

ALABASTER CITY

by Stuart Spencer

The setting for the play should be simple: suggesting naturalism yet not really naturalistic. I imagine a grouping of furniture (a sofa, an armchair, a small table or two, a fragment of staircase if possible) floating as an island in a sea of darkness from which the characters emerge and to which they retreat when unneeded.

Characters

In 2000:	In 1968:
Frances	Syrie, Frances' mother
Gordon	Bronson, France's father
Jamal	Des, Jamal's father
Megan	Frannie

The play should be double-cast accordingly.

"There is guilt in the rage ... all of them know and feel that their lives are built upon a historical deed of wrong against many people, people from whose lives they have bled their leisure and their luxury. Fear and hate and guilt are the keynotes of this drama."

-Richard Wright
Native Son

A pool of light appears in the dark. Frances steps into it, and talks to us.

FRANCES

I was never a saint. No such claims. My heart has always refused to bleed.

But I was always the type - *am* the type - and I admit it, I'm proud of it - if I see a wound, I want to heal it. If there's damage, I try to fix it. Simple as that.

So you ask, what brings me here. To this place, to this particular ... state of mind. Some would say bitter. Others might even say ... angry. Me, I just think I see things for what they are now.

Disappointed? Yes. But somehow ... liberated.

My story - and this is my story, and that's all it is - my story begins ... well ... come to think, I'm not sure I know. This morning? Thirty years ago? Three hundred?

All I know is, my daughter came for lunch today.

With her boyfriend.

His request.

That was progress, let me tell you. They'd been together a year and he always seemed - well - he held back, as if he didn't want to - ... no. I'm getting ahead. You'll see ...

(She calls off stage as the lights widen to reveal the furniture ...)

FRANCES

Gordon?

GORDON (O.S.)

What?

FRANCES

You ready for lunch?

GORDON (O.S.)

No.

FRANCES

Oh, Gordie ... !

GORDON

Not having lunch.

(He has entered. Grease stained from working on the car. He carries a can of soda which he deposits on the table.)

FRANCES

Are you still working on that car?

GORDON

Done with the Chevy. I'm on to the Ford.

FRANCES

What's wrong with the Ford?

GORDON

Well let me put it this way: you know why the Ford couldn't make the Chevy laugh, don't you?

Timing was off.

(He cracks himself up. She waits until he stops laughing. She's quite serious.)

FRANCES

Are you all right?

GORDON

I'm fine.

(He nods at the soda can on the hall table.)

Cream soda, darling. Straight from the can.

FRANCES

(To us)

I have to ask. They tell me it's better if I do.

GORDON

Want a sip? Just to make sure?

FRANCES

We're having lunch as soon as they get here. I think he has something to tell us.

GORDON

What kind of something?

FRANCES

I'm not sure. Megan didn't know - wouldn't tell me anyway. I have my suspicions, though.

GORDON

Oh?

FRANCES

I think it's serious.

GORDON

Yeah?

FRANCES

I like him, Gordie. He's good for her. If this is what I think it is, I want you to know: I'm all for it.

GORDON

Who isn't? I'm for it. Who's not for it?

FRANCES

Of course you are. But we've got to send clear, positive signals. Oprah says so.

GORDON

Tell you what: I'll wave to him in a friendly manner as they pull in the driveway and kiss his shoes as he steps out of the car - how about that?

FRANCES

That's not funny.

GORDON

Sweetheart, you take this smart, sophisticated guy - which he is - and every time he comes over you meet him at the door with a sledgehammer that's got 'Welcome to the family' on it. You don't have to. Not with him. God knows he must be the one black kid in Milwaukee who doesn't think we owe him something.

(Pause; she turns to ice.)

I didn't mean that quite like it sounded.

FRANCES

(Deadly calm)

Is that an apology?

GORDON

Yes.

FRANCES

Thank you.

GORDON

But you know what I'm saying. You don't have to try so hard. Not with Jamal. That's the beauty of it. It's why we like him.

(A kiss on the cheek.)

I'll be in the garage.

(He is gone. She turns to us before she leaves ...)

