah, 'Louis'. Talk about a knight in shining armor.

VAL

(ignoring that provocation) Look, Hal...the doctor says you'll need a solid three months of rest and... why shouldn't I take on some more hours? Until you're back on your feet.

(Hal begins to sob, despite trying to control himself.)

Have another sip of your cocoa.

HAL

Val...I love you. Do you hear me? I really love you.

VAL

Yes yes, you too Hal.

(Suddenly the sound of a tea kettle whistling.)

HAL

I want you back in our bed. One bed. 'Til death do us part.'

VAL

There goes Henry-Hank-Hal, bein' overly dramatic again.
(responding to the tea kettle) I'll be right back. But you-- you need to get back in bed. Doctor's orders! Why don't you watch some more TV. Or open more of your get well cards, you haven't even opened them all.

HAL

I'm sick of watching TV.

VAL

I'll bet ESPN'll have some news about the Super Bowl this Sunday.

(VAL exits.)

HAL

(shouting) I'm sick of watching TV! *(to himself: "Oh Lord")*

(HAL lumbers frailly back to the bedroom. The sounds of him changing TV channels can be heard and he settles on sportscasters discussing the Super Bowl, which reverberates in the house.)

(Val comes from the kitchen into the living room, carrying a tea kettle and tea cup. She is emotional, trembling, eyes teary. The sound of the TV echoes.)

VAL

Damn him! How dare he tell me that...after all these years!

(PAUSE.)

"I love you, Val." How dare he not tell me, for so many years. Oh, Henry Armstrong -- I could just clobber you sometimes.

(A softish knock is heard at the front door, and Louis Davidson pops his head in. He's dressed for winter. Their conversation occurs in hushed, covert tones.)

LOUIS

Anybody home?

VAL

(kind of drained) Hi, come on in. I'm just preparing lunch. Have you eaten?

LOUIS

I'm good, thanks. Did you talk to him?

VAL

Yes. He was about as receptive as I thought he would be.

LOUIS

He has a lot of pride.

VAL

Pride, schmide. At a certain point, a proud man is no better than a selfish mule. Goin' in circles, never thinkin' how it affects others.

(Val and Lou look long and deep at each other. Lou grabs her by her elbows, moves in closer.)

LOUIS

Valerie...

VAL

No, Louis. Like I told you...this is wrong. Whatever has happened...whatever water has passed under that bridge...we all

have to face moments when we can make it right or...or make it more wrong. So please...

LOUIS

Let's not be hasty. You're such a good woman. We both deserve what makes us happy.

VAL

(pulling away) No! We don't deserve anything of the kind!

LOUIS

Right now you got to...your family needs you. But nothing's changed Valerie...the things our hearts have confessed.

VAL

I wonder what Minnie would say to that!

(The sound of the TV abruptly cuts out and Hal calls out).

HAL

Val? Is somebody there?

VAL

Uh, I'll be right there, Hal. No, no one's here.

(Pause, TV resumes. Val lowers her voice.)

I'm sorry...that was mean. I'm so confused. I've been thinkin' of Mose and...it tears my guts out...

(The next three speeches are spoken over each other.)

LOUIS

I know...I know...

VAL

What if he's one of those murdered ones. I'd never forgive myself, I... *(she wipes away tears.)*

LOUIS

Ssshhh, easy Valerie. Easy.

VAL

I need to be here...for him. I know Mose is coming back-- one of these days, I just know he's gonna walk through that door.

LOUIS

Mose'd be welcome in my home, Valerie. Unconditionally. *They* would.

VAL

It's not the same thing, he's--

LOUIS

We don't have to decide now--

VAL

He's such a tortured soul. Only his father can give him what he needs. Mose will never escape that, no matter how far he runs.

(LOUIS moves closer, VAL moves away.)

(fighting back tears) Bein' the rock for this family is the only success I've ever had.

LOUIS

(pauses) I'm serious about my offer. If you need help, financially...

VAL

Please, Louis...

(Val tearfully points to the front door. Lou nods regretfully. He walks to the front door.)

Louis...thank you for...*(tenderly, eyes closing)*...for going.

(Val returns to the kitchen. As Louis exits, he bumps into Hallie and hurries out the door with no greeting.)

HALLIE

Uh, hi, Mr. Davidson.

(Hallie gives him a quizzical look. Val comes out of the kitchen carrying a tray with sandwiches.)

HALLIE

What's he doing here? Brrr, it's brutal out there. With that arctic wind off the lake, they're saying it's the coldest since, like, 1934 or something. Are you OK?

VAL

(wiping away tears.) Oh, it's nothing. I was just...chopping an extra strong onion, for the tuna sandwiches. I thought you were going to Filene's?

HALLIE

The lunch hour lines were crazy. I figured I'd go back later and - was Mr. Davidson visiting Daddy? Hey, you still have your Christmas tree up.

VAL

I left it up for your father. I thought it might cheer him up.

