

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 Goodness! 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" exists when freedom of expression exists, all voices included,
nobody shouting another down.
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 anyone seriously breaks the speed limit.

ROB

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

AARON

That's a democracy?

AKIKO

No vulgar language or disrespect is another.

ROB

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

JOSEPH

And 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 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 don't sit around on our hands if 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, 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.
Isn't it sort of how the Amish live?
In Pennsylvania.

ROB

Sort of like that, I believe.
But we're not as organized.
And definitely not religious.
Although I think our kids have just as happy a life.

AARON

Do you have a leader, or something?

ROB

Our meetings ... we call them assemblies ... are weekly, and mostly for fun.
No leaders needed.
The monthly ones are more down to business; and for them 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 in the neighborhood as men.
And things are bound to happen, from time to time. They always do.

ROB

Not just fix-up things. Houses and cars, fences and whatnot.
More than just that.

AKIKO

The neighborhood's a joy and a protection to live in. Believe me.
You'll find out. We believe in friendship, and happiness in friendly faces.
For all of us, but especially our 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.
We're all like parents and protectors for the kids. All of them.

AARON

Protectors?

ROB

Against drugs, for example.
Our neighborhood's a village where no illegal drugs are ever allowed.

JOSEPH

It is a happy place here. But don't get me wrong, we've had our sadness, too.
Lost a boy in Afghanistan.
Some said 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, you know.

AARON

You're not putting us on, are you?
This friends and neighbors stuff?
Just trying to get a new black family put in their place?
I don't see many black families around here.

ROB

We have a code we live by, and it's definitely not racist.
It's not exactly in writing, but we all know it:
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 we *act* towards one another in a
spirit of brotherhood, regardless of color.
We all stand ready to protect a neighbor's property, and honor, and children.
That's how we interpret the scriptural 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 recently, 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

Let me say one last thing, please:

About the children.

Children, I feel, are the greatest blessing people can have.

And no one in our neighborhood is impatient of any child ever. That's important.

AISHA

We have a lot to learn.
But we certainly agree on that.

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 wasn't meaning to be critical of you.

MARY

Of course you weren't.

I know what you meant.

See?

I'm learning.

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

Right off the bat.

It's special. The Japanese way, I imagine.

And a good lesson for us all, in these crabby days.

AKIKO

Yes. Japanese custom.

We're taught very young about certain rules, and respectful greetings and gestures, and gifts to give.

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

AISHA

Handing a glass to AKIKO.

A Pinot for you, Akiko.

Handing a glass to MARY.

And one for you, Mary.

The three sit.

MARY

A toast: To good friendship, health, and a happy neighborhood

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

MARY

I was thinking of something you said the other day, Aisha....

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

I'm a bit forward, at times. I know. No offence intended.

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

AKIKO

How sad.

AISHA

It's been over four years now, since his brother died.
And he tells us he won't leave the house.
Not 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 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, do you?
What does Aaron think?

AISHA

Aaron's frustrated to death with it.
He's always been able to fix things.
But this door's plumb stuck 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, and won't leave the house.

AKIKO

What happened to her?

MARY

We're not so sure. Nobody seems to know.
After her mother went ... sort of off her rocker, so to speak, and had to go
someplace else, her father raised her on his own.
And when he passed, she about killed herself.
But that was seven, maybe eight years ago her father died.

AKIKO

There are things like that we have in Japan, too.

MARY

Like what, Akiko?

AKIKO

People who hide in their homes, away from other people.
And sometimes don't come out.
Not for years.

MARY

I never knew that.

AISHA

Why?
And how do they live?

AKIKO

They survive on the care of their families.
Maybe a million of them, if you can believe it.
Afraid to come out for embarrassment. For fear of being seen as a failure.

AISHA

Fear of failure is an Old Man River.
It tells us nothin'! It must know somethin'.
It just keeps rolling along.

Is it really that bad in Japan, Akiko?
I thought things were going well over there now.

AKIKO

There's nothing worse in Japan than to embarrass yourself in public.
Unless it's to embarrass someone else.
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 losing your job.
It's not so easy finding another job in Japan, once you've lost your old one.

AISHA

Or your husband walking out on you?

AKIKO

That's shame on him.
No. Losing self-esteem is worse.
Like losing your job, and then cutting yourself.
Or burning yourself with a cigarette.
And then seeing that your mother saw you.
With the look she would get of shock, and helplessness, and disappointment.
So they shut themselves in.
Away from everybody.

MARY

You're saying being jilted isn't heart-breaking in Japan?