FRANCES

At which point I went upstairs to get nervous. I mean ready.

The following, therefore, is speculation. But I think it's a pretty safe guess.

(She goes as Megan and Jamal enter.)

MEGAN

Mom? We're here! Hello? Dad?

JAMAL

Maybe they're hiding.

MEGAN

Sh! They'll hear you.

(She laughs though, and flops onto the couch
and gives it a whack.)

Sit.

JAMAL

I'm all right. And no, I'm not talking about it.

MEGAN

Who's talking about it?

JAMAL

You are. With both eyes.

(He grins at her sardonically - and she
returns it.)

MEGAN

She thinks we're getting married.

JAMAL

She said that?

MEGAN

(Ticking them off her fingers -)

Getting married, moving in together, or it's a
baby. One of those three.

(He looks at her evenly, poker faced.)

Is it?

JAMAL

Is it what?

MEGAN

One of those three.

JAMAL

(Wearily ...)

Meg ...

MEGAN

A hint. That's all I want.

JAMAL

No previews. I'm going to say it once, period.
Okay? One time, everybody present.

JAMAL (con't)

And by the way, if it's a baby? I think you'd know it.

(A slight beat ...)

MEGAN

I'd like to have a baby.

(Going to him now -)

I'd like to have your baby.

JAMAL

Is that right.

MEGAN

I would, actually. Jamal Junior. Or ... *Jamalia*. How about that?

JAMAL

I think we better wait 'til after lunch before you start naming the kids.

MEGAN

See, you say things like that and then you wonder why I want to know ... !

(Frances has entered with flowers and a vase. She and Megan greet like schoolgirls, giggling with pleasure.)

FRANCES

Oh good, you're here! Hello Jamal. Nice hair cut. I like it.

(To Megan)

Go get your father, darling. He's working on the car.

(Megan goes)

I'm so glad you could come. We don't see nearly enough of you.

(She hands him the flowers.)

Hold these, would you?

(She sets the vase on a table.)

I understand you're working at the college this summer.

JAMAL

Grounds crew.

FRANCES

I always worked summers myself, and weekends. My father owned a glue factory. Very glamorous. He used to say he wanted me to have a work ethic, and he wanted it to stick.

(She produces a pair of scissors and reaches to take a flower from Jamal.)

You brought me flowers. Isn't that sweet.

(She takes one and begins to clip and arrange.)

I hope you have some vacation time. We'd love you to come visit in Door County.

JAMAL

Just weekends, unfortunately.

FRANCES

Oh that's ridiculous. They ought to give you a week anyway.

JAMAL

Well there's Fourth of July, it's a long weekend.

FRANCES

That's it then. You'll come up for the Fourth. No computers, not even a phone. Just lots of sun and sky and water. And you never know: bad case of poison ivy, we might not let you go home.

(Megan returns.)

MEGAN

He said he'll be in, don't wait. What's for lunch?

FRANCES

I made lazanki.

MEGAN

Fabulous. I hope there's beer in the house.

FRANCES

There's some in the basement, in the fridge.

(Megan goes again ...)

Just enough for the three of us.

MEGAN

I know ... !

(She is gone. An awkward moment, into which Jamal gently steps.)

JAMAL

How's he doing?

FRANCES

Oh ... don't know, Jamal. Sometimes I think he's fine - next thing I know -

(She shrugs...)

Well, you were here last time. You see what happens. The problem is, you never know what's going to set him off. It certainly doesn't take much, does it.

I asked the counselor once: 'do you think it's guilt? Because he threw away all our money?' You know what she said?

JAMAL

What?

FRANCES

She said, 'how could he be guilty about that? He was already a drunk when he threw it all away.' So much for the guilt theory.

(She stands back to look at the flowers, which are now in the vase)

You like?

JAMAL

Beautiful.

FRANCES

Grew them myself.

(She sees his worried look -)

Oh, don't worry. He'll be fine. He likes it when you're here. He can't wait to hear the news. We've been trying to guess all morning.

(This seems to have no effect -)

You do have news, yes?

JAMAL

Yeah, I do, but -

(Megan enters.)