HALLIE

Wasn't that thoughtful. Daddy's one lucky guy.

VAL

Oh, please, don't say that.

HALLIE

And modest too.

VAL

(stronger) No, please...I'm not...just don't say that, OK?

HALLIE

(surprised.) Sure, OK, if you say so. Uhhh...so how's he doing?

VAL

Physically he's making progress, but mentally--

HALLIE

Still saying strange things?

VAL

Twilight Zone. The kind he said when he first came out of the coma. Yesterday he was saying he could predict the future. And now he's seeing things out the window! A new Hal, every day.

HALLIE

Ah, don't worry, Mama. That's what a brush with the Maker will do. But he's a tough old shoe...plenty of leather left.

VAL

Goodness, look at the time! He's probably so antsy 'cause he's hungry as a bear. I don't know what could be keeping Reggie. It's just not like him to no-show, or not call.

HALLIE

Yeah, who knows. Reggie's been kinda in the Twilight Zone himself. But you're right, Daddy needs to eat, to keep his blood sugar. Shall we go feed Mr. Fortune Teller?

VAL

OK, sure. Here, you take this *(Val hands Hallie the tray of sandwiches)*...He'll be so glad to see you. Let's keep the conversation light, OK? Nothing too serious.

HALLIE

Right-o.

(Just then, Hallie's cell phone rings. She lays down the tray of sandwiches and answers).

HALLIE

I'll be there in a sec. *(into the phone)* Hello?

(Val takes the sandwich tray and heads into the bedroom.)

HALLIE

(lowering her voice) Reg? Where the heck you...I'm here with Mama, she's worried sick...*(suddenly, with alarm)* Whaaat?? You're kidding!...You're talking on the phone with him right now?

(She looks over her shoulder before speaking.)

Uh huh. Well his initial leads were pretty erratic. First San Francisco, then Denver, then an hour away in Rochester!...Sure, there's a few Moses Armstrongs in the world, but still...uh huh, that's what we get for shopping online and hiring the cheapest Sherlock in the biz...

Uh huh, uh huh...well has he found him or hasn't he?...Oh, he's got 'big news'. Uh huh. He's probably just trying to milk us for more dough.

(VAL enters, but HALLIE doesn't notice.)

Yeah, that sure sounds like Mose. Jesus Kee-rist, maybe he's really found him. Amazing.

(as Hallie talks, she turns and sees a shocked Val.)

HALLIE

Gotta go.

(She hangs up her phone.)

VAL

What's that? Someone has...found Mose???

HALLIE

Uh, no, Mama, that was Reggie. He'll be here in a minute and-

VAL

I know what I heard, Hallie. Have you...found Moses?

HALLIE

(Pauses.) OK, listen. We don't wanna get anybody upset so...

VAL

I want to know. I got a *right* to know!

HALLIE

(pause) Reggie and I hired a private detective...to find him. We thought...it was time. Reggie just spoke with the detective on the phone, and sounds like he has some news for us.

(Val is quiet, nodding pensively.)

VAL

Yes. Yes, it's way overdue. He's been missing far too long. I hope he's...OK. I hope...he's happy...and wants us to find him.

(Val begins to weep quietly.)

HALLIE

It's gonna be OK, Mama.

VAL

Who knows, maybe he's got a job and...a whole new life. Or maybe he's in culinary school. He talked about being a chef. He's so talented and creative. He could do anything.

HALLIE

I don't think we should build up too many expectations, OK? Let's just see what the detective's got. Apparently he just arrived back in town and has a few loose ends to tie up. Honestly, we've never even met this guy, so who knows what to expect.

VAL

Well, whatever Mose is doing, however he's living, he's welcome back in this family. That's all there is to it. Nobody better mess with this Mama Bear.

HALLIE

OK, but for God's sake, let's keep this to ourselves for now, OK? Daddy's been through a rough patch lately, so...

(Suddenly there is a knock on the door, Reggie rushes in, dressed in his long double-breasted winter trench coat, backward baseball cap, and sporting a pair of dangling flashy earrings.)

REGGIE

(talking excitedly) Sorry I'm late, Mama. I got held up by an important phone call!

HALLIE

I already filled her in on all the detective biz. Did he tell you anything more?

REGGIE

No, uh-uh. He's holding his cards close. But I have a feeling it's big!

HALLIE

OK, not so loud. We don't wanna alarm the patient.

REGGIE

You kidding? I wanna shout it from a mountain top!

HALLIE

Bad idea, Reg.

VAL

(whispering in a hiss.) This has...gone on long enough! It's time for a fresh start!

HALLIE

We don't even know all the details...no reason to poke the hornets' nest before--

VAL

I'm tired of tiptoeing around it! He's my son too. Moses is as much black as he is white!

HALLIE

I'm not goin' there, Mama. All I'm saying is, a few more days and then-

(Suddenly Hal comes lumbering into the living room.)

HAL

I knew I heard voices out here. What's all the whispering about?

