

DANCE INTO NIGHT

A Play in Two Acts

by Ken Love

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CHARACTERS

JAMES LASSITER

Black male. Late twenties. Ex-football player. Handsome, well developed, yet slender.

WALTER LASSITER

James' father. Black male. Late fifties.

DONNA

White female. Mid-forties. Very attractive.

MIA

Black female. Early twenties. Shy, petite, sultry.

ALYSSA

White female. Early twenties. Donna's daughter.

A TENOR SAX PLAYER is heard offstage at specified times.

THE SET

Three platforms. USC platform portrays business offices, as well as US limbo. DSR platform is the bedroom of James Lassiter. DSL platform is Mia's room in a large old house, consisting of a bed, a crib, coloring books and crayons strewn about the floor, etc. (Note: the audience never sees the child inside the crib) Action also takes place in the DSC open space between DSL and DSR platforms.

THE PLACE

Somewhere in the American south.

THE TIME

Possibly the PRESENT, or the PAST.

for Paul Carter Harrison (1936-2021)

ACT ONE

(Lights up as Walter rushes into his office. He stops to catch his breath, then moves quickly to his desk and takes out a bottle of liquor and a glass. He pours a drink, gulps it down, then does the same with another. He is trembling. He stops suddenly upon pouring a third drink)

WALTER

Smokey? Where you at? C'mon, now! This ain't no time t' leave a man by himself. Where you at, Smokey? Man, c'mon! It ain't over yet –

(Sax riffs and melodies creep in, filling the environment)

That's right! That's it! I ain't gon nowhere.

(He drinks, relaxes, listens)

Keep goin'. That's the way! Let it ride on it. Oh, yes! You know what a man wants, don't you? Yes, now! You know just what I need . . .

(James enters. Music stops. Walter, distressed again, is aware of another presence. He turns and is calmed when he sees his son)

Come on in, boy. Siddown. Have a drink with y' ol' man.

JAMES

What's the matter?

WALTER

Nothing. Siddown.

(James sits)

Go ahead. Have a drink. Come on, now! Liquor ain't foreign to you . . .

JAMES

It's not the liquor – dad, what's up?

WALTER

Oh, I'm fine. I . . .

(Silence)

That crew we put Braxton in charge of – how they working out?

JAMES

Alright, so far.

WALTER

It's gon take a while before he can prove himself.

JAMES

Nothing to worry about.

WALTER

Braxton's a good man.

JAMES

All the more reason not to worry.

(Silence. Walter drinks)

WALTER

Lotta new business coming in. With the way this town is growing . . . we'll be set for a while. Might need t' hire another crew. Look into that for me, alright?

JAMES

Sure.

WALTER

Go on, son. Have a drink.

JAMES

I can't . . . I gotta be getting back . . .

WALTER

Oh, yeah – yeah . . . that's right.

(Silence)

So . . . are you happy? I mean, are you satisfied – in running the business?

JAMES

I'm growing into it.

WALTER

Good. 'Cause the thing is . . . this'll all be yours . . . after I'm gone.

(James is taken by this)

I've been watching you these past few years and I believe the time will be fit for you to take charge . . . after I'm gone.

JAMES

Thanks.

WALTER

The more I step back and look at things, I got t' confess it's been good having my son here. And I never had the chance t' tell you how fine a job y' been doing. It makes me proud –

(He's hit with a sharp pain. He begins to stumble. James helps him)

JAMES

DAD!

WALTER

It's alright.

(The pain subsides)

JAMES

Let me call an ambulance –

WALTER

NO! Ain't no need for that . . .

JAMES

But dad –

WALTER

I said there ain't no need! I'm alright. Let me sit here for a bit. And I'll be fine.

(Silence as he gathers himself)

Alright, I . . . I need t' say this: when I'm gone, run this place like it was yours. Make it grow. Make our name grow. Stand firm, son, on *our* piece of the world. You hear me?

JAMES

Yes, sir, but –

WALTER

Something else: I want it known that y' mother . . . she cared about you. I know it's hard to believe, but I know what I'm talking about. Be assured of her love. Trust me on that.

One more thing –

(He's hit with more sudden pain. James reacts to his father as sax riffs bound in and dance furiously)

I still hear you, Smokey! I'm with you! That's right! THAT'S RIGHT! Keep me with you . . . don't stop! Smokey! YOU BET' NOT QUIT NOW! . . .

(The noise ebbs, then dissipates. His pain is gone. Long silence as he settles, then pours himself another drink. He takes some of it down, then looks at a photo of his wife, which is on the desk)

This woman, your mother . . . she never did me wrong. When I first met 'er, she took every bit of eyesight I had. And this same woman would've blinded me to death . . . if I'd allowed it.

(He drinks. Silence)

A couple of years before y' mother passed on, I . . . there was a girl. That's right. And this child stirred feelings in me that I didn't think a man had any business having. It got so good that I put 'er up in a place to h'self – the great big house off Route One where ol' man Barnett used t' live and went crazy – know where it is?

(James nods)

Well, I picked out a room and cleaned it and fixed it so I could move this girl of mine on in. And I been taking care of her. Which means, I'm the one who 'tends to 'er groceries, shopping and what-not. When I pass on, though –

JAMES

What do you need me to do?

WALTER

Make sure she gets what she needs. Check up on 'er once in a while. And . . . sit with her. When you can. Alright? . . . What's the matter?

JAMES

It ain't important. And if there's nothing else to say, I got shit I need to get done.

WALTER

Take that edge out y' voice when you talk t' me, boy. And get that holier-than-me look off y' face. You, the same as me, have been kicking up a good piece of dirt more often than once. So quit lookin' at me like you doesn't know what I'm talking about –

JAMES

Wait a minute! I was called in here on what I thought was urgent business – I get here and see you damn near drop dead – *TWICE!* – from what looked to me to be a heart attack – I wanted to call a doctor – I was told *No, all was well* – to which I get fed me some story about a woman you poked behind my mothers' back – and, now, I get my business thrown in my face –

WALTER

SON, I'M DYING! And I ain't got but a little bit of time to set my house in order.

Y' know that truck we just leased? Earlier today I got one of the men t' run me to the dealership to pick it up. I got there, signed the papers, picked up the keys, and sent the man on back. I'm driving along when I soon came across an accident – up by the railroad overpass – a three car collision. Son, it was a mess. Paramedics, cops . . . blood . . . all over the damn place. Now, one of the cars was on fire, and the fire . . . the fire looked to burn the sky out – this black cloud gathered over and around everything. I started feeling pain – just like I was feeling a few minutes ago – in m' heart. I figured . . . maybe it was from taking in all that smoke. I rolled up the windows and tried to pull out . . . look for some other route back. Things got so black, though, I dared not move –

(He feels pain again, though not as intense)

No, no – I'm fine.

(Silence as he settles)

After a while, sitting in that truck . . . the pain digging through me . . . it got to where I couldn't hear nothing but the beating of my heart. It got loud. And everything got swallowed up in that loudness. And then I . . . *I saw your mother*. I know how it sounds, and I might be a little touched, but the Lord knows – *I ain't blind!* I know what I saw! She just stood in the midst of all that smoke and noise and . . .

(Silence)

Listen, take over for the rest of the day, huh? I think I . . . I need to go home.

(James nods)

I believe it was time for you to come back here. Those dreams I had of you playing football . . . and being the next Jim Brown – y’ know, when I met Jim Brown –

JAMES

I get told that same story about a hundred times a year.

(They laugh tentatively. Silence)

WALTER

Just the same, I was willing to support that, but . . . having you stand before me now with nothing but breath in body – it’s enough!

(Silence)

JAMES

What’s the matter now?

WALTER

How long *are* you planning on letting that woman ruin you? I’m not trying to get in nobodies business, but . . . I just can’t see why you want t’ stick your neck in a trap for a piece of trash like Mills Conley’s wife.

JAMES

I can run my shit, dad.

WALTER

In other words . . .

JAMES

I know what I’m doing –

(Walter begins to respond)

I’ll be fine.

WALTER

Alright. I won’t get into it. Not now.

(Walter exits)

(Lights rise on Donna, who is sitting on James’ bed smoking a cigarette. James enters, takes the

get to know each other better.

JAMES

Wouldn't that be asking for trouble?

DONNA

When we're already neck deep in it?

JAMES

What? You think Mills knows something?

DONNA

I haven't the vaguest clue as to what troubles that man's mind. He can go days without breathing so much as a sentence at me.

JAMES

And what about that damn Velma?

DONNA

Don't sweat it about her. She's sworn to secrecy.

(She kisses him, then looks at her watch)

We've got less than an hour now. Do you want me to go?

(He takes her in his arms. They kiss again, then part and slowly begin undressing, afterwards nestling beneath the bed covers. James appears distraught)

What's wrong, honey? Are you getting tired of this?

JAMES

No.

DONNA

Not starting to feel guilty after all this time, are you?

JAMES

I sure as shit ain't feeling any guilt.

DONNA

Well, whatever it is, it's making you look pathetic.

(A kiss)

Take it easy. Huh?