MEGAN

They weren't even cold.

FRANCES

I'm sorry ...

MEGAN

I put 'em in the freezer but I'm not eating 'til they're cold.

JAMAL

I was going to say: maybe I should tell you now. While he's outside

FRANCES

(The penny drops.)

Oh.

JAMAL

I think it might be better.

FRANCES

I see.

MEGAN

Better about what?

FRANCES

(To Megan)

Your father.

MEGAN

What about him?

FRANCES

We don't need any more slips, that's all.

(An awkward silence. They are waiting for Jamal.)

JAMAL

Right. So. Just let me -

(He takes his cell phone out of his pocket.)
- turn this thing off. People do have a knack for calling at the wrong moment? Right?

(He turns it off.)

FRANCES

Do you want to sit?

JAMAL

No, actually, I think I better, uh ... no, you're right.

(He sits. Frances sits. Megan sits. Again, they wait.)

JAMAL

Well ... it's ... it's about my father.

FRANCES

Your father.

JAMAL

Yeah, something - came up. Something you should know.

FRANCES

I'm sorry, I thought your father -

(To Megan)

Didn't you tell me he was - ?

MEGAN

Yes, mother ...

FRANCES

... some kind of accident?

MEGAN

Let him finish.

JAMAL

Killed, actually. Shot.

MEGAN

Murdered more like it.

FRANCES

Oh, Jamal ...

JAMAL

By the police.

FRANCES

I'm so sorry.

JAMAL

That's all right, it's a long time ago.

FRANCES

Yes but to find out ...

MEGAN

He's known it for twenty years Mom. Let him talk.

FRANCES

Oh - I'm sorry.

JAMAL

This is more about - I don't know - ... me, I guess. And you. All of us.

MEGAN

Go ahead.

JAMAL

(A beat. He almost speaks, then stops. Then he begins ...)

When I was little - he used to come by in the evenings - my father. He'd sit on the front stoop with my mother. She didn't want him in the house 'cause he'd steal things.

(Unable to look at either of them; and in any case immersed in the story -)

But he'd take me in his lap and say he was going to tell me something. Something I needed to know. And it was always the same thing.

That I was not ... that we were not poor.

Because - a long time ago, before I was born, before he met my mother, before he went to Vietnam - he used to work at a factory. Way in back of an old factory. Up on top of these giant vats. He could see the whole place, down in front of him. How the whole factory worked - like one big machine, with every part turning. But - like a machine that didn't work quite right. There was something wrong. He could see it. Sense it.

JAMAL (con't)

So he went home and he worked it out on paper. A whole plan. He called it the system. Took him more than a year. At home, at night, in his room. On his own time. But he did it. And when it was done, he gave it to the front office, to the boss, right to the owner himself. And that man - the man who owned the factory - he stole it. He used the system, he put it in place, he made himself rich off it.

And my father - well, you already know about my father.

He'd say this to me, and he'd get done, and he'd walk off into the night.

When he was gone, I'd ask my mother about everything he said. And she'd say, "No. No, son, your father's good underneath, but the war has ruined him. And whatever the war hasn't ruined, the junk has done the rest. Everything he tells you - it's just dreams. Because that's all he has left."

(Silence.)

MEGAN

Okay.

I'm not - totally ... Mom?

(Again, silence.)

FRANCES

Go ahead. Tell her the rest.

JAMAL

Last week, Wednesday night - the dinner party? - there was a letter on the table there, an envelope, with your mother's name on it. Her full name. Maiden name. Kiefer. Frances Kiefer LaFavre. I saw that and I realized, my mother was wrong. He wasn't dreaming. He wasn't dreaming at all, was he.

FRANCES

(As a gift, a reassurance ...)
No, he wasn't.

JAMAL

It was all true.

FRANCES

Yes.

MEGAN

What was true? What's he talking about?

FRANCES

The old factory.

JAMAL

Your grandfather, Bronson Kiefer.

FRANCES

And your father. Desmond. Desmond Fairchild.

JAMAL

You knew him?

FRANCES

I worked at that factory after school. After school and every summer.

