

BLACK FIRE

A Play by Ken Love

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CHARACTERS

RAMSEY

White Male. Mid-fifties. A cop.

LA'SHANDA

Black Female. Early thirties.

DRE

Black Male. Fourteen. La'Shanda's son.

DINA

White Female. Early fifties. Ramsey's wife.

PLACE AND TIME

A mid-sized city somewhere in the American South. Summer of 2021, one year after the death of George Floyd.

“You can’t make me do nothing but die!”

“Native Son”
Richard Wright

(Streetlights rise slowly on a darkened corner late at night. A young teenaged kid, Dre, is standing on the curb, waiting. After a moment, Ramsey – a cop – enters whistling Merle Haggard’s “Mama Tried”, stopping when he notices Dre. They eye each other. Dre suddenly reaches for a gun. Just as Ramsey is about to respond, Dre has drawn his weapon and is now aiming it at Ramsey. Sudden blackout)

(Lights rise on the backyard of Ramsey’s home, very early in the morning, still dark. Dina is reclined on a lawn chair, smoking, nursing a drink. After a moment, Ramsey enters from the house still in his policeman’s uniform, his shirt unbuttoned. He gives her a quick kiss on the cheek, then cracks a beer and sits. Dina stares at him)

RAMSEY

Is there a problem?

DINA

You tell me.

(Ramsey scoffs)

You *were* on patrol t’night?

RAMSEY

I sure as shit didn’t walk the dog.

DINA

We ain’t even got a dog.

RAMSEY

Precisely.

DINA

Anything out-of-the-way happen?

RAMSEY

Aside from scaring awake a drunk and cruising the town, nope. Nothing unusual at-all.

(Silence. Ramsey rises suddenly and kisses Dina again on the cheek. She doesn't respond)

DINA

What have you been into?

(Ramsey chuckles)

Don't laugh at me.

RAMSEY

C'mon, Dina. It's too damn early to be fightin' about shit –

DINA

I just wanna know . . .

RAMSEY

Whatever it is, figure it out for yourself. Then fill me in. Alright?

(Silence. He stretches, then sits)

Anything t' eat in there?

DINA

Haven't bought groceries yet. I'll go later on. There's some microwavable stuff in the freezer if you want it.

RAMSEY

You know how much I hate that shit.

DINA

So, order a pizza.

(Ramsey takes off his gun belt)

RAMSEY

Again – if it'll make y' feel comforted, the night was reasonably quiet.

DINA

Sure.

RAMSEY

I take it nothing eventful happened at Elva's. As usual.

DINA

Of course, not. When a cops wife is tending bar, folks behave themselves. Of course, if, by chance, something should light up, it soon diffuses when I put that look on 'em.

RAMSEY

The same look that diffuses me?

DINA

You bet your ass!

(Tense silence)

RAMSEY

Dina, what the hell is wrong?

DINA

I know you! *That's* what's wrong.

RAMSEY

Well, I'm sorry . . .

DINA

What happened t'night, Ramsey?

RAMSEY

Not a goddamn thing. Now please get off my ass.

(He takes a swig of beer. Silence)

DINA

You know what we ought to do? Move.

RAMSEY

Why?

DINA

I'm tired of this town.

RAMSEY

The town's done right by me.

DINA

For you, sure. But . . .

RAMSEY

If moving to the coast is what you want, we'd have nothin' t' look forward to.

DINA

Well, if we're planted in this God-awful city any longer, I'm scared we'll . . .

(Silence)

I'm going to bed. You coming?

RAMSEY

In a little bit.

(Dina motions to go into the house, then stops and eyes him once more. Ramsey ignores her and she exits into the house)

Sorry, mama. And fuck you, daddy.

(He hums "Mama Tried" as lights fade to half-light)

(Lights rise on La'Shanda's front stoop. She steps from the front door and sits down. She's talking on her phone. Ramsey is still visible, observing her)

LA'SHANDA

Well, when was you plannin' on coming back?

(Lights rise on Dre in DS limbo, dribbling a basketball and motioning an occasional shot)

DRE

I tol' you. In a minute.

LA'SHANDA

How long of a minute?

DRE

Wha' chu mean?

LA'SHANDA

I mean a minute with you is sometimes another hour, or thirty minutes, or whatever.

DRE

I'll be home in a while, mama.

LA'SHANDA

You know I don't feel right wit' you out this late. Not when you got school t'morrow.

DRE

Daddy never had a problem with it.

LA'SHANDA

Your daddy ain't here no more. Now get y' ass home.

DRE

Soon.

(Fade on Dre. La'Shanda turns off her phone.
Lights rise on Ramsey)

RAMSEY

Who was that?

LA'SHANDA

None of your damn business.

RAMSEY

Was it y' man?

LA'SHANDA

Will you please quit with that.

RAMSEY

With all we've been through, I thought you'd learn t' be civil with me.

LA'SHANDA

With all we've been through?

RAMSEY

You know what I'm talkin' about, *Low*-Shanda.

(Ramsey rises and approaches. She takes out a cigarette and a lighter. She is about to light the cigarette when Ramsey gently takes the lighter and does it for her)

LA'SHANDA

The name is *La*'Shanda. For the last time get the shit right.

RAMSEY

Okay. Don't get mad.

(He returns the lighter)

I bet you'd like to cuss me to a dog, wouldn't you?

LA'SHANDA

I already do.

RAMSEY

To my face, I mean.

LA'SHANDA

You ain't man enough t' take it.

RAMSEY

Try me sometime.

(He touches her face, then kisses her cheek. She allows this, yet is uncomfortable with it)

You hate me, too. Don't you?

LA'SHANDA

I don't hate nobody. It ain't Christian.

RAMSEY

Shit.

LA'SHANDA

Fuck you, Ramsey.

RAMSEY

Aw, come now! Why you got t' be like that? I'm the best friend you'll ever have. And don't forget it.

LA'SHANDA

How can I forget when I ain't had the chance?

