

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

By Jerold London

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A man's life ain't worth a hill of beans except he lives up to his own conscience. I've got to give Josh that chance.

– Friendly Persuasion, 1956

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.

– Matthew 5:43-44

I had roads to travel before I would know it's not that simple, the dope versus the person you love.

– Barbara Kingsolver, Demon Copperhead, 2022

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

TIME AND PLACE

2024. New England.

CHARACTERS

AARON, new homeowner in the neighborhood.

AISHA, Aaron's wife.

JOSHUA, Aaron's and Aisha's son (age 8).

ROB, a neighbor.

MARY, Rob's wife.

JOSEPH, a neighbor.

AKIKO, Joseph's wife.

MIA, Joseph's and Akiko's daughter (age 8).

WOLF WORTHINGTON, a friend of neighborhoods and democracy, from Michigan.

EMILY, Mary's unmarried cousin and a recluse. Mid 20's.

ALEXANDER ("Ali"), Aaron's cousin and a recluse from another neighborhood. Mid 20's.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

SCENE 1

ROB, MARY, JOSEPH, AKIKO, and their daughter, MIA, are all standing at the front door of Aaron's and Aisha's home. ROB rings the doorbell.

All of them have their arms full of welcoming treats.

AARON opens the front door.

ROB

Welcome, neighbor. Welcome to the neighborhood.

AARON

Whoa!

**AISHA and JOSHUA join AARON, to see
who's calling.**

MARY

We're here to introduce ourselves..... Hello!

AISHA

O! My God! How wonderful!

JOSEPH

We live three doors down. Hi. I'm Joe.

This is my wife Akiko. [*indicating*]

And our girl, Mia. [*indicating*]

MARY

And I'm Mary ... down at the end of the street.

And my husband, Rob. [*indicating*]

AISHA

Well, come in. Come in.

What a wonderful surprise!

**ROB, MARY, JOSEPH, AKIKO, and MIA
go through the door into Aaron's and
Aisha's house.**

**There are unopened boxes all over, a
couple of chairs, and one table.**

AISHA

We never expected anything like this.

My name's Aisha.

This is my husband, Aaron.

And our boy, Josh.

You can see we're just at the beginning. Moving in.

AARON

Here. Let me help you.

AARON takes some of the gifts, and directs the group to put them down on the table and chairs in the living room.

AARON

The movers are coming tomorrow with the furniture.
Sorry. No place to sit right now.

ROB

No problem.
We're happy to just stand.

AISHA

[to JOSHUA] Josh, take their girl ...
Nina, did you say?

AKIKO

Mia.

AISHA

[to JOSHUA] Mia. Take Mia, and show her your room.

The two youngsters exit.

AARON looks at the pile of gifts.

AARON

I don't know quite what to say.... This is all too much.

JOSEPH

The least we can do to welcome you all.
And make you feel at home here.
And whatever else you need, just ask.

AISHA

The Johnsons told us you're extraordinary.
That this neighborhood is special.

AARON

But we didn't expect this.

ROB

This is a very special neighborhood.
The Johnsons told you right.

AARON

They said, like you have weekly cookouts and things.

JOSEPH

Yep. Once a week
More formal meetings once a month.

AARON

To do what? Exactly? May I ask?

ROB

Our neighborhood's a democracy, and meeting together is a regular part of being that.

AARON

Our country's a democracy.

ROB

Not like our neighborhood, sadly.

AARON

What do you mean?

ROB

Our country's gotten a bit too big to fit the essential meaning of "democracy."
But our neighborhood hasn't.

AARON

Ut-oh. How's that?

ROB

"Democracy" can be when freedom of expression exists with everyone's courtesy.
And when each competent adult has an oar in the water.

AARON

For example?

MARY

Take speeding, for instance.
We have so many youngsters in the neighborhood we felt ...

JOSEPH

The mothers, especially felt ...

MARY

That certain action must be taken if people seriously break our speed limits.

ROB

Which means a neighborhood fine. And not a cheap one, I might add.
Which did the trick.

AARON

Oh.
That's a democracy?

AKIKO

Vulgar language and disrespect for others is another.

ROB

We didn't all grow up learning the same rules of respect for one another.
But in this neighborhood we respect others as though they were our mothers, or
our bosses at work. It takes a little work getting used to.

JOSEPH

Like, abuse is absolutely unacceptable.

MARY

Not nobody. Not no how.
We don't cotton to abuse of husbands, wives, children, or political opponents of
any kind.

ROB

That's not to say we're softies. We're not.
We know full well that democracy is worth fighting for.
And enduring for.
And having patience and tolerance of all sorts for.

AARON

You're your own policemen?

JOSEPH

We obey the law. We obey good, clean common sense. And we like each other.

MARY

It works other ways, too.

We won't sit around on our hands when anyone in the neighborhood loses a job, or has a serious injury, or somebody goes to the hospital.

ROB

Like my wife and her sisters take care of their cousin Emily....
Who lives in the neighborhood
Didn't the Johnsons tell you?

AARON

What they said sounded like a neighborhood watch.
I guess I didn't picture anything as organized as this.
It sounds sort of how I always thought the Amish live.

ROB

Like that.
But not so organized.
And definitely not religious.
Although I think our kids are just as happy.

AARON

Do you have a leader, or something?

ROB

Our meetings ... we call them assemblies ... are weekly, and mostly for fun.
The monthly ones are more important.
For the monthly assemblies a spokesman is elected.
I'm the current one.
But it's usually only for a year, or so.

JOSEPH

And a task force.
To help the spokesman ...

MARY

Spokesperson ...

JOSEPH

Help them keep track of things happening.
And yes, spokeswomen, too.
Because women take as much a role in leadership here as men.
And things are bound to happen, from time to time. They always do.

ROB

Not just fix up things to houses and cars.
More than just that.

AKIKO

The neighborhood's a joy to be a part of. And to live in.
You'll find out. Believe me.
For all of us, but especially children.

MARY

You've heard the famous saying that it takes a village to raise a child.
That's what we've got. Our neighborhood's a village.
All of us.
We're all like parents to *all* the kids.

AKIKO

But we've had our sadness, too.

JOSEPH

Lost a boy in Afghanistan.
Some think he may have had a child over there.
We tried to find out, and get the two of them here, to the U. S.
The mother and her child.
But red tape put stop to that, even more than the Taliban did.

AKIKO

We find hope in friends; and light in friendly faces.

AARON

You're not putting us on, are you?
Friends and neighbors?
Or just trying to get a new black family put in their place?
I don't see many blacks around here.

ROB

We have a code we live by.
It's not exactly in writing, but we all know essentially what it says, and means.
Which is: Peace, dignity and equality, in as healthy a place as our hands can make it.
We're not colorblind, but the next thing to it:
Everyone's allowed to have their own mind; but here we all *act* towards one another in a spirit of true brotherhood, irrespective of skin.
We all stand ready to protect a neighbor's honor and reputation and children.
That's how we interpret our duty to love our neighbors as ourselves.

AARON

We have your word on that?

ROB

You have my word on that, and my hand, too.

ROB extends his right hand to AARON, who takes it and holds it firmly. ROB then embraces AARON in a man hug, again firmly.

JOSEPH

And my hand and word, as well.

JOSEPH likewise extends his right hand to AARON, who takes it and holds it firmly, whereupon JOSEPH, like ROB, then embraces AARON in a man hug, again firmly.

AISHA

Aaron has had a hard time, and doesn't mean to sound unkind.
His cousin

AARON

It's nothing.

MARY

[kindly] But feminine intuition tells me it *is*.

AISHA

His cousin lost his

AARON

Not now, Aisha. Not now.

AISHA

[to MARY] We'll talk later.

MARY

Of course.

AKIKO

One more thing about the children.

We have a code we live by:
Children are the greatest blessing a family, and a neighborhood can have.
We protect them, and we are impatient of no child. Ever. That's important.

AISHA

We have a lot to learn.
We didn't realize.

AARON

My wife's right.
We have a lot to learn.

**At this point the youngsters, JOSHUA
and MIA, reenter.**

AKIKO

The children are back.
[to JOSEPH] I think it's time we go.

JOSEPH

Yep.
Give our new neighbors a chance to organize.

ROB

Have a good rest of your day.
And remember: Anything you need ... that's why you have neighbors.
Until until.

MARY

We are truly happy to have you with us.
Believe me.

AISHA

We feel the same.

AARON

Hugs JOSHUA at his side.

What a day!
Never expected anything like this....
Thank you.

**ROB, MARY, JOSEPH, AKIKO and MIA
all exit.**

**AARON and AISHA embrace. JOSHUA
pushes into the middle of them for a
family-3 joint embrace.**

SCENE 2

MARY and AKIKO enter, chatting and walking up the street to the front door of Aaron's and Aisha's home. MARY rings the doorbell.

AISHA opens the front door. The living room is now completely furnished.

AISHA

Hi, you two.
Come on in.

MARY and AKIKO enter Aisha's home.

MARY

My Goodness, Aisha! What you've done. It's beautiful!

AISHA

Thank you.... Pick a seat.
I'll get us something to drink.
What's your poison?

The three remain standing.

There are cheeses, crackers, nuts, olives, biscuits, assorted chocolates, and napkins ready for them on the coffee table.

MARY

Rob always says that: "Pick your poison."
The neighbor kids don't understand. They just laugh.

AKIKO

I'd like something dry and white, if that's no problem.

AISHA

Hardly.
Exactly what I'm having:
A Pinot Grigio from Oregon. Lange Estate.
Our Wine Club says it's the next best thing to Santa Margherita.
Except they call it Pinot Gris in Oregon. The same difference.

AKIKO

Sounds interesting.
Thanks.
I like trying new wines....
So long as they're not too expensive.

AISHA

Well within budget.
All the wines we get from our Club are medium priced, or better.
That's why we joined it.

AKIKO

In town, here?

AISHA

No.
Mail order.
They send us twelve bottles a month.
Selected. Not all the same.
And tell us all about the wines, and the vineyards.
If you like discovering new things, Aaron and I think this is the perfect way to.

MARY

Well, make it three, then.
I'm normally a Chardonnay girl; but you've talked me into it.

AISHA

Be right back.

AISHA exits.

MARY

Haven't they done a wonderful job with this room?
Remember the first day?
Boxes all over, and nowhere to sit?

AKIKO

Yes....
But, Mary, I wouldn't dream of saying otherwise, you know.

MARY

I'm too direct, aren't I?
Nothing personal. Just how I was raised, I guess.