AKIKO

I don't know....
I know how I'd feel if I lost Joe. But that's different.
Because I'm part American, now.
I'd say it's more like Cio-Cio-San's [*Cho-Cho-Sawn*] story.
Killing herself with the same dagger her father used to commit suicide.
"He who cannot live with honor must die with honor."
That's what was inscribed on the dagger.
Cio-Cio-San took her life because she lost her honor, marrying an American sailor who didn't consider marrying her to be a real marriage.
He went back to America, promising to return to her, but instead came back to Japan with an Americana wife.
And Cio-Cio-San couldn't bear the public shame of it.
She killed herself for shame, not for a broken heart.

MARY

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

AKIKO

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 special word for it.
"Hiki-Komori."
It means people who hide away for shame.

AISHA

And they don't do anything for them?

AKIKO

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

MARY

Well, it's a damn shame. That's all I can say.
A damn shame. For Emily and for all of us.
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 expectations here in the neighborhood?
I hope so.
Is that it? What you came to talk to me about?

AKIKO

Goodness no.

MARY

[*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 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.
You know that.
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 their meetings here? At your house? A small meeting?
Rob and Joe come over some night?

AISHA

Is that all?

MARY

Oh 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 *my* ears?

AKIKO

There's nothing the least bit racial in this, Aisha.
I promise you, if that's what you're thinking.
We *all* know what drugs can do.

AISHA

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

MARY

Oh 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 knowing whom you can trust.

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, I'm telling you, I mean the illegal ones, drugs are the greatest danger to our children, beyond everything else.

JOSEPH

Our country's number one enemy.

AARON

But not its only enemy.

ROB

Drug addiction is a daily crisis, Aaron. A big-city crisis, and a small-city crisis.

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 on that. Zero tolerance.

AARON

And how, exactly, do we do it?
The government has drug people all over, and they've not stopped it.
In fact, it's only worse now with fentanyl.

ROB

Officers aren't worth much, I agree, against the flood of opiates.

JOSEPH

The only protection we have is to keep the drugs 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.
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 in the neighborhood is meeting tonight, or tomorrow night.
In small groups. And taking this pledge.

JOSEPH

[*to AARON*] Before you ask, because I know you're going to:
It's a pledge to be on the watch for suspicious activities at all times, day or night,
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 a threat to any child nearby.

AARON

What about doctors?

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

ROB

I'm talking about *illegal* drugs.

However, nobody takes Vicodin or OxyContin in our neighborhood.

If you don't believe me, go out and ask.

AARON

And the pain?

Where does the pain go?

ROB

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

From Anacin to Tylenol to ibuprofen.

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. It's worth the sacrifice.

ROB

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

AARON

Sorry, Rob, don't know the place.

ROB

Well the opioid crisis took us country people in Virginia to hell.
I saw it firsthand.
Addiction killed a dozen kids in my high school alone.
My God!!...
Sorry.
I didn't mean to get going on this tonight.

JOSEPH

It gives you cred, Brother.
Don't be ashamed of it.

AARON

I've seen my share in my time, too.

ROB

There's a seed of caring for yourself and other people that gets planted in your brain before you're even born.
And if you don't get messed up, it grows.
But alongside it other seeds start growing, too.
Like selfishness.
And greed.
And avarice.
And any number of fears.
And anger and hatred.
And if you're not careful they will crowd out the first seed.
The caring for others.
It's what parents naturally feel the most when they have children.
Caring for their children.
And caring for the other children in the neighborhood.
Caring for everything in the neighborhood that is good.

AARON

Love, you mean.

ROB

Not "love" exactly. Not Romeo and Juliet.
I'm talking about the primal human instinct to care for other human beings.
The instinct that kept the human race alive in prehistoric days.

AARON

Are you talking about evolutionary psychology and Carl Jung?

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 caveman days were people peddling narcotics.
Because narcotics kill love at the nerve roots.
When *that seed* enters something dies in our brains.
We don't care for ourselves anymore. Whether we live or die.
All we think about is wanting to be high.
[repressing a sob] I've had roads to go before I found out that it's not that simple: dope versus the person you care about.

Pause. ROB hits the table with his fist.

ROB

Dammit!! My mother stopped caring, and OxyContin killed her!!

AARON

Dear Lord, Rob! I'm sorry. I had no idea.

ROB

[beat] If I hadn't found Mary, or she found me,
I would have gone down the same snake path.
She nursed me, in the worst of times, back to my senses.
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 this evil.

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 their life is.
Unfulfilling job opportunities.
Discrimination they know and feel all the time.
Poor housing. Disrespect. Isolation.
Never a chance to get caught up on money worries.