RAMSEY

The fact that you let me in your house and wrestle wit' you in th' bed tells me I

must have somethin' on the ball, right?

(Silence. He strokes her hair)

Now tell me: who was you talkin' to a while ago?

LA'SHANDA

I'd rather not say.

RAMSEY

Did ya go on an' find yourself another man? This soon after losing Faze?

LA'SHANDA

Faze been gone a month.

RAMSEY

You done got over 'im, then? This soon?

LA'SHANDA

As he would have wanted.

(Ramsey laughs at her. Silence)

RAMSEY

'Course, not that it'd bother me if y' did come across somethin' else t' play with. It's just that I'm y' best friend. And now that y' man's no longer around, I'd like to know who my competition is.

LA'SHANDA

And if I did happen t' get somebody else to warm my bed at night, what would you do? Watch and take notes?

(Ramsey laughs)

I was talking to Dre.

RAMSEY

Dre? Out this late? Why ain't he home?

LA'SHANDA

Ramsey, please.

(After a moment, he acknowledges, then exits)

(Cross fade to the darkened street. Dre is dribbling

the basketball as he walks home. Ramsey notices and sets down the beer can, then tucks in his shirt)

RAMSEY

Out a little late, ain't you?

DRE

What's it t' you?

RAMSEY

Watch y' mouth. You know who I am. And it's gon always be somethin' to me.

DRE

I'm on my way home.

(Silence. Ramsey looks him over)

RAMSEY

Well, come on, now. Let's go! I ain't got all night.

(Dre empties his pockets, revealing a few dollars, some change, house keys, etc. Innocuous items)

Keep going. We ain't finished.

(He removes his shoes. Ramsey looks inside)

And them damn socks. Come on.

(Dre removes his socks, turning them inside out)

Good boy.

DRE

I keep saying – I don't have no dope.

RAMSEY

Well, I'm a cop, son. A white cop, at that. It's not in my nature to trust nobody.

(Dre scoffs, then begins putting on his socks and shoes)

Now I need to lay somethin' down: put the word out to all your li'l jungle bunny friends that deal shit, tell 'em not t' sell it around here. This territory is now spoken for. It belongs t' Bobby T. You got that?

(He nods)

Good. Now get your ass home.

(Dre laughs)

Something funny?

DRE

Jungle bunny? What, you done forgot how to say niggah?

RAMSEY

Believe it, or not, in spite of what I think of you people, I find the word distasteful. Now take your black ass home.

(Dre rises, takes up his basketball and exits. Ramsey picks up the can of beer and drinks)

“Mama tried, mama tried . . . “

(Crossfade to La’Shanda still sitting on the stoop as Dre arrives. She notices that he’s more than a little agitated)

LA’SHANDA

What happened?

DRE

I just knocked heads with that peckerwood Ramsey.

LA’SHANDA

He didn’t do nothin’ to you, did he?

DRE

He ain’t killed me.

(He sits beside her on the stoop)

He runs for Bobby T now. Yeah! He jus’ up and tol’ me. Like he knows I can’t do nothin’ about it. Muthafucker!

LA’SHANDA

Dre . . . go in the house. Go on.

(Silence as Dre rises and exits into the house,

leaving La'Shanda to her thoughts)

(Black out)

(Lights rise as Ramsey enters and knocks on La'Shanda's door. She answers)

LA'SHANDA

I told you to call first.

RAMSEY

Expecting somebody?

LA'SHANDA

That ain't y' business. And I'm not in the mood for no comp'ny.

RAMSEY

Quit talkin' at me like some chump. I ain't in a good mood, either.

LA'SHANDA

Then come back another day.

RAMSEY

What's wrong with right now?

LA'SHANDA

You wouldn't enjoy y'self much t'night.

RAMSEY

Are you sick?

LA'SHANDA

My disposition is in a bad way, yeah.

RAMSEY

Disposition? Where'd you learn them fancy words, girl?

LA'SHANDA

T' hell wit' you, Ramsey.

RAMSEY

I tol' you t' watch that goddamn tone! Now what the hell's wrong with you?

LA'SHANDA

It's that time of the month.

RAMSEY

Woman, that's the oldest lie in th' book. Can't you think of nothin' better'n that?

LA'SHANDA

Ramsey! Goddammit! Would you please leave my presence?

RAMSEY

Y' know, I'll never be able t' understand why you're so ashamed of me.

LA'SHANDA

I'm ashamed of myself. And Dre will be running up here after 'while.

(Dre enters. He approaches the door, then stops upon noticing Ramsey)

RAMSEY

Speakin' of which –

DRE

Wha' chu want?

RAMSEY

You need to keep this boy off these streets this late at night.

LA'SHANDA

I've talked to him about it.

RAMSEY

Yet the situation remains uncorrected . . .

LA'SHANDA

I'll deal with him. It ain't your concern, anyway –

DRE

Damn right!

(Ramsey is about to respond)

LA'SHANDA

RAMSEY!

(He stops. Silence)

RAMSEY

Alright. I'll go ahead an' stop by t'morrow, *La'Shanda*, if it's what y' want. In

fact, if it'll make your highness feel better, I'll even call before I visit.
Ya'll have a good night.

(He smiles as he exits)

DRE

How come he's here so much? And so damn late?

LA'SHANDA

Don't worry 'bout it.

DRE

I ain't playin', mama. Now what's up?

LA'SHANDA

It's a long story –

DRE

We ain't got nothin' but time.

LA'SHANDA

Well, I don't got nothin' to say about it –

DRE

I ain't a kid no more. Now be straight with me.

(Silence)

LA'SHANDA

He's not hurting me. So don't worry.

(She moves toward the door and exits. Lights fade)

(Lights rise in La'Shanda's bedroom where Ramsey is lying in bed. La'Shanda enters in a short robe)

RAMSEY

You clean y'self out good?

(She lights a cigarette)

I can't be havin' no bastard babies, now.

LA'SHANDA

I'm on th' goddamn pill. So shut the shit up.