AKIKO

I didn't mean to be critical.

MARY

Of course not.

And not taken that way. At all.

I'm learning.

Don't think I don't notice how you always take people's feelings into consideration first.

It's special. The Japanese way, I imagine; and a good lesson for us all.

Especially in these crabby days.

AKIKO

Yes. Japanese custom.

We are taught very young about certain rules, and respectful greetings, and what gifts to give.

AISHA reenters with three glasses of wine on a small tray.

AISHA

Handing a glass to AKIKO.

There's a Pinot for you, Akiko, and your good health.

Handing a glass to MARY.

And a glass for you, Mary, for your good health as well.

The three sit.

MARY

A toast:

To good friendship, health, and a happy, happy neighborhood

They raise their glasses, clink them, and take a drink.

MARY

I thought of something, the other day....

[beat] Do you mind if I just jump right in?

I'm a bit forward, at times.

We were talking, the day you were moving in.

The day before, actually.

About your husband's cousin, I believe

AISHA

I remember.
I told you we could talk about it later.

MARY

Is there anything we can do?
Any way we can help?

AISHA

I don't think so....
You see, he was away at school when both his grandfather and his father passed.
In the same week.
And a few months later he lost his brother, too.
His name's Alexander.
We call him Ali.
And he took it real hard. Extra hard.
He's so young, and all. And dropped out of school...
He doesn't live in our neighborhood.
You'd know that, of course, since you know everybody here.

AKIKO

How sad for him.

AISHA

It's been over four years now ... since his brother died
And he won't leave the house.
He won't take a step outside.
Night or day.
Not for anything.

MARY

That's unbelievable!
And nothing can be done?

AISHA

His mother tried.
But everything's been so hard for her, too.
And finally she left, to go live with a sister.
And Ali's all alone now, in that house.

MARY

How does he eat?
And things?

AISHA

Aaron and Josh and I look in on him.
At least once a week.
Whenever he needs us.
And his mother and aunt, too. From time to time.

MARY

You just never know....
What does Aaron say?

AISHA

Aaron's frustrated to death with it.
He's always been able to fix things.
But this door's stuck, plumb shut.

MARY

That's weird, you know.

AISHA

It sure is.

MARY

I mean ...
I have a cousin just like that.

AISHA

You do??...
Where?

MARY

Right here. In our neighborhood.
Her name's Emily; and she's been living all alone for years.

AKIKO

What happened to her?

MARY

We're not sure.
Nobody seems to know.
She about killed herself ... when her father passed.
He was raising her on his own ... after her mother went, sort of, off her rocker.
If you know what I mean.
But that was seven, maybe eight years ago her father died.

AKIKO

Things like that happen in Japan, too.

MARY

Like what, Akiko?

AKIKO

People who hide away ... from other people.
In their homes, and sometimes never come out. Not for years.
It's too much of an embarrassment for them.

MARY

I never knew that.

AISHA

Why? Why do they do it?
And how do they live?

AKIKO

They survive on welfare, and the care of their families.
Maybe a million of them, if you can believe it.
It's a fear of not being respected. Being shamed. The fear of being a failure.

AISHA

[*aside*] Fear of failure is Old Man River. I've seen.
It tells us nothing! It must know something.
It just keeps rolling along.

[*to AKIKO*] It's that bad? In Japan?
I thought things were going pretty well over there.

AKIKO

There's nothing worse in Japan than to humiliate yourself in public.
Or even worse, to embarrass someone else.
Or, especially, family or a close friend.
You'd want to die first.
Like failing an exam at school.
Or losing a friend's valuable necklace you've borrowed.
Or, fates forbid, losing your job.
It's not so easy finding another job in Japan, when you've lost your old one.

AISHA

Or losing your husband?

AKIKO

Lost love is not so damaging as lost self-esteem.
Like harming yourself.
Cutting yourself.
Or burning yourself with a cigarette.
And seeing your mother see you.
With that look she would get of shock and helplessness.
Or being embarrassed not having a job, or a career.
So they shut themselves in. Away from their family and everybody.

MARY

You're saying being jilted isn't that heart-breaking for the Japanese?

AKIKO

I don't know....
I know how I'd feel if I lost Joe. But that's different.
Because I'm American, now.
I'd say it's more like falling out with your girlfriends, than losing your boyfriend.
Or more like Cio-Cio-San. [Cho-Cho-Sawn]
When she kills herself ... with the same dagger her father used to kill himself, she
reads its inscription, which says:
"He who cannot live with honor must die with honor."
Cio-Cio-San died because her honor was lost when Pinkerton married an
American wife.
Not because her heart was broken.

MARY

Who's this Cio-Cio-San person you're talking about?

AKIKO

In Madame Butterfly.

MARY

What's that? A movie?

AKIKO

An opera.

MARY

Sorry.
That wasn't our thing, when I was growing up.
But Emily loves opera ... I think.

AISHA

Was she jilted?
Your cousin?
Or lose a front tooth, or something?

MARY

No. It's something else.

AISHA

Everybody needs some time off when they get dumped.

MARY

It's not that. I'm sure.
Not for eight years in her house alone.

AKIKO

The Japanese have a word for it.
“Hiki-Komori.”
It means people who hide away, to conceal their shame inside.

AISHA

And they're not doing anything for them?

AKIKO

Lots have tried, Aisha.
Doctors.
Psychiatrists.
Health workers.

MARY

Well, it's a damn shame. That's all I can say.
A damn shame.
The waste of a good life.

AISHA

And the waste of a good friend, too ... possibly.

Pause.

AISHA

I have a thought!

MARY

What?

AISHA

It just came to me:
Let's get them together.

MARY

Who?

AISHA

Aaron's cousin and your cousin.

MARY

It would never work.

AISHA

She never lets people in her house?
Other than family?

MARY

Oh, that's not true.
She used to have a number of fishermen friends....
People from the waterfront who were old friends with her father.
And a few others. Not for a while, though.

AISHA

See!

MARY

See what? You're going to get Aaron's cousin to leave his house to come into our neighborhood?

AISHA

Because they're the same.
Strangers together in a strange land.

MARY

[*beat*] Maybe.

AISHA

It's worth a try, isn't it?
What have we got to lose?
And if it works, it would mean the world to my husband.

MARY

It's a thought.... Where do we start?

AISHA

I'll talk to Aaron about it. Tonight.

MARY

Okay.
And I'll talk to Emily.
Next week.

AISHA

What does Emily like?
To do, I mean.

MARY

Opera. That's all I know. And reads. She reads a lot.

AISHA

We can begin there ... if Aaron's cousin knows anything about opera.

AKIKO

Well, good.
We've accomplished a lot ... what with Aisha's fine wine and goodies.

MARY

Calories well spent, I'd say.

AISHA

Anything else you came to talk about?

MARY

Should there be?

AISHA

I don't know.
Are we living up to your standards here in the neighborhood?
I hope so.
Is that it? What you came to talk to me about?

MARY

Goodness sakes no.
[beat] There *has* been something Rob's mentioned.
And we wanted you and Aaron to know.

AISHA

I knew it. I knew there had to be something.

MARY

Nothing for you two to worry about.
Nothing personal.
It's just

AISHA

[*beat*] Just?

MARY

There was a shooting.
You probably heard.
Not five miles from here....
Drugs, we think.
And we don't allow drugs anywhere in the neighborhood.
Next to abusing a child, having drugs is the biggest No-No we have.
It's up and out, if we catch any.

AISHA

We don't have anything to do with drugs.
Nobody in our family does.

MARY

We assumed that.
But there's going to be some meetings of the men.
Soon.
To talk about what's to be done.

AISHA

[*beat*] And?

MARY

Could they have one of them here? At your house? A small meeting?
Rob and Joe come over some night?

AISHA

Is that all?

MARY

Absolutely.

AISHA

Then, of course.
When?

MARY

This Friday evening.
Rob plans on mentioning it to Aaron.
We just wanted you to know.

AKIKO

You and Josh are welcome to come over to our place.
Mia and I would like that.

AISHA

You don't think Josh and I should be here?
When the men meet.

MARY

It's better not to.
There may be things said that a youngster's ears aren't quite ready for.

AISHA

Josh's ears?... or any child's ears?

AKIKO

There's nothing the least bit racial in this, Aisha.
I promise you, if that's what you're worried about.
We *all* know what drugs can do, and the dangers they expose our children to.

AISHA

Well, okay then.
The boys will be welcome.
Will there be poker as well?

MARY

I don't think so.
This get together will be 100% business.

AISHA

It's part of living in the neighborhood, isn't it?

MARY

I'm afraid so.
Part of life nowadays.
Part of modern American life:
Drugs, shootings, and fake news.

AISHA

Our share....

Aaron and I want to do our share.

And we intend to.

We're beginning to know this neighborhood; and we will help protect it....

Do you think the men would like cheese and crackers?

And assorted chocolates?

MARY

Laughs.

We'll talk about it.

I'll ask Rob.

They all laugh.

SCENE 3

AARON, ROB and JOSEPH are sitting in the living room of Aaron's and Aisha's home.

Each of them is drinking beer from a can.

There are pretzels, chips, nuts, cocktail wieners on toothpicks, and hush puppies on the coffee table, and a metal tub of more beers on ice next to it.

ROB

Flat out: Drugs today are the greatest danger to our world and our children.

JOSEPH

And they're our country's number one enemy.

AARON

But not the only enemy.

ROB

Drug addiction is a crisis. A daily crisis. Big cities and small.

JOSEPH

Nearly a martial-law crisis.

AARON

Martial law?

ROB

We need to agree on this, Aaron:
Our neighborhood must remain 100% drug free and vigilant.

JOSEPH

I agree completely with Rob.
Zero tolerance.

AARON

And how, exactly, do we do that?
The government has drug people all over, and they haven't stopped it.
It only seems to be getting worse with the birth of fentanyl.

ROB

Officers aren't worth a leaky dam against the flood of opiates.

JOSEPH

The only protection we have is to keep the flood from reaching *our* streets.
You see that, don't you, Aaron?

AARON

I "see" what you're saying.
But I guess I don't see what we can do ... more than the government's doing.

ROB

The government's failing us. Beyond the political divide.
We are the ones who have to protect our own.

JOSEPH

You love what you know, right?
And protect what you love?

AARON

I know the neighborhood. And what it stands for.
And I *do* want to protect it.
Because I *do* love it. *We* love it, Aisha and I. And Josh.
I'm just not seeing how.