HALLIE

We're not whisperin', Daddy.

HAL

You look like the Apostles tryin' to break bad news to Mary and Joseph. Did the Docs say I only have a month left or something?

HALLIE

(laughing) No, Daddy, you're gonna be fine. We just didn't want to disturb you, is all.

VAL

Now Hal, you turn right around and go back --

HAL

-- back to bed. I know, Medical Gestapo.

(HALLIE grabs HAL affectionately by the arm.)

HALLIE

Here Daddy, let me escort you right back to --

REGGIE

Wait, Hallie...Pops needs to know.

(HALLIE glares at Reggie.)

REGGIE

I haven't told you. I done invited him to come over here...and he's gonna arrive shortly.

HALLIE

What? Why the hell did you --

REGGIE

It was sooner or later, Hallie. I voted for 'sooner'.

HAL

Invited who? Who's coming?

(Long pause. No one wants to talk.)

VAL

It's...about Moses, Hal.

(Long shaking sound of a rattle.)

HALLIE

Reggie and I...we hired a private detective. To find Mose, Daddy. It was time.

HAL

(crossly but weak) I see. Now that I'm in a sick bed, you're calling the shots...is that it?

HALLIE

Easy, Daddy. We decided it a few weeks ago.

HAL

While I was flat on my back, on life support. That took a lot of guts. *(voice rising)* Look, maybe I didn't always handle things the 100% right way. But, unless this is another coma dream, I'm still the head of this family!

VAL

Hal! Settle down!

(The rattle sounds again. Reggie's cell phone dings and he receives a text. The others wait as he reads it and quickly responds. Then, ding! he receives a text back.)

REGGIE

He's here! Mama, maybe we can offer him something...tea and the tuna sandwiches or something?

VAL

Sure, yes, we want to welcome him. Don't we, Hal. Hal?

(HAL looks lost, panicked. A moment later the doorbell rings, Reggie walks to the front door and lets in someone who is dressed like a detective: trench coat, fedora, tinted eyeglasses, speaking in a deep gravelly voice with graying hair, African-American about 50 years old. The rattle sounds louder, HAL jerks his head around.)

HAL

What's that rattling sound?

HALLIE

What rattle sound?

HAL

I keep hearin' a rattle...like a rattlesnake or something.

REGGIE

Yeah, right. As if he's ever heard a rattlesnake, except on TV.

Pops, Mama- this is the private detective we hired. His name is Mr. Cervantes. I asked him to come over. To tell us the news, in person.

HAL

He's coming back, I'm tellin' ya!...Is this all a dream?

VAL

Hal, for heaven's sake, calm down.

MR. CERVANTES

(confidentially to Reggie) Uh, Mr. Armstrong? I didn't realize it would be a full-on family affair. Maybe better to wait 'til-

REGGIE

There couldn't be a better time. Everyone's in a chipper good mood. Right, Pops?

MR. CERVANTES

(starting to retreat toward the door) No, really, I don't think this is the time to--

REGGIE

(dragging the detective by the arm) Come in, come in, meet the family.

HAL

(sounding increasingly frantic) He's almost here! What kind of trick is this? I told you he was coming!

VAL

(protective of Hal) Reg, maybe this isn't such a good time.

REGGIE

(impatiently confronting Hal) Why can't you just accept people for as they are? Hah? Your own son...why not help him? You think his road is easy? You any idea how much guts it take to be black and different in this snowflake town?

(Reggie whips out lipstick and applies it to his lips.)

See that? The sky didn't fall. The president didn't get shot. We can wear lipstick, dresses, feather boas or any other swish thing...I can be a 'they' or a 'she' or 'them', and the stock market don't crash, civilization don't fall!

HAL

(spoken over Reggie) Merciful Lord, it's spreading. Invasion of the body snatchers!

REGGIE

I'm still me, however I'm decked out, Pops. If we stick together, black and white, they can't touch us! Isn't that what you always taught us?

HAL

Don't twist my words, I--

REGGIE

(laughing) Here, let me put some on you. You'll see what I mean.

(Reggie reaches to put lipstick on Hal, who pulls away.)

HALLIE

OK OK Reg, you made your point.

HAL

(upset, yelling) Don't try to mock me! I may be ill but...the rest of you have no idea. He...he threatened me. His own father.

HALLIE

Mose? Threatened you?

HAL

His own father. That night, I was the only one there. You have no idea what happened.

REGGIE

Oh...I bet we have a pretty good idea. Mr. Cervantes? Earlier today you said you had a breakthrough? The floor is yours.

(All but Hal arrange themselves around Mr. Cervantes.)

MR. CERVANTES

Yes but...Mr. Armstrong. Since then I found out some newer information and--

REGGIE

Fabulous. So you've located him then?

MR. CERVANTES

Yes...you could say that.

(Reggie takes a deep breath. All look filled with expectation, except Hal, who looks filled with dread.)