JOSEPH

I read that only seven percent of people born into poverty get out.

AARON

It's a mockery.

JOSEPH

What is?

AARON

Thinking drugs are a way to turn your life around.

JOSEPH

You do know then.

We can see that, Brother.

AARON

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

ROB

Are you talking about hillbillies? What happened in Lee County?

AARON

Of course not....

Or, rather, not just there.

I'm talking about people anywhere who are uninformed about the dangers of narcotics – how insidious they are, and how they can sneak through a back door, or a doctor's door, or a school's door, if you're not looking. And I know how they are a plague on the rich as well as the poor, and whites as well as blacks. I know. And I wasn't trying to stereotype anybody.

JOSEPH

Good.

Because we don't take to pigeonholing people in our neighborhood.

We value our neighbors as people working together for the well-being of us all.

AARON

I know you're being real; but the whole thing sounds like a fantasy to me, Joe.

How one neighborhood can stand up to a whole country on its own.

It sounds way too good to be true. But I'll say one thing:

I've seen enough to know you're not just blowing hot air.

You're serious.

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 flush them down the toilet over doubts of your success.

ROB

Our success.

AARON

Our success.

JOSEPH

We *are* going to stop parasites before they cross 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.
I mean, 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, or boats, 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 to be banished?... Where to?

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 confirmation. 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 a Protector. His name is Aaron.

Applause.

WOLF walks the room as he addresses his audience.

WOLF

[to the assembled group] Now to the less pleasant business of the evening.... 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 your neighborhood. Good!

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

We live at a time which is not of our choosing, but is thrust upon us. We may have wished never to see anything like this, 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. And it's no good blaming it on the government.

Our government is not what's harvesting coke, meth, heroin, and fentanyl. Nor can you honestly blame illegal immigrants, who themselves are fleeing the terror of gangs and drugs, and are too poor and too cut off to be smuggling them.

WOLF

No. The invaders are billionaire professionals who live abroad, and use traffickers and paid hitmen to get the drugs into our communities.

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, *at the local level*, once the drugs have gotten over our borders.

And how?

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

Very possibly a Zero Tolerance Policy 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 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*] Simple.... 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 wall of well-regulated, neighborhood militia.

I'm not going to say more on that.

Intelligent men like you get my point.

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 mutherfuckers from obliterating the peace and safety of our lives and our children's lives.

WOLF

Thank you for listening.

And remember, God, Nature, and the heart of America are with you.

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

EMILY

Do you have nightmares, too?

ALEXANDER

My *whole life's* a nightmare, so you know.

EMILY

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

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

[pause] I shouldn't be here.

EMILY

Why are you, then?

ALEXANDER

My cousin Aaron told me I had to. And I owe him. Big time.

EMILY

Oh? Is that so?

ALEXANDER

I mean, for the last four years he's the main reason I'm alive.

[pause] I was at college when my granddad died.

He was the leather that held our family together.

We loved him. We all loved him. Nearly worshipped him.

My dad, especially.

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 Dad was.

Then they told me: Dad was dead, too.

Shot dead. Like my granddad.

And no one knows why.

People guessed it was mistaken identity, or whatever.

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

EMILY

Dear God! I'm so sorry.

ALEXANDER

I dropped out of school to stay with Mom.
My brother, Jason, moved away.
He called me a frigging fool for staying in the neighborhood.
It was too dangerous he said....
He got killed, too. With an AR-15.
It's insane: Three of my family, shot dead. And no one knows why.
Or who.

EMILY

Is that really true? It seems impossible.

ALEXANDER

I got a letter a month later saying, "Man, your Day is coming."
That's when my life literally ended.
Mom moved out. To go live with her sister.
And that's when, Emily, I started hiding behind closed blinds.
That's your name, right? Emily?

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 me 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 be a description of my life, in a way.

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

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

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

Peter Peter Pumpkin-eater.

ALEXANDER

I've never understood that rhyme.
Was his name "Peter Peter"?
Like Arthur MacArthur.
Or William Carlos Williams?
Or Ford Madox Ford?
Or was his last name Pumpkin-Eater, and Peter was his first and middle name?

EMILY

Does it matter?

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

And let her go out, when 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 told me you're totally safe.
"A tiny bit weird," she said, "but totally safe."

ALEXANDER

True. All true. But who wouldn't be?
And 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 strange spirit of trust that floats over this neighborhood that I don't really understand.

EMILY

What I don't understand is: Can't you find someone who will protect you?
The police, or something?

ALEXANDER

Whoever those killers are, they're invisible to police. They're shadows.
Everyone's in the dark.