ROB

Every man is meeting tonight or tomorrow night.
And taking this pledge.

JOSEPH

[to AARON] Before you ask:
It's a pledge to be on the watch for suspicious activities at all times, day or night,
but especially at night.
And to report anything immediately to the volunteer patrol.

AARON

Vigilantes?

JOSEPH

Parents.

ROB

An attack on any one of our children is an attack on all of us.

JOSEPH

And drugs anywhere are an attack on any child nearby.

AARON

What about doctors?

Are they an attack? If they prescribe drugs for pain?

ROB

Nobody takes Vicodin or OxyContin in our neighborhood.

If you don't believe it, go and ask them.

JOSEPH

A small sacrifice for man; a great leap for fellow man.

AARON

And the pain? Where does it go?

ROB

There's plenty of safe stuff that's worked for decades:

From ibuprofen to Anacin.

JOSEPH

You're not on anything, are you, Aaron? Or Aisha?

AARON

No, Joe; we're not.

ROB

Definitely not?

AARON

Absolutely not.

ROB

Good. Keep it that way.

JOSEPH

We're our only real protection.

ROB

I grew up in Lee County, Virginia. Ever heard of it?

AARON

Sorry, Rob, I don't know the place.

ROB

Well the opioid crisis took us in western Virginia to hell.
We saw it firsthand.
Addiction killed a dozen kids in my high school alone.
Friends of mine. Some of them.
If you can call us friends....
Jesus Christ!! I didn't mean to get going on this tonight.

JOSEPH

It gives you the cred, Brother. Don't deny it.
And don't be ashamed of it.

AARON

I've seen my share in my time.

ROB

There's a seed that gets planted in your brain.
Before you even get born.
And if you're a member of the human race, it begins to grow.
But alongside it other seeds start to grow, too.
Like egotism.
And envy.
And greed.
And selfishness.
And thirty-six shades of fear.
And if you're not careful they will crowd it out.
That first seed I mentioned. Which is the most important seed of all.
It's the seed of caring for others. Children, neighbors, everybody who is good.

JOSEPH

Love.

ROB

Not "love" exactly.
Not the kind of feelings that get confused with love.
Like longing, and desire, and sex.
Not Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo kind of thing.
I'm talking about the primal human instinct to care for other humans.
The instinct that kept the human race alive in prehistoric days.

AARON

Are you talking about Carl Jung and evolutionary psychology?

ROB

I don't know any highfalutin names for it.
It's just common sense to me.
What kept us alive when we lived in caves has naturally come down to us today.

AARON

Okay.
No problem.
I get what you're saying.

ROB

But what they didn't have in cave man days were any people peddling narcotics.
People didn't develop an immunity for that back then.
And when drugs started coming, they began to kill the seed that makes people care for people.
And when that seed in our brain dies, we don't care for ourselves anymore either.
Whether we live or die.
All we think about, and feel about, is the desire to get more drugs.
[beat] I had roads to travel before I found out that it's not that simple, the dope versus the person you love.

Goddammit!! My mother died from OxyContin!!

AARON

Jesus, Rob! I'm sorry.

ROB

[beat] Thank the Lord I found Mary. Or she found me.
Because I would have gone down into that same snake pit.
She held me, in the worst of times, through my dope sickness, back to sobriety.
She believed in me; and I owe her my life.
And I intend to spend it every way I can, doing anything I can to protect her and stamp out the monster.

AARON

There's others of us in the fight with you, Rob.
But it has to begin deeper, I think, than drugs.
People are drawn to a life of addiction because they can't bear the life that life is.
Unfulfilling. Piss poor job opportunities.
Discrimination they know and feel is there in real time.
Poor housing, Disrespect. Isolation.
No chance to get caught up on money worries, much less get ahead.

JOSEPH

Not to disagree with you, but I read that only seven percent of people born into poverty ever get out.

AARON

It's a parody.

ROB

What is?

AARON

Drugs being the way for people to turn their lives of poverty into something unpainful.

ROB

You do know, Aaron.
We can see that, Brother.

AARON

What I know is that people are more than willing to use the suffering of others to make a profit for themselves.

ROB

Are you talking about us hillbillies? What they did to us in Lee County?

AARON

No. Of course not....
Or, rather, not just that.
I'm talking about people who paint groups of people, whole neighborhoods, Lee County, you said, with a single brush ... of poverty, and ignorance, and color.
Stereotyping people because of how they look, or talk, or what clothes they wear.

JOSEPH

That's the exact thing we are against here.
We don't typecast people because of their looks, or how they were raised.
We value them, just as I value my wife and child, as people working together for the well-being and defense of us all.

AARON

I know you're being real; but the whole thing sounds like a pipe dream, Joe.
How one neighborhood can stand up to a whole country on its own.
It sounds too good to be true.
But I'll say one thing: I've seen enough to know you're not just blowing hot air.

JOSEPH

Thank you.

ROB

So, you're with us?

AARON

I believe in the same principles you believe in, and Joe believes in, and I'm not going to blow all that over doubts of your success.

ROB

Our success.

AARON

Our success.

JOSEPH

We *are* going to stop the disease of drug addiction before it crosses our borders. I promise you.

AARON

Good.

ROB lifts his beer can up for a toast.

ROB

To our success.

AARON

To our success.

They all drink.

AARON

Just one thing.

ROB

What's that?

AARON

We can't let our zeal injure innocent people. If someone breaks the code, just once, we can't run them out of the neighborhood without a chance to apologize and change.

JOSEPH

Oh yes we can!
You're wrong there, Man.
That's exactly what we can do, and will do.
Because we must protect the kids, at all costs.
That's our Second Commandment.
One slip up, and we could lose a child.
Don't go soft on us.
This is critical.
If there's a second chance, it's after he's gone, and then asks to come back.

ROB

And.
And.
And he satisfies us he's honest, and sees what he's done wrong, and is sincere about it.

AARON

You have your own Ten Commandment?

JOSEPH

Yes, we do.

ROB

Freedom of belief.
Love of children.
Care for all, ourselves, neighbors, and animals.
Respect for the neighborhood and the language we use in it.
(Which means no abandoned cars, trucks, boats, or airplanes, by the way.)
No lying.
No cheating – spouses or otherwise.
No stealing.
No narcotics.
No exploitation of Earth or living beings anywhere.
And, of course, no murder, rape, maiming, or anything like it.

AARON

What if the whole country were the same way?
And violators needed be banished?

ROB

We'd buy some islands, and ship then offshore.

JOSEPH

The key thing to remember is:
When the safety of children is at stake, it's better to be mad than sorry.
That's why we do what we do when we have to.

ROB

We have a friend coming in from Michigan in a week.
He'll give us the tips we need.
He's paid his dues, and knows the ropes.
His name is Wolf Worthington.
You'll remember that.

SCENE 4

A set of stairs descends into a large, underground room (indirectly and dimly lit), to which ROB and JOSEPH are leading AARON, blindfolded.

When they reach the bottom, ROB removes the blindfold.

Tall columns stand in rows; and through employment of a troop of well-placed mannequins, or the like, the space is made to appear populated by an assembly of some 20 to 25 men.

ROB

Aaron, if you're still with us ... *really* with us ... tonight will be sort of a mild confirmation. Call it an initiation, of a sort. Of being a full-fledged Protector of our neighborhood. Like the rest of us here.

If that's what you truly want, nod your head "yes."

AARON nods his head in agreement.

ROB

Good.

And remember what I said out there: You're not to say a thing down here tonight. That's an absolute must. Not a single word. No matter what happens. Nod your head again if you get it; or we're turning back right now.

AARON again nods his head in agreement.

JOSEPH

Also, you'll be asked to walk through a trough where snakes are swimming.

We've all done it; and none of us has died yet.

Except, the idea of the whole thing is to test how well you can handle the fear of death. It's to test your courage to be a Protector.

If you can't do it, just step out.

No harm; no foul.

You simply won't become a Protector.

You can still live in the neighborhood.

ROB

Your only protection is this flute.

Here.

Take it.

**ROB hands AARON a flute, which
AARON takes and holds.**

ROB

If you feel you must, play a few notes on it.
It doesn't matter whether they're musical or not. Just play them.
I guarantee the flute will keep you safe.

WOLF enters to the three of them.

WOLF

[to ROB, *pointing at AARON*] Is this the man we're inaugurating?

ROB

Wolf, let me introduce you to our new neighbor, Aaron.
Aaron, this is Wolf, we told you about.
He's just arrived from Michigan.

WOLF and AARON shake hands.

WOLF

[to AARON] Here, brother, follow me.

WOLF leads AARON upstage to a trough.

WOLF

[to AARON] Take your shoes and socks off.

AARON complies.

WOLF

Pointing at the trough.

Now walk it. Walk it, end to end.

**AARON steps into the trough and
tentatively takes a first step. Then he
nervously blows a couple of notes on the
flute. However, the sounds coming from
the flute couldn't be more perfect if
played by James Galway himself.**

**Encouraged by that, AARON, continuing
to play the flute, walks the length of the
trough untroubled; and steps out.**

WOLF

[to AARON] Well done, my friend. Well done.

WOLF again shakes Aaron's hand, and then hands him his shoes and socks.

AARON puts them back on.

WOLF

[to the group assembled] Everyone. Attention! May I have your attention.... I take great pride presenting to you the newest member of your neighborhood worthy of being called a Protector. His name is Aaron.

Applause.

WOLF

[to the assembled group] Now to the less pleasant and more pressing business of the evening. Why this meeting was called in the first place. And why I came. Every one of you knows of the recent fatal shooting nearby.

And you all suspect what I now confirm:

It was about drugs.

Duh!! No surprise. Right?

Drugs and drug hitmen are coming closer and closer to your family and friends.

I understand you've started operations to shield yourselves and your neighborhood. Good!

But let me add a few words of caution and advice, from my perspective.

We live at a time which is not of our choosing, but thrust upon us.

We may have wished never to see such a time, but that's not for us to decide.

All we have to decide is whether or not we're going to do something about it.

What I'm telling you boils down to one thing:

The ultimate protection of your families falls into the hands of the people.

In every honest democracy that fact cannot be denied, or avoided.

Drugs are a foreign, cartel-driven enterprise invading our shores, destroying American lives; upending communities; killing children.

And it's no good blaming it on the government.

Governments aren't the ones planting trees that fentanyl grows on.

Nor can you honestly blame illegal immigrants, who themselves are fleeing the terror, and are too poor to be drug-trafficking.