REGGIE

We've been waitin' a long time. Please tell us what you know.

(Mr. Cervantes looks down at the ground, weighing what to say. The rattle sounds louder, HAL looks startled.)

REGGIE

Mr. Cervantes? What's going on?

(Mr. Cervantes remains silent.)

(losing patience) Do you got news about Mose or don't you? Dammit, that's what I paid you a lot o' money for!

MR. CERVANTES

(nervously) OK, Mr. Armstrong, OK *(pause.)* You see, your brother...your son...Moses Henry Armstrong...well, apparently after bumming around the country, seeing the sights -- national parks, famous landmarks and such-- he and some friends he hooked up with settled into a small town in Colorado.

Granitesville, it's called, in the Rockies. Beautiful country...a place of loggers, miners, back to the land-ers. Moses and his associates decided it would be a suitable place for their, well...commune is about the only thing you can call it. Yes ma'am, your son joined a commune. With teepees and ribbons and skinny dipping in the river. Women and men, children too. Idyllic, if you go for that sort of thing.

HALLIE

Sounds like Mose. He found more people just like him.

MR. CERVANTES

Yes, ma'am. Except...well, unfortunately relations between him and the others in the town was...it's a redneck town, where, frankly, the cops are kinda corrupt and certain locals, well... sometimes they take the law into their own hands.

(Rattle sounds. Hal hears it and looks agitated.)

On the afternoon of this past December 10th, the Sheriff -- a fellow by the name of Renner LeRoy Forbes, white man, retired Air Force -- encountered your son panhandling outside the post office, for the umpteenth time. He arrested him for 'disorderly conduct,' and hauled him off to jail.

(Long pause. Mr. Cervantes hesitates, struggles, while the others remain silent.)

Just this afternoon...I'm sorry to say...your son's body was found in a mountain ravine, 25 miles outside of town.

(Val sobs, nearly collapses, as does Reggie. Hal and Hallie gasp and sob.)

The prime suspect is...Sheriff Forbes. He's the last person seen with your son. He swears innocence but...no witnesses. His word against...nobody.

VAL

Oh, my boy. My baby, Moses. My God, heaven help us. What have we done?

HALLIE

(reaching out to hold VAL) Shhhh, Mama, easy, easy.

(Mr. Cervantes is deeply touched by Val's tears.)

MR. CERVANTES

I'm truly sorry, ma'am, I-- I didn't mean to...I'm very sorry to be the bearer of this terrible news.

VAL

Why didn't we try harder to find him?

HALLIE

We did try, Mama. We did.

VAL

Not hard enough. *(to Hal, with bereaved fury)* You! You drove him away. Your own son!

HAL

No, I...you don't understand, I...

HALLIE

OK Mama, shhhh. Easy *(still hugging her.)*

MR. CERVANTES

(tears in his eyes, to Reggie.) If you don't mind, Mr. Armstrong...I'll be leaving now. It's best that you and your family are alone, so...

(He hands Reggie the report, turns toward the front door.)

HAL

(dabbing tears) Wait, Mr. Cervantes. If you don't mind...before you go...this is a hard thing...for a father to hear about the boy I raised from-

MR. CERVANTES

(dabbing tears) Yes sir, I'm sure it is.

HAL

(fighting back tears) Were there any final words from my son, or his associates or --

MR. CERVANTES

Not really, sir. *(pause.)* It's all in my report, so if you will excuse me I- *(he turns to leave.)*

HAL

Would you say my son...was he...was Moses a troublemaker in this -- Granitesville?

MR. CERVANTES

Some would say so, Mr. Armstrong. I have no opinion on that. Some people's lifestyles clash, simple as that. Apparently, he made some people very angry.

HAL

Lifestyles. That's charitable of you. Some people don't have any respect. Not for authority...or values or...my son was like that.

(Reggie glares at him. VAL and HALLIE remain stricken.)

The way he dressed...I tried telling him...the world doesn't bend that far! There are consequences...I know the white world, I trained you all to survive in it! But rules lead to consequences. Sometimes harsh ones. Am I wrong, Mr. Cervantes?

MR. CERVANTES

(with a flash of restrained anger)

With all due respect sir... I'm a veteran, and for the most part a pretty conservative fellow. But I don't think the way a person dresses...or looks or behaves, long as they're not threatening...justifies taking two bullets. One in the *head*, the other in the *chest*.

VAL

(wailing) Oh Mose, Mose. What did we do? What did we do?

MR. CERVANTES

He also was beaten to a bruised and bloodied pulp. Hard to tell which killed him, sir, the beatings, or the bullets. And then tossed off a steep dirt road in the middle of nowhere. No sir, that's just meanness. Brutal, hateful meanness.

(VAL wails again in grief.)

HALLIE

Easy Mama, easy, shhh.

MR. CERVANTES

(to Reg but staring at Val, wiping his own tears)

Mr. Armstrong, I should go. Feel free to call me if you have any questions.