EMILY

Then you need a shadow of your own.

ALEXANDER

I need to be a shadow, you mean. Like I'm doing.

EMILY

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

ALEXANDER

There is.
A war on what people think is right and wrong, and what they'll do for it.

EMILY

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 green.

EMILY

I'm green, too. But occasionally I see things other people don't.

ALEXANDER

For example....

EMILY

You.

For example ... *you.*

I was perfectly content, on the floor, scrubbing.

But I never heard anybody so hurt in my life.

It's bare survival, the life you're living. And it hurts me to hear about it.

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 our country's way of life.

EMILY

You think the government's to blame?

ALEXANDER

Not exactly.

Except when 55,000 people a year die from guns, something must be wrong.

EMILY

America's not the only place where people die from guns.

ALEXANDER

Of course not. There's always Mexico.

EMILY

That's because of the drug cartels.

And anyway, Mexico is worlds away from here.

ALEXANDER

No it isn't. It's only a thin line away, called the Rio Grande, which doesn't even flow like a river but for six months a year.

EMILY

That's all?

ALEXANDER

You can walk across it in summertime.

EMILY

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

ALEXANDER

True.

EMILY

And nothing to be done?

ALEXANDER

Sit, and wait for the day.

EMILY

Talking.

ALEXANDER

Waiting for What's-His-Name.

EMILY

You *are* weird.

ALEXANDER

It's been said.

But why are you saying so now?

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, and waiting.

EMILY

Like us, you're thinking.

ALEXANDER

You have to admit: It is bizarre that there are two people like us, hiding at home, afraid to go out, living this close.

And talking like this, the first time ever we met. And who knows why?

EMILY

Talking's better than losing your mind, isn't it?
But your cousin, Aaron....
Can't you talk to him?

ALEXANDER

He's one of the lucky ones.
He doesn't understand what I understand.
Not knowing for him is ignorant bliss.
Innocent and unafraid.
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 gangs, or any of that crap.
And look at us.

EMILY

Maybe you just don't know.

ALEXANDER

Not knowing's a killer.

EMILY

Like cancer.

ALEXANDER

Yeah, I guess. Not knowing *is* 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 a cure for cancer.
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?

That nobody knows the pain I felt today, walking out my front door like I did?

EMILY

Then why did you do it?

ALEXANDER

I told you.

Aaron and Aisha talked me into it.

EMILY

Was that the only reason?

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 find somebody?

Like, fall in love?

And give her the life I have?

Maybe even afraid she's going to shoot me?...

Hardly.

EMILY

Have you?

Ever fallen in love?

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 love.

ALEXANDER

Thank you. I won't.

But I appreciate your advice.

EMILY

What I'm getting at is this:
Love can be a cruel master.
Beware.
Never let love be the love of your life.
Or you will shipwreck on its rocks.
Like Mozart proved in Don Giovanni.

ALEXANDER

Do you like opera?

EMILY

Is the Pope Catholic?

ALEXANDER

I do.
God! when I was in college!
And now.
What else is there good to listen to, other than opera?
Or the sound of a cold beer opening?

EMILY

Opera is about the one best thing in the world to listen to.
But 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 today.

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

Not really.

ALEXANDER

We don't think alike, do we? At least, it doesn't seem we do.

EMILY

Nobody thinks like me, the nobody that I am.

ALEXANDER

Same here.

EMILY

Tell me: 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 God be so heartless?
To let this world deteriorate the way it has, in pain.

EMILY

I have a theory about that.

ALEXANDER

Oh? What is it?

EMILY

That God gave herself up ... or himself up to mankind, after we evolved from the apes.
And since then we have been God's only representatives on this planet.
God is as we do.
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 are?

EMILY

That there's no one to blame but ourselves. Not God.

ALEXANDER

How lame is that? Who thinks like that?

EMILY

The nobody that I am.

ALEXANDER

There's not a religious person in the world who'd agree with you.

EMILY

That's their loss.

ALEXANDER

And if you pray to God for help? What then?

EMILY

You're praying to yourself.

ALEXANDER

How does *that* work?

EMILY

Let's say: Somewhere out there on the edge where consciousness rubs up against the stuff that dreams are made of.

ALEXANDER

Yep! That's where I live. You nailed it!
On the edge of nightmares.
In a fun-house of mirrors. A slave to my fears.

EMILY

In bondage.

ALEXANDER

And that's what? No kingdom of heaven to you, I suppose.

EMILY

Not a happy kingdom.
But the kingdom of heaven, like everything else, beats a path through the brain.
And God, to me, is the mysterious and fearful way the brain of the human race works.