WOLF

No. The invaders are billionaire professionals who live abroad; whose business it is, is to get the drugs over our borders; and who use hired guns to accomplish their purpose.

So ... what's the solution?

At the national level:

Better policing of imports coming in, by air, by sea, by truck, and by mail.

It can be done; but imperfectly at the present time.

However, that's not *our* business.

Our business is intercepting the traffickers once they've gotten the drugs.

At the local level.

And how?

No drug-dealer's life is worth the life of one of our children.

Very possibly a Zero Tolerance Policy toward your residents will work.

I've seen it work in other places.

A few times.

Only a few times.

Because it's dependent on an allegiance to community that's relatively rare these days, and always fragile.

You must keep in mind:

One of the effects of narcotics is breaking down interpersonal loyalty.

Let me repeat that thought:

It's not so simple, the dope versus the person you love.

Instead, drug dealers have to be convinced that it's not worth their while to trouble your neighborhood.

And what would convince them?

[*beat*] A drug dealer or two needs to disappear.

That's what we've learned in other places.

The backbone of protecting our families is a well-regulated, neighborhood militia.

I'm not going to say more on that. Fear talks louder than words.

Intelligent men like you get my point, or you wouldn't be here tonight.

Anything short of action is bullshit.

It's your neighborhood's choice.

Obviously.

But I assure you: There is a strong organization out there that will back you up.

Not that that's what we want to do. We are against killing.

But in extreme circumstance.... To stop the mutherfuckers from obliterating the peace of our lives and our children's lives.

WOLF

Thank you for listening.

And remember, God, Nature, and the heart of America are on your side.

If you have any questions, I'll be around for the rest of the night to answer them.

**AARON places the flute to his lips, and
plays.**

Darkness.

SCENE 5

Without dialogue AARON and MARY bring ALEXANDER to Emily's house.

MARY has a key, opens the front door, and the three of them enter.

EMILY is sitting by herself in her kitchen. There are a table, two chairs, a gas range and oven, a refrigerator, a sink, a dishwasher, and cabinets. She stands as they enter the kitchen; and ALEXANDER sits.

AARON and MARY exit without a word.

EMILY rinses a few items at her sink, puts them into her dishwasher, and turns the dishwasher on. Next, she fills a pail with water, and gets down on her hands and knees to scrub the linoleum floor.

For five minutes EMILY busies herself this way without a word, while ALEXANDER remains sitting, silently, watching.

Sounds of the dishwasher, keys jangling in Alexander's pocket, and a fly buzzing.

Flickering of the phosphorescent light.

ALEXANDER

Stop! Stop it!!
I can't stand it anymore!
I hate the silence.
It's a nightmare. Watching you, slaving away like that.
On the floor. Without a word.

EMILY

Why? Are you a nobody, too? Who has nightmares?

ALEXANDER

My life's a nightmare, so you know.

EMILY

Mine, too, when I sleep.
I clean the kitchen floor when I can't.

ALEXANDER

You have trouble sleeping?

EMILY

I worry too much.

ALEXANDER

I go to bed with a gun.

EMILY

[*ironically*] Good for you.
Is it a comfort?

ALEXANDER

[*beat*] I shouldn't be here.
[*pause*] Four years ago I was at school when my granddad died.
He was the leather, we all used to say, that bound us together.
The cornerstone of our family.
We loved him.
Nearly worshipped him.
My dad did, most of all.
But when I got home, for the funeral, everyone just sat there in the room.
Silent.
No one said a word to me.
Until I asked where Mom and Dad were.
Then they told me:
Dad was dead, too.
Shot dead.
Like my granddad.
And no one supposedly knows why.

**EMILY stands and comes to sit down
beside ALEXANDER at the kitchen table.**

EMILY

Dear God!... I'm sorry.

ALEXANDER

I stayed out of school. Dropped out, actually.
To live with my mother.
My brother, Jason, moved away.
He called me a fool. Our neighborhood was too dangerous to live in, he said....
He got killed, too.
With an AR-15.
Two of them.
It's insane.
Three of my family, dead. And no one can be found who knows why.
Or who.

EMILY

I can't believe it. Is it really true?

ALEXANDER

I got a letter a month later saying, "Man, your Day of Death is coming."
That's when my life ended, and I started hiding in my house behind blinds and prayers.
And my mother moved out. To go live with her sister.
It's when the parade started, Emily....
That's your name, right?

EMILY

Yes. Emily.

ALEXANDER

I'm Alexander, I presume you know. "Ali" for short.

EMILY

It's horrible, Alexander, to have to live like that.
How many people know?

ALEXANDER

I don't want people to know.... To think: The coward I've become.

EMILY

I've felt the same way.... I mean ... I'm not saying I know how you feel. Just that what you said ... how you said it, could have been a description of my life.

ALEXANDER

I think once your name gets in their mouths, there's no way to get it out.
Unless you die.

EMILY

These things you're telling me, I never imagined in the world going on.
The pumpkin shell I live in.

ALEXANDER

Peter What's-His-Name's wife.

EMILY

Peter Peter Pumpkin-eater.

ALEXANDER

I never understood that poem.
Was his name "Peter Peter"?
Like Arthur MacArthur.
Or William Carlos Williams?
Or Ford Madox Ford?
Or was his last name Pumpkin-Eater?

EMILY

Does it matter?

ALEXANDER

I guess not. So long as he kept her very well, in her pumpkin shell.

EMILY

And let her go out, whenever she wanted.

ALEXANDER

If she wasn't afraid to.

EMILY

Like us, you mean.

ALEXANDER

[*beat*] I wouldn't have come today, Emily, except my cousin assured me this is a totally safe neighborhood.
And the debt I owe him. Watching out for me, like he does.
I can't afford to lose that.

EMILY

Same for me....
My cousin assuring me you're a totally safe person.
"A tiny bit weird," she said, "but totally safe."

ALEXANDER

True. All true.
But how would she know?
I never met her before today.

EMILY

Your cousin, Aaron, must have told her.
And she believed him.

ALEXANDER

There's a peculiar spirit of trust that floats over this strange neighborhood.

EMILY

One thing I don't understand, though.
Can't you find someone who will protect you?
The police, or something?

ALEXANDER

Whoever those killers are, they're invisible. Shadows.
The police are in the dark. Everyone is.

EMILY

Then you need a shadow of your own.

ALEXANDER

I need to become a shadow of my own, you mean. Invisible, but not by dying.

EMILY

You make it sound like there's a war going on out there.

ALEXANDER

There is.
If nothing less, a war on what people believe is right and wrong.
Or so my cousin tells me.

EMILY

[*beat*] You're frightening me.

ALEXANDER

He says your neighborhood needs brave men like me to help defend it....
Brave men like me. Imagine him saying that! He's so naïve.

EMILY

I'm naïve. But occasionally I see things other people don't.

ALEXANDER

For example....

EMILY

You.

You, for example.

I was perfectly content, on the floor, scrubbing.

But I never heard anybody so hurt in my life.

It's bare survival you're living.

ALEXANDER

Better than the alternative.

EMILY

That's a matter of opinion....

But who am I to judge?

Afraid of guns and loud noises the way I am.

ALEXANDER

Guns are part of life in America.

EMILY

You think the government's to blame?

ALEXANDER

No....

Except when 55,000 people a year die from guns, something's wrong.

EMILY

America's not the only place where people die, being shot.

ALEXANDER

Of course not. There's always Mexico.

EMILY

That's drug cartels.

But anyway, Mexico is worlds away from here.

ALEXANDER

No.

A thin line away, called the Rio Grande, which flows only six months a year.

EMILY

That's all?

ALEXANDER

You can walk across it in summer.

EMILY

Not if I don't leave this house I couldn't.

ALEXANDER

True.

EMILY

And nothing to be done?

ALEXANDER

Sit, and wait for the day.

EMILY

Talking.

ALEXANDER

Waiting for Gadot.

EMILY

You *are* weird.

ALEXANDER

It's been said.

But why do you say so?

EMILY

Bringing up Waiting for Godot at a time like this.

Why would you say something like that?

ALEXANDER

I don't know.

It just came into my mind.

Two lost souls, talking.

EMILY

Like us, you're thinking.

ALEXANDER

You have to admit:

It is bizarre that there are two people like us, shut-ins, living this close.

Talking like this, the first time. And who knows why?

EMILY

Talking's better than losing your mind...
But your cousin
Can't you talk to Aaron about these things?

ALEXANDER

He's one of the lucky ones.
He doesn't understand what I understand.
Ignorance for him is bliss.
Ignorance and innocence.
Believing that staying clean is enough.

EMILY

What *is* enough?

ALEXANDER

He'll learn. But not from me.
My family was clean.
Never involved in drugs or any of that.
And look at us.

EMILY

Maybe you just didn't know.

ALEXANDER

[*pause*] Not knowing's a killer.

EMILY

Like cancer.

ALEXANDER

Yes, I guess. Like cancer.

EMILY

And there's no cure for cancer until you take the first step.

ALEXANDER

I suppose.

EMILY

People travel thousands of miles to find what they're searching for.
Bruised and battered people. To sacred cities. Up mountainsides. Into temples.
Or out their front door; like you did today.

ALEXANDER

What's your point?
Nobody knows the pain I felt today, walking out that front door.
Not like breathing the fresh air of Norwegian snow.

EMILY

Nobody knows.
I'm absolutely sure you're right....
Then why did you do it?

ALEXANDER

I told you.
Aaron ... *and Aisha* talked me into it.

EMILY

Oh?

ALEXANDER

They said I'm not that kind of man.
That I should get out and find somebody.

EMILY

Is that what you want?

ALEXANDER

What? To fall in love?
The wiped out soul I am?
Hardly.

EMILY

Have you? Fallen in love? Ever?

ALEXANDER

Never.
I wouldn't know how, and wasn't interested.
I wanted my life to amount to something first, before I started dividing it up.

EMILY

Well if you do, don't throw everything into it.

ALEXANDER

Thank you. I won't.
But I appreciate your concern.

EMILY

What I'm getting at is this:

Love is a jealous god who can be a cruel and angry master. Beware.

When Dr. Schweitzer gave up everything to move to Africa to save lives there, it wasn't because he fell in love with somebody at the Equator.

Or when Salk and Sabin developed the vaccines to stop polio, the prevention of that horrible disease was what was the love of their lives.

Does that make any sense?

Or when Jane Goodall moved to Tanzania, or Mozart wrote Don Giovanni

ALEXANDER

Do you like opera, Emily?

