

Nor Iron Bars a Cage

A full-length play in one act

by John Scavone

Contact:
John Scavone
67 Lincoln Ave.
Sheboygan, WI 53081
(312) 451-6245
scavj@outlook.com

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Characters (in order of appearance)

James Burke, Anglo American, late 50's

Clarence Marsh, African American, 38

Kyle Marsh, his brother, plays mid 20's – mid 30's

Ruth Burke, James' wife, plays mid 40's – mid 50's

Setting: The living room of James Burke's street level, one-bedroom apartment: dingy plaster walls and dirty carpeting, furnished with a rectangular table and two chairs, a couch and mismatched armchair, perhaps an end table, a set of shelves. Upstage windows are barred on the outside. On one side of the stage is the apartment's entry, downstage of which is the bedroom door. On the opposite side is an efficiency kitchen, with another barred window above the sink. Upstage of the kitchen is the bathroom; with the door open, a person standing at the bathroom sink is at least partially visible. Decorations about the apartment include photos and memorabilia from a life on the police force. The table is cluttered with the remains of a fast-food meal, a plastic grocery bag, a glass and half-full whiskey bottle, cigarettes, a lighter and ashtray, assorted papers and a pen.

Rising above and behind the upstage wall is an imposing graystone building with barred windows, presumably the building across the street or alley, but reminiscent of a prison in appearance. The left and right apartment walls finish in graystone above the height of the room. Stage entrances for Kyle and Ruth should be preserved down left and right.

Time: The present.

Nor Iron Bars a Cage

At rise, James Burke is at the bathroom sink, brushing his teeth. He's wearing pants and a t-shirt, has a towel around his neck, and his hair is damp. The door buzzer rings. He rinses his mouth. The buzzer rings again.

BURKE

Just a damn minute!

He combs his hair. The buzzer rings again.

Keep your shorts on, I'm coming!
(at the intercom)

Yeah?

MARSH

(over the speaker) I'm looking for James Burke.

BURKE

What for?

MARSH

I'm here from the Department of Corrections.

BURKE

(buzzes him in)

For Chrissakes, what do those assholes want?

He goes into the bedroom, returns wearing a Fraternal Order of Police sweatshirt and carrying socks and shoes. He sits down to put them on. After a moment, there's a knock on the apartment door.

Hang on, I'm still getting dressed!

Shoes tied, he unbolts and opens the door to Clarence Marsh, who wears an inexpensive new suit, quickly flashes an ID at him.

MARSH
Mr. Burke?

BURKE
That's me.

MARSH
Can I come in?

*Burke stands aside and gestures
him in.*

Sorry if I'm disturbing your morning, but most folks already
had their lunch by now.

BURKE
I had kind of a late night.

MARSH
Uh-huh, I see you did some celebrating.

BURKE
Not celebrating, just drinking. Want one?

MARSH
No, thanks.

BURKE
Mind if I do? Hair of the dog.

MARSH
I don't mind.

*Burke belts down a short one. He
lights a smoke. Marsh coughs.*

BURKE
I thought I was all through with yous guys. What do you want
with me now?

MARSH
Turns out there's some unfinished business. Won't take long.
Can I sit down?

BURKE
Help yourself.

MARSH

Nice little crib you got here.

BURKE

What're you, a wise guy? It's a shitty apartment in a shitty neighborhood. So what?

MARSH

I didn't mean offense, just making conversation.

BURKE

How about getting on with your business? No law says we gotta be friendly.

MARSH

No, ain't no law says that.

(takes out a notebook and pencil)

You are the James Burke was a detective captain, third precinct, that right?

BURKE

They retired me a goddamn sergeant, it's in the record.

MARSH

I gotta make sure you're the guy I want, that's all.

BURKE

I'm the guy. What is it you want me for?

MARSH

You seem mad about something, Mr. Burke.

BURKE

Tell you the truth, I am a little pissed. Like I said, I'm supposed to be through with this crap, I paid my debt to society. I'll be paying it the rest of my crummy life.

MARSH

I know it must've pretty hard on you, Sergeant.

BURKE

Fuck you. And you don't know a damn thing.

MARSH

Maybe not. Let's say I'm sympathetic to your case.

BURKE

Fine, you're sympathetic. So was everyone I knew, for all

the fucking good it did me.

MARSH

Maybe we oughtta just get on with this.

BURKE

Yeah, maybe we oughtta.

MARSH

Got a couple questions for you. First-

(coughs for several seconds)

Excuse me.

BURKE

Pretty bad cough.