ALEXANDER

Which is what you believe protects you from murderers?

EMILY

Warns you, I suppose, to protect yourself.

ALEXANDER

Are you telling me that when I prayed to God to get me here safely today, and back home in one piece, 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 my life as it is.
Without you trying to unravel the whole ball of yarn in front of my eyes.

EMILY

We'll see.

ALEXANDER

What I hear you saying right now is nothing but:
What is soft is hard.
What is sweet is sour.
What is beautiful is ugly.
What is right is wrong.

EMILY

You're hearing it backwards.
What I'm saying is that people and witches lie; and when lies start coming out their ears, earwax starts coming out their mouths.

ALEXANDER

Every time I open *my mouth* it feels as though a chicken flops out.
Breakfast at Tiffany's. Lunch at a garbage can. Macbeth in the cookhouse.

EMILY

And that's your destiny, is it?

ALEXANDER

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

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, you mean.

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 Monstrous Ideas*?

ALEXANDER

Never heard of it.

EMILY

It's about people talking over walls of the multiverse, and how communications twist and turn down through the layers.

ALEXANDER

I don't put any stock in metaphysical stuff.
No use for it.

EMILY

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

ALEXANDER

Who hide from bags flopping down the street, is more like it.
Body bags.

EMILY

Bush or bags, we let them smother our lives.

ALEXANDER

What is it you don't understand that every person killed by guns 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

[*beat*] Then what's your story, Emily?
Tell me yours.

EMILY

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

ALEXANDER

No.
You need a phantom whose life's been turned off so he can pay attention to yours.

EMILY

[*pause*] I was born in the normal way, but behind a veil.
It was my father.
The only person who was always there to protect me; and the only person I ever
trusted, or loved.
And it's killing me.
When he died, I wanted to die with him.
And would have, if I hadn't botched the job.

I never forgave him for dying.
It killed my happiness.
It split my life in two.
It forced hateful sounds into my ears I can hardly bear.
[*beat*] Does your hearing ever bother you?
Ambulance sirens? Tires screeching?
Boomboxes, or whatever they're called?
My God! I can't tell you how much I hate noises like that.
What a cacophonous laugh life can be!

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 my father
dying.
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.
Well, I guess, he had to.... He was blind.
And when he felt for his food, his fingers had the nose of a fox.

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 sunshine.

I was younger then, still holding his hand and believing his spirit was in the sun.

Being Christened in the sorrows of his absence.

Being watched by the suspicious eyes of some wet crow arranging his feathers.

Thinking, I'm sure, like Poe's raven: "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, Ali.

I'm forever weird.

Love died in me in a way that gave no mercy. God, 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 in me!

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

The sky was 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 the pink hands of a mole, palming dirt aside in the darkness.

Oh yes! The day he died I went into the darkness where moles sleep.

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

[*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

[*beat*] Do you ever just let go, and watch candles burn, for example?

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 protect his daughter.
And everything works out for the worst....
But, yes, I do let go, sometimes, and 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? Are you a bird-watcher?

EMILY

Birds have the freedom I long for.
I envy every one of them.
But not their food. Raw worms and bugs! 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 be!
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 them.
Like butterflies.
They have color to trade us for our want of color within.
Flowers are attracted to our darkness almost as much as to their 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 a fig tree.
Grapes off a 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 know: I have an idiot bird in the house.
It sits atop a fathead clock.
And like a drunk, it leans out to chirp the time in sweet thirteens.
The drunken bird leans out to chirp the time in sweet thirteens.
The drunken bird leans out to chirp the time in sweet thirteens....

ALEXANDER

Are you all right?

EMILY

My mother's belly wore the stains of paranoia the day I was born.
Before my baby self had time to drive her completely insane.
Postpartum-style.
She would sit at the kitchen table without lifting a finger, while I stood there, my
diapers drooping, 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 at sea.

ALEXANDER

Of me?

EMILY

I meant my father. Sorry.

ALEXANDER

Of your father? Drowned?

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.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.

I brought my love to try to lift him up. But he was dead.
O pardon the one who knocked too lightly at your door, Father.
It was me, your hound-bitch daughter.
It was my love that did us in.

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

I can't find his eyes so well anymore.

ALEXANDER

Are you all right, Emily?

EMILY

I walk in rings about this house, sucking 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

People used to come visit me.

ALEXANDER

What people?

EMILY

Friends.

I don't mean family, like Mary, who always comes.
And they sometimes brought strangers with them.

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, creak their boots would crack and stain my linoleum floor.

They'd sit in this kitchen, and tell stories.

ALEXANDER

What kind of stories?