EMILY

Is the Pope Catholic?

ALEXANDER

I do, too.

God! when I was in college!

And now.

What else do I have good to listen to?

Other than opera; and opening a nice, cold beer.

EMILY

Well that's good.

Because what I'm trying to say is:

Do you remember the statue in Don Giovanni?

ALEXANDER

Of course.

EMILY

How it rumbled into life?

ALEXANDER

Like your dishwasher.

EMILY

Laughs.

Different, but the same. Like the hand you felt, pulling you out of your house.

ALEXANDER

That's stretching a simile, don't you think?

EMILY

Not really.

ALEXANDER

We don't think alike, do we? At least, I don't think we do.

EMILY

I've found nobody who thinks like me.

ALEXANDER

Same here.

EMILY

If you happen to believe in God, what do you think of him?
Was *he* behind your decision to go out today?

ALEXANDER

What I think about God is, how can he be so heartless?
But he is. To let his creation deteriorate the way it has.

EMILY

I have a theory about that.

ALEXANDER

What's your theory?

EMILY

That God ... some way or other ... I have no idea how ... gave herself up to
mankind, when we evolved from more primitive primates.
And since then we have been God's sole representatives on this planet.
For better or for worse.

ALEXANDER

Mostly for worse, I'd say.

EMILY

And there's your answer.

ALEXANDER

What? That God's as helpless as people?

EMILY

That if so, there's no one to blame but ourselves.

ALEXANDER

How lame is that?

EMILY

I told you: The nobody that I am.

ALEXANDER

There's not a Christian, nor a Jew, nor a Muslim in the world who'd agree with you.

EMILY

That's their loss.

ALEXANDER

And when you pray to God for help?

EMILY

You pray to yourself for help.

ALEXANDER

How does *that* work?

EMILY

Let's say: Somewhere on the edges of consciousness.

ALEXANDER

Yep! That's where I live.

On the edges of consciousness, in a fun-house of mirrors.

A slave to my fears.

EMILY

In bondage.

ALEXANDER

And that's what? Not the kingdom of heaven to you?

EMILY

The kingdom of heaven, like everything else, beats a path through the brain.

A brain which works in mysterious and fearful ways.

God to me is the inscrutable within the collective unconscious of the human race.

ALEXANDER

Which is what you believe protects you?

EMILY

Warns you. To protect yourself.

ALEXANDER

Are you telling me that when I prayed to God to get me here safely today, and back home, all I was doing was praying to myself?

EMILY

We'll see.

ALEXANDER

And then we'll know?
Is that what you're saying?

EMILY

It's a survival tactic.

ALEXANDER

It's mere tapestry.

EMILY

Tapestry?

ALEXANDER

It's taken me a long time to accept this life.
Without you trying to unravel the whole thing.

EMILY

We'll see.

ALEXANDER

What is soft is hard.
What is sweet is sour.
What is beautiful is ugly.
What is wrong is right.
That's what I'm hearing from Emily right now.

EMILY

Lies. Towers of lies.
And when lies start coming out your ears, towers begin to fall.

ALEXANDER

Every time I open my mouth it feels as though chickens keep flocking out.
Breakfast at Tiffany's. Lunch at a garbage can.

EMILY

And that's your destiny, is it?

ALEXANDER

[*beat*] You don't believe in God, do you?

EMILY

We'll see.

ALEXANDER

Is that an answer?

EMILY

You believe in music, don't you?

ALEXANDER

Yes.

EMILY

Opera?

ALEXANDER

Yes.

EMILY

Why?

ALEXANDER

Because I can hear it.

EMILY

Where?

ALEXANDER

In my ears.

EMILY

In your brain you mean.

ALEXANDER

Okay.... In my brain, through my ears.

EMILY

And there are people who say they can hear God in their brains.

ALEXANDER

Voices.
There are people who hear voices in their heads.

EMILY

Real voices, to them.

ALEXANDER

It's not the same thing.
The voices they hear are imaginary.
When you hear an opera, other people hear the same thing, too.

EMILY

So ... unless God can speak to an entire audience, God's voice is imaginary?

ALEXANDER

I wouldn't trust anyone short of Jesus who says they hear God's voice.

EMILY

Therefore Jesus must be God.

ALEXANDER

It couldn't be any other way.

EMILY

He had no choice but to accept the nomination.

ALEXANDER

None.

EMILY

And that's my point.

ALEXANDER

If that's your point, you talk in riddles.

EMILY

Parables, they're called.

ALEXANDER

Whatever.

EMILY

Have you ever read, *Anatomy of Existence and Other Monstrosities*?

ALEXANDER

Never heard of it.

EMILY

It's about the multiverse, and how communications can be heard through the layers.

ALEXANDER

I don't put any stock in metaphysical things.
No use for them.

EMILY

You and I are ghosts, the theory is.
Who hide in our tombs from dust and wind and dry leaves fluttering down the pavement.

ALEXANDER

Who hide from flapping bags, is more like it.
Bags in the wind.
Body bags.

EMILY

Letting them smother our lives *and* our faith.

ALEXANDER

What is it you don't understand that every person killed by a gun understands?

EMILY

Why.
I don't understand why.
I don't understand why *I'm alive*, listening to this.
I hardly even know you.

ALEXANDER

[*pause*] Then what's your story, Emily?

EMILY

What?
I need another living witness to my wasted life?

ALEXANDER

No.
You need a Deadpool whose life's been turned off so he can hear yours.

EMILY

[*pause*] I was born in the normal way, but behind a veil I couldn't understand.
It was my father.
The only person who always protected me; and the only person I ever loved.
And it's killing me.
When he died, I wanted to die, too.
And would have, if I hadn't botched the whole thing.

I never forgave him for dying.
It forever cut my cord of happiness.
It split my life and tongue in two.
It forced open my ears to sounds I can hardly bear.
Does your hearing bother you?
There are hateful sounds I can't stand anymore.
Ambulance sirens.
Tires screeching.
Boomboxes, or whatever you call them.
Seagulls, whenever they squawk together in cacophony.
My God! I can't tell you how much I hate noises like that.
What a bagpipe laugh my life is!

ALEXANDER

I've tried asking you this before: Do you believe in God? Or not?
Is he the one who's done this to us?

EMILY

I'm sorry, Ali, I don't see any help in asking.
I don't believe in some airy, sky-god, that's for sure, who sits behind blue and white clouds where angels swim.
Not some God who tells me to love him more than my own father.
Not a God who turns my mind into a bloody fist every time I think of him dead.
But *some* God?... I don't know.

ALEXANDER

What do you believe in?

EMILY

If I believe in anything I believe in music.
When I was young we'd go to a friend's house, in the neighborhood.
A pianist, who loved to play for us.
He could see Beethoven and Chopin with his eyes closed.... Because he was blind.
When he felt for his food, his fingers had the noses of foxes.

ALEXANDER

Would you rather be blind, or deaf?

EMILY

Blind.

Deafness is a dark funnel. Like Polish sausage.

ALEXANDER

You're weirder than I am.

EMILY

Mostly since my father's death....

I'd walk in the garden, listening for some happy news from the birds, bowing my head to the untouchable rays of the sun holding my father's spirit.

I was younger then, still holding his hand.

Being Christened in the waterfall of his absence.

Watched by the suspicious eyes of a wet crow arranging his feathers and thinking, I'm sure, "Nevermore."

Never again the miracles.

Never again a trip to the Arctic, dog sleds, and nighttime camp fires.

Never again hours at a table with an Impossible Jigsaw Puzzle.

Never again sobbing childishly over Mimi's death in La Bohème.

Never again the gleam in his eye looking at me with such pride....

I'll never be whole like that again, and forever be weird.

Love died in me in a way that gives no mercy.

God died, too. And Jesus, three.

Crows no longer speak of immortality....

How much do crows know, do you think? From the expression on our face?

ALEXANDER

I have no idea.

EMILY

How like wild strawberries my father's faith was to me!

He gave me the Way in the milk and honey of my childhood.

The sky was yet sky blue, sane, and meaningful.

But after he died the Tao consoled me no longer.

My hands grown small in his hands, grew smaller still.

Like pink hands of a mole, palming dirt aside in the darkness. Oh yes!

The day he died I went into the darkness where bees sleep out the blizzard.

For thine, Father, is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.

[*in a near whisper*] Come back to me.

ALEXANDER

Death stinks, doesn't it?

EMILY

The one immortal truth: Death stinks.

ALEXANDER

Rigoletto.

EMILY

What??

ALEXANDER

[*pause*] Do you ever watch candles?

EMILY

That's not what you said. You said Rigoletto.
I heard you. And I get what you mean.
A father doing everything he can to safeguard his daughter.
And everything works out bad....
But, yes, I do watch candles. Burning as innocently as nuns.

ALEXANDER

Nuns?

EMILY

Burning heavenward, and never marrying.

ALEXANDER

And do you watch clouds?

EMILY

Clouds don't interest me.
They're like a herd of listless elephants.

ALEXANDER

Or birds?

EMILY

A bird has the freedom I long for.
I envy every one of them.
But not their food. Raw worms! Ugh!
Still ... they're simply in their element, aren't they?
Birds are not what steals our happiness.

ALEXANDER

No. Birds are not what steals our happiness.

EMILY

Birds have a right to themselves.

Let birds! I say: Let birds!

The moon is a bird on the wing, like my father's soul.

Life is a bird on the wing.

And my heart is as helpless as crushed birds.

ALEXANDER

Flowers?

Do you ever watch flowers?

EMILY

The one thing I know about flowers is: Flowers don't want us to hurry by.

Like butterflies.

They have color to trade us, before the frost, for our want of color within.

Flowers are attracted to our darkness almost as much as to the sun.

ALEXANDER

And food? What do you think of food?

EMILY

Food reminds me of this kitchen, which reminds me anymore of being alone.

ALEXANDER

I eat alone.

EMILY

So do I.

Figs from the fig tree.

Grapes of the vine.

Tomatoes, red *and* fried green.

ALEXANDER

Do you ever think of getting out?

EMILY

The Devil leans into my ear, from time to time, if that's what you mean.

ALEXANDER

Trying to do what? Kiss you?

EMILY

That's a laugh!
If that's what he wants, he's an idiot.

ALEXANDER

Idiots do strange things.