(They pause, then gradually relinquish themselves to the act)

(Cross fade to DS limbo. Walter enters with a bottle of liquor. He is drunk)

WALTER

Once more, Smokey. Just one time more.

(Sax music creeps in. He sits and savors the music)

When I was fourteen years old, when all around me fell dark, I started a fire . . . then watched it get angry and burn itself alive! White hot! It's when I first saw you. Them flames was high and lickin' away that dark. And Lord! Man! You played and danced like you'd took the devil and beat the breath out of 'im. And I danced with you. I didn't care. I was gon dance that night – all night – if I had to. 'Cause I got something from you – something new that was gon stay new. Something that'd soothe me. Still me. Then carry me on to the arms of death . . . when the time was right for it.

(Music. Specters in darkness. Riffs)

Look at 'er, Smokey. That same woman still dancing in the same fire I made so very long ago. Look at 'er stepping . . . dancing . . . across them bones. And listen to her laughing – a laugh that'd drown away y' music if you didn't play so well. Oh, yes! I know you, woman. You laughed at me then, you laugh at me still. But I got even! Didn't I? Just as sure as the living devil, I got even!

(He takes a drink)

And here's my wife, sittin' before me just as calm as late daylight air. That tear . . . Lord knows the sight of it would kill me if that smile wasn't set so naturally on her face. I've always loved you, woman. I just . . . I was weak, is all. You can't blame a man for that Can you . . . ?

(He suddenly feels great pain. Music stops)

Go ahead and cry – I ain't sorry. You hear? Cry all y' want, but I ain't sorry. I was a fool – I'll go ahead and accept that, but I won't wrong. As much as I gave you – ought've been glad for your husband, in takin' a little something more for himself. I ain't sorry. What I got t' be sorry for? That'd make me a bigger fool. Truth is I enjoyed myself with that girl. Yes, I was a fool! But I ain't sorry –

(More pain)

Lord! . . .

(Walter is now gasping. Lights up on James putting on funeral clothing: dark suit, et al)

. . . Have mercy on Mia. Please . . . don't let nothing befall 'er. Watch over . . . my li'l Mia.

(He dies)

(Fade on Walter. Fade in on James, fully dressed. He enters Mia's house. She is sitting on the floor coloring in a coloring book)

JAMES

Hello.

(She rises quickly, startled)

It's alright! I'm – I'm James Lassiter. You don't know me. I'm Walter's son. I've . . . got bad news. The day before yesterday, Walter, my father . . . passed away. Now, he wanted me to let you know nothing will change. You can go on staying here for as long as you like. Are you alright?

(She nods)

You're a real pretty girl.

(Silence)

I just got back from the funeral and . . .

(He notices the crib. He looks at Mia, then back at the crib, then back at her)

Is . . . is that a baby? I meant . . . there's a baby in the crib, right?

(She nods)

And . . . is the baby . . . yours?

(She nods)

Which makes that baby –

(Again, she nods. James sits. Silence, then – suddenly – Mia moves quickly to the crib and rocks it, as if she is trying to calm the child)

What's the matter . . . ?

(James steps over, looks inside, and is immediately repulsed – horrified – by what he sees)

Oh! DAMN!

(He shudders and moves away. Silence as he gathers himself)

I'm – I'm sorry –

MIA

It's aw'ight.

(She hums softly to the child. Apparently, she has calmed it)

I'm . . . th' only one can hear her.

JAMES

Really?

(She nods)

How old is she?

MIA

She jus' turned five.

JAMES

Five!? She looks newborn. Is . . . is she in pain?

(Mia shakes her head)

She was born this way, wasn't she?

(She nods and wraps the child in a blanket, takes her out of the crib, and cradles it in her arms)

It's all on me, now, ain't it ol' man?

(Silence)

I guess you'll be needing stuff for her. I mean . . . well, what does she eat?

MIA

She don' eat much –

JAMES

It's okay. I'll take care of it.

(She shows him an empty can of baby formula)

That's it? Fine. I'll come back with some baby formula. Anything else you need?

(She shakes her head. He exits)

(James enters the office, opens a desk drawer and takes out the same bottle of liquor and the same glass as did Walter. He pours a drink, sits and toasts)

My father.

(He drinks)

Why didn't you tell me? Is this supposed to teach me something? Or do you even give a damn as to what happens now? I guess it comes down to just one more thing I won't be able to run from.

(Walters specter emerges US, unbeknownst to James)

Why didn't you tell me?

WALTER

Did you see Mia?

JAMES

You said nothing about a baby!

WALTER

You was gon find out –

JAMES

DAMN YOU! What did you leave me with? That baby, that poor baby . . . in that great big ol' house – What in the hell did you leave me with?

(Fade on James. Walter crosses over to Mia, who is sleeping)

WALTER

I delivered this baby myself, son. And it was as if . . . Lord help me! If I hadn't known better, I'd swear y' mother put something on 'er t' get back at me. And the truth is, I did give that woman, sweet as she was, cause enough t' work some kind of spell.

(He looks with longing upon Mia)

I can love you now. Death can hide me and make it safe for me to love you . . . and this child.

All them clothes I bought you, when y' gon wear some of 'em? You'll have t' put something on the next time James comes by. I'll bet when he sees you in those sharp dresses . . . it'll do something to him. Like it did me. Might even pull him away from that woman.

(James is in his bedroom. He pours another drink. Soon, Donna steps in, somewhat tipsy)

I got 'er once, and I'd hoped to keep what had happened with me in my grave.

(Donna and James embrace)

As things look, though, she's gon force my hand again.

(He fades away)

DONNA

I stayed away for a while figuring with your father gone, you needed time.

JAMES

I appreciate it.

DONNA

You gon be alright?

JAMES

Yeah. Listen, I don't want to deal with it anymore. Okay?

DONNA

In that case . . . let's go dancing.

JAMES

You know I can't take you nowhere –

DONNA

Yes, I do. But I'd still like to go anyway. With somebody. It's one of the things I miss about m' first husband – he loved to dance.

JAMES

Why don't you get Mills to take you dancing?

DONNA

Mills doesn't like to dance.

(He finally notices her condition)

JAMES

You been drinking?

DONNA

I just got back from a barbeque where I think I swilled a little too much beer and one too many whiskey shots. On returning to the home front, I didn't feel like retiring to my husbands' bed, and since I needed to get out of the house – *again* . . . I told Mills I had a headache and that I had to go to the store for some aspirin. Before I left, though, I went through the house and gathered up every bottle of aspirin I could find.

(She empties her purse of two or three bottles of aspirin)

I wouldn't want m' little husband to suspect anything, now – would I?

(She giggles, then reclines on the bed)

Oh, James! Honey! I wanna go dancing! When I get to feeling like this, all I want to do is dance! Dance! DANCE –

JAMES

How much time we got?

DONNA

I can stay gone for a half hour.

JAMES

You sure?

DONNA

I know my husband.

(Music rises. Donna stands and beckons him. He takes her in his arms, and they begin dancing slowly amid riffs and sweetness)

The only time I could feel anything like love for my first husband was when he'd dance with me. He'd hold me. And move me. With his body. And I would hear music, like this music, sweating out of his life. Sweet, hot music. If only you'd heard it, James.

(They kiss and continue dancing. Music. Riffs. Soon, Alyssa fades in)

ALYSSA

I smell her . . . all over you.

(James notices her yet continues to dance)

We had the whole house to ourselves. Didn't we? Then mommy walked in on us. Remember that?

JAMES

Alyssa –

ALYSSA

Be still. And for a few little seconds recall how everything froze. And how she stared at us. She didn't look surprised, or mad. She only . . . looked.

(Donna laughs)

Then, I kissed you on the cheek. And what did I say?

JAMES

You said . . . *don't stop, James.*

ALYSSA

And mommy shut the door. And left us to our business.

JAMES

Yeah. She did.

ALYSSA

That day was special. In more ways than one.

(Alyssa fades as James breaks gently from Donna.
Music also fades)

DONNA

What's the matter?

JAMES

Have you . . . heard anything yet?

DONNA

From who?

(Silence as James stares)

I told you. We don't speak.

JAMES

That's a shame.

DONNA

Well . . . I live with it.

JAMES

I guess she's been in my head.

DONNA

Why? It's not like you owe her, or that little bastard of hers anything –

JAMES

Stop it.

DONNA

Well, honey, I'd say it's a fairly apt term. Considering it's what they call a child without a –

JAMES

And I just said don't call him that. Not in my damn house.

DONNA

Is there something you want to tell me?

(James laughs derisively. Silence)

Alright, I'll acknowledge – she got back at us. Ten years in making it her business to keep us distanced, not only from herself, but from that child. Neither of us have pictures, no knowledge of a birthday . . . my God! We don't even know his name, do we?

Let's do ourselves a favor and not resurrect the thought of her again . . .

(James scoffs)

. . . Please?

(Silence. She prepares to leave)

And I am sorry 'bout your father. You'll miss him but you'll run his business well. Walter Lassiter. We all had our suspicions.

JAMES

What of?

DONNA

Oh . . . nothing.

JAMES

But –

DONNA

It's nothing at all. Just the liquor in me. Cuttin' up.