RAMSEY

What in th' Sam-hell's your problem? Didn't we jus' make love? If that's so, ain't you supposed to be all warm and glowin'? Instead, y' turn into mammy-bitch on a hog! Won't I good to ya?

LA'SHANDA

Of course, you were. You put all lovers t' shame. I jus' got a lot on my mind.

RAMSEY

Come on over here an' let me ease that mind some more –

LA'SHANDA

Will you leave me alone? And ain't it time for you t' get back on patrol?

RAMSEY

Fuck you, then.

(He rises and begins dressing)

I surely feel sorry for the black man if all black wenches are like you.

LA'SHANDA

My black man is dead. By the hand of one of your own.

RAMSEY

As I've been tol'.

(He continues dressing)

I'll bet you wonder why in th' hell you haven't you gon on an' put a knife across my throat.

LA'SHANDA

I won't ever bring myself t' kill nobody. Even somethin' as low as you. Besides –

RAMSEY

It ain't Christian?

LA'SHANDA

Worse! My ass will go to jail. For killing some peckerwood cop. And what in the world can be as bad as that?

RAMSEY

Still, if somethin's on your mind . . . let's talk about it.

LA'SHANDA

Not with you. I got what I need t' keep comfort.

RAMSEY

Does it take batteries?

LA'SHANDA

You and your filthy damn mind!

RAMSEY

C'mon! I ain't no Mama Theresa. What th' hell d' you expect?

LA'SHANDA

You don't want me t' answer that.

RAMSEY

Well, what kind of comfort you talkin' about? Is it a man? If it is, ain't you got no respect for Faze?

LA'SHANDA

You see that Bible sittin' on the nightstand? That, officer, is my comfort. My mama passed it on to me before she died. And every so often, in spite of this life I lead, I do take the time to read it. You might think t' do the same.

RAMSEY

And if I did, I'd be a worse piece of shit than I am now. Trust me on that.

(He's finished dressing)

Well, could you, at least, deign to give this white man a kiss goodnight before he leaves?

LA'SHANDA

Man, will you please go? Before Dre get back?

RAMSEY

He's a big enough boy t' understand the world.

LA'SHANDA

And I want him t' see and understand as little of you as possible. Now, go!

RAMSEY

You might find this hard t' believe, but I'm on your side.

LA'SHANDA

I appreciate that, but –

RAMSEY

And I tol' you – I'm the best friend you got.

LA'SHANDA

I wish you would stop tellin' me that. It ain't nothin' but a whole lotta shit. And you know it.

RAMSEY

Now I'm feelin' insulted.

LA'SHANDA

All the more reason t' blow.

RAMSEY

With all I've done for you –

LA'SHANDA

Quit takin' it there, goddammit!

RAMSEY

It's been there, woman. *We've* been there. And until I say different, you're in bed with me. That's right! We done practically jumped th' broom, honey. Now it's not my fault that you gotta short memory, but let me remind you that you do, in point of fact, owe me.

LA'SHANDA

Ain't I done repaid you enough?

RAMSEY

Not by a country mile.

(Dre enters, unbeknownst to either of them)

LA'SHANDA

Ramsey, this shit has got t' end sometime.

RAMSEY

When I'm ready t' throw in the towel, I'll go to my corner and stay. Until then, we gon keep-a punchin'.

(La'Shanda notices Dre. Ramsey turns and sees him as well)

It's five minutes after 11 o'clock. You over an hour passed lock down.

DRE

This ain't your house. And you ain't my goddamn daddy.

RAMSEY

It's within your best interest t' teach this li'l punk some protocol on dealin' with me –

LA'SHANDA

Ramsey! It's time for you go!

(He eyes Dre, then exits. Silence)

Baby . . . after your daddy was killed . . . one night . . . that low down white man saved my black skin.

DRE

And for that you owe him?

(Silence)

How'd it go down? I got a right to know. Mama?

LA'SHANDA

All I'll say is that after y' daddy died . . . Ramsey, he – he left us the money.

DRE

You talking about the stash?

(She nods)

And what about the –

LA'SHANDA

He left us the money.

DRE

But what about –

LA'SHANDA

And I ain't up to tellin' no more! NOW I'M THROUGH WITH IT!

DRE

You got his cellphone number?

LA'SHANDA

What you want with it . . . ?

DRE

I need t' talk to 'im. Man to man.

(She scoffs)

What's the number?

LA'SHANDA

Dre, keep out of this –

DRE

But I'm in it!

LA'SHANDA

Dre . . .

DRE

What's the damn number?

LA'SHANDA

You ain't gettin' it –

(Dre reacts)

Ramsey will hurt you! Matter fact, he'll hurt us both if I don't see this through to the end.

DRE

In other words, he got you spooked.

LA'SHANDA

In other words, if you know what's good for you – for you *and* me – you'll let me deal with it!

(He exits. Blackout)

(Later that night. Lights rise on Bobby T's block.
Dre is waiting. After a moment, Ramsey enters)

DRE

I got your number from mama's phone. She wouldn't give it to me, so I took it while she was sleeping.

RAMSEY

I ought t' plug your ass where you stand, boy.

DRE

But you ain't gon do that.

RAMSEY

What'd stop me?

DRE

You somethin', man! You a fuckin' piece o' work . . .

RAMSEY

What'd I tell you about this corner?

DRE

I know what you tol' me. It's claimed by yo' niggah massah. Yeah! See, I figured the shit out. You Bobby T's eyes and ears. And at the top line of his payroll, too.

RAMSEY

That makes a pretty smart boy to've figured all that out. And now that the score is known, you got less than five seconds to cut or suffer the consequences.

DRE

Fuck you!

(Ramsey is about to draw his weapon when Dre suddenly pulls his, aiming at Ramsey)

RAMSEY

Well, ain't this the livin' end!

DRE

I brought you out here t' warn your cracker ass.

RAMSEY

What of?

DRE

You know what. See . . . I picked this particular location for th' fact that, yeah – it's Bobby T's block. And off th' track. That means there ain't no witnesses – nobody who gives a fuck. In other words, ain't nobody out here but you and me. Officer!