EMILY

I have an idiot bird like that.
It sits atop a fat-head clock, and drunken leans to chirp the time in sweet thirteens.
The crazy bird leaps out, and drunken leans to chirp the time in sweet thirteens....
The crazy bird leaps out, and drunken leans to chirp the time in sweet thirteens....
The crazy bird leaps out, and drunken leans to chirp the time in sweet thirteens....

ALEXANDER

Are you all right?

EMILY

My mother's belly wore the stains of divinity, the day I was born.
Before my trying self led her to insanity.
Postpartum-style.
She would sit at her kitchen table without lifting a finger, while I stood there, my
diapers needing to be changed.
Everything else my father did.

ALEXANDER

O my God!

EMILY

Don't get me wrong.
It wasn't the day I was born my mother's curse came on. Oh no.
Not for a year or more when the petals of her hothouse roses began to drip blood,
and the dreams of you came over her, lying face down, drowned in the sea.

ALEXANDER

Of me?

EMILY

I meant my father. Sorry.

ALEXANDER

Of your father? Drowning?

EMILY

Full fathom five my father lies
Of his bones are coral made.
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

I brought my love to try to buoy him up through tragedy.
And then he died...

[*beat*] O pardon the one who knocked too lightly for pardon at your door, Father.
It was your hound-bitch daughter, lookalike.
It was my love that did us in.

ALEXANDER

[*to himself*] I think I'm missing something.

EMILY

I can't find his eyes so well anymore.

ALEXANDER

Are you all right, Emily?

EMILY

I walk in rings about this house, and suck the sour fruit.
Peace will never find me here.

ALEXANDER

Is there anything I can do?

EMILY

Are you listening?

ALEXANDER

Yes.

EMILY

What else is there to do?

ALEXANDER

I just thought

EMILY

[*beat*] People used to come visit me.

ALEXANDER

What people?

EMILY

Friends.

I don't mean just family.

And sometimes strangers with them.

Not Mary and my other cousins, of course, who always come.

ALEXANDER

Oh?

EMILY

Seamen, mostly. Friends of my father.

From our harbor, with its skin of oil, and red and orange barges.

Seaspawn, seawrack, grainy sand, oil, and bits of razorshell clinging to their boots. Crick, crack their boots would creak.

Sit in this kitchen, and tell stories.

ALEXANDER

What kind of stories?

EMILY

Coarse stories of women, and unnerving stories of storms.

ALEXANDER

That would figure.

EMILY

They would tell stories of frights at sea they had had.

Sea crossings from Europe – different from their normal coastal travels.

Like the one from Southampton to New York.

Sailors who knew the trip sang praises of full sunshine, white gulls, and the peacock blue drenched radiance of the waters that time of year.

But their third full day at sea and Frankie, and his brother, Rick, saw something in the weather going really bad.

Within minutes, gale-force winds whipped through the air.

With each shock and shudder their ship cleaved forward through the massive waves.

ALEXANDER

I'm a land-lover when it comes to sea legs.

EMILY

They knew the sea.
But Frankie said that for the first and only time in his life he got seasick.
The bow of the ship pitched upward and slammed back down.
Loud booms came with each pounding. The entire ship shuddered.
People gripped what they could hold. The rails. Making their way below.
Ready to their cabins. Wondering how much longer. Retching in orange basins.
Those who so unwisely chose to stay atop were flayed by spray, squinting ahead.
Yet marvelous! All were saved and well, aside from their stomachs.
They reached port, born with a new respect for what men cannot control.
For no man controls the ocean, no matter who he thinks he is.
And meekened by the experience, they disembarked.
No debts surviving the ordeal, they walked ashore like strangers.

ALEXANDER

Sailors have their own, peculiar form of bravery.

EMILY

And a different kind of smell.

ALEXANDER

What kind of smell?

EMILY

Not like the smells from my kitchen.
Crabs, cod, sand grit, grapeblue mussels, and tar they bore.
And when I'm quiet at my cooking, I feel the odors surrounding me.
I feel them judging me.

ALEXANDER

What? Kitchen aromas?

EMILY

How kind you are. Not everyone knows the difference.

ALEXANDER

What difference?

EMILY

Between "smell" and "aroma".

ALEXANDER

Oh.

EMILY

I am sure it must be unique.

ALEXANDER

What?

EMILY

Understanding how aromas can judge *you*, even more than you judge them.

ALEXANDER

How? How do they judge you?

EMILY

“Is this the one?” they ask.

“Is this the elect one? The one with hawkish nose whom I’m being prepared for?”

ALEXANDER

You treat yourself unkindly as a woman.

EMILY

Do I?

ALEXANDER

Most certainly.

EMILY

So be it. But I do it to myself.

Not like what those sailors did to the women they had.

I mean, it brought tears to my eyes.

The shameful brutishness mixed with their whorish behavior.

As though a strumpet’s mouth was made for nothing else than to do violence on.

Those women were once young and vital.

They must have been,

And children before that.

To chide them for their weathered faces.

Beaten more from need than from their age.

And I asked them:

Was there not a man among you as could spare a breath of gentleness?....

They never spoke of them again to me....

Anyway, as I was saying, measuring the flour, slicing the onions and turnips, peeling the potatoes, slow roasting the meat, adhering to all the rules, I hear the “aromas” thinking about me. Me, and the cockleshells, and the goat cheese.

ALEXANDER

What do they think? I mean, what do you hear them think?

EMILY

“Her breath reminds us of death.”

ALEXANDER

They’re slugs. What do they know? Slugs don’t smell.

EMILY

Not like skunks, you mean.

ALEXANDER

Skunks smell two ways.

EMILY

They mean I talk too much.

ALEXANDER

About death?

EMILY

No more than you do.

ALEXANDER

We’re a pair, aren’t we?

EMILY

Oh yes. Quite a pair.

ALEXANDER

Breathing breath into death, and back again.

EMILY

Dust to dust.

ALEXANDER

[*beat*] Do you cook a lot?

EMILY

You want to talk about *that*?

ALEXANDER

We may as well.

EMILY

How much is a lot?
I eat every day, if that's what you're asking.

ALEXANDER

And you cook your own meals?

EMILY

You might say that.
Every one as though it were my last supper. Like a hospital plate.

ALEXANDER

What do you prefer to eat?

EMILY

Burnt remnants of hope ... with fish, eggs, and zinfandel.

ALEXANDER

Does zinfandel go with seafood?

EMILY

It does in *my* mouth.

ALEXANDER

Oh-kay.

EMILY

[*pause*] I had other visitors, from time to time.
Not just sailors. But they didn't last.

ALEXANDER

What happened to them?

EMILY

They moved on, I suppose. I lost sight of them.
Like the mirrors I covered when my father died.

ALEXANDER

They moved? To where?

EMILY

Down the stream.
Up a river. To the sea.
Or into the mouth of Christ for all I know.

ALEXANDER

If I keep listening to this

EMILY

You may risk losing your sanity, come the future.

ALEXANDER

What is our future?

EMILY

We'll know well enough when all we hear in the darkness are white seagulls quarreling in their cat-voices of departure.

ALEXANDER

Which, methinks, is when I'll start walking on moonbeams.

EMILY

Walking on moonbeams! What an excellent expression!
Those silvery, slippery things that feather life together.
A laugh in the face of fools and kings.
Childhood castles, unicorns; swings in the air that never asked a crumb of me.
"Moonbeams!" How delicious!

ALEXANDER

The hopes and dreams of all the years.

EMILY

Oh! if only I could have those years, and my hopes back again.

ALEXANDER

Many a man has lived miserably wanting hope. I know I have.

EMILY

Many a man has gotten lost in the hills wanting to know how mountains feel.

ALEXANDER

Like the proverbial crags of Norway, I'd once dreamed to escape to.

EMILY

The mountain climbs. The Northern Lights.

ALEXANDER

The scent of pines.

EMILY

The pines of Norway are immortal, compared to me.

ALEXANDER

Compared to me an oak is immortal.

EMILY

I've walked beneath oaks; giant ones; and they've paid me little notice.

ALEXANDER

I've climbed smaller ones; and they've paid me none.

EMILY

Not until we finally lie down for the last time will trees find us of use to them.

ALEXANDER

And to flies and maggots.

EMILY

When I die ... I imagine I'll hear a fly buzz near my ear.
The room will be dead silent, except for it.
My keepsakes will all be willed.
And between me and eternity will fly a fly.
A blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz between the light and me.

ALEXANDER

Flies and maggots. Kill them all!

EMILY

To kill a fly? In its innocence?
A harmless fly, that with his pretty buzzing melody comes to make me merry in
extremis?

ALEXANDER

I was merely expressing disgust, thinking of your life compared to a lowly fly's.

EMILY

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

ALEXANDER

Pray, don't. I am all clouds, rough winds, and storm.

EMILY

You are more than that. Much more.

ALEXANDER

O yeah?
What? for example.

EMILY

You are half of what you've been hiding from me.

ALEXANDER

I'll never get out of this, will I?
Yes. Yes. I admit it.
I had a total other self I put away when my father died.

EMILY

As did I.

ALEXANDER

Times change.

EMILY

You could be a film star, you know.

ALEXANDER

And you, a spokes-woman for the lost bits of America.

EMILY

There *are* lost bits of America, you know.

ALEXANDER

I sure do.

EMILY

In prisons.

ALEXANDER

In heroin, OxyContin, and meth.

EMILY

Insomnia.

ALEXANDER

Addiction.

EMILY

Suicide.

ALEXANDER

Let's not go there anymore. Okay?
It's enough measuring of every grief that hurts to live.

EMILY

Give me three reasons to live and I'll give you three reasons to barf.

ALEXANDER

Three reasons to live....
Fear.... Talking.... And opera.

EMILY

Not what I expected from you.

ALEXANDER

So?... Your turn.

EMILY

[*pause*] Nights I can't get to sleep.
That's the first thing I'd barf over.

ALEXANDER

I've played the game.

EMILY

I work. And read.
And weary with it all, I hasten to bed,
where there begins a journey in my head
that keep my drooping eyelids open wide,
to look on darkness which the blind do see.

ALEXANDER

It's haunting, Shakespeare only knows, staring into that kind of darkness.

EMILY

Darkness alone. And alone. Moving toward the ultimate aloneness.

ALEXANDER

I share my aloneness with a Walther at my side.
Locked and loaded. Starting at each foreign sound.

EMILY

That, too.
The malicious onset of acute hearing at night.

ALEXANDER

[*beat*] What else?
On your list of barfables?