(Reggie has been looking through the report and finds something alarming.)

REGGIE

Wait, Mr. Cervantes...what's this part here, in your report? About the sheriff's office calling?

MR. CERVANTES

You should read that later, Mr. Armstrong. It's best that you and your family—

REGGIE

Mr. Cervantes...please explain this part.

(Mr. Cervantes looks down at the ground.)

(angrily.) That's what I'm paying you for!

MR. CERVANTES

Alright, Mr. Armstrong, alright. Yes, when the Granitesville police arrested your brother, and, well sir, according to the police report they made a phone call. Trying to locate next of kin for bail purposes, since your brother was flat penny broke. (glaring at HAL)...A Mr. Hal Armstrong answered the phone.

(They all turn and look at Hal, who looks mortified.)

VAL

Hal?

MR. CERVANTES

Mr. Armstrong stated to the sheriff -- according to the report -
- quote: "My son needs to learn a few hard lessons. I suggest you prosecute him..."

VAL

Hal, my God!

MR. CERVANTES

...to the fullest extent of the law."

VAL

Hal, did you really say that???

HALLIE

Daddy! You knew where Mose was???

REGGIE

A week before Christmas???

HAL

No, I...I. No. I deny it. I deny it!

VAL

(trembling, trying to control her mounting fury)
Hal...you... you treated me so badly...for so long...and I stayed...for our family...

HAL

Val, no. You have to listen!

VAL

And if I had left...Moses would still be alive??? By my own hand! *(staring at her hands in disbelief)*

HAL

No, I...I thought, finally this might be something that got through to him! For his own good!

(REGGIE explodes.)

REGGIE

Shut up! Shut up, or by God I'll strangle you myself.

HALLIE

Reggie! For God's sake, don't pour gas on the flames!

HAL

(To Reggie.) You...you were sympathetic, admit it. You encouraged him, looked up to him...

(Hallie has to restrain Reggie.)

REGGIE

I'm warning you!

HAL

'Cause he was *(uses fingers to make quote marks)* "doing his own thing." Look where that got him. Wise up, mister!

VAL

Stop, for God's sake, stop! My son is dead!

(Mr. Cervantes has been fidgeting, touched by Val's pain and increasingly disturbed about his role.)

MR. CERVANTES

I'm gonna go now. I'm truly sorry, Mrs. Armstrong. I hope you all can find it in your hearts to forgive, and forgive again. Sometimes we don't know what we got...'til we lose it. Good day.

(He hurriedly exits through the front door.)

(Reggie angrily yanks off his showy earrings, wipes off his red lipstick with his sleeve, smearing it over his face, then violently throws the earrings across the room.)

REGGIE

(Pointing at Hal with barely-controlled fury) You...you're a murderer! You done left your own son stranded...in a whitey redneck jail! That was *your* revenge?

(The rattle sounds loudly. HAL flinches.)

HAL

No, no, that's now how it...I-

REGGIE

At least Mose was honest...about who they was. You're a big phony! And a liar! And now a murderer!

VAL

Hal...what have you done? What have we done?

REGGIE

How many times did we get an earful from you -- "don't act like a rapper-thug-Tupac gangsta" -- and look at you! Bombed in one business after another! Hidin' behind your self-righteous drive-bys you aimed at us my entire life!

HALLIE

Reggie, calm down. This is moving too fast, I--

REGGIE

Too fast? Mose is dead! If we hadn't waited so long- if *he* hadn't left him rotting...(to HAL) you might as well pulled the trigger yourself!

(REGGIE grows more furious, seemingly urged on by the sound of a loud menacing rattle shaking. HAL flinches.)

HAL

No, you don't understand. We argued, yes--

VAL

The wickedness, Hal!

HAL

We're all guilty, aren't we 'Valerie'?

VAL

(sobbing) What was Mose guilty of?

HAL

(looking trapped) Don't look at me that way! My God, my God, this can't be happening! *(covers his face with his hands)*

REGGIE

Oh, it's happening alright! You the big fake zero you always made us feel like. Your own wife...shoppin' 'round in 'nother man's supermarket-

HALLIE

Reggie!

(HAL is speechless, and looks anguished and exposed. The rattle sounds grow more urgent.)

VAL

(angrily to REGGIE) You don't know nothin' 'bout nothin'!

REGGIE

I know that my whole life I cowered in fear from what he dished out. We all did. I don't blame you one bit, Mama.

HAL

I am not on trial here!

REGGIE

If you were black, you'd know...you always on trial. Every single day. Even your own father as judge!

HAL

You've stabbed me through the heart. You cannot try the child, one day you'll see. The child remains. I--I refuse to plead!

VAL

Reggie, please...no more ripping and tearing. I'm angry and confused too. But he just got out of the hospital!

REGGIE

I'd throw him in jail if I could!

HALLIE

This is crazy talk! We have to pull together!