RAMSEY

I see. And tell me: where'd you get th' gun?

DRE

What's it t' you?

RAMSEY

I'm interested.

DRE

Let's just say I know folks.

RAMSEY

Sure, you do. Other dope peddlers, like y'self, right?

DRE

Man, I done tol' you, I AIN'T DEALIN' NO DRUGS!

RAMSEY

Don't shit me. As big of a player as your daddy was? You gon stand in them high priced sneakers and tell me you don't carry his stain?

DRE

Let's say he wiped me clean of it when he died.

RAMSEY

What? He didn't think the life was good enough for you?

DRE

That's right. And I gave him my word I'd stand up for mama. I'd have her back and her heart. To the death, if need be.

RAMSEY

I am impressed! Now where'd you get th' goddamn steel?

DRE

I tol' you, I know muthafuckers, aw'ight? Now you raise up off my mama. You leave her alone. Or I swear 'fore your white God, you ain't walkin' away from here.

RAMSEY

Is that so?

DRE

Don't test me, you asshole!

RAMSEY

You got stones for balls, boy, I'll say that! Ain't much in th' way of brains in that skull, but there sure as shit is somethin' heavy in them nuts. I am impressed. Yes, I am!

DRE

Fuck all that. Just leave my mama be. That's a warning.

RAMSEY

You do understand that I'm wearing a vest – a bulletproof vest. Right?

DRE

Ain't nothin' t' save that thick head, though.

RAMSEY

Unless the white God chooses to intervene.

DRE

God done cursed you, man!

RAMSEY

Boy, I am the last thing that would carry a curse if the God above is, in fact, white. The same white God, by the way, that y' poor mama prays to. She reads the Bible – you know that? And she prays, boy. Oh, yes Lord! She's also thankful. And grateful to her God and to me, the white man sporting a uniform of an officer of the law . . . the very white man that saved your mama's good-for-shit life. Did she ever tell you about that?

DRE

What if she did? It wouldn't make no difference.

RAMSEY

Two cops, just like me, was about to put a plug – each – in that womans skull. Trust me, I ain't talkin' out my ass.

DRE

Alright. So what?

RAMSEY

What's more, I gave her the stash.

DRE

But you kept the *dope*. And won't nothin' yours to give anyway.

(Ramsey laughs)

Muthafucker! Don't you laugh at me –

RAMSEY

ALRIGHT! Alright, look . . . if it's what y' want . . . I'll turn th' woman loose. Shit, I done got tired of 'er, anyhow.

(Dre is about to react)

Put th' piece down! I didn't mean it like that. I'll raise up off of the woman. For good. And go on about m' business. Just . . . lower that thing, will ya?

DRE

T' hell wit' you –

(Ramsey swiftly grabs Dre's hand which holds the gun, then subdues him)

RAMSEY

Sorry, mama –

(Ramsey then draws his weapon and shoots Dre in the chest, twice. Dre falls. Ramsey puts away the weapon and kneels by Dre as he writhes on the ground)

Now . . . I ain't got time t' go into a whole lot of detail, but I'll let this bit of information go: *I was the one who smoked y' daddy.* Now consider y'self privileged. Nobody knew that till now.

(Dre's movements eventually cease, and he dies)

I am sorry 'bout that, mama. And fuck you, daddy.

(Ramsey hums "Mama Tried" as he pulls out his police radio and calls in. Lights fade soon on Dre. A spot fades in on Ramsey who now stands in SL limbo. He replaces the radio in his belt holster and speaks toward the audience)

It was a good shooting. The kid drew first.

(A spot fades in on La'Shanda in SR limbo. She holds her Bible and also faces front and speaks)

LA'SHANDA

Just tell me the name of the swine who did it.

RAMSEY

T' tell you th' truth I have no idea. I don't know who he was, nor have I seen 'im before.

LA'SHANDA

What do you mean? It's my child. So, I have a right t' know!

RAMSEY

Well, actually . . . that's not so. I – I do recall seeing th' young man out after dark, a few times.

LA'SHANDA

My baby is dead, killed by some cop, just like you. And you ain't got th' decency to give me his name?

RAMSEY

I warned 'im not to stay out so late. Oh, yes, I searched 'im for drugs – you bet your hide, I did.

LA'SHANDA

Fine! You want me t' guess? Yeah, come t' think of it, I do “have fairly good idea.”

RAMSEY

These damn kids! Out after dark, lookin' for trouble. Their damn parents ain't got the decency t' take care of 'em. What's more, there's too many – way too many of 'em t' deal with, y' know?

LA'SHANDA

Oh, I'd be askin' f' trouble, huh? Well, wha' cha gon do about it? Arrest me? Smack me around wit' that damn stick? You gon taser me if I don't go somewhere and be quiet? Huh?

RAMSEY

Anyway, I – I talked to 'im for a while and got 'im to bring the gun down.

LA'SHANDA

Fuck ev'ry last one of ya'll! That's right, I don't give a shit! Yeah, I know who I'm talkin' to. *And I know who did it!* You damn right!

RAMSEY

So, well . . . he brought it down, and I was walkin' toward 'im when he – he

started to raise the damn thing up at me again.

LA'SHANDA

And get off my yard! GET THE HELL OFF MY GODDAMN YARD! You police ain't SHIT! NONE OF YOU! Fuckin' swine! Yeah, I know who it is! And I got his muthafuckin' number, too!

RAMSEY

Like, I didn't want t' do it. But . . . the damn punk left me no choice. It was either him or me.

LA'SHANDA

You hear that, Ramsey? MUTHAFUCKER! You hear that?

RAMSEY

Again, the shoot was good. Even if I do have regrets about it.

(Fade on Ramsey)

LA'SHANDA

I'm gon kill you, Ramsey! Peckerwood! Yeah, you damn cops hear that? I jus' signed th' death warrant on that man! You dead, Ramsey! DEAD! DEAD! Goddammit – dead . . . Oh, Lord!