MARSH

It's nothing.

BURKE

Want some water?

MARSH

If you don't mind.

*Burke gets him a glass of water
from the kitchen, he drinks.*

Thanks. Okay to take off my coat and tie? Kinda hot in here.

BURKE

Even if I had an AC, I couldn't put it in these damn windows. Sure, go ahead, long as it don't mean you're staying for any length of time. I got things I do on- what is this, Thursday?

MARSH

Friday.

BURKE

I got things I do on Fridays.

MARSH

I understand.

(coughs, has another swallow of water)

Okay, first I gotta make sure you don't keep any weapons here. Even if you are off parole, the law won't allow it.

BURKE

I was thoroughly instructed about all that.

MARSH

I still gotta check.

BURKE

You wanna search the place? Go ahead. Just put everything back where you find it.

MARSH

Alright, if I really have to. Not too many places out here you'd have it. These cabinets, maybe?

(searching)

Don't keep much food in the house, do you? How about the drawers? You got it in with your spoons and things?

BURKE

What makes you think I'd have a gun after I've been told not to?

MARSH

I didn't say it was a gun, Mr. Burke. But that is what I'm looking for, ain't it? You're an ex-cop, you all are married to your guns, you don't just give 'em up 'cause the law says so. Let's have a peek at those shelves over there.

BURKE

Be careful with that stuff.

MARSH

Nah, too much in plain sight here, and it'd be too hard to get to on the top shelves. Between the couch cushions? Too obvious, I ain't even gonna look there. But under the mattress, that'd be a good place. This your bedroom?

BURKE

You stay the fuck outta there!

MARSH

Give the man a prize. Okay, Mr. Burke, why don't you just bring it here, instead of making me go in and get it?

BURKE

Fuck. Alright, but listen, it's only my old service revolver. It never leaves the house with me, I keep it 'cause of the neighborhood. C'mon, everyone's got a right to protect himself in his own home.

MARSH

I don't disagree with you. Tell you what, you go ahead and get it for me, I'll go easy on you. I'll just get rid of it, won't say anything about you having it.

BURKE

You kidding?

MARSH

Word of honor, it stays between us. *(pause)* You might as well, I know you got it in there.

Burke puts out the cigarette, goes into the bedroom. Marsh walks about the room, checking out the memorabilia. He stops at a framed photo of a group of policemen in uniform. Burke reenters with the gun.

BURKE

Here.

MARSH

Is it empty?

BURKE

(opens the cylinder, shows it to him)

I ain't gotten dumb enough to give a loaded gun to someone I never seen before.

MARSH

(takes the gun)

That's smart. Can't be too careful with us someones these days. That all your ammo?

BURKE

This one box is all I got.

MARSH

Stick 'em in my coat pocket, you don't mind. She's heavy. Never held a gun before, believe that? Never in my life.

BURKE

I thought all yous guys took training.

MARSH

They'd be crazy, let us handle guns. When I was a kid, I

used to think you all shoot with one hand, like Marshall Dillon. But with the weight, I see why the cops on tv do like this, takes two hands to hold it straight. Freeze, dirt bag! Bam, bam, bam! That how you used to do?

BURKE

Something like that.

MARSH

Kind of fun.

BURKE

It's a real kick.

MARSH

Must've felt good wearing it all them years. Cops always talk about folks respecting the badge, but this is what they respect, ain't it?

BURKE

Quit waving it around like that.

MARSH

Reach, sidewinder! Bam! One shot's all it took for Marshall Dillon, one shot, that son of a bitch was stone cold dead. Dillon be standing there looking at him like, I warned you, son of a bitch. All righteous about it, not tough, righteous. Lots of guys don't need a gun to be tough, but having one sure as hell makes a man righteous, and that's a whole lot worse. That how it made you feel?

BURKE

What the fuck do you care? Just don't fool with it, makes me uncomfortable.

MARSH

I ain't fooling, Mr. Burke. I was noticing this picture. This one here, that you? This the same gun?

BURKE

The same. Graduation from the academy, twenty-two years old.

MARSH

You look mighty proud.

BURKE

I was always proud of being a policeman.

MARSH

Still got the uniform?

BURKE

What am I, on This Is Your Life? C'mon, put the gun away, and let's finish up your business. You really won't tell anyone I had it?

MARSH

You been through enough trouble with the law already, you don't need more. Besides, what do I care if you got a gun in the house? You don't present a danger to anyone now.

(sits, setting the gun beside him on the table)

Maybe I won't even take it. I think it'd be alright to leave you something to protect yourself with.