JAMES

My father had heart.

DONNA

Of course, he did, honey. When the dream of playing football went the way of the wind, and when you came crawling back home, other than myself, your father was the only mortal soul who comforted you. Who, in his own way, saved you. He was good to you while he was here. And it's all you need to be concerned with.

(She kisses him, then exits)

(Walter appears, carrying a bottle of liquor)

WALTER

The next Jim Brown! Y' know, I met Jim Brown – back when he'd left playing football for Cleveland t' be a movie actor. Saw 'im at a little club outside of L.A. Him and some woman – might've been his wife. Anyway, me and Jim got t'

talking – that’s right! Jim thought enough of your old man t’ sit and hold court with ‘im. Anyway, like I said, me and Jim went on talking, and pretty soon his woman perked up right in the middle of our little chat and threw her half-a-cent in. Jim got this scowling look, turned to that woman and shot back at ‘er: *I don’t recall nobody asking your opinion!*

(They laugh)

That was Jim’s way, see. He wasn’t too refined around his women. You couldn’t touch ‘im on that gridiron, though.

(He places his arm around James)

Now, listen: when it comes time t’ play, I want you doing right by every stretch of that scholarship. And don’t ever be coy about what God has given. Don’t act like y’ need to hide it from nobody. You hear?

(James nods and they embrace. Walter fights to control his emotions)

JAMES

I’m not gon fail you, ol’ man. *That’s a promise.*

(Alyssa appears and watches them)

WALTER

I think I hear your mother. C’mon! Let’s tell ‘er.

(Alyssa smiles as Walter exits. James remains to observe the action between Alyssa and Donna, who enters)

ALYSSA

So . . . it means yes, right?

DONNA

It means I’m not sure – I’ll think about it.

ALYSSA

What’s the problem?

DONNA

Do you know exactly what you’re getting into?

ALYSSA

What are you afraid of?

DONNA

That's the wrong question to ask.

ALYSSA

Just let me bring James over. You'll meet him and see –

DONNA

No.

ALYSSA

Mommy!

DONNA

No. Now, don't make me repeat it.

ALYSSA

I knew I should've gone to daddy first.

(Silence)

DONNA

Alright. Invite him over. I've changed my mind.

ALYSSA

Really? I mean . . .

DONNA

He can come over.

ALYSSA

Okay, but . . . Will you make him feel welcome?

DONNA

Sure. I'll even make dinner.

ALYSSA

Thanks –

DONNA

Save that. When it's all said and finished, you will find yourself on the bad end of this. And, just so you're aware, that – my daughter – is the reason for the change in my decision.

ALYSSA

To prove a point?

DONNA

Why don't I go ahead and extend this invitation myself so your boyfriend will feel confident he's . . . welcome.

(Alyssa exits while Donna and James glare at one another. Walter enters gravely)

WALTER

I talked to the coach. Wanna know what he said?

(Fade on Donna)

JAMES

No, but I'm about to get told anyway.

WALTER

He said if you'd concede being in the wrong, he'd put you back on the team.

JAMES

And is he doing this as a favor to me, or to you?

WALTER

Son, I'm trying to help . . .

JAMES

Just stay the hell out of it.

WALTER

Boy have a mind about y'self –

JAMES

Or, what? You gon hit me?

WALTER

I don't want you going through life regretting nothing.

JAMES

I won't. I'm gonna be a man and deal with it.

WALTER

There's a difference between being a man and giving in to foolishness.

JAMES

Oh, I'm a fool now?

WALTER

That's not what I meant . . .

JAMES

Well, what did you say to the coach about getting in my face and blaming me for that upset?

WALTER

He had every right t' be mad.

JAMES

BULLSHIT! That chump from the other team pushed me right into the sidelines.

WALTER

Still, it won't no reason to . . .

JAMES

Again, I could not keep respecting myself as a man if I'd just let myself be pushed like that.

WALTER

There was no cause to hit 'im and get thrown outta the game. You could've been more . . . I don't know, sportsmanlike about it.

JAMES

In other words, turn the other ass-cheek.

WALTER

Go back and talk to the coach, son.

JAMES

Are you telling me?

WALTER

I'm trying to say there's a bigger picture –

JAMES

Which is the picture according to that damn Coach O'Neal! No, dad. Coach O'Neal has got a bad habit of getting in your face and cuttin' you down like some boot camp grunt. And when I hit him, I did what everybody on the team had been primed to do right from day one. Yeah – we lost the game. I regret that, but – number one – I was pushed! And – two – Coach O'Neal had no business blaming

me for the shit. And – three . . . he should've stayed out of my face. He was disrespectful. And I'll be damned twenty times over before I crawl back to . . .

WALTER

Ain't nobody asking for that. I only want you to see the future that's been set for you.

JAMES

On other words kiss ass and make up.

WALTER

That ain't no way to look at it.

JAMES

Is that what you tell yourself to make shit easy?

(Walter suddenly hits James, knocking him down.
After a few beats, James rises)

See what I'm talking about? Now tell me *you're* sorry.

(Walter tries to settle himself, then exits. Alyssa fades in)

In spite of it all, though . . . I'd heed my fathers word and step into Coach O'Neal's office hat-in-mitt to tell that white man I was sorry. And he'd give me this look that said he'd known all along he'd had my balls.

He went on and let me come back, but just to let it soak in, he made me heat the bench for two games. And when I finally got to see some action, I played good. Damned good! And through what was left of my college career, if you'd asked me, or anybody who followed the game, I was doing fine.

But, when the NFL draft picks came around, for some karmic reason, I was passed over.

(Walter enters and sits)

I didn't even make the last round of the draft.

WALTER

And do you know why?

JAMES

Should I?

(Walter scoffs and chuckles bitterly)

What?

WALTER

I bet I know why them NFL big shots turned y' down.

JAMES

C'mon. That shit is long over with.

WALTER

It don't excuse the fact that y' got stupid and too damn big for y' underpants, now does it?

JAMES

And what makes you so goddamned sure of –

WALTER

Hittin' that boy on the playing field and hittin' the damn coach won't sit right with – boy, look at me when I'm talkin'!

JAMES

Quit calling me boy.

WALTER

I've always prided myself on calling 'em like I see 'em. And the way I see it, manhood ain't something God just bestows on you like your color – you earn it. *Boy!* And what's worse is that I look just as poor. I'm ashamed! *Boy!* And it ain't right for a grown man t' be this ashamed. I swear t' goodness, I ain't been this ashamed since . . .

(Silence)

I reckon if there's anything t' be got from this, it's that you've still got a whole lot t' learn. But I don't know who in the hell's gon waste God-given precious time trying to teach you anything.

You broke your word and failed me. *Boy.*

(Walter exits. Silence as James struggles to hold on to himself)

ALYSSA

Are you okay?

JAMES

I'm dealing with it. *How's he doing?*

ALYSSA

Your son is fine.

JAMES

Good.

ALYSSA

Derrick has grown to love him. In fact, right from the start, he wanted to accept him as his own.

I'm having another baby. Derricks this time.

JAMES

Oh, yeah?

ALYSSA

I think it'll be a boy.

JAMES

Another boy?

ALYSSA

Sure. Why not?

JAMES

Are you happy?

ALYSSA

Sometimes.

JAMES

Does Derrick treat you right?

ALYSSA

Sometimes.

I want you to know I haven't told anyone – including my mother – that he's yours because Derrick wants it that way and . . . because I've forgiven you.

JAMES

I don't need to be forgiven.

ALYSSA

Of course not. Who am I kidding.

(Alyssa exits as lights fade)

(Cross fade to Mia dancing to sax music. James enters with a grocery bag of baby formula. Mia notices him and stops dancing. Music also stops)

JAMES

Hi. I brought baby formula. It's what the little girl eats, right? How is she doing?

MIA

She aw'ight.

JAMES

And how're you doing?

(She nods. James looks around, then sits)

Looks like my dad fixed this place up well. This part of it, anyway. Had time to look at the rest of the house yet?

(She shrugs)

Ever get scared living in this big place? Y' know the man who lived, Mr. Barnett . . . word is he went crazy in the house. And died here.

(Silence)

Well . . . what do you do with yourself? To like . . . pass the time? Anything?

(She hands him one of her coloring books)

You like to color, huh?

(He sees the colored pictures torn from coloring books and hung on the wall)

I'll have to bring more of these. And how 'bout some crayons, too?

(Silence)

So: you sit around the house. Color. And take care of the baby. All day.

MIA

I . . . I sing.

JAMES

Oh, yeah?

MIA

Um hm. Church songs.

JAMES

Like gospel songs? That's nice.

MIA

I list'n to the radio . . . on Sund'y. An' . . . an' I like t' sing wha's on th' radio. I like it . . . I like it when th' . . .

JAMES

You like to listen to the choir? And I take it you like to sing along with the choir?

(She nods)

Think you could sing something for me? C'mon. Sing one of those songs you hear on the radio for me. Go ahead.

(She struggles, then relents, shaking her head)

Okay. Some other time. And, one day, maybe, we could go somewhere. You and me. And . . . the baby. Is she able to go out?