(She breaks down and weeps bitterly. Dre's image appears in US limbo)

LA'SHANDA

Dre . . . Dre, baby . . . I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. And damn you, Faze. Damn you, muthafucker!

DRE

Daddy said a dope dealers days were as numbered as short money.

LA'SHANDA

He told you that.

DRE

He sold dope 'cause it was all he knew. But he believed I could do something else. He said when the time came for him to get iced, I'd be better served if I took his death like a man. He knew all along what he was doing. And wouldn't be no need for a whole lotta weeping and moaning when he got his comeuppance. "Turn your back on this shit", he said, "And turn your back on me."

(Still crying, she grasps her Bible)

And stand up for your mama.

(Fade on Dre as she weeps more)

LA'SHANDA

Jesus – Jesus, please! Forgive him! And forgive me! Oh please, Lord . . .

(The weeping soon diminishes)

“Turn your back on this shit!”

(She laughs, in spite of herself)

Oh, Faze. You'd say that, wouldn't you?

(Very slowly pulls herself together and rises. Still holding the Bible, she prays)

Lord . . . take my son. Wrap him in your arms, dear Jesus. Hold him. He's yours now. He ain't mine no more. I give my boy to you. And Jesus . . . Lord, curse that damn Ramsey. And curse me, too . . . for goin' along with that man. All this . . . it won't nothin' but my doing.

(Lights suddenly rise on Ramsey's backyard as he enters with a beer. Dina is sitting in the same lawn chair, smoking. La'Shanda is still seen in half-light)

RAMSEY

Go on an' say it.

(He sits and cracks his beer)

I'm sportin' that look again, ain't I?

(Silence)

I don't know what t' tell you, Dina. And I'm sorry if –

DINA

Who is she?

(Ramsey is incredulous)

Quit lookin' at me like I'm dumb. Just tell me who she is.

(Silence)

As said – I know you. For the past thirty-odd years you’ve been a cop, when it’s time for you to walk through that door from coming off patrol, you sport one of three looks: when all you’ve done is rouse drunks, move bums and lowlifes around, or pull some mean as hell husband off of his wife, you look tired. On those rare times when you’ve had to draw your gun, or – God forbid – shoot somebody, you look all agitated. And whenever you’ve had to deal in any way with those young black good-for-nothin’ hoods, you come home smiling, which, at the time, I was never able to understand. But now . . .

(Silence as La’Shanda exits slowly into her house.
Light fade on the scene)

Did she come on to you first? Did she seduce you? Or was this some piece of trim you did in the patrol car to keep outta jail?

(Ramsey laughs)

Don’t you laugh at me, motherfucker!

RAMSEY

You ‘bout to get called, woman –

DINA

How did it go down, Ramsey? I have a right to know. And do not tell me it was “nothing”.

RAMSEY

I won’t. All I will say –

DINA

I’m listening.

RAMSEY

You don’t want to hear the details. I’ll just say that it’s over with. I’m finished with it. And her.

DINA

In that case . . . if she made the first move –

RAMSEY

What?

DINA

I'll – I'll forgive you.

(Silence, then Ramsey laughs at her again)

Alright, I can't help myself. So, I'll play the fool. I'll be the goddamned fool and forgive you! NOW STOP LAUGHING AT ME!

(He stops)

I've – I've been around long enough t' know how women are. Especially some of these lowdown –

RAMSEY

No! Don't say it – don't let it come out of your mouth.

DINA

You want *me* to start laughing?

RAMSEY

What's your point, Dina?

DINA

Did she draw you in for money?

RAMSEY

What if she did?

DINA

Then it's okay, baby. She came onto you. She closed you in. And she trapped you. That breed of woman . . . they're good at that – all of them!

RAMSEY

That being said, how did you . . . ?

DINA

Don't worry about it. Some . . . scum took advantage of you. All is forgiven.

(She kisses him)

Mama'd been wrong. She hated you from day-one. But I knew better. She couldn't understand that all I needed was something to hold on to. And I'd found it. Mama saw you as another angry asshole who drew good women in and ruined them. I refused to believe her or tolerate such talk.

(Ramsey attempts to respond)

It's finished, baby. All of it. And we're not gonna deal with it anymore.
Now . . . as for that boy you had t' kill –

RAMSEY

That's done with. Self-defense. Case closed.

DINA

You're sure? I mean, that shit's not gonna rise up again and . . .

RAMSEY

They investigated and closed the case. Ain't nothin' t' worry on.

(Silence)

DINA

I'll say it again: we need a break. Let's go to the coast this weekend. In fact . . . in fact, let's pack everything and move. For good. I want us to get away! Soon. Now! We should do that, Ramsey. Or at least . . . we can think about it. Okay?

RAMSEY

I ain't gon run from nothin' –

DINA

Nobody's saying anything about running. I'd like it if we could get away. At least for a while. And maybe – maybe for good. I'd like a change. That's all.

(Silence. Dina exits into the house. Lights rise on La'Shanda's front stoop. Ramsey steps over into her yard. After a moment, La'Shanda opens the front door slowly, then steps out)

RAMSEY

If you got anything t' say t' me, you best speak in a civil tone. You can start hollering and crying, ravin' and rantin' like some wet hen if y' want to. Jus' know that I will run your black ass in for disorderly conduct and keep you locked up till I see fit t' turn you loose. You hear?

As for our little arrangement . . . I reckon it's time we put a stop to it. I've got tired of you. But t' show I ain't all heartless . . .

(He pulls two one hundred-dollar bills from his wallet and hands them to her)

. . . I b'lieve I ought t' give you somethin' for the trouble.

(La'Shanda does not respond)

Go on, woman. Take it! TAKE IT!

(Still no response. He throws the money on the ground)

And I'll have you know I have no guilt or remorse over what I did. That young punk of yours brought it on himself. He pulled a gun on me. And I had the right to respond in kind.