JAMAL

He never mentioned you.

FRANCES

(Brushing it off ...)
No, well ... he wouldn't.

MEGAN

But my God: Jay. When did you - ? You knew about this - ? - for a week?

JAMAL

I'm sorry. I had to think.

MEGAN

Think about what? This is insane. This is a crime. We're talking about a crime.

JAMAL

I realize that.

(Both the women absorb this)

MEGAN

I always knew about Grampa - you didn't have to be a genius - but not this. Nothing like this.

FRANCES

He was a complicated man.

MEGAN

Oh please. Everybody's favorite euphemism. Complicated. How complicated do you have to be to be a racist?

FRANCES

I'm not defending him, believe me.

MEGAN

You think he would have done this to a white man? You think he would have had the nerve?

JAMAL

Meg - hey -

MEGAN

(Still to Frances)

And you did nothing *but* defend him. My entire life that's all I heard.

"He was an old man." "It was another generation."
"That was the only thing he knew."

So now this. What's the excuse for this?

JAMAL

Meg -

MEGAN

I'm serious. I don't understand. I really don't.

JAMAL

Meg, come on. I had to say it, but that's all. So we all know. There's no accusation. It's not about that.

JAMAL (con't)

(He goes to her.)

Okay? That's all there is.

FRANCES

It's not though. It's not all.

JAMAL

Well, no, I don't mean ... - we have to talk about it obviously, but -

FRANCES

No, don't you see? Megan's right. What is talk? What is there to say? This was a crime. It's not some abstract idea, it was money. So let's deal with it just like that. It can't be so difficult. Add everything up, divide by two. Half to you, half to us.

MEGAN

That's not funny.

FRANCES

And I'm not joking.

MEGAN

Half of what? There is no more Kiefer Adhesive. It doesn't even exist.

FRANCES

Yes but we've got the spoils, don't we. Of war, I mean. And it was a war, wasn't it? In a way.

Stocks, money markets, bonds. They can all be divided. Not so hard.

MEGAN

Oh mother, stop it.

FRANCES

What?

MEGAN

This is some kind of sarcastic joke, isn't it.

FRANCES

It is not a joke.

MEGAN

(Contemptuous ...)

So you plan on giving Jamal half of what you own.

FRANCES

I don't see why not. Why shouldn't I?

JAMAL

But that's not what I'm saying ...

MEGAN

Jay - please - let me.

FRANCES

It's my money. There's not all that much left. I mean, it's not millions, but what's there is mine. I can do what I want with it.

MEGAN

All right so you do that. You give away all your money.

FRANCES

Not all: half.

MEGAN

Then where does that leave you? Because right now you're living off the interest. Mr. Goodwrench out there has seen his last paycheck. He'll never work again, and you know it. He'd fall off the wagon just thinking about the possibility. So let's say you give away half the remains of the great Kiefer glue fortune.

You'd never live off the interest of what's left. So you dip into capital. And how long is that going to last? Five years? Ten? And then what?

FRANCES

I can't worry about that.

MEGAN

(To Jamal)

She does this. She's thinks it's funny. It's not funny, mother. Nobody's laughing.

JAMAL

Can I say something?

MEGAN

No.

(To Frances)

You think I don't see your bullshit, but I do. You would never in a million years do something like this. Never.

(To Jamal)

You want to see something? You want to see what a joke it is?

(To Frances)

What about patents?

FRANCES

What about them?

MEGAN

There must have been a patent, yes?

JAMAL

No. He always said that. No patent.

MEGAN

Well you can't own ideas. You can only own things. You can only patent things. I remember Grampa used to say that to me. Like a mantra.

FRANCES

And now we know why, don't we.

MEGAN

It's still a fact. If you don't have a patent to show exactly what it was and what it wasn't, legally you've got nothing.

FRANCES

You don't understand.

MEGAN

Then you explain it to me. Like how do we know he had this idea if he didn't tell it to anyone? Forget the patents. How do we even know the idea was his?

JAMAL

He told it to me.

MEGAN

Jay, please - ...

JAMAL

No but I -

MEGAN

Then let me talk. I know her.