BURKE

You wouldn't bullshit me?

MARSH

No, Mr. Burke, I wouldn't lie to you, I got no reason. So don't lie to me, now, okay? You keep any other weapons in the house?

BURKE

Not unless you count my kitchen knives.

MARSH

I won't count them. Or you telling me I should?

BURKE

Thanks for letting me have the gun. If you're through with it, I'll put it away.

MARSH

Leave it stay there, you don't mind, you can put it away after I go.

BURKE

I don't like it being out.

MARSH

It's safer being out.

BURKE

What, you afraid there's more ammo in there, I'll load it and come back blasting?

MARSH

You might. But no, I ain't afraid of you, Jamie. You afraid of me?

BURKE

Where do you get off calling me that?

MARSH

Why, ain't that what they always called you? Your buddies?

BURKE

I don't need to hear it from a fucking- don't call me Jamie, that's all.

MARSH

From a fucking what? Nigger? Spook?

BURKE

I didn't say anything like that.

MARSH

Never?

BURKE

What the hell are you after?

MARSH

Just some information.

BURKE

Seems to me you already got some. How'd you know what my buddies used to call me?

MARSH

I must've heard it somewhere.

BURKE

Well, look, if you don't got any more questions-

MARSH

One or two.

BURKE

Fine, so ask 'em.

MARSH

I'm trying to think how I knew about them calling you Jamie.

BURKE

What's the damn difference? Let's just get this over with.

MARSH

Let's. I remember, it was in that little room you took me. I was sitting at a table, kinda like this one here. Man, I was already beat down by then. You were stomping all around, real mad like.

BURKE

What the fuck-?

MARSH

Guy must've seen you through that one-way glass, he pokes his head in, says, "Everything alright, Jamie?" That's where I heard your name before.

BURKE

You ain't with the Department of Corrections.

MARSH

I told you I'm here from the Department of Corrections, meaning I just come from there, from one of the facilities. Ain't quite accurate, I been out a few days.

BURKE

Who the hell are you?

MARSH

Clarence Marsh. *(pause)* You don't remember?

BURKE

Am I supposed to?

MARSH

Nah, wouldn't make sense, would it? You must've put away a couple thousand guys. How could you remember every one of 'em? But I wished you would remember me. I used to get this picture in my mind of your eyes bugging out when I come to the door. I was disappointed they didn't.

BURKE

I never put anyone away didn't deserve it.

MARSH

Stop, now, it's too late to lie, you been in all the papers. I kept up my library privileges, saw a paper most every day. One thing about being in stir, taught me to like reading.

BURKE

I don't give a shit what they said in the papers, or any fucking where else! I did my job the best way I knew how. Buncha liberal pussies, not a one of them could do it.

MARSH

You were a pretty tough man, as I recall.

BURKE

I still am.

MARSH

You still righteous, too.

BURKE

Damn straight. So if you came here for some kinda personal apology, you can forget about it.

MARSH

I wouldn't expect you to apologize for doing your job.

BURKE

What, then? You didn't get a big enough settlement? See the mayor, I'm all tapped out.

*Marsh coughs heavily, as oldest
Kyle enters.*

KYLE

If you had some of that money, you could get proper care for that cough.

MARSH

Seen doctors, was sent to the hospital and everything. Bronchitis, they told me. That means just a cough, one I gotta live with.

KYLE

Doesn't sound like just a cough to me, Clarence.

MARSH

That's what it is. I got some medicine I'm supposed to take.

KYLE

Haven't seen you take any since you've been home.

MARSH

What the fuck you care about it?

KYLE

I'm still your brother, I care about you, even if you don't.

MARSH

Alright, Kyle, I didn't mean nothing. I just ain't supposed to have people telling me what to do no more, that's all. When I eat, when I sleep, when I take my medicine.

KYLE

I wouldn't try telling you what to do, I don't know you well enough.

MARSH

Never give you much to look up to, did I?

KYLE

Wasn't all your fault.

MARSH

Getting sent away was none of my fault.

KYLE

And they owe you something, don't you see? Make them pay for what they did. I read stories all the time about guys like you, they sue for being put in prison when they didn't commit any crime. They sue the cops, the city, hell, they'd sue the president, except if we get another black one. You at least gotta think about it, might be worth a million bucks, maybe more.

MARSH

Ain't worth shit to me.

(to Burke as Kyle exits)

I don't want your damn money, ain't enough money you could give me.

BURKE

Then what do you want?