(Silence. La'Shanda steps down, picks up the money and hands the money back to Ramsey)

LA'SHANDA

Take your money and go, Ramsey.

RAMSEY

Come again . . . ?

LA'SHANDA

I'm saying I've – I've had a talk with God. A long talk. Now take your money and leave my presence. Please.

RAMSEY

Do you know it's a sin t' blaspheme?

LA'SHANDA

I know what sin is.

RAMSEY

You sure about that? After lettin' a married man – a married *white* man poke you ev'ry which-way for nights on end? Then having the gumption to say you've talked things over with God? What in th' hell is that?

LA'SHANDA

There is so much I have to account for. And I know I've got to repent. And to see to my child's salvation in the arms of the Lord. Yes, I talked it over with God, officer. I've asked forgiveness. *For myself*. And if He's gon extend any mercy to my dead son . . . and to me, I must – I must be humble. And try to make peace with it all.

RAMSEY

You ain't gon press charges or file a complaint, or nothing?

LA'SHANDA

It wouldn't do no good. And you know it.

RAMSEY

Well, take the damn money –

LA'SHANDA

I don't want it.

RAMSEY

You just gon stand there and let your child's death go unanswered, then hope t' pray it all away like some over the hill church mammy?

LA'SHANDA

I done made my choice.

RAMSEY

That choice is for shit! And I'm here t' tell you that if, by chance, there is a God, He's for sure ain't listenin' to no prayin' from you. Keep in mind, Miss, that you were married to the one of the biggest dope peddlers this side of hell's gate.

LA'SHANDA

That's right. All this was as much my doing as it was yours. I thought I could at least help my child and keep him from you, but . . . I'd been a fool.

RAMSEY

And now that you've seen the daylight, quit actin' as such and at least take this money. B'fore I get good an' pissed off!

LA'SHANDA

Ramsey, if you won't take this money back, I'll throw it in the garbage.

RAMSEY

Like the pathetic wench you are.

LA'SHANDA

At least I'll be free of you.

RAMSEY

And t' think I'd lived and seen it all.

LA'SHANDA

You ain't seen nothin'. Matter fact, you ain't as smart as you think.

RAMSEY

How's that?

LA'SHANDA

Man, I pity you.

RAMSEY

The last thing I need is somebody's goddamn pity –

LA'SHANDA

You might want to rethink that. I wasn't gon say nothin', but Pastor Frank Mills came by here yesterday.

RAMSEY

The pastor Frank?

LA'SHANDA

Yes, you've heard of him.

RAMSEY

Calling to the house of the woman of a dead purveyor of contraband . . . ?

LA'SHANDA

God can be good to everybody. Believe that, or not. Now, I told the pastor everything. 'Bout you, me – I didn't spare nothin'. He got the whole story. And do you know what he wants me to do? He said I ought t' go to the media – not the po-lice, but the *media* and repeat it all to them – that I was *forced* into this sexual burden, as he put it. And the officer that did so put two bullets in my son and let him choke on his own blood.

RAMSEY

The department has already cleared me of shootin' that boy –

LA'SHANDA

I also told him all of what my son knew 'bout you and Bobby T. And Pastor Mills said he knows of two investigative reporters – not here, but up north – who'd like nothin' better than t' work somethin' up over this. And once the truth hits them streets, shits gone get to rumbling. Things have been quiet for a time. A few years, in fact. But it won't take much to resurrect that hell all over again. Don't look at me like you don't know what I'm talking about.

Now I told the preacher, and I'm telling you, that I've spoken with the Father above. I've made peace. *For myself*. And I will keep the peace. It's in your best interest to accept that, officer. And leave me to my business.

(Silence. He takes the money back from her. She

turns to exit, and stops on hearing him speak)

RAMSEY

Since you're in such a state of pissful forgiveness –

LA'SHANDA

I ain't said nothing about forgiveness. I will keep the peace *for me*. This shit is still on your head. I'm just gon pray to accept this thing . . . as it is.

RAMSEY

For the sake of that boy?

(She nods)

If that's how it is . . . maybe – maybe you won't mind if I drop this on you: Faze, y' ol' man? . . . *I took 'im out*. That's right! Him and his brother. I tracked both of 'em down to that house just outside the city limits. And laid 'em down with a cap *each!*

So, what about it?

(She takes a moment and glares hatefully at him, then exits into the house)

I don't believe it! I JUST FUCKIN' DON'T BELIEVE IT!

(He laughs hysterically)

You dumb WENCH! Do you know what you did?

(He exits, laughing to himself. Blackout)

(Lights rise on Ramsey sitting in his backyard drinking a beer. Dina enters from the house)

You still set on movin' out to our house on the coast? For good?

(Dina nods)

And what if I wanted t' retire?

DINA

Retire?

RAMSEY

You heard right. Thirty-five years . . . I b'lieve it's time.

DINA

I don't know. Are you sure it's what you want?

RAMSEY

Oh, yeah!

(She smiles, hugs and kisses him)

DINA

Thanks.

RAMSEY

I'll put m' papers in on Monday.

DINA

When do we start moving?

RAMSEY

I want to be out there and settled in by the end of next month.

DINA

Next month . . . ?

RAMSEY

Why we got to lollygag around for? The sooner, the better. Let's not waist time.

DINA

What's got you so happy?

RAMSEY

What? Can't a man be happy every once in a while? When he ain't drunk? And I ain't drunk.

DINA

Listen, I know "drunk". I work in a bar, for goodness sakes.

RAMSEY

Well, if it'll suit you, I reckon I'm just in the mood t' be happy.

(He kisses her)

Now I got an idea: when we get out there, let's think about openin' up a little bed & breakfast. Something for the college kids during the summer.

DINA

And I can still tend bar. I know some club and restaurant owners out there.

RAMSEY

Sure. Sure. We can do that.

DINA

Good! And thank you, Ramsey.

RAMSEY

I b'lieve you were right. This is just what we need. Get outta this godforsaken town. And breathe some clean air for a change.

DINA

I can't wait.