EMILY

Coarse stories of loose women, and unnerving stories of sea storms.

ALEXANDER

That would figure.

EMILY

Stories of frights they had had.

Sea crossings from Europe – different from the normal coastal travels around here.

Like the one from Southampton to New York once.

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

But their third day out 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 not crazy about sea stories. More 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 rails they could find, making their way below.
Wondering how much longer it would last. Retching into orange basins.
Those who chose to stay atop were showered by spray, squinting ahead.
Through some miracle, everyone came out safe and sound.
Except for their stomachs, of course.
They reached port so meekened by the experience, that they disembarked the
ship like strangers.

ALEXANDER

Sailors have their own, peculiar form of bravery.

EMILY

And a different kind of smell.

ALEXANDER

What kind of smell?

EMILY

Crabs, cod, sand grit, grapeblue mussels, and tar.
Not like the odors of my kitchen.
Which, by the way, while I'm quiet at my cooking, I can feel surround me, judging
me.

ALEXANDER

What? Kitchen aromas?

EMILY

How kind you are. Not everyone knows the difference.

ALEXANDER

What difference?

EMILY

Between "odors" 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 impose upon.

Those women were once young and vital.

They must have been,

And children before then.

To chide them for their weathered faces.

Beaten more from need than from 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 both ways.

EMILY

The aromas 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

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

Eggs, vegetables, fish, and zinfandel.

ALEXANDER

Does zinfandel go with seafood?

EMILY

It does in *my* mouth.

ALEXANDER

Oh, okay.

EMILY

If you keep listening to me, you're at risk of losing your own sanity in the future.

ALEXANDER

What is our future?

EMILY

We'll know well enough when all we hear at night are seagulls, quarreling in their departure.

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

Walking on moonbeams! How quaint! I love that expression!
Those silvery, slippery things like feathers.
Like childhood castles, unicorns, swings that reach for the sky.
"Moonbeams!" How delicious!

ALEXANDER

Hopes and dreams that never ask a crumb of you.

EMILY

Oh! if only I could have those years back again.

ALEXANDER

I've waited for hope for so long.
Like the mountains of Norway, I've dreamed to escape to.

EMILY

The Northern Lights.

ALEXANDER

The scent of pine.

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 any use to them.

ALEXANDER

And flies and maggots, too.

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

O! No! To kill a fly in its innocence?
A harmless fly, that with his pretty buzzing rhythm comes to make me merry in
my final moments?

ALEXANDER

I was merely expressing disgust, thinking of you being assaulted by flies.

EMILY

You're more than what you let yourself appear, aren't you?

ALEXANDER

What? for example.

EMILY

Half of what you've been hiding from me.

ALEXANDER

I'll never get out of this, will I?
Yes. Yes. 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

Ah, yes, there *are* lost bits of America, as you say.

ALEXANDER

Drive-in movies.

EMILY

Native American culture.

ALEXANDER

Rust-belt dreams.

EMILY

Sleep.

ALEXANDER

More dreams.

EMILY

Suitcases ... at airports.

ALEXANDER

Homes, for some.

EMILY

Eyesight of the Statue of Liberty.

ALEXANDER

Our moral compass.

EMILY

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

ALEXANDER

Three reasons to live. Let's see....

To conquer fear.... Talking.... And opera.

EMILY

Not what I expected from you.

ALEXANDER

So?... Your turn.

EMILY

[*pause*] Nights of insomnia.

That's the first thing I'd barf over.

ALEXANDER

I've been in that game.

EMILY

I work. And read.

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

ALEXANDER

Sleep no more! Shakespeare doth murder sleep.

EMILY

Lying in bed without sleeping is alone. And alone. And alone.
Feeling yourself moving toward the ultimate darkness.

ALEXANDER

I share my aloneness with a Walther at my side.

EMILY

And all the malignant sounds that night brings forth.

ALEXANDER

All right.... What else? On your list of barfables?

EMILY

Migraine headaches.
Lights in the back of my head.
And thoughts of the kitchen that never stop haunting me.

ALEXANDER

Hell yes! The kitchen first! Migraines be damned!

EMILY

O! the viciousness of kitchen duty ringing in my brain,
where blue flames burn and boiling water hisses.
Where back and forth, just to provoke my migraine,
a pulsing, phosphorescent lighting fixture winces.
And always on the yellow-edged linoleum
lie particles of dirt and food all spilt
to join my sailors' footprints of petroleum
and drown my purist's soul in exasperated guilt.

ALEXANDER

My God! That rivets it perfectly!
Every cat hair and bone of OCD.
Feet first and all.