(She shrugs)

I guess you never tried to take her anywhere, huh?

(He takes a moment to observe her)

I see why my father wanted you. You're beautiful.

(He rises)

I'll be back tomorrow with those coloring books. Anything else you need?

(Silence)

I'll see you, then –

MIA

Walter . . .

JAMES

What?

MIA

Walter say . . . he say you usta play football.

JAMES

That's right.

MIA

He say you was a star.

(James laughs)

JAMES

Yeah. Even though I never made it to the pros. I was gonna be great, though – a star! I'll see you later . . .

MIA

Walter say you *was* great.

JAMES

He said that?

(She nods. He sits again)

What else did my father say? About me?

MIA

Lotta stuff.

JAMES

Like what?

MIA

That you an' him . . . was jus' alike.

(Again, James laughs)

And he tol' me . . .

(Silence)

JAMES

Go on.

MIA

He say . . . when it's time f' him t' go . . . he say . . . you was gon step in his shoes. An' he say I would know when you was ready.

JAMES

Ready? For what?

(She approaches him seductively)

MIA

He say . . . I should help you. He say you worry him.

(She stands behind him caressing his shoulders)

He say "James needs somebody. A woman – a *good* woman. But when . . . when a good woman shows herself . . . he make it his bus'ness t' run off – "

(James rises)

JAMES

That's bullshit!

MIA

You remember me, don't you?

JAMES

Remember? How should I . . .

MIA

You saw me. Wit' Walter that night.

JAMES

Wait a minute –

MIA

I saw you . . . lookin' th'ough th' window . . .

(She indicates)

. . . Over there. That night . . . you followed Walter here. An' looked . . . th' whole time Walter was havin' me. He didn't see you . . . but I did.

(She stands before him and slowly peels out of her clothes)

I didn't care if you looked. Walter always say a boy . . . ought t' want what his father has.

(Still standing, she is now naked)

It's aw'ight. Don't be scared. This is jus' what y' father wanted.

(He motions to touch her when Walters specter flashes briefly in front of him. He sees it and is startled)

JAMES

I can't. No . . . I have to –

MIA

You been waiting a long time f' this, James. Ain't no cause bein' scared.

(She leads him to the bed, sits him down, then coaxes him to lie back. Then, she straddles him. Walter fades in again. Upon sighting him, James vacillates. Then –)

JAMES

Fuck it.

(He submits. Walter watches his son and Mia in the throes of passion as sax riffs swirl and undulate about the stage.

Lights dim on James and Mia, then intensify on Walter. He smiles, then laughs to himself)

(Slow fade on Walter. Lights rise again. The act complete, James is now buttoning his shirt, fastening his pants, etc.)

I need to get back. So much shit to do. I mean . . .

(He looks at Mia)

What in the fuck is wrong with me? I'm sorry, it's not – DAMMIT!

(He looks around, walking through the house)

Ol' man! WHERE YOU AT?

(His voice echoes. Silence)

Please . . . *Do not torment me!*

(Silence)

I . . . I need to get outta here.

(He starts to leave. Mia rises, stops him, and abruptly kisses him on the cheek)

Don't do that again.

(Slowly, she parts from him, then steps to the crib and rocks it gently)

Listen, I won't be coming here anymore. But I'll still see to it that you never go without. I'll send somebody else by to . . . y' know, to take care of things.

(He jots something down on a business card)

This is my home number. And this is the office number. If there's a problem . . . call.

(He exits. Fade on Mia)

(He enters his bedroom where Donna is waits, smoking a cigarette)

DONNA

I want to leave him.

Mills came home from work early today. He wasn't feeling well. So, he went to lay down. After a while, I went in the bedroom and sat beside him on the bed. His eyes were closed, but he was awake and aware of the fact that I was in the room. *Can I get you anything?* He didn't answer. He just laid there. Like he wanted me to go away.

Mills is a good man. An honest man. But I can no longer tolerate him. These days, when he tells me he loves me, I get irritated. And today, for the first time in our marriage, he ignored me. And it scared me. And even though I was scared, I laughed. I just didn't think it'd ever be possible for the man to scare me.

James . . . I want to leave him.

JAMES

Where're you planning on going?

DONNA

I thought about that.

(She approaches him)

This doesn't have to be a secret anymore. I want to free myself. I want to love. Freely. And I want to dance.

(Music rises)

And I want everyone to see us dance. I don't care anymore. I'm so tired of life. I'm sick to death of wanting and begging. I want to love! I want to dance!

(They begin dancing slowly)

And if things don't work out for us here, we can go somewhere else. We can move away. I don't care. I only want to be happy. And I can make you happy, too, baby. Right? James?

(She laughs)

It's okay, honey. You're a young and not supposed to know what to say about how you feel. That's fine. I'll take care of things.

(Dancing, music)

Oh, that's good! Oh, yes! This feels so good. Don't stop. Please!

(Riffs. Dancing)

My first husband used to do me like this. Did you know he made love to me on the dance floor once? While we were dancing? Did I ever tell that? Oh, baby! You wouldn't have believed it! He didn't care a wit if anybody looked. He had to have me. Right there. And I let him. And it was good. So, so good.

(Music ebbs, then stops. James pulls away from her)

JAMES

What do you want from me?

DONNA

Come to think of it . . . perhaps it's not a question of what I want, at all.

(James is incredulous)

Ask yourself, James, if you can keep on in this way much longer. And if you believe you can run off and forget me.

JAMES

Donna . . .

DONNA

There's something hanging over you. Like a bad smell. It weighs on you, baby. What you want is someone who will take some of it away. Someone who will come at that time of night when God turns His back and leaves the world to its wicked business. Someone who will let you have your way and do whatever it takes to keep you from cracking.

(She kisses him deeply)

Now, let's go somewhere. Together. Me and you. Next weekend. Let's . . . let's go to the lake! Let's stay all weekend. And I'll teach you to swim, like I said I would –

(She glances at her watch)

Goodness! Time doesn't stand pat.

(She prepares to leave)

I've got to run to the house for a few minutes and check on Mills. He might be over his little sickness. And if he is, he'll be wanting supper. I'll be back in a bit. That is, if it's okay to come back?

(He nods)

You're a beautiful man, James Lassiter. I could love you. Deeply.

(Donna leaves. James pours a drink. Soon, the sax bleeds sound into the room)

JAMES

Dad? Is that you?

(Walter appears in US limbo, dancing slowly and fluidly to the music)

What is it? What's wrong? Are you worried about the business? Don't! It's okay. Braxton's working out fine. As I said he would.

(Walter continues to dance. The sax is now more intimidating)

Dad! Stop this! Please! DON'T TORMENT ME!

(Walter vanishes and Alyssa stands in his place. James takes a moment, then resumes pouring the drink)

ALYSSA

May I . . . ?

(He hands her the glass. She sips and savors the liquor)

You've got good taste in liquor. And I guess you're wondering how in the world I came to know good liquor from bad, right?

(She giggles, then finishes the drink)

I want another.

(He refills her glass)

Maybe, if I drink enough, my mothers' smell you seem to unwittingly carry around won't bother me so much . . .

JAMES

Goddammit, Alyssa!

ALYSSA

Shh.

(She covers his lips with her hand, then kisses him deeply. Afterwards, she caresses his face)

To think there was a day when I was so crazy about you . . .

(Donna appears)

. . . And completely unaware as to how much of a fool I'd been. I was a girl, yes – I realize that, but my Lord! I'd been so foolish.

DONNA

I hope we made this worth your while.

ALYSSA

I should never have put you before my mother.

DONNA

Although, it would've been nicer . . .

JAMES

How were you to know, Alyssa?

DONNA

. . . since you're going away to college . . .

ALYSSA

That's right! How in the hell was I supposed to know?

DONNA

. . . if we could have given a bigger send off.

(Alyssa moves US and observes the action)

JAMES

Everything was alright.

DONNA

I wonder what Alyssa will do with herself when you're gone. Are the two of you planning on seeing each other? If so, what kind of future do you have in mind? With my daughter?

JAMES

I don't know . . .

DONNA

Haven't you thought on it at all?

JAMES

I guess not.

DONNA

Oh? Then, what exactly is this . . . ?

JAMES

Come again . . . ?

DONNA

. . . Well?

JAMES

That's something I need to decide . . . I mean, Alyssa and myself – look, we ain't even that far along to be talkin' this future shit anyway . . . I'm sorry –

DONNA

So, this isn't serious?

(Silence)

She's crazy about you. And she'll probably get even crazier when she finds she can't have what she wants. At least, not in any real sense. Yet, I never approved of this. And I reckon I ought to be grateful for the fact that it was never serious. That is, as far as you were ever concerned.

JAMES

What makes you think I won't grow to like her more? In fact, I could end up falling in love with that girl.

(Donna laughs)

Look, I don't know what I'm being taken me for, but –

DONNA

I take you to be what you are, James. And thank you for helping me to see – within the twinkling of an eye – that men really are all alike. Despite the difference in shading.

(James starts to exit. Donna stops him)

And I only have one more question: why Alyssa? What's so special about her? I ask because – one – I suspect she's not the only mare in your stable and – two – I think she knows yet tolerates it.