REGGIE

Know who I'm gonna call next? The chief of police, uh-huh. 'Cause in Hal Armstrong's world, there's got to be consequences. You gonna turn yourself in to the cops. For the murder of your own son!

HALLIE

He's a sick man!

REGGIE

Go get your coat, Mr. Henry Armstrong. Time to do the perp walk!

(The rattle shakes and sounds loudly. HAL flinches.)

HAL

That rattling sound! Make it stop! Someone make it stop!

VAL

I don't hear anything, Hal!

HAL

I've made my own plans for you, Val. You'll see.

REGGIE

Let's see how you like the inside of a jail cell. Now go get your coat!

HAL

I'll take care of you, Val!

(Frail, speechless and emotionally drained, HAL slinks toward the bedroom, holding his hands over his ears. The rattling sound has become loud and intense. HAL goes into the bedroom, closing the door.)

VAL

Hal? Hal! Reggie, please...I'm begging you. Don't do this!

REGGIE

I'm doin' it. I'm takin' him in. With Mose as my witness, I'll show Pop some consequences.

HALLIE

Now you sound like HIM! *(pointing toward her father.)* The apple doesn't fall very far from the tree, does it, Reg?

(Suddenly they hear a shout and a thrashing noise in the bedroom.)

VAL

My God! He's got a gun in there!

REGGIE

(tearfully) *THEY* was our brother, Hallie!

VAL

I'm telling you, he's got a gun in there—

HALLIE

(suddenly realizing) No!

REGGIE

(running toward the bedroom) POPS!

(They hear a gunshot from the bedroom. Everyone stands frozen for a long moment. The stage lighting dims to near-black at center stage, with a spotlight now focused on the bedroom door. Suddenly Mr. Cervantes bursts through the front door and the house lights come fully up. He also stands frozen.)

MR. CERVANTES

(his voice suddenly not so old, deep or gravelly) My God, what the hell's he done?

(Visibly frightened, Mr. Cervantes slowly goes to the bedroom door, reaching for the door knob. After a long moment, he opens the door. Hal is standing there, shaking, sobbing, holding the pistol, which he drops with a thud.)

HAL

I...I couldn't do it, Val. For you...a shred of decency...the insurance money. I couldn't even do that right.

VAL

Thank God. *THANK* God!

(Hal is looking confused at Mr. Cervantes. Mr. Cervantes removes his tinted eyeglasses, stares at Hal for a long moment. Finally...)

MR. CERVANTES

P-Poppy?

(HAL stares, confused, shocked, speechless. Mr. Cervantes takes off a grayish wig and loosens his long hair that had been tucked under his hat. It's Moses.)

VAL

(tears of joy) M-M-Mose??? Wha...? From God's own angel!

(Val throws herself at Moses in a big sobbing embrace.)

My baby. I *knew* you'd come back. Mama knew it.

(Mose removes his trench coat, reveals his very peacock colorful, distinctive transgender attire beneath.)

HAL

Am I...dreaming again?

REGGIE

It's a miracle! Like you come down from the mountain top -- Moses! -- all thunder and lightning!

HALLIE

(suspiciously) More like a trick. And nearly a deadly one. What is this, Mose, your idea of revenge? Hah?

MOSES

(with remorse) Oh Poppy, what we done. Guns, pills, heart attacks. How many different ways we gonna kill us?

HALLIE

What sick game you playin' here, Mose?

VAL

Don't you be hard on him, Hallie.

(Moses looks confused and lost, searching for an answer.)

HAL

You...you haven't been murdered then? Not a ghost? Dear Lord...

MOSES

No Pop, no ghost. And nothin' divine. But I been prayin' for a miracle a long time...somethin' that might fit my own skin.

HALLIE

I told you he'd come back. When he wanted something. So what you want, Mose?

(Moses again looks confused and lost.)

VAL

None of that matters now. You not dead, I can't believe my eyes.

MOSES

No Mama, not me. But -- my best friend -- no, m-my lover -- they was my lover, Pops -- *they* dead. The story Mr. Cervantes told you is true -- but it didn't happen to me. It happened to...someone I loved...someone I still love...*(voice trails off sadly)*.

VAL

Oh Mose, I am so so sorry, I--

MOSES

(fighting back tears) Enrico was they name...such a brilliant comet, streakin' 'cross the sky. Hella handsome to look at. Here, I have a photo...wanna see?

VAL

I would love to. Hal, look at this. Hal!

(All but Hal crowd around the photo. Hal is distracted, hard to focus, puffing out his cheeks.)

MOSES

I wish you coulda woulda met 'em, Pops. They had that butter and sugar corn side o' sweetness that most people have strangled 'long the way. I lost my best friend, my love...my dreams.

VAL

Oh, Mose.

MOSES

(putting a loving hand on Val's cheek) Hasn't it always been this way, Mama? The innocent get crucified, so the rest of us can learn right from wrong....

REGGIE

But where you been all this time, Mose? I got your post cards last month and...