RAMSEY

This town's gon t' shit, anyhow. I mean, at least, when it was a town, in the true sense of the word, things were fairly decent around here. Then, by golly-goddamn if we didn't have t' start growing. Before long, this won't a town no more. We've now become a mid-sized city. With all the bad trappings.

DINA

Which you were, no doubt, benefitting from. Admit it.

(Silence. Ramsey eyes her)

But, no more. Right? Once we're gone?

(Silence)

You're putting in your papers next week?

RAMSEY

Monday morning.

DINA

And after that . . . when we're gone, you're done with the police?

RAMSEY

I'll still draw a pension –

DINA

But there'll be no need to put that damn uniform on again?

RAMSEY

Maybe not . . .

DINA

Maybe?

RAMSEY

Will you quit dancin' and say what's in your head.

DINA

Ramsey . . . I didn't have the nerve to say this before –

RAMSEY

Get the nerve, goddammit. And say it.

DINA

I'm glad you're retiring because – because I've come to hate the fact that you're a cop. Lately, I truly despise it. And I'd been so scared to . . .

RAMSEY

What is it you know?

DINA

You need me to tell it?

RAMSEY

I need t' hear it, yes.

DINA

Listen . . . when the papers go in, will you –

RAMSEY

I'm cuttin' all that loose.

DINA

Are you sure you can do that?

RAMSEY

What's gon stop me?

(Dina scoffs)

I'm serious –

DINA

You're fulla shit, Ramsey. And I should've known.

RAMSEY

Dina, when we're gone, it will be done with! And I'm through talkin' on it –

(Dina is about to respond)

I said ZIP IT UP!

(Silence)

DINA

One more thing – I . . . I want to burn that uniform.

RAMSEY

What?

DINA

You heard me.

RAMSEY

Have you lost your mind?

DINA

I just want to be happy and have a new life.

RAMSEY

And how is burning my uniform supposed to –

DINA

It's my way of being finished with it!

RAMSEY

You ain't burnin' my goddamn uniform!

DINA

I want it gone!

RAMSEY

To hell with you. And if I see you put your hands on that uniform –

DINA

You'll WHAT?

(He motions toward her aggressively)

RAMSEY!

(She gives him a look and he stops. Silence as he tries to control himself)

RAMSEY

Dina . . . my uniform, I can't –

DINA

Shh.

(She embraces him)

I want nothing between us anymore. And nothing to corrupt us. Ever again. Please, baby. Please.

RAMSEY

You don't understand. My daddy . . . you know how hard a man he'd been. We never saw eye to eye on nothin'. Nothin'! Until I became a cop. And I swear t' God, things between us changed . . . when he beheld his son in that uniform.

DINA

I don't mean any disrespect, but your daddy is dead. Now, please.

(Silence)

RAMSEY

If there's gon be any burnin' . . . I won't be around when it's done.

(Dina exits into the house. Lights fade)

(Lights rise again on Ramsey's backyard. It's late at night. He's drunk and pulling from a bottle of good whiskey. "Mama Tried" is heard from the house. A pistol and two clips are on the table beside him)

You said I'd not amount to a lump on a horses behind, didn't you, daddy? But I proved you wrong, you ol' fucker. I beat you, daddy! Worse than if I'd beat you with my fists or with a goddamn brick!

Sorry, mama.

(He hums. Dre's specter soon appears in limbo)

You just had t' bow to my newfound manhood when I shined that po-lice badge in your face, now ain't that right? You son of a bitch! I swear t' Jesus if you didn't shrink about two or three inches that day.

(He laughs, then notices Dre)

What the hell is this, boy? Get off my property!

(He takes up the pistol and aims at Dre)

I said MOVE IT! NOW!

(Ramsey fires, and the image vanishes)

I warned you, boy. I warned you –

(Dre is seen again at a different end of the stage)

What? You want some more? Huh?

(He fires and Dre vanishes. Ramsey laughs)

Come on, boy! Come an' get it!

(Dre appears again and again at various points onstage. Each time Ramsey fires, the image disappears, then re-appears in a different area)

Here's another one – for you and your mama!

(Fires again)

That woman'd be as dead as you if it won't for me.

(Ramsey reloads and continues firing)

You dumb-ass little shithead. Do you know what would've happened if I hadn't stepped in and did that bitch a favor? Your young ass ought to be good an' goddamned grateful. The powers that be would've tossed your black hide into a group home, and – boy – in this state, for a young punk your age, you got no clue what a rabbit hole is once you've been through that.

(Dre appears. Ramsey fires)

They tied your mama up, boy! Goddammit, they were gon gut her like a hog then

shoot ‘er dead if she didn’t tell them where your daddy hid the scratch and the contraband.

(Dre vanishes)

We all just had to know where he kept the spoils of war!

(He fires into the air. Dre appears)

I’ll be damned if them two bad ass cops didn’t almost beat me to the punch.

(Dre vanishes, then reappears in a different area)

I felt sympathy for ‘er, son. Believe it or not, this good-for-shit peckerwood had a touch of empathy for that poor woman.

(Ramsey fires, the image vanishes)

I saved that lowdown wench!

(Again, he fires)

You ungrateful asshole! *Sorry, mama* –

(He finally fires his last bullet when Dre’s image vanishes for good. With this, we hear an abrupt, blood-curdling scream from Dina, who runs onto the backyard from offstage, shaken and terrified)

DINA

Your uniform. You said I could burn it. You told me it’d be alright to burn the damn thing! YOU SAID THAT RAMSEY!

RAMSEY

What is the matter with you, woman . . . ?

DINA

The fire! Look at it! LOOK AT THE FIRE!

(Dina points offstage. Ramsey looks)

It – it’s *black*, Ramsey! THE FIRE IS BLACK! Why? Why is the fire *black*?

RAMSEY

Goddamn –

DINA

WHY IS THE FIRE BURNING BLACK?