JAMES

Why was I asked here?

DONNA

It was a favor to my daughter. I wouldn't broach the idea of someone like yourself into my mind, let alone my house.

JAMES

If you want me to quit seeing her, give the word and I'll cut.

DONNA

In a small way, you remind me of my first husband. The one difference being that

whenever it came time for ‘im to pounce on a woman other than his own, I swear, there wasn’t a coy note in that man’s tune.

(She shows him a wound in her hand)

Look at this: my first husband did that. With a gun. He was the kind of man who lived to poke under every skirt he’d see while I stayed home and played the part of the long-suffering spouse. One day, when I’d finally had my fill of his shit, I pulled a gun on ‘im. And the bastard laughed, snatched it from me, then shot me. In my hand. He told me if I was gonna pull a gun, at least I ought to learn how.

My mother nearly lost her head in trying to dissuade me from marrying him. But, at the time I knew it all. And what I put that woman through was as close to criminal as I ever want to get.

I don’t like or trust you, Mr. Lassiter. And, come to think of it, I would appreciate it if you stopped seeing my daughter.

(Donna exits)

ALYSSA

And you should have heeded her word and even been cruel about it, James. There’d be an excuse to hate you.

(Donna re-enters)

DONNA

Alyssa’s not here.

(James walks by her, “entering” the house)

JAMES

I ain’t looking for her.

DONNA

Then, what do you want?

JAMES

You think you know it all, huh?

DONNA

I know better.

JAMES

No, you don’t. What’s more, I’ll quit seeing your daughter when I’m ready.

DONNA

What do you see in her that you can't get from somebody else?

JAMES

Maybe it's not about her anymore. Maybe I just want to sit back watch you.

DONNA

Don't play with me, James.

JAMES

I'm not. I'm daring you.

DONNA

Are your balls big enough for that?

JAMES

You tell me.

DONNA

The truth is, from where I stand, you seem kinda dickless.

(James laughs)

Sure! Laugh! But it won't get any better. Alyssa is just a girl – just as easy as candy. But one of these days, you'll come across a woman – a real grown-up – who's as foreign to easy as a rabid bull is to being civil: she'll stand in your face, lock you down with her eyes, and match you pound for pound.

JAMES

And there ain't but one grown-up on this bastard earth who could play that role.

DONNA

You disgust me.

JAMES

And you ain't doing me no favors, either.

DONNA

GET OUT!

JAMES

Or, what? You gon call your husband? Or the sheriff? Or your next-door neighbor?

DONNA

I don't scare so easily. And if I were to lose my head and trot down that road, I'd make sure you'd never live to squeal about it.

JAMES

You're a married woman. It'd be a sin to walk that road, wouldn't it?

DONNA

I've never believed in sin. Which makes me a world of trouble, James Lassiter.

JAMES

Or a lotta fun, depending on how you look at it.

DONNA

Trust me, it could never be fun.

JAMES

And I'm supposed to be scared by that?

DONNA

It'd scare me.

(He starts to exit)

What are you running from?

JAMES

Nothing. And I sure as shit ain't scared.

DONNA

Then, why the trembling? Shaking like a spooked alley cat. Am I the cause of this?

(She touches him)

My, my! To think I still have what it takes to make a man tremble.

(Their stares lock upon one another as Alyssa crosses into James' bedroom. She pulls back the covers – preparing the bed for the two of them – then stands off to the side as James and Donna enter. Alyssa continues to watch the action)

It's awfully quiet. Dead, even.

JAMES

The folks are outta town for the weekend.

DONNA

I see.

(She sits on the bed)

Tell me the truth: how many innocent souls have been slain on this thing?

JAMES

None. I don't bring girls here.

DONNA

So, I'm the first?

(Silence)

Y' know, since I've been married to Mills, I usually like to take a few drinks. That way, I'm more than a little numbed. And there's no need for a whole lot of effort.

JAMES

Are you saying you don't like it anymore?

DONNA

I could like it again. I want to like it. Again.

(She rises, turns her back to him and begins to undress. She notices Alyssa, yet continues to disrobe)

That boyfriend of yours put up a pretty good facade at dinner. I won't be cruel, but . . . well, you've known him long enough to be aware of the kind of boy he is, I suppose.

(Stripped to her bra and panties, she sits on the bed, still looking at her daughter)

I'd tell you what's good for you, but – in your eyes – listening to your mother would be like taking strychnine. Ergo, I won't say a damn thing.

(Fade on Donna)

ALYSSA

That Sunday afternoon, James . . . I was so in love. When mommy walked into my room and caught us, I almost laughed. Not 'cause it was funny, but . . . I was in love. And I didn't care.

(Donna fades in, dressed)

DONNA

Then do me a favor: the next time you decide to put out for this boy, do it someplace else. I won't have it in my house.

ALYSSA

Sure, mommy. In fact, since you've been putting out enough for both of us –

(Struck by this, Donna is about to respond)

How I came to it isn't important. Just tell me how long you were planning on –

DONNA

I won't answer that. The only thing I will say is that you had this coming. I warned you about him. You refused to listen to me. And now you've ended up like every other woman who's been left with nothing.

ALYSSA

Well, look at this! I expected you to lie or deny it. Instead, I have the privilege of hearing my own mother . . .

DONNA

He never gave a rat's tail for anything, Alyssa. From the start you had nothing.

ALYSSA

And, having said that, what do you expect to get out of it?

DONNA

None of your business. And if you want to hate me, go ahead. I don't care.

ALYSSA

That would satisfy you, wouldn't it?

DONNA

Like I said – I don't care. None of this means a damn thing to me.

(Donna fades out)

ALYSSA

And before it all became . . . nothing . . . I'd kept our afternoon in a deep and special place in my life: in my mothers presence, a little flame had ignited between us – our child. Why that look? She may as well have been right there . . . watching us.

But like she said – it's nothing. Now stop worrying.

(Slowly, she begins to fade away)

JAMES

I will. I'm not gon let this – or you, get next to me. I'm gonna live with it 'cause *I'm a man!* You hear me, Alyssa? I'M A MAN! What the hell do I have to worry about? And what the hell do I have to be sorry for? I'm a man! And I'm not sorry for shit!

(She is gone, absorbed completely into the darkness. Sax music intrudes as lights fade)

(End Act One)

ACT TWO

(Walter emerges from the darkness)

WALTER

Look at ‘er, Smokey.

(Donna fades in)

Remember the corner joint back where I was raised? And that piece of trash who used t’ flit through every now and again? She looks just like ‘er. She got around to a lot of ‘em, didn’t she? And ruined some, too. Got a few sent to jail. Even had one killed.

(Fade on Walter. Lights rise on James, in bed, asleep, and tossing from a nightmare. Donna stands beside the bed)

DONNA

Hello, James. My name is Donna. I’m Alyssa’s mother . . .

(Mia’s voice is heard)

MIA

James! Come quick! My baby! It’s growing! James! . . . My baby is growing! . . .

DONNA

. . . I’d like to congratulate you on the scholarship. And before going off to college, Alyssa, her father and I would like to invite you over for supper tonight –

MIA

JAMES! MY BABY IS GROWING!

(He awakens suddenly. Donna vanishes. There is only silence as he takes all the time he needs to calm down. After a bit, Mia appears)

MIA

James? When you comin’ back t’ see me? Don’t be scared. Can’t nobody do you no harm.

I’m thinkin’ about you. Matter fact, I ain’t stopped thinkin’ of you. I dream about you, too. Dancin’ wit’ me . . . in the fire . . . your daddy made f’ us.

(Walter appears again amid sax melodies. He takes Mia in his arms. They dance slowly)

WALTER
I want you t' do something for me.

MIA
What?

WALTER
My son. Help 'im.

MIA
What c'n I do?

WALTER
Plenty.

MIA
But . . . you his father.

WALTER
He won't listen to me.

(They dance)

MIA
Walter?

WALTER
Hm?

MIA
You fixin' t' leave me?

WALTER
I'm gon have t' leave sometime. You know that.

MIA
But, where –

WALTER
A man does get old, Mia.

(She laughs)

What's funny?

MIA

I . . . I thought –

WALTER

I'd found somebody else?

MIA

Or . . . maybe . . . you wanna be wit' y' wife.

WALTER

Don't worry 'bout her.

(Lights fade on the two of them and intensify on James. The sax blows as if it is calling him)

JAMES

Dad? . . . Why are you still on my ass? Go away. Leave me alone. Do you hear? I said leave me alone! *AND GO SIT IN THE HELL THEY MADE FOR YOU* –

(The harking sounds of the sax suddenly become sharp, reverberating riffs that cut into James. He is in agony, tossing and writhing on the bed. After a moment, he stops, as if having been suddenly alerted to something)

Mama!?. . .

(The noise ceases, and he rises and runs into Mia's house and calls out to her, his voice reverberating within the walls)

I hear you! I swear to God, I HEAR YOU!!!

(He finally confronts Mia who stands awaiting him)

I heard it! I HEARD THE BABY!