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

EMILY

I can't. It's gone.
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

I know the kind of dog shit you're talking about.

EMILY

Enough said.

ALEXANDER

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 did.

ALEXANDER

No. *I* did.

EMILY

You wish.

ALEXANDER

If wishes were horses

EMILY

Or flying carpets.

ALEXANDER

Or kitchen chairs.

EMILY

Did you know these two kitchen chairs of mine almost fell in love once?

ALEXANDER

What are you talking about?

EMILY

I used to imagine what it would be like:

To be one of these kitchen chairs, anchored in place, trying to raise a leg to bring yourself closer to the attractive, neighboring chair.

But here it stays, in a John Keats, Grecian Urn type tragedy.

Until two humans sit down.

And then there's a chance.

Like we're some kind of gods to them.

ALEXANDER

That's a magical chair!

I wouldn't trade a chair like that for gold.

EMILY

Not for a quart jar of gilded jumping beans?

ALEXANDER

Not for a trunk bursting with Mexican moon beams.

EMILY

Not for a rare arctic fox?

Atop a loaded pirates' box?

ALEXANDER

Not for 24 karat golden eggs with bagels and lox.

EMILY

Not for a dozen 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 learned how to fly.

EMILY

To meet ghosts from both sides now.

ALEXANDER

I knew a priest once, who met a ghost.
He came to the house. Father Keagan. I asked him to. Me! Call a priest!
And this is what he told me:
He'd seen the ghost actually from both sides, as you said.
The week before, in the rectory garden, on an 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 all things, like pipe tobacco.
"What's your business here, in our rectory garden?"

EMILY

What did the ghost say?

ALEXANDER

The ghost was silent.
"Are you from hell or purgatory, here to disturb our peace?" the rector asked.
To this the ghost replied: "Neither. The Earth is my haunt."
"Come, now. Everyone knows ghosts are either from purgatory or from hell.
One or the other. Schoolchildren all know that.
Even Hamlet's father knew that."
To which the ghost said something like, "Love did this to me.
In life it sucked me to the bone to leave me here, pale as I am."
"What love?" asked Father Keagan.
"Too great a love for women's flesh."
"Then that's your doing. Get thee gone."
"No," the ghost answered.
"You stubborn phantom. Get to judgment in a higher court than ours."
At which the ghost laughed heartily:
"There sits no higher court than yours.
No higher judge than your own doubting heart."

EMILY

What's that supposed to mean?

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

[*pause*] Alexander?

ALEXANDER

Yes?

EMILY

I'm afraid.

ALEXANDER

Of what?

EMILY

Of what I'm about to tell you will drive you away.

ALEXANDER

What's that?

EMILY

I'm not whole.

ALEXANDER

I'm sorry.

I don't know what you mean.

Am I supposed to?

EMILY

I haven't been telling you the whole truth.

ALEXANDER

Because you've been carefully beating around the bush?

EMILY

Yes.

ALEXANDER

I know.

EMILY

How do you know?

ALEXANDER

I know that kind of jazz when I hear it.

EMILY

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

I'm epileptic.

ALEXANDER

So?

I'm a contract to be murdered. You think that's any 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 the gutter, convulsing and twisting.

To be seen like that by strangers would mortify me.

The shame of it would kill me.

ALEXANDER

And *that's* what's condemned you to living like this?

EMILY

After my father died, it has.

He was always there to protect me before. Carry me away in his arms.

ALEXANDER

What a waste of a life!

EMILY

I told you that.

I told you my life's been a waste.

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

Okay.

ALEXANDER

You start.

EMILY

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

ALEXANDER

What would you do with your life, if you had a regular one?

EMILY

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

Or even lift one fainting robin back into its nest.

ALEXANDER

Then get outside.

EMILY

You, get outside.

ALEXANDER

And die? What hungry person does that feed?

EMILY

You don't know you'll die.

ALEXANDER

I've been told.
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 about at night? 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 if you have a fit.
No eyes of anything else watching you.
Nothing other than the moon, the stars, a few bats, and whatever octopus arms
there are that hold down the night sky.

EMILY

I don't get it.

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

Then take your own advice.

ALEXANDER

It's against my nature.

EMILY

The night is?

ALEXANDER

Yes, the night.

EMILY

But the night is *Nessun dorma!*
Remember?

ALEXANDER

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

EMILY

And *Madame Butterfly*, waiting through the night for Pinkerton.

ALEXANDER

Or *Grizabella*....

EMILY

I know! I know!
Memory. All alone in the moonlight.
I can dream of the old days.
Life was beautiful then.
I remember the time I knew what happiness was.
Let the memory live again....
I remember.