JAMAL

Meg, he told it to me.

MEGAN

Ten years later! He could have heard about these vats and whatever it was, this system, and made up some story about how it was all his idea.

JAMAL

I don't think my father would lie about something like that.

MEGAN

(Without thinking -)

Your father was a junky, Jamal.

FRANCES

(Calmly; cutting through the icy pause -)

He told your grandfather. I remember it. Des came here to the house. My father invited him. They talked.

MEGAN

In front of you?

FRANCES

No. They didn't let me listen.

MEGAN

Then how do you know what he said to Grampa? I mean, I'm sorry, but how do you know any of this?

FRANCES

Because the whole business took off, Megan. Six months later we were rich. Rich as kings.

MEGAN

But the connection never occurred to you.

FRANCES

No.

MEGAN

Not then.

FRANCES

No.

MEGAN

Not until now, in fact.

FRANCES

No.

MEGAN

Well I find that sort of strange. It never dawned on you then but suddenly it's all clear. Just like that.

FRANCES

I didn't think about it at the time. My mind was not focused on gluing vats.

MEGAN

So what we're saying is that you don't actually have a single fact. What you have is what you think people might have said. Or what some very troubled man said to give his little boy something to admire in him. Since apparently in reality there wasn't much to go on.

(Quickly, to Jamal)

And I'm sorry, Jay, that's you talking. That's your version. You told me that more than once. And I'm sorry to say it back to you, but I cannot let you get taken in by this - this - whatever it is. This is a sick, insincere, fatuous joke.

FRANCES

May I talk now?

His father worked very hard at that factory. At very bad wages. And you heard Jamal: on his own time, with no payment whatsoever, he worked on a way to improve the entire manufacturing system. It

FRANCES (con't)

turns out that his work, his efforts, doubled - and I mean doubled the gross output of that plant. At half the cost. The competition was wiped out. It made Kiefer what it was. The only way you ever knew it. A giant. Huge. International. World class. When he sold, it was worth 50 million dollars. It was a crime. A literal crime. You said so yourself.

I wish it were a joke, Meg. I do. But it's not. Whatever we have - and it's not all that much, I grant you that - but whatever we do have, we have to give some of it back, don't we?

MEGAN

I get it. No, I do. And that's fine.

You give yourself a day or two, tell yourself what a big heart you've got. Then a day goes by - a week maybe, then a month - and oh well, you can't really do that. I mean, not half. Maybe something symbolic instead. Something meaningful, not too expensive. A statue, maybe, down by city hall. An allegory: Liberal Woman Lifting the Burden of Guilt Off Her Shoulders.

You know what this is? It's the pleasant daydream of an upper middle class white woman, who imagines herself the benefactress of a young man. Black fortunately. Extra points. It's a lovely little daydream, but you wait. It's only good for an afternoon. It won't stick.

You make me laugh. You really do.

(The lights narrow change to Frances,
speaking to us.)

FRANCES

Con artist? He might have been. I considered that. But everything fit. All the details, just the way I knew them.

No, Jamal the con man would be the simple story. The easy one. This was not easy. And it was just beginning.

FRANCES (con't)

Desmond did in fact come to our house that day, thirty years ago. And I remember it very well.

(The lights are up now on Des and Frannie, who are in the same places as Jamal and Megan were in the previous scene: Des on the sofa, Frannie at the window.)

Look familiar?

Strange, isn't it. The same tableau, 1968. This is Des now, and that's me at the window. And I - well, for now I'm going to become my own mother.

I know, it's the old chestnut.

(She has arranged herself in the chair, and without a beat, speaks to Des in a lively patter.)

SYRIE

His name was Mathews, or Mathiesson, or Matley, or -

FRANNIE

(Not looking up -)
Mathers -

SYRIE

Mathers, that's right. Boppie Mathers. He was our gardener. From Mississippi originally. He came north to find a job and never went back. We were so fond of him. I remember when he passed, I was only ten. It was like a member of the family had died.

FRANNIE

A member of the family whose name you can't remember.