(Moses goes to Reggie, places his hands on his shoulders, face-to-face. Hal watches then turns away, looks into the distance, muttering to himself.)

MOSES

Yeah Reg, I'm, uh...I know I coulda shoulda woulda written more, or called or...

HALLIE

More? How about even *once*?

REGGIE

I bet you were out there kickin' it over, huh? "Lettin' the rage free" on the open road?

MOSES

(puts a loving hand on Reggie's cheek) Oh dear bro... truth is, I fled 'cross this beautiful heartsick land with the North Star at my back. I walked and bummed rides 'cross the Midwest and the bitter South, with the bloodhounds of sadness and fear nippin' at my heels; and I climbed the Rockies and hid from the cops and took the Greyhound when my feet wore out.

REGGIE

But you made it to California! Was it sunny and warm there? What did you find?

MOSES

(sings) "You got to folloooow, the Drinkin' Gourd. Got to folloooow, the Drinkin' Gourd, it's your heart that's tellin' you, where is your freedom. Got to folloooow the Drinkin' Gourd."

REGGIE

That's it! That's the tune I been hearing in my head for weeks! Where did you—

(Hal has been listening then pretends not to listen, and buries his face in his hands.)

MOSES

That's what I been following, like a carrot dangled in front of a blind horse. I woke up with it one morning, the sound of the ancestors ringin' in my head. I sang it for direction, for freedom...I sang it every day to save my life!

(Sings again) "It's your heart that's tellin' you, where is your freedom. Got to folloooow the Drinking Gourd."

VAL

Were you safe? I prayed for you every night, Mose; dreamt about you...

MOSES

Oh, dear Mama...I'm so so sorry. I never meant to cause you heartache.

(Suddenly distraught) What am I, Mama? Can anybody tell me? Am I some kinda freak? Ain't I made from the same Adam's clay as everybody else?

VAL

Better. You made from better clay, Mose.

MOSES

Was I safe?? Dressed like this?? Lordy, in some parts of this land of *(scoffing)* the Declaration of Independence and Emancipation Proclamation, the strange fruit swingin' from the tree limbs of the mob ain't that far back in the rear view mirror.

REGGIE

(still excited) But you saw the Grand Canyon? And the Golden Gate Bridge? That musta been pretty amazing and--

MOSES

I found relief wherever I could, Reg. One freezing cold night, I met a racist Confederate who gave me the coat off his back, and a sip of his home-cooked moonshine. A few too many sips, I'm afraid. We forgot who was good and who was evil. What happened after that, well, it ain't for polite company.

VAL

Well you're safe now. You're home.

MOSES

I've done things I ain't too proud of, Mama.

HAL

'Not'. 'Not too proud of'. We don't use 'ain't' in this family.

(VAL glares at HAL).

VAL

Please say it, Mose: "I'm home."

MOSES

But that's the part that won't gimme peace, Mama. I'm so upside down, I'm not sure where home is. I feel like I got a bulls eye on my back. Thousands more like me, stranded in the middle of another rigged century...expelled by those willing to cheat for

their tribe. There's no "E Pluribus Doo Dah" anywhere, Mama. And I got the bruises and lumps to prove it!

HALLIE

But Mose, we can still make it here! You never even gave it a chance. We can build our own castles. It's your birthright, much as anyone's! I will not be denied, right Daddy?

(HAL turns away, starts pacing.)

MOSES

Dear dear Hallie...I so admire your faith in this comic book dream. I wish I shared it, it woulda made my life so much easier. But I tell you, we are more like a coyote caught in a steel trap, chewing off its own leg to get out!

HALLIE

You gotta want it bad, Mose. I can show you how to grab for it. We just have to...clean you up a bit. Put some shine on you.

MOSES

(sadly laughing) You mean wipe off the lipstick and nail polish? Oh Hal-Hal, you always was the *real* boy in the family, wasn't you? The goddesses and gods shook us all upside down in the tumbler like a Watermelon Mojito, and none of us come out right -- did we Poppy-Hal?

HAL

(speaking into the distance) You...you missed Christmas again.

MOSES

I'm real sorry about that I...I was...detained. *(Pause.)* Thrown in the slammer for a month for trying to stop 'em from takin' Enrico.

VAL

Oh Mose, Mose, I can't bear the thought of you...in a jail cell, all alone...no one taking your call *(she glares at Hal)*.

MOSES

I'm so sorry, Mama...I've let you down. Can you ever forgive me?

(As he says this MOSE looks towards Hal, who looks away.)

So yeah Hallie, I come back. When the real Mr. Cervantes found me, and told me about Pop's heart attack, I figured it was time.

He's a good man, Mr. Cervantes. I told him I wanted to... to surprise you all and, well...

HALLIE

Surprise us? Your little joke nearly ended in tragedy. You're playing with dynamite here...you of all people shoulda known!