(Blackout)

(Lights rise on La'Shanda's front yard. Ramsey enters with a rifle)

RAMSEY

La'Shanda! Goddammit, get y' ass out here! NOW! B'fore I start actin' like a cop an' come in after you. LA'SHANDA! I ain't gon ask again!

(La'Shanda enters from the house. She is well-dressed, having returned from her sons funeral)

You went ahead an' buried that li'l punk t'day, I see? Maybe the ground'll do what neither you or I could do for 'im.

LA'SHANDA

What do you want?

RAMSEY

I'd like t' know something: now that y' been resurrected into such a peace loving soul, did you take it up with y'self to pray for me? Or did you decide to chuck all that an' slap a curse on this jive peckerwood? And his wife?

(No response)

Answer me, goddammit!

(Still response. He aims the rifle at La'Shanda)

What is it you want? Tell me what you need for me t' do. Say it all! Right now! Or I swear t' God Almighty –

LA'SHANDA

You gon shoot me?

RAMSEY

I am not gon live my life in torment. I refuse t' let you or that damn boy drag me to hell.

LA'SHANDA

Officer –

RAMSEY

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME, LA'SHANDA? WHAT? You want me t' turn myself in? T' go to the goddamn press? Is that it?

LA'SHANDA

Understand that you ain't got nothin' I want.

(He cocks the rifle)

RAMSEY

Don't you shit me. Everybody wants somethin'. And everybody has got a price. Now talk. C'mon! Say it!

LA'SHANDA

Shoot me. Go ahead.

RAMSEY

I will.

LA'SHANDA

So, go on. Do it.

RAMSEY

I'm warning you. Like I warned that boy o' your'n.

LA'SHANDA

And I done heard the warning. I just ain't heard no gunshot yet.

RAMSEY

Quit playin' with me, girl.

LA'SHANDA

Ain't nobody playing.

RAMSEY

Stop it. Now!

LA'SHANDA

You just gon stand there all day and talk?

RAMSEY

You stupid little – GODDAMMIT! DON'T PUSH ME!

LA'SHANDA

White asshole! If you gon shoot somebody, gon and do it! Your damn daddy

wouldn't have had no problem with it.

RAMSEY

Leave that man out of this!

LA'SHANDA

Done killed my son's father. Then took m' son. Now finish the damn job.

RAMSEY

Alright, you want me to apologize?

LA'SHANDA

I want to see you pull that damn trigger.

RAMSEY

You're asking for it!

LA'SHANDA

And I'm still standing here –

(Ramsey screams in anger, then throws the rifle down)

What's wrong, Ramsey? Why is it so hard to shoot me, too? Done took out both men in my life like two flies in the wind. How come you can't do the same to me? You can get away with it. Like everything else.

(Silence. Ramsey appears shaken)

Can't you, Officer?

(Silence)

Why didn't you shoot me, Ramsey?

(He vacillates, struggling emotionally, then suddenly falls to his knees before her)

RAMSEY

That word . . . that goddamn word . . .

LA'SHANDA

Niggah?

RAMSEY

With all the contempt I have for you folks . . . I can't bring myself to say it. Why is that? WHY?

The goddamn Feds . . . Ya'll didn't know they were on to us, did you?

(La'Shanda listens)

The dealing and what-not goin' on . . . every cop involved and on th' take in this town . . . we got t'gether to make a plan t' head off the FBI. I mean, they was fixin' t' do us in. The same way they brought the house down in Atlanta. And you know what the clincher was? We got word that th' Feds wanted th' po-lice more than them goddamn dealers. In fact, they were even willing t' bargain with all them big-time dope peddlers for information on us, who they wanted t' nail as bad as man wants to nail his woman.

Faze was ours. We tol' Faze t' leave town. Disappear for a while. If he won't around, them mutherfuckers'd have nobody to grind about us. But that ungrateful black asshole, he won't buyin' it. And he won't movin'. He said he won't runnin' for or from nobody, that this shit was on th' cops head, not his.

As far as we were concerned, that meant that the situation had t' be escalated. The plan was t' track 'im down, arrest his ass, then *do 'im*. Simple and clean! And alleviate the issue. We located 'im at that black nightclub ya'll like t' hang at. The plan was t' go in, make an arrest, drag 'is ass out, throw 'im in a car, then drive out and end him! Simple! Only, we won't countin' on 'im havin' most of his crew that night. They made us first. Some dumb ass drew a gun. And it was on! Faze, though, seemed to get passed all the shootin' and chaos. And escape.

I made the decision t' take it on myself to do the job. I put out the word, trailed th' network, then found Faze an' his brother at some house passed the city limits. I showed up at night and did 'is brother on the couch while he was watching TV, then did Faze as he stepped outta th' bathroom.

That's all of it. And it is the truth.

LA'SHANDA

It's finished, then.

(He nods)

I didn't like what Faze was doing, selling and using dope. None of it sat right with me. But he was my man, won't he?

Ramsey . . . officer, if you want this load of your head –

(He rises)

RAMSEY

What?

LA'SHANDA

You don't need nothin' from me.

RAMSEY

I won't live in torment!

LA'SHANDA

We both got to live with it. This shit was our doing. And we got to deal with it . . . or just die.

RAMSEY

That's it?

LA'SHANDA

I'm afraid so.

RAMSEY

That's . . . that's all of it?

LA'SHANDA

Yes. Now gon 'bout your business. And . . . and leave me alone.

RAMSEY

Leave you alone?

LA'SHANDA

I'm through with it.

RAMSEY

La'Shanda! . . . La'Shanda, please . . . I –

LA'SHANDA

Goodbye, Ramsey.

RAMSEY

Well, then . . . then . . . fuck it. And fuck you, La'Shanda! FUCK YOU!
And fuck you, daddy.

(La'Shanda pauses for a moment, then exits into her house. Ramsey remains in place. Soon the specter of Dre enters from behind the house. The two face one another, waiting. Dre then slowly raises his arm and points a finger at Ramsey, as if aiming a gun. He smiles, then laughs at Ramsey, who stares without responding)

(Lights fade. End of play)