MARSH

I want you to feel what it was like.

BURKE

(rushes for the gun)

Motherfucker.

MARSH

No you don't!

They grapple briefly, Marsh is able to throw Burke off, then decks him with a blow to the chin as he charges back.

It's fucking empty. What were you gonna do, pistol-whip me?

BURKE

Get the fuck outta my house, or I'll call the whole fucking force in!

MARSH

(laughs) That's damn funny, you calling the fuzz. Really think they'd come for you?

BURKE

There's still laws against some fucking nigger breaking into my home and beating me up.

MARSH

Yeah, and your boys in blue would enjoy taking me in. They'd make sure they went nice and gentle with me, I bet.

He spots the phone, removes the battery from the handset, puts it in his pocket.

Yassuh, this fucking nigger learned about all kinda things in the joint. Like we had this tough little spic there for a couple years, Carlos his name was, fought in the Golden Gloves. Give some of us boxing lessons during free time.

BURKE

So you came to beat the crap outta me. So go ahead and try.

MARSH

Just letting you know I can. You got a cell phone? Tell the truth, don't lie to me.

BURKE

Look at this place, you think I can afford a goddamn cell phone? I can't afford the bills on that thing.

MARSH

Shoot, every damn bum in the alley has a cell, I spied 'em on my walk over here.

BURKE

Well, I don't, hand to God.

MARSH

Don't bring Him into it, I'll believe you. I'm kinda thinking you were right before, about this thing. I don't really like it being out, neither, bound to give one of us a bad idea. Where's someplace safe I could put it?

(as Burke moves toward him)

Hey, now, don't make me slug you with it. Hm. I know. Oops, almost forgot the bullets.

He goes into the bathroom; sound of him removing and replacing the toilet tank lid. He returns.

Like putting a brick in the tank, saves water. I remember my Pop used to do that to save a little on the bill. You have to pay your water bill here?

BURKE

You motherfucking-

MARSH

Careful, Sarge, I won't listen to it too many times before I get mad, and you don't want that. Call me a nigger once, maybe, okay, but you went over the limit a long time ago.

BURKE

I call 'em like I see 'em.

MARSH

And what you see ain't pretty, is it?

BURKE

Remind me, what was it I pinched you for?

MARSH

For fun.

BURKE

Marsh, Marsh. Clarence, you said? Clarence Marsh.

MARSH

Think big, a real big case you had.

BURKE

You were in that auto ring we busted up in Englewood, about

ten, twelve years ago. Took us six months, but we nabbed a garage full of yours creeps, earned the whole unit that Special Commendation hanging right over there.

MARSH

I never set foot in Englewood, that hood's dangerous.

BURKE

And none of those fuckers served more'n five, thanks to a pussy DA. You said you just got out.

MARSH

That's right, think like a detective.

BURKE

Unless you got sent up again for something else. Once a thief, always a thief.

MARSH

I got sent up one time, served twenty of twenty-five.

BURKE

Wait a second, you're still on parole. You dumb bastard, you could get thrown back in another twenty for doing this here.

MARSH

What, associating with a known felon?

BURKE

I wasn't a fucking criminal!

MARSH

They sent you up for nothing, too? Praise the Lord, He works in crazy ways.

BURKE

It was the goddamn press sent me up. Fucking pansies, think they know what it's like out there, they don't know shit. Want the cops to stop crime, but they're afraid to let us really do the job. They don't wanna hear what it takes, they don't give a crap what we're up against with guys like you. You're all just sweet little boys to them. They don't know the first thing about guys like you.

MARSH

But you knew me, alright. You knew me.

BURKE

Did I?

MARSH

Think hard. It started raining right when you picked us up. Remember it? That hard, soaking cold rain. Pigs kept us spread out on the trunk maybe twenty minutes, smacking us with their sticks if we moved, couple times if they thought we might wanna move. Yeah, it was funny, I saw you, I saw you laugh when we get poked a good one. You and them other detectives sitting over in your car, smoking butts and watching us, laughing. You waited 'til the rain let up before you got out and told the pigs haul us down the third.

BURKE

That nurse, the one got attacked outside the hospital, just off her shift and walking to the bus. What was her name?

MARSH

Julie Gray. I could never forget her name.

BURKE

(pushes Marsh hard into a chair)

I said sit down! Damn straight I know you, sonny boy. See your kind every day, punks, gang-banger wanna-bes. Gonna show the whole world how bad you are. You wanna see a bad man, you look across the table.

MARSH

Please, I ain't done nothing.