MOSES

(Looking distraught.) I never...I never dreamed it would...I thought after awhile I would just take off my disguise-surpriiise! -- but when time come, I froze and I--

HALLIE

You got your revenge, Mose. It's what you wanted, admit it!

MOSES

No! That's not...*(sadly)* I...I guess I...I just wanted to...see the looks on all o' your sweet faces, when I was pronounced dead as Emmett Till.

(They all go silent. Hal for a moment has a look of compassion.)

I wanted to see if...I mattered...to anyone. I needed the real truth...I wanted to hold what you got in your guts, and see it for myself!

REGGIE

Ha, I love it! Kinda like attending your own funeral. See who shows up, and what they say about you.

VAL

Oh yes, Mose, you matter. You are, and always will be, my beautiful child. They, them, their, she. Always.

REGGIE

You a bad ass prophet, Mose. Tupac in soul-drag. In the eye of the hurricane, you the North Star for everyone without lights.

(MOSES looks toward HAL, who looks away and goes and sits on the sofa, looking confused, staring.)

MOSES

(tearing up) The last time I held Enrico...we were lying in bed, on a glorious morning, surrounded by country quiet, with the light streaming in like a cathedral forest; serenaded by sweet sounds of delicate birds. And I felt still at last. The fear and

dread was gone...I felt blessed, wrapped up in they's arms like the petals of a beautiful black lily. And then...the Sheriff burst in. Enrico's last words, right before they grabbed them was, "We got to do it ourselves, Mose. They never gonna give us permission."

And I remembered, that I had seen a strange bird once, somewhere in the Bayou. That mysterious swampland of gators and copperheads and mossy trees like ghosts. That bird was tall, with thick, bright plumage, magnificent colored, but prehistoric-looking...like something from a distant time, from a time beyond time. Beautiful and ugly, all at the same time. It struck me - finally - I was seeing myself, like in the mirror - who I am, Mama - and I was shocked, let me tell you: I didn't wanna be that! Instead, I wanted...oh, I wanted, and I wanted and I -- that strange creature doesn't want to live any less 'cause it's strange. It wants to live *more!*

REGGIE

Damn right, we don't need their permission, right Mose? Enforcers of all types, policin' and profilin' us. We ain't clay for their moldin', right Mose?

HAL

Consequences...for who we are! The world doesn't bend that far.

MOSES

Why should *I* have to run from the people I love, and have shared so many years and summers and Christmases with...just because I was born some kinda strange bird?

REGGIE

Yeah! The right to be who I am, no matter *who* I am! The right to love who I want, no matter *who* I love. Ain't that the truth, Mose?

(HAL stands and resumes pacing.)

VAL

Of course, Reggie, what could be more true? Hal, isn't that what we meant by civil rights, so many years ago? Hal!

HAL

Truth? What's the truth? Unspoken rules decide the truth.

VAL

Henry Armstrong! You listen to me. You said you love me. Well if you really do...*this* is your chance!

HAL

Truth is...everything hurts.

MOSES

(fighting back tears) I appreciate everyone's words, but...

(Moses stares across the room toward Hal. The next part is spoken aloud, but also partly to himself.)

...damn, I'm scared. I'm the scariest cat I know. I didn't ask for this, I'm no revolutionary. I understand that now.

(says to the others) And I ain't no saint, neither. I like my creature comforts and libations, as much as the next fallen angel. Maybe more.

VAL

ALL of us forward, Mose.

MOSES

I don't know the way forward, Mama.

VAL

All of us together. Mercy...mercy and tolerance...that's what'll take us forward.

(Moses stares again at HAL, long stare; Hal looks away. Finally Moses addresses the others.)

MOSES

I don't wanna force nobody, Mama. I wanna be accepted by all... without the debt o' anyone's disgust. Veiled or otherwise. That's my American Dream, strange as it is.

So here's my proposal, you ready? Here's why I come back, Hallie, here's your answer. I thought of this, one lonely morning, when I woke up all alone after a miserable sleep under a bridge in bloody Vicksburg, spanning the mighty Mississippi. That wide, silver ribbon that was used to transport our ancestors. And I thought:

Why not vote on it? Our people fought and died for that damn vote, useless as it is; Pops and Mama, you marched for it. So

we'll put it to a vote. If I win -- then I stay. If not ...then I disappear. For good. And God bless you all.

(Pause. Then, in a whisper.)

Who here...can accept Moses...as they is. Raise...your...hand.

(Val raises her hand, followed by an enthusiastic Reggie. Hallie slowly, reluctantly, raises her hand. HAL is distracted and confused. Moses moves closer to him, facing him, eye to eye. Finally, Moses says, almost whispering.)

MOSES

Poppy...will you...be...my father again?

(Moses stretches out his hand toward Hal. Hal tentatively starts to reach across the divide. A loud rattle sounds, and Hal flinches and stops. As Hal tries to slowly reach, and before they connect, the lights fade out.)

FINAL CURTAIN - END OF PLAY