(He looks inside the crib)

She cried. And then she called me. That's right! This child spoke to me. She called my name. What's wrong with her? Did something happen? . . . ANSWER ME!

MIA

It – it won't her.

JAMES
What do you mean?

MIA
She didn't call you.

JAMES
I know what I heard, Mia.

MIA
But it won't her.

(He is about to respond, but stops upon seeing her touch her abdomen)

JAMES
Oh, Jesus! What the hell is this about? What the hell is goin' on? What are you trying to do to me – WHAT!?

MIA
Ain't no need to worry. Not no more.

JAMES
See . . . that's where you're wrong.

MIA
Wha' chu mean?

JAMES
If there's a baby . . . he won't live long enough to crawl from your insides – I'll make sure of that.

MIA
You hush! If Walter heard you –

JAMES
Goddamn Walter!

MIA
You ain't got no business talkin' 'bout him in such a way as that. He your father.

JAMES
Fuck him.

MIA

He love you, James. An' it's a sin t' –

(He starts to leave)

No, James – WAIT! Listen t' me!

JAMES

Turn me loose.

MIA

Walter only wanted to –

JAMES

I don't want to hear it.

MIA

You got t' hear this . . .

JAMES

I ain't got to hear nothing!

MIA

But –

JAMES

Look, this is how it is – LISTEN: you ain't nothing to me, understand? Nothing. As far as I'm concerned, it's been left up to me to decide to just up and leave you here to go crazy with Ol' man Barnett's ghost or –

MIA

NO! You . . . you can't –

JAMES

What? What can't I do?

MIA

Walter say . . .

JAMES

FUCK WALTER!

(Again, he tries to exit. She embraces him. He pushes her, and – once again – attempts to leave. She clings to him desperately)

MIA
 WAIT!

JAMES
 Let go of me!

MIA
 I can't be left here . . .

JAMES
 Let go of me, Mia . . .

MIA
 . . . James . . .

JAMES
 . . . Stop it.

MIA
 What about –

JAMES
 SHUT UP!

(He pushes her to the floor, then exits, crossing into his bedroom. Fade on Mia as he pours himself a drink. Walters' specter fades in)

JAMES
 What's wrong? You – you trying to scare me to death?

(Silence)

Well?

(Again, silence. Then –)

WALTER
 When I was about fourteen years old, there was a joint down by where I was raised. They used t' call it Binky's Place. My mother and father said it was a cesspool and forbade me t' even look in the direction of it. Now, the word around was that this . . . trash . . . would show h'self at Binky's. And she didn't care what color a man was – if he was a man, she'd try h'self with 'im. 'Course, there were more than a few who were wise to 'er and did all they knew to avoid her. Yet, there was also that one, two, sometimes even three who were too dumb or worked

up over ‘er t’ see where that bitch was leading ‘em. And I saw plenty of young men – like you – flat out ruined by that no-good wench. And one of those ruined . . . was me.

I won’t nothin’ but a boy, but some of the stories battin’ around ‘bout Binky’s, they’d stoke a young man’s interest, if you know what I’m talking about. So, behind my parents back I made my presence known. And, sure enough, after a time, she came ‘round and threwed it my way.

I couldn’t work her like I wanted to, like some of the other boys my age and older who’d been doin’ it longer. Well, the sorry bitch laughed at me. Then made it her business t’ spread the shit to anybody who’d hear, ‘bout how the Lassiter boy was too stupid t’ find his private parts with both eyes on two hands. Pretty soon, enough people were told of it t’ where, in time, it got back t’ my folks. Daddy beat the hell outta me. And I swear, it got me so ashamed of myself I came damn close t’ . . . to cuttin’ this ugly thing off. It’s the truth!

As young as I was, I swore to myself, to the Almighty, and the devil, too – if he was of a mind t’ listen – that I was getting back at her. And Lord knows . . . I did.

JAMES

What did you do?

WALTER

Son, I got even. She ain’t around t’ tell the story. So, let’s leave it alone. Now Mia is carrying something that’s yours and you need t’ be thinkin’ about what to do when it comes time for her to –

JAMES

I won’t let it get that far.

WALTER

Come again?

JAMES

Don’t make me repeat it.

WALTER

Watch y’self, now . . . !

JAMES

Or, what?

WALTER

I won’t stand for it!

JAMES

And what, exactly, can a *dead man* do . . . ?

WALTER

That don't mean nothing! Death ain't no match f' me! I'll curse this death and . . .

(James turns from him)

Look at me. Turn around and look at me! YOU GODDAMNED FOOL!

(James now faces him)

Yes! You heard right. And I'll say it again – FOOL! And you'll always be one – a damned fool! A blind – stupid – damned FOOL! And after all this time, you still got a whole lot t' learn. *Boy*.

JAMES

Well, ain't you one to talk.

WALTER

What was that?

JAMES

I'll tell it: that day, *I saw you with Mia*.

(Walter reacts)

Yeah! And you tried. I got to admit, an effort was made. And she put up a show, but that's all it was – *a show*, 'cause you didn't do shit in the way of showing her, or me, a goddamned thing.

WALTER

Be careful of them words! Be careful now.

JAMES

I laughed at you. And y' know something else? This is why I've been poking Donna all this time: even if it is against my better judgment, I have to do something to prove to myself that I'm not like you – *THAT I AM A MAN!* In fact, all this makes me wonder if you're really my –

WALTER

SHUT UP! SHUT THE HELL UP!

(Mia appears)

Boy, I curse you – I CURSE YOU!

MIA

WALTER! HUSH!

(She is dressed in an outfit that Walter had bought for her: short, sexy dress, hose, high heels, et al. She wears make up and her hair is combed stylishly)

Leave James alone.

WALTER

Hold on . . .

MIA

Let ‘im be, Walter. Let both of us be. Go on, now.

(Walter fades away as Mia steps over the void to James’ bedroom)

Walter bought me these clothes. How they look?

JAMES

What are you trying to do to me?

MIA

I think you need t’ be askin’ . . . what *you* need t’ do for y’self.

(Sax music adorns the scene. James resists her)

Don’t fight me, James. I can’t do you no harm.

(Mia coaxes James into the dance)

It’s all about me an’ you, now. Y’ daddy ain’t got nothin’ else t’ do wit’ us no more. Ain’t no need in fightin’ me.

(They dance slowly)

I been prayin’ f’ you. Since the first day . . . I prayed . . . and kept on prayin’ . . . that something inside . . . would move you t’ me. Now . . . hol’ on tight. There’s something you need to feel.

(He does so)

You feel that?

(He nods)

Now, James . . . what would the man you say you is do wit' me?

(He stops for a moment to look at her, then takes her in his arms and kisses her with violent lust. He stops, and she slowly leads him to her bed and sits him down)

When I prayed . . . I asked God what I needed t' do. So, don't worry. God fixed ev'rything f' us.

(Her back to the audience, she kneels to fellate him as lights fade)

(Lights rise on Walter in US limbo)

WALTER

Come on in, Smokey. Step in here. Sit awhile. And make it sweet.

(Sax music continues)

I think the fire is about to spend itself. Daylight, blue and clean, she's just about t' still that fire. And dissolve the night. Yes! I do believe so – Wait a minute! I see a woman. Still dancing in what's left of the fire.

(Donna emerges from the darkness)

Yes. I see you, woman. White-hot inside the night. But, not for long.

(Lights rise on James in his bedroom, asleep and, again, in the throes of a nightmare. Walter fades as Donna approaches James. She stands and observes him in the heat of torment, then extends her hand and touches him. He awakens and bolts up)

JAMES

Goddammit! What?

DONNA

Well, maybe I ought to leave and let whatever was eating you alive in your sleep have a go at the rest of you.

(Silence. He rises and pours himself a drink, then gulps it down)

May I have one, too?

(No response)

Is there something wrong?

(Silence)

Okay. Let's not have any words. At least, not until the weekend. When we're up at the lake. We'll talk up there.

(She approaches and embraces him from behind)

It won't do us any good to talk now. We'll have plenty of time for that. At the lake. Where we can relax and enjoy ourselves. Where I'll teach you to swim. And we can have dinner at the restaurant nearby – that seafood place. Then, at night, when we're at peace with ourselves, we'll talk. And by the way, I haven't said anything to Mills. The time's not right. I know this. And out of consideration for you, I held back on telling him. And, if you're scared – it's okay. I'm scared, too. In time, though, we'll know we did the proper thing. I do love you, baby.

JAMES

This was never about love.

DONNA

Whatever it was, it's come to this.

JAMES

Think so?

DONNA

Yes, I do . . .

(She tries to kiss him. He gently pushes her away)

Is there a problem?

JAMES

What we did to Alyssa . . . how do you feel about that?

DONNA

Why are you asking me this now?

JAMES

I just think we need to –

DONNA

Why?

JAMES

Alright, what about your husband?

DONNA

This was never about Mills. And stop acting as if you're concerned when you give less than a damn than I do about him.

JAMES

And it bothers me.

DONNA

Well, if there's guilt, if anything's wrong, let's make it right.

(Again, she attempts intimacy. James does not respond)

James, what's the matter?