EMILY

Migraine headaches.
Unstringing a person's wits as surely as balls of snakes.
Sounds out of the blue.
Lights in the back of my head.
My heart suddenly beating in my ears.
And food that never stops demanding to be cooked.

ALEXANDER

Hell yes! Women, children and kitchen duties first! Migraines be damned!

EMILY

O! the viciousness of kitchen duty reigning in my brain,
where blue flames burn and boiling water hisses.
Where back and forth, as though to instigate a migraine,
a pulsing phosphorescent lighting fixture winces.
And always on the yellow-edged linoleum
lie particles of dirt and food all spilt
that join my callers' lasting footprints of petroleum
and terrify a neat freak's soul that's vulnerable to guilt.

ALEXANDER

My God! That's nailed it!
Every cat hair and bone of OCD.
Feet first and all.

That was excellent.
Say it again.
I want to write it down....
Give me something to write it on.

EMILY

I can't. It's gone I'm afraid.
And, by the way, I don't have OCD. I just do things. When I have to.

ALEXANDER

Oh well, too bad. Maybe later....
[*beat*] What about the third?
On your list of barfable baggage in this life?

EMILY

Hypocrisy.
Not just pathological lying. That's barfable enough.
But out-and-out, premeditated hypocrisy.

ALEXANDER

Dog shit famous preachers and politicians have put their feet in. Some of them.
On top of their obnoxious pride.

EMILY

But look at *us*!
How we can see and be deceived with stories that would riddle the guts of a
whale.
Day after day.
Narcissists turned to kings, and back to stink again.
And stink, in turn, into new despair.

ALEXANDER

That's why mirrors can be so unpopular.
They show us lies to our face.

EMILY

They show us olden versions of our face, rising like a fish out of the deep.

ALEXANDER

Is nothing untouchable?

EMILY

Not that I know of.
Life inevitably happens, and disappoints.
Even to heroes.

ALEXANDER

Not one Lancelot who knows the proper limits of chivalry?

EMILY

Not if Guinevere's infatuation with King Arthur begins to cool.

ALEXANDER

As Orpheus is bound to turn, and lose Eurydice.

EMILY

One of my favorite operas.

ALEXANDER

[*beat*] Shut your eyes, and the world drops dead.
Lift your lids, and all is born again.
I just made that up, inside my head.

EMILY

No.
Plato the Platonic did.

ALEXANDER

No.
Alexander the albatross.

EMILY

If cats could only always be kittens!

ALEXANDER

And if wishes could only always be horses.

EMILY

Or flying carpets.

ALEXANDER

Or kitchen chairs.

EMILY

[*beat*] Did you know these two kitchen chairs of mine once fell in love?

ALEXANDER

What are you talking about?

EMILY

I used to imagine what it would be like:
To be a kitchen chair, anchored in your place, trying to raise a leg to bring
yourself closer to the neighboring chair.
But she'd just shy away, wouldn't she?
And then where would it be?
So here they stay, in a Keatsian-like tragedy.
Hand painted on a Grecian urn.
Until two humans sit on them.
Making them jealous of being only chairs.
As if people are the heaven chairs dream of.

ALEXANDER

I wouldn't trade magical chairs like these for gold.

EMILY

Not for a quart jar of platinum covered jumping beans?

ALEXANDER

Not for a steamer trunk bursting with Swedish moon beams.

EMILY

Not in a box? Not for a fox?

ALEXANDER

Not for Lucy in the sky with bagels and lox.

EMILY

Not for clocks running backwards through time?

ALEXANDER

Now *that* could tempt me!

EMILY

To see if Pilgrims and Indians ever really happened to each other.

ALEXANDER

To see if reindeer ever really knew how to fly.

EMILY

To see ghosts from both sides now.

ALEXANDER

[*beat*] I met a priest once, who saw a ghost.
I went to him. Father Keagan. Me! To a priest!
And this is what he told me: He'd seen a ghost from both sides, like you said.
The week before, in the rectory garden, on his evening walk.
It was in November, cold and wet from a recent rain.
And suddenly he saw the thing.
Shaping itself from the mist in the quivering air. Backwards; then frontwards.
He said he could feel the hair prickling on his head.
"How now?" he asked the ghost, smelling of woodsmoke.
"What's your business here, in our peaceful rectory garden?"

EMILY

What did the ghost say?

ALEXANDER

The ghost was silent.

“Are you from heaven or hell, here to disturb our peace?” the rector asked.

To this the ghost replied: “Neither. The Earth is my only haunt.”

“I don’t believe you.

Everyone who becomes a ghost goes to heaven or hell.

Schoolchildren all know that.

Even Hamlet’s father.”

To which the ghost said something like, “Love did this to me.

In life it sucked me to the bone to leave me here, as I am.”

“What love?” asked Father Keagan.

“Too great a love for earthly flesh.”

“Then that’s your doing. Get thee gone.”

“No,” the ghost answered.

“You stubborn phantom.

Get to judgment in a higher court than here.”

At which the ghost laughed heartily:

“There sits no higher court than yours, no higher judge than man’s red heart.”

EMILY

What’s that supposed to mean?

ALEXANDER

It means that I was getting no help from *that* priest!

And it means you don’t have to be a castle to be haunted.

A mind in a garden will do quite well.

If accompanied by enough fear.

EMILY

[*pause*] Alexander?

ALEXANDER

Yes?

EMILY

I’m afraid.

ALEXANDER

Of what?

EMILY

Of what I’m about to tell you.

ALEXANDER

What's that?

EMILY

I'm not whole.

ALEXANDER

I'm sorry.

I don't know what you mean by that.

Am I supposed to?

EMILY

I haven't been telling you the whole truth.

ALEXANDER

Because you've been carefully beating about the middle of it. Is that it?

EMILY

[*beat*] Yes.

ALEXANDER

I know.

EMILY

How do you know?

ALEXANDER

I know jazz when I hear it. I'm not all opera.

Playing from the sides to show the middle, without actually hitting it.

EMILY

[*pause*] I have epilepsy....

[*beat*] I'm an epileptic.

ALEXANDER

So?

I'm a contract to be murdered. You think that's better?

EMILY

You don't understand. I *can't* go outside.

I can't go out because someone might see me.

The horror of lying in a gutter, convulsing, writhing and twisting.

To be seen like that by strangers would mortify me.

The shame of it would kill me.

ALEXANDER

And it's condemned you to isolation.

EMILY

After my father died.

I knew he'd always be there.... To pick me up and carry me away, if he had to.

ALEXANDER

What a waste!

EMILY

I told you that.

I told you my life's been a waste.

ALEXANDER

Well, let's talk about it....

[*beat*] Okay?

EMILY

Okay.

ALEXANDER

You start.

EMILY

[*beat*] Shame like that is worse than death, to me.

ALEXANDER

What would you want to do with your life, if you had it?

EMILY

If I could stop one heart from breaking, my life would not have been in vain.

Save one animal from starving to death.

Lift one fainting robin into his nest again.

ALEXANDER

Then get outside.

EMILY

You, get outside.

ALEXANDER

And die? Is that lifting a robin into its nest?

EMILY

You don't know that.
And it's better, I think, than dying piecemeal the way you *are* doing.
Someday there won't be anything left of you but your fears.

ALEXANDER

And you?
What's your risk?

EMILY

Nothing more than Goliath waiting for me.
And unlike David, I'm way too small.

ALEXANDER

What about at night?

EMILY

What's there to see at night?

ALEXANDER

How would *I* know?
But that's not the point.
It's not what's to see; it's what's not to be seen by.
No eyes of anything else watching you.
Judging you.
Nothing other than the moon and stars, and whatever ropes there are holding
down the night.
You might amuse yourself, spying on the flying bats.

EMILY

I don't get it.

ALEXANDER

It's a start.
Master nighttime, and there's daytime ahead.

EMILY

Take your own advice.

ALEXANDER

It's against my nature, I know, but it's
It *is* a Pandora's box, isn't it?... The night.

EMILY

The night?
The night is when spiders sew their webs without a light.

ALEXANDER

The night is Nessun dorma!
Remember?

EMILY

O! my God! The greatest aria ever.... Of all time.

ALEXANDER

Turandot's unknown prince in the moonlight.

EMILY

And Madame Butterfly, waiting the night for Pinkerton.

ALEXANDER

Or Grizabella....

EMILY

[*beat*] Memory.
All alone in the moonlight....
I know. I know. I remember.

ALEXANDER

And the Phantom....

EMILY

[*beat*] In sleep he sang to me; in dreams he came:
The Phantom of the Opera is here, inside my mind.

ALEXANDER

I'm not sure where this is leading.

EMILY

Back to my father. The mistakes we make, he told me.
Treating this existence of ours as a conclusion rather than as a summertime.
In Paris.
I agree.

ALEXANDER

Whatever all that means.

EMILY

It's **not** the conclusion. That what it all means. I'm beginning to see it.
You find what's the most important chance, and you risk taking it.
Only then will fear disappear. Bees and butterflies do every Fall.
Hoping they'll find new Spring flowers. Which they always do.
Just like La bohème.
One great opera does not mean the end of opera.
More great ones stand ready, just out there.

While I've been fearing it, it came.
But came with less of fear, because of you....
Because you, a stranger, found me here, and have made me see the difference.

ALEXANDER

Tell me then: What is the greatest opera ever written?

EMILY

The greatest opera ever written hasn't been written yet.
It takes place in Egypt, but not Aida. In the silence of the sands, where mystery
brings death alive; and death brings mystery alive. The Egyptians knew what
Moses forgot, and then went to sleep on it themselves.

ALEXANDER

Emily? Are you okay? I wonder about you.

EMILY

My father told me the five secrets, known by the pharaohs and the Sphynx, how
to make the journey safely from life, through night, and into existence again.
I didn't understand him then. I didn't know why he was telling me. Now I do.
The first secret was patience along the tiresome way.
And the key to keeping patient was contained in a prayer.
A very specific prayer. Which has been lost.
However, the essence of the prayer is, more or less, a series of moving thoughts,
with animals, fields, flowers, and water coming to rest in a wilderness that cannot
be expressed in words of any language other than universal love.
The second secret was spiritual understanding, which is given you on the journey.
Known as Maat. Everything Zoroaster ever taught was based on that principle.
Isis, Osiris, and much of what Moses didn't forget, as well.
The third secret was cleansing.
To understand the spiritual meaning of Maat a soul must feel absorbed in a river
of souls, like what was taught a hundred years ago as cosmic consciousness:
Every man is an island. Every man has a soul. No soul is an island.