BURKE

Why you shivering? You cold?

MARSH

Man, I'm soaking wet! At least gimme a towel or something.

Burke lights a cigarette.

BURKE

I'll dry you off.

He blows a cloud of smoke in Marsh's face, Marsh coughs.

What's the matter, you don't like that?

MARSH

I hate cigarette smoke.

He reaches for the glass of water still on the table, Burke snatches it up.

BURKE

Thought you wanted to dry off.

Drinks the water himself. He takes another drag and blows the smoke at Marsh, making him cough again.

Tough guy like you, don't like smoking, huh? Well, just to show you I'm a reasonable man, I'll put it out. There you go. Now you see how it's gonna work between us, I give you what you want, you give me what I want. Okay? That's fair, right?

MARSH

I don't know what you want.

BURKE

Let's start with how well you know Julie Gray.

MARSH

I never heard of a Julie Gray before.

BURKE

You and your friends just picked her out at random.

MARSH

Picked her out for what? What're you talking about?

BURKE

I'm talking about rape! And a beating so bad she could die from it. That'll make the charge murder one.

MARSH

Murder! Lord Jesus, no, I never hurt nobody! Look at me, no marks on me, no blood on my clothes, nothing.

BURKE

Maybe that rain washed your clothes for you. Or maybe you changed your clothes, you had time.

MARSH

You think a rapist gonna bring a change of clothes with him? I ain't from that neighborhood, I told the cops, I stay with my folks, more than a mile away from there.

BURKE

Yeah, south on King Boulevard you said, they're checking it out right now. So what were you doing up near the hospital?

MARSH

Like I told them, I was headed to my job there, I work nights in housekeeping. Check the personnel file, you don't believe me.

BURKE

You work at the hospital? And you don't know a nurse named Julie Gray?

MARSH

I don't know every fucking nurse that's there! We work different shifts, she was just coming off hers.

BURKE

How do you know what shift she's on?

MARSH

God, oh, God, I don't know. I must've heard one of the cops say she was just coming off.

BURKE

You weren't in much hurry to get to work, you had time to hang on the corner with your home boys.

MARSH

They ain't my friends, not buddies with me, I mean, just a couple guys I seen around. I happened to meet up with 'em, that's all.

BURKE

We got a witness, woman who phoned it in, said she heard the screams, looked out her window, and three young bucks were running down the street.

MARSH

(rises from the chair)

You had a near blind old woman didn't know what she heard or seen.

BURKE

We had three guys matching her description.

MARSH

You convinced her we did. She couldn't even ID us positive at trial.

BURKE

Didn't matter, she said there were three, and we had you three practically on the scene.

MARSH

Hysterical old witch, the kind thinks something bad happened, it must be them awful, noisy black people again. And you the kind, you see three niggers standing together, you know something bad's going on over there.

BURKE

You tell me when it wasn't on those stinking streets, tell me it ain't still going on. I remember those two guys you were with, we didn't pick you out by accident, we knew those two alright. Rap sheets as long as a brother's dick. Guys like them don't have nice, respectable friends.

MARSH

They weren't my motherfucking friends, I hardly remember their faces! And I remember everything else, every goddamn last detail, twenty years start to finish. Only the real finish ain't got here yet.

BURKE

I didn't make your bed, pal, I just made you lie in it.

MARSH

You built it, sheeted it and strapped me down to it.

BURKE

Sure, no one's guilty, not one guy I ever busted was guilty. The prisons are full of innocent men.

MARSH

Everyone's guilty, in or out of prison. But don't everyone get what they deserve.

BURKE

Bull.

MARSH

How about you? You get what you deserved?

BURKE

Fuck you.

MARSH

No, you got off way too easy, you deserved ten times what you got. Ain't no justice in this world, unless a man can get it for himself.

Faintly, a sound that becomes recognizable as a cell phone ring. As Marsh realizes what it is, Burke bolts for the bedroom. Marsh catches him, is able to get an arm-lock on him.

BURKE

Agh! You're breaking my arm!

MARSH

First time you feeling this? That's how it felt to me!

(twists harder)

That's how it felt to me!

He starts coughing, shoves Burke hard into the table, gets it under control. The phone has stopped ringing.

What a nasty liar. Bring it out here.

BURKE

Lousy bastard.

MARSH

I said go and get it!

He grabs Burke, hustles him into the bedroom.

I'm watching. Best pick up nothing but that phone.

He coughs. As Burke returns, he snatches the phone from him, drops it on the floor and stomps on it.