JAMES

What if I were to say I didn't love you? And that I never could?

DONNA

I wouldn't believe it. I can't be pushed away. You want me. You've always wanted me.

JAMES

What if I were to say it's no longer a question of what I want?

DONNA

I'd tell you it was the dumbest thing I've yet heard.

JAMES

Then, what if I were to say I've finally gotten tired of you?

(Silence)

I'm tired, Donna. Besides, I've . . . I've got something else taking up my life now. And I think it'd be for the best if we went ahead and . . . and finished this thing.

DONNA

James, what do you want to tell me?

JAMES

Alright . . . there's someone else.

DONNA

Someone else?

JAMES

Yes.

DONNA

Are you trying to make a fool out of me?

(He laughs. And she suddenly slaps him. Deadly silence)

Aren't you gonna hit back?

JAMES

I'd like to kill you.

DONNA

What's stopping you?

JAMES

Maybe I won't give you the satisfaction –

DONNA

Alright – alright! James . . . I'm – I'm sorry, but . . . I can't go back to Mills. I swear to goodness, I'll cut my throat if I have to spend another day in his house.

(Silence)

JAMES

That dream, that nightmare . . . You were in it. As if you'd stepped uninvited into a dream of mine to reveal some terrible truth.

There was this field – an endless field, stretching in all directions . . . into nothing. It was dark, yet it wasn't night, only . . . nothing. And I saw you in what looked like the middle of that field, dancing . . . naked . . . in a fire that had lifted from the ground and was dancing with you. And, as you danced, you laughed at me, as if some bad joke had been at my expense. And while you danced and danced . . . I felt myself drowning in laughter. I covered my ears, yet I couldn't shut out the laughter. I cursed, yet I couldn't stop the laughing. I tore off my ears,

and I still heard laughter. I'd shut my eyes through all this. And the laughter seemed to push them open. And as I opened my eyes, my sight fell on . . . bones –

DONNA

Bones? . . . Your daddy – he's responsible for all this.

JAMES

My father is dead.

DONNA

Before he died, though, he told you –

JAMES

Told me what?

(Alyssa appears)

ALYSSA

Mommy? . . .

DONNA

What everybody'd been talking of. For all these years.

JAMES

And what is that?

DONNA

Don't insult the little intelligence I have when you already know.

(He exits)

ALYSSA

. . . Mommy?

DONNA

What is it?

ALYSSA

Are you okay?

(She composes herself)

DONNA

I'm fine, sweetie. I'm . . . I'm only –

ALYSSA

I know, but Derrick didn't want a wedding.

DONNA

As I've been told.

ALYSSA

I'll be fine.

DONNA

You're in love. And that's what counts.

ALYSSA

I guess.

DONNA

You do love him, don't you?

ALYSSA

He's okay. One thing, though: there's no need to worry, 'cause I'm not saying anything to daddy about you or James.

DONNA

Alyssa?

ALYSSA

Yes.

DONNA

If I haven't been as good a mother as the world expected . . . I want it known . . . I'm not sorry for it.

ALYSSA

And I'll never hate you for that.

DONNA

I could care less if you did.

ALYSSA

I've gotta go. Bye, mommy.

(As Alyssa fades, Donna turns quickly, as if she's had a change of heart. She is startled, however, when Walters specter fades in once Alyssa has dissolved. They stand and face one another as

lights fade)

(Cross fade to Mia's house. She is still wearing the short dress, yet she's taken off the shoes. She is dancing to a gospel music on the radio while James sits and listens. She holds a bottle of liquor. She is drunk. James is a little tipsy)

MIA

You know what I wanna do one o' these days? I wanna go t' church. In my Sund'y bes'. An' get right in th' middle o' the church . . . while th' preacher is preachin' . . . an' take off my clothes . . . an' dance naked 'fore God. An' th' preacher, too.

(She laughs)

Ain't nothin' wrong wit' that! It's what Noah did. He took off his clothes . . . an' danced naked 'fore his God.

(She laughs again, then takes note of the music)

Don't this music fill you up inside? It feel like it takes away all sin . . . so won't nothin' hol' you back . . . from flyin' up . . . and kissin' th' lips of God!

(She sings with the music, twirls, then falls on the floor)

You know what Walter did when he firs' saw me? He took me t' get ice cream. I got in th' car wit' 'im. An' we went down th' road . . . f' ice cream. We sat in th' car, some of it ran down my neck. An' I let Walter lick it off.

That same night, I had Walter. An' it was like . . . God tol' my whole body how t' get ready an' take a man. Now that I c'n see a li'l diff'ent, though . . . I mean, now that his own son showed 'im up . . . I think somebody ought've taught 'im a thing or two on how t' give a woman what she want –

JAMES

Stop talking about my father.

MIA

But –

JAMES

I mean it. Leave Walter alone.

(She rises and moves toward the crib. After a

moment, James joins her)

MIA

You wanna hol' her for a while?

(He hesitates, then nods. Mia turns off the radio, gets a blanket, wraps the child in it, and hands her to James. With some tentativeness, he takes her, sits, then cradles her in his arms)

JAMES

What's her name?

MIA

Amelia.

JAMES

That was my grandmothers name.

I had an uncle who cut out on a woman who'd just bore his child. Mama went on and on about how low he was, and how poor of an excuse he'd been as a man. I used to laugh at all that, and laugh at her . . . until now, when what she said hit a little too close to home.

MIA

How so?

JAMES

I've got a child of my own – a son. Ten years old. And to think that I've never seen . . . nor do I have the desire to see . . . my own child.

She never lived to find out him. She was on to this thing between me and Donna, though. She even confronted me about it. She told me what I did, what I was doing, was selfish and disrespectful to myself and to her, my mother. *And what about that woman's poor husband?* I said if she thought it was so wrong, why didn't she punish me? She said I was doing a pretty good job of it myself. I didn't want to hear that, so . . . I cursed her. Yeah, my own mother. Then I said she ought to get herself in order before she loses her own husband. *You know what I'm talking about.*

It would have served me better if I'd punched her in the face: from then, until the day she died . . . she did not say another word to me.

MIA

James . . . why don't you pray?

JAMES

What?

MIA

If you need t' get right wit' y' mama again . . . pray to 'er.

JAMES

Pray? To my mother?

MIA

That's right. If God won't hear you . . . y' mama will.

(She takes the child and returns it to the crib. She then lies on the bed.

James ponders. Alyssa fades in by James' bed in her underwear)

ALYSSA

I wonder if she's still in the house. Do you hear anything? What's the matter? . . . Oh, don't worry. She wouldn't dare come back into my room now.

(She begins dressing)

I will get to see you when you're away at college, right? Hey, I know you're seeing other girls. I don't care . . . well, yeah – I guess I do. But, in that case, I'd like to be . . . special. Okay? . . . James?

(She fights her emotions, then calms and finishes dressing)

Derrick's been sending me letters. Yeah! Can you believe it? Pasty-faced Derrick, who nobody sees as anything but a joke. What I ought to do is tell him to stop sending those stupid letters. And then, I'll tell him I've already got a boyfriend. And if he doesn't leave me alone, I'll tell you to go and . . . and kick the shit out of him!

(Laughter. Silence)

When I called your house the other day and you weren't home, I got to speak to your mother. And do you know what she told me? Before we hung up, she said if James is smart, he'll hold onto you. She told me she liked me. She thought I was a nice girl. How 'bout that?

She cares about you. And I think she knows what's inside you. She feels it . . . in the same way I feel it. Even if you can't.

(She fades away as James begins his prayer)

JAMES

Mama? Listen: I don't know if you can hear me, but –

(He stops suddenly upon feeling her touch)

Your hand . . . is this your hand I feel on my face?

(He submits himself to his mothers presence)

Mama! I'm – I'm sorry. I never stopped to . . . to look at you. I mean . . . really look at you and see . . . how pretty you are. *You're beautiful, mama* –

(He weeps, then settles)

I've stopped seeing Donna. Yeah . . . I finally got up the nerve to cut loose of her. What we were doing . . . it was wrong. And you were right. About all of it.

(He turns to Mia, who is sleeping. He looks in on the child, then turns back to the sleeping Mia, kisses her lightly, then lies beside her)

(Fade out)

(Sax melodies lift the morning light, then dissolve into silence. Mia and James are sitting on the floor. James talks as Mia colors in a coloring book)

I failed my father. And when I did, I broke something in him – broke it to pieces. I failed him once, but never again. I'm gonna make up for it by carrying on with his name. All that makes the name worth a damn is the business. And I've got to put everything I have into it . . . for no other reason than to prove to myself that I can do something – that I can be *something* . . . other than a fool.

(Mia kisses him. He looks into her face, then kisses her back – deeply)

It's gon be fine with us. I know it . . .

(She jumps up suddenly and gently rocks the crib)

You're the only one who can hear her? Why is that?

(No response. She gets a bottle of formula and

holds it down and inside of the crib, feeding the child. James steps over and touches her, gesturing to hold the bottle. She smiles and concedes)

Five years old. Ought to be in school, playing . . . running with kids her age . . .

(He takes the bottle away)

Looks like she wants to sleep now.