ALEXANDER

I'm not sure where this is leading.

EMILY

Back to my father.
I believe I can feel something like hope from him again.

ALEXANDER

There's a positive thought.

EMILY

Because of you.

ALEXANDER

Whoa! Wait a minute.

EMILY

My father told me that there's always time.

There's always been time.

Even before the beginning of time there was time for it to happen.

And I never understood.

**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

It's been good. May I come again?

EMILY

Is the Pope Catholic?

MARY

What have you two been talking about?

EMILY

Everything.

AARON

That's interesting.

ALEXANDER

And opera.

MARY

Opera?

Oh, of course.

ALEXANDER

I think we should write an opera.

EMILY

Oh, be serious.

ALEXANDER

I am being serious.

An opera for kids.

With flying carpets, and magical chairs that can touch, and animals that talk....

And a wizard.

Kids would love it.

What do you think of that?

MARY

I ... don't quite know what to think.

You've certainly been busy, haven't you?

ALEXANDER

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

AARON

What??

EMILY

I can just picture the children's faces.

ALEXANDER

And do you know what they'll say?

EMILY

No. What?

ALEXANDER

What took you so long?

ALEXANDER, MARY and AARON go to the door – ALEXANDER turning to take one last look at EMILY before they exit.

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 like some Die Hard movie script to me.
Are we serious?

ROB

The die's been cast.
It's *our* lives, or theirs.
The lives of our neighborhood, our wives, and our kids.

JOSEPH

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

AARON

I never thought

ROB

You know we can't afford to lose this. It's War!

ALEXANDER

I have the least to lose.
No wife. No kids.
No life, really, while they're out there.

ROB

That's a yes, I take it. Good Man!

ALEXANDER

[*pause*] Yes, it's a 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 brutal and heartless. Trust me.

JOSEPH

And there's no other way.

AARON

Why are you doing this to us?

JOSEPH

Me?

AARON

No. God.
Why is God doing this?

ROB

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 master it.
Or it masters you.

AARON

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

ALEXANDER

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

AARON

My whole life there's been this one question:
Who's the most important to me?
God?
My family?
Aisha and Josh?
Who would I risk my life for?
And now I know:
I'd risk my life for Aisha and Josh.
Absolutely. No question about it.

ROB

No question about it.
Your wife and child are number one.
That's what caring people do. They protect the ones they love.
That's what loving is all about, in God's way.
And that's what we, and our neighborhood are all about.

AARON

The only thing I can't wrap my mind around is:
Is it really necessary?

A knock at the door.

ROB goes to the door.

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

We have a new Protector to initiate, when there is time.

End of Scene 6.

**Between Scene 6 and Scene 7 a gun fight
occurs in a blaze, offstage.**

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 is on edge throughout.

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 animals. They're ruthless.
They're professional killers, hired by drug dealers to eliminate innocent people
who get in their way.
Rob said there were four of them, who'd killed maybe 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?

We **can't** lose him. **He can't be gone.**

MARY

I just hate this. It's too awful.

AISHA stands.

MARY and AKIKO stand as well.

AISHA

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

My poor man.

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

Begins walking about the room.

Why in Hell did we ever come to this neighborhood in the first place?

Your democracy was never our democracy.

It wasn't our fight.

AKIKO

It's all of our fight.

MARY and AKIKO try to put their arms around AISHA, but she pushes them away.

AISHA

The world's a shithole.

This neighborhood's a shithole.

We never should have moved here.

Our friends warned us not to.

AISHA sits down, still sobbing, her head in her hands.

**MARY and AKIKO remain standing,
looking at each other as if to ask: What
do we do next?**

AISHA

He was the kindest man I ever knew.
There's no other like him.
You lose a love like him, and it never comes again....
But who cares when a black man dies?
Who cares?

MARY

We care.
And we'll take care of you.
And Josh, too.
All of us will.
For as long as you need us.

Pause.

AISHA

Ali told us they were out there. To get *him*, he thought.
Like they did his father. And his grandfather. And his brother.
And he was so afraid to even leave his house.
And now he's alive and Aaron isn't.

MARY

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

AISHA screams.

AISHA

NO!!!

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 a good man.

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 killed.

MARY

To protect us, 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.
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. Forever brave through all that fear....
My God, Mary!!! Both of them.
The only two people in my life I trusted enough 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, until 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

He liked opera, didn't he?
Like you?
I thought he did.

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....
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 afraid 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 to save the neighborhood.
They were heroes. Protecting us.
And we'll never forget it.

[*beat*] We are given tragedies in life, I believe, 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