ALEXANDER

“No soul is an island.” Where have I heard *that* before?

EMILY

From birth people are born as islands, out of wet separation from their mother. Believing they can gain superiority and control by being separate.

ALEXANDER

You got all this from your father?

EMILY

I know what I know, and some of what I don't know.

ALEXANDER

How?

EMILY

Let me go on....

The fourth secret, the Egyptians believed, was the importance of the body itself, to serve as a boat for the soul's safe-keeping on its journey.

ALEXANDER

How is that?

The body goes with the soul through the afterworld?

EMILY

The soul never leaves the body.

The journey is entirely within the mind.

Native Americans, he told me, had somewhat the same concept.

ALEXANDER

Oh.

EMILY

Which leaves us with what we know of the fifth secret:

Which is the Confusion of Death.

People forget, if they ever knew; and all we have left are snippets and surprises.

Like the expansion of nothingness into everything.

Joyce's Ulysses and Brontë's Heathcliff.

Forgetting that there was always time before time, before the beginning of time.

MARY opens the front door, and she and AARON reenter Emily's house.

ALEXANDER stands.

EMILY

Is it time already?

AARON

It's time.

ALEXANDER touches Emily's shoulder.

ALEXANDER

May I come again, Emily?

EMILY

Is the Pope Catholic?

MARY

What have you two been talking about?

EMILY

Flying.

AARON

Flying to where?

ALEXANDER

To Egypt.

MARY

To Egypt??

ALEXANDER

We're going to latch Emily's house to a tornado, and sail it to Egypt.

AARON

Oh, be serious.

ALEXANDER

And introduce Cairo to Dorothy, Toto, and the Wizard.
What do you think of that?

MARY

They'll love it, I'm sure.

ALEXANDER

The children will....

Did you know that the Wizard of Oz was the first A I in America?

EMILY

O! Boy! O! Boy!

I can't wait!

Let me tell the children!

ALEXANDER

And do you know what the children will say?

EMILY

No. What?

ALEXANDER

What took you so long?

**ALEXANDER turns, waves a goodbye,
and exits with MARY and AARON.**

**EMILY smiles; then goes back to the pail
of water and begins scrubbing the floor
again. On her hands and knees.**

SCENE 6

AARON, ROB, JOSEPH and ALEXANDER are sitting in the living room of Aaron's and Aisha's home.

Each of them is drinking beer from a can.

There is a metal tub of more beers on ice next to it.

The lights are dimmer than normal.

ALEXANDER

Where are we going with this?
It sounds Star Wars to me.

ROB

The die's been cast.
It's *our* life, or theirs.
The lives of our neighborhood, our wives, and our kids.
Time to shit, or get off the can.

JOSEPH

We're the Minutemen. They're the enemy.

AARON

I never thought

ROB

You know we can't afford to lose this.
Call it World War Three.

ALEXANDER

I have the least to lose.
No wife. No kids.
No freedom.

ROB

That's a yes, I take it. Right, Alexander?

ALEXANDER

[*pause*] Yes.

JOSEPH

Good.

AARON

There's no other way?

ROB

We've had our choices.
And we've been let down everywhere else.
You know that.

AARON

I'm taking your word for it.

ROB

Well, you can count on it.

AARON

I've never been any place like this before.

ROB

They're heathens. Trust me.

JOSEPH

And there's no other way.

AARON

Why are you doing this to us?

ROB

Me?

AARON

No. God.
Why is God doing this to us?

JOSEPH

It's not God.
God helps those who help themselves.
It's a fact of life:
A problem keeps coming back.
And never goes away.
Until you're the master of it.
Or it is the master of you.

AARON

[to ALEXANDER] For all this time I thought you were crazy, Ali.
Now I know.
And I'm sorry.
I apologize.

ALEXANDER

I *was* crazy.
It's what they do to you.

AARON

For my whole life there's been that one question:
Who's the most important to you?
God?
Your parents?
Your family?
Your wife?
Your child?
Who would you risk your life for?...
I'd absolutely risk my life for Aisha and Josh.
No question about it.
The only thing standing in my way in my mind is:
Is it really necessary?

A knock at the door.

**ROB goes to the door, and WOLF enters,
carrying a flashlight.**

ROB

[to WOLF] Come on in. We're here.

Lights go dark, except for the flashlight.

WOLF

They don't know we know.
I'm certain of that.
Now's the time to act.

ROB

[beat] We have a new Protector to initiate.

SCENE 7

AISHA, MARY and AKIKO are sitting in the living room of Aaron's and Aisha's home.

It is early afternoon. (JOSH is at school.)

AISHA

When are they coming home?

MARY

They have some loose ends to tie up.

AISHA

What does that mean?

MARY

I don't know....
Just "loose ends," Rob told me.

AISHA

[*pause*] Everything's all right, isn't it?

MARY

We're safe.
The neighborhood's safe.

AISHA

I mean ... with the men.

Pause.

AISHA

Aaron's all right, isn't he?

MARY

I don't know all the details.
Rob tells me he can't tell me everything....
For my own good.

AISHA

[*beat*] And???

MARY

Those people ... you know ... they're heartless monsters.
They have professional killers they use.
Rob said there were four of them, who'd probably killed a thousand men among them.
No heart.
No conscience.
No souls.
And now, no more.
They've been dealt with.

AISHA

Thank the Lord!...

[*beat*] So when is Aaron coming home?

Pause.

AISHA

[*with panic forming in her voice*] He is coming home, isn't he?

AKIKO

[*pause*] No, Aisha.

AISHA

What??!!

AKIKO

[*beat*] Aaron's not coming back.

AISHA

What??!!

AKIKO

[*beat*] Aaron's not coming home.

AISHA

O! my God!
O! my God!
O! my God!

Sobbing.

He's dead! Isn't he?

MARY

[*beat*] Yes.

AISHA

How?...

How?...

How can he be gone?

How can we lose him?

MARY

I just hate this. It's too awful.

AISHA stands.

MARY and AKIKO stand, too, and put their arms around the shaking AISHA.

AISHA

[*crying*] O my poor, poor man.

My poor man.

Everything he worked for ... and saved for... and prayed for

[*pause*] What are we going to do?

How will get along without him?

AKIKO

He died protecting you.... Us.... All of us.

And we'll protect you..... Forever. All of us will.

AISHA

[*beat*] The world's a shithole.

This neighborhood's a shithole.

We never should have moved in here.

They told us not to.

Pause. The three women still holding each other.

AISHA

Ali told us they were out there. To get him, he thought.

Like they did his father. And his grandfather. And his brother....

He was so afraid, to leave his house.

And now he's alive and Aaron isn't.

MARY

[*pause*] Ali's dead, too.

AISHA screams, and falls to the floor.

SCENE 8

EMILY is on her hands and knees, scrubbing the kitchen floor.

MARY opens the front door, and without a word goes into the kitchen with EMILY and sits down at the table.

Nothing is said for a minute or more.

MARY

I'm supposing you've heard....
[beat] About Ali.

EMILY

He was a good man.
Not a nobody....
Not a nobody like me.

MARY

He was.

EMILY

He told me once his life was a nightmare.

MARY

You made the difference in him.

EMILY

Oh yes!!
I'm the one who got him out of his house, to be shot to death.

MARY

Yes And to protect all of us from the same nightmare....
He gave his life to protect you, and me, and all of us.

EMILY

Still scrubbing the floor.

[pause] He found his chance to live, and seized it, bravely. Forever bravely.
Through the fear. I never met a man so brave; and I will remember him first for
that, and grieve for the loss of him the rest of my life....
My God, Mary!!! Both of them.
The only two people in my life I found the courage to love.

MARY

I'm sorry.

EMILY

I'm not brave like that, you know.

MARY

You have your own brand of bravery.

EMILY

Once your name gets in their mouths, there's no way to get it out, unless you die.
He told me that....

He told me lots of things.

MARY

Here.
Come up here, and sit with me.

**EMILY pauses for a few moments, then
slowly joins MARY, sitting at the table.**

MARY

I've never understood you very well, have I?

EMILY

Because we don't think alike.

MARY

That's about it.

EMILY

I've found nobody who thinks like me.
I wasn't old enough for my father to.
And Ali didn't live long enough.

MARY

[*beat*] What was Ali like?

EMILY

Quiet ... in a talkative way ... when he got going. If he got going.
He wanted to move to Norway. See the Northern Lights.
Be with the pines and the fjords ... away from his fear of dying.
Be quiet there. And maybe just sit quietly with me.

MARY

Didn't he like opera?
Like you?
I thought he did. From what Aaron had said.

EMILY

We both loved opera.
That we could talk about for hours.

MARY

What else did he like?

EMILY

Making silly jokes....
He'd talk sometimes about walking on moonbeams.
That was a favorite joke of his....
Of ours....
[beat] And Chris Christie.
Ali got a kick out of double names like that.
Like Arthur MacArthur.
And Peter Peter Pumpkin-eater.

MARY

I'm so sorry, Em.

EMILY

And ghosts.
Ali was afraid of dying, but never of ghosts.
Ali laughed at the thought of ghosts.

MARY

[beat] I guess that makes what he did even more brave.

EMILY

It was my love that did him in.
It was my father's hound-bitch daughter's love that did them both in.
Twice.
My father.
Now Ali.

MARY

If you asked them, I'm sure they'd tell you that the time they were with you was the best time of their lives.

EMILY

[*beat*] I should ask them, shouldn't I?
They were the only good years of *my life*.

Pause.

EMILY

I only wish

MARY

[*beat*] You only wish what?

EMILY

I only wish when you find greatness in a man you could tell him before it's too late.... To his face.
I accomplished that failure twice in my life.

MARY

Taking Emily's hand.

What Ali and Aaron did was the supreme sacrifice.
In wartime.
A war against the people.
They were heroes. Protecting us.
And the neighborhood.
And we'll never forget it.

[*beat*] We are given tragedies so that after, we are better trained to heal the tragedies of others.

MARY stands.

EMILY stands.

They hug each other.

MARY

I'll be back tomorrow.
Anything I can get you? Anything I can do?

EMILY

Have you been listening?

MARY

Of course.

What else is there to do?

EMILY

I just thought

MARY

[*beat*] I love you, Em.
I really do.

EMILY

Same back to you.

MARY

Well ... see you....
Tomorrow.

EMILY

See you.

**MARY lets herself out Emily's front door
and exits.**

**EMILY goes back, on her hands and
knees to scrub the kitchen floor.**

END