MIA

When she was born, Walter gave her a name. He say he always wanted him a li'l girl. An' if he had one . . . he knew jus' what he'd name it.

Your father . . . it feel like he still here . . . fillin' up this whole house. Tha's how come I don't get scared out here.

JAMES

Then, why do you need me?

(She embraces him. James smiles)

It's alright. I ain't going nowhere. To leave would be like running. And what in the hell do I have to run to?

(Donna enters, quite drunk)

DONNA

Not a damned thing. You're at a dead end, baby. You've run out of life.

JAMES

How in the fuck did you –

DONNA

Is this the little piece of trim you're throwing me away for?

JAMES

What do you want?

DONNA

I couldn't let it go so easily. I followed you out here. No need to worry, though. What I'm here for won't take long.

(She looks at Mia)

What's your name, honey?

MIA

My name is Mia.

DONNA

Is it? Well . . . my name is Donna.

MIA

Yes, ma'am.

DONNA

You may call me by my name. Go on.

MIA

Aw'ight, Miss . . . Miss Donna.

DONNA

She's awfully pathetic, isn't she?

JAMES

Are you through?

DONNA

Any more dreams about me? If so, tell me: in the darkness of that . . . nothing . . . do you still hear laughing? And did you come to realize that I wasn't laughing at you . . . but at myself . . . for being such a total idiot . . .

JAMES

Mia, go in the back room.

DONNA

. . . on account of lowering myself into sharing a bed with your sorry ass . . .

JAMES

Go ahead, Mia.

DONNA

. . . and becoming the very thing I'd always held in complete disgust – A
GODDAMNED MONKEY CHASER!

(James motions to strike her. She stops him by quickly drawing a gun from her handbag, aiming it at him)

I went home and told Mills about us – don't worry, baby. He knew. Oh, yes! The sonofabitch knew. He said he'd kept quiet 'cause it didn't bother 'im. And do you

know what he did when I up and let the cat out of the sack? He laughed! In my face! Like I was the biggest fool who'd ever stood in a pair of shoes.

JAMES

Then, what do you want from me? Wait a minute – I'll bet you twenty dollars that's the same gun you pulled on your ex, isn't it?

DONNA

That's a hell of a memory, James.

JAMES

You take any time to learn how to use it?

DONNA

We'll find out soon enough.

JAMES

And I'll bet another twenty dollars that I'm about to taken out 'cause thought of me with somebody else . . .

DONNA

Although, I'm afraid you're as wrong as four left feet on that one. Stop trying to flatter yourself. I could give two shakes of a dogs tail as to who gets or doesn't get you. It's like this: I've spent the prime of my womanhood trapped by something I was too stupid and unwilling to face: *I'm damned, James!* And you are half right – I am here to take you out. And when I've settled that business . . . it'll be my turn. That's right: I refuse to suffer this damnation alone –

(She aims. Mia screams. Donna is distracted. James hits Donna. She falls and he wrests the gun from her. It falls on the floor. Mia is still screaming)

JAMES

MIA! BE QUIET! PLEASE!

(She stops screaming. Everyone settles. James picks up the gun)

DONNA

Well . . . doesn't this beat everything.

(Donna notices the crib and laughs)

I don't believe it! Did you father a child? . . .

(She rises and saunters toward the crib and looks inside. She is aghast, yet continues to look)

Sweet Jesus.

JAMES

Yes, Donna. It's a child. And look – she's reaching for you. See?

(Donna backs away)

You wanna pick her up and hold her?

(She shakes her head)

Why not? There's nothing to be scared of. Go ahead and pick her up. Go on –

DONNA

SHUT UP! DAMN YOU!

(Silence. She gazes at Mia)

What did you say your girlfriends name was?

JAMES

Her name is Mia.

DONNA

That's pretty.

I would've had no trouble at all shooting you. I was close enough to get a clean shot – right through the meat of your brain. And you would've been as dead as your daddy. When I stop to think about it, though . . . I'd've had more 'n a little trouble shooting myself.

Of course, I'll still manage to get what I want. And you'll not have daddy to get your back this time. As a matter of fact, I saw 'im. He showed himself to me. And guess what? He didn't scare me a bit. I thought it was kind of funny, even. Walter Lassiter . . . raising himself from the grave just to spook me into keeping my distance.

Well, he can watch us, for all I care. Y' see, I can't let Velma down. She still likes it when I bring you up. And I so love giving her something to look forward to. *You bastard.*

(Donna turns from him, then crosses over and descends to James' bedroom where she begins disrobing to her lace underwear)

JAMES

And what makes you think it's gon be so easy?

DONNA

One can always run away.

JAMES

That's just it: *I'm a man*. And I don't run from nothin'.

DONNA

Then tell me, honey . . . what would a man who doesn't run do now?

(Undressed, she reclines temptingly on his bed.
Mia laughs)

JAMES

What are you laughing at?

(He grabs her. She is still laughing)

I said what are you laughing at?

DONNA

Seems like it ought to be plain.

(He releases her)

JAMES

Well, listen: ain't nothing keeping me between you two. I can drop either one of you. Anytime! And when I feel like it.

DONNA

And what need would there be for that, honey? Aren't you man enough to deal with two good-for-nothing women?

JAMES

What do you want from me?

DONNA

I think I've made my case.

JAMES

Then let me make mine: I won't live and be nobodies' goddamned dog. I can solve this problem now. Right now!

DONNA

How? *By cutting it off?*

(Donna starts to laugh, then stops when Mia screams)

MIA

My baby! Come an' look! COME AND LOOK!

(She has been standing by the crib. With great apprehension and dread, James steps over and looks inside. He is aghast)

JAMES

Lord, help us.

MIA

Look at 'er! She's growing! See? . . . MY BABY IS GROWING! And –

(She clutches her abdomen)

And my new baby . . . she's growing, too!

(She laughs as if in a drugged ecstasy)

DONNA

And now that our lives are out in the open, James, Mills won't mind if I have you over. In fact, you can spend the night, if you're up to it. Of course, we'll have to use Alyssa's room if we're going to sleep together. Even with Mills' attitude, such as it is now . . . I don't think he'd be too hot on the idea of us doing it in his bed.

(Walter appears)

Well, hello again, Walter.

WALTER

That's Mr. Lassiter, if you please.

DONNA

Oh, I'm sorry –

WALTER

I know. You can't help it.

DONNA

I beg your pardon?

WALTER

I didn't stutter. See, I knew somebody just like you.

DONNA

Is that so? Tell me – was she the same minx who curdles your sons' dreams?

WALTER

I won't say.

DONNA

Of course not. It wouldn't be fitting to air the truth before ones only seed.

JAMES

The truth on what? . . . *How you got even?*

WALTER

Let this alone, son. Please.

DONNA

You told him, yet never bothered to finish the story?

WALTER

At the time, I didn't think there'd be a need to. I thought things'd end up different.

DONNA

Life shoots curve balls, though, doesn't it? The truth of it all, James, is that I'll bet this dream-woman wasn't laughing at all. I'll bet she was screaming . . . screaming from inside some joint way out on the corner of Stokes Road and Jasper Street –

JAMES

Binky's Place.

DONNA

That's it!

JAMES

Did you ever go there?

DONNA

No, honey. The woman is dead. And she wasn't alone. She had a man with her that night, didn't she, Walter?

WALTER

I didn't care. I didn't give a shit. I got even.

DONNA

Some said their bones were found locked together in what was left of the fire . . .

JAMES

Bones.

DONNA

I never believed that part of the story, but –

WALTER

The young man got even! Somebody had t' get even!

DONNA

We all suspected . . .

WALTER

But nobody could prove nothin'! I got even! And the woman . . . that woman – Lord knows if she wasn't just like you.

DONNA

Was she . . . like me?

WALTER

So much that if death didn't have such a hold on me, I'd spit at you.

DONNA

My, my! Well, James, there's no fire, but . . .

(James looks upon the gun)

. . . there's still the means to play this out before your father. If you're up to it.

JAMES

What am I being asked to do?

DONNA

To look at where your life is now.

JAMES

You're crazy –

DONNA

Am I?

(He looks at Donna, then at the gun, then back at Donna, then holds a steady gaze upon Walter)

JAMES

This is why you've been in my face all this time, fighting death: to stop what was once yours from visiting me.

WALTER

I'm sorry, son. I didn't want it t' turn out like this. But, whatever you do, always know I'm here. And I'll never stop lookin' out for you.

JAMES

Sure.

WALTER

I'm here, son.

DONNA

And don't forget about me. I'm here, too. Now quit standing and holding that damn thing like it was your –

JAMES

SHUT UP!

(Donna tries to suppress her laughter. Walter steps DS as music bleeds in)

WALTER

I hear you, Smokey. And once again, I see daylight. I stand and look at the long, hem of light. And, once again, I see that woman. She's settin' fire under the light. And that fire . . . it's burning it away. Burning the clean sky of light . . . black.

(Sax music flies, then settles into nothingness)

DONNA

James? What are you waiting on?

(Again, James looks at the gun, then at Donna. Everyone freezes in an extended pause)

(Blackout. End of play)