SYRIE

(Unaffected by this barb -)
I'm the one who named him Boppie actually. I was just a baby. I'd point right at him and say "Boppie." Just like that. He loved it when I called him that. Would you like something to drink?

DES

No ma'am. Thank you.

SYRIE

He can't be too much longer. Although those draft board meetings do go on forever these days. It's a terrible mess, I don't have to tell you. Some boys will say anything to get a deferral. And I mean anything. One boy came in and announced he was a homosexual. Just like that.

FRANNIE

Maybe he was.

SYRIE

In Milwaukee? I doubt that.

(To Desmond)

I take it you're no relation then.

DES

Ma'am?

SYRIE

To Boppie. Boppie Mathews.

FRANNIE

Mathers.

DES

No ma'am, no relation. Not that I know of.

FRANNIE

They're not all related, Mom.

SYRIE

How long have you been at the factory Desmond?

DES

Two years, ma'am.

SYRIE

Is that right.

DES

Two years this month.

SYRIE

I hope you're not unhappy.

DES

No ma'am - no complaints.

SYRIE

I know Mr. Kiefer wants all of you at the factory to be happy there. He thinks of it as a family. We all do. His father established that business you know.

FRANNIE

He knows, mother.

SYRIE

You work in the vats I understand.

DES

Yes ma'am.

SYRIE

That's considered a very important job, you know.

DES

Yes ma'am, I know that.

SYRIE

They must have a great deal of faith in you.

DES

I believe they do, yes.

SYRIE

The vats are the heart of the business, Bron's father always said so. He said if the glue isn't right coming out of the vats, we might as well be selling sticky oatmeal.

(She stands.)

Are you sure I can't get you anything?

DES

No // thank you ma'am.

FRANNIE

He said no twice.

SYRIE

Bottle of pop? Lemonade?

DES

I'm just fine.

SYRIE

Frances makes a lovely lemonade. Fresh lemons.

(He stands also...)

DES

No ma'am. Thank you, I'm just fine.

SYRIE

Oh no, please, sit. Make yourself at home.

(Just enough time for Syrie to exit before)

DES

Will you *stop*?

FRANNIE

What am I doing?

DES

You're going to mess this up.

FRANNIE

Are you even listening to her? Matley, Matthews, Mathiesson - I mean, Jesus. And him too. What is this? You come all the way out here and what do you do? You wait.

DES

He's at a meeting.

FRANNIE

Meeting my eye. He makes you wait because he can.

DES

So I wait. So what. It's Saturday. I got the time.

(They are close now, not touching, but intimate -)

And unlike some people, I'm very patient.

(We hear Bronson, still off-stage ...)

BRONSON (O.S.)

Syrie? I'm home.

(Des and Frannie instinctively move apart as Bronson appears.)

FRANNIE
You're late, Daddy.

BRONSON
(Brushing past her -)
Desmond - good to see you -

FRANNIE
He's been waiting an hour -

(Bronson goes to Desmond and they shake hands.)

BRONSON
Desmond doesn't mind, do you Desmond.

DES
No sir, not at all.

(Syrie enters.)

SYRIE
Darling, you're late. We've been waiting for you.

FRANNIE
But everybody waits for you, don't they Daddy.

SYRIE
And on that note, you're coming with me.

(She pulls at Frannie's elbow, but Frannie tugs away.)

FRANNIE
Mother, please -

SYRIE
I believe this is business, Frannie.

FRANNIE
I'm getting my crossword!
(She retrieves it and goes upstairs. To Bronson -)
I'll be listening.

SYRIE

No you won't.

FRANNIE

Yes I will.

SYRIE

No you won't.

FRANNIE

(Sing-songy -)

Yes I will.

SYRIE

(To us ...)

But I didn't, unfortunately. Therefore, more speculation.

(They are gone.)

BRONSON

Desmond, I apologize. That draft board these days. You can imagine.

DES

No problem, Mr. Kiefer. We had a nice talk.

BRONSON

Sit, please, have a seat.

(Des sits, and Bronson goes to a cabinet at the side of the room.)

I've got to make this snappy, son. We're on a lunch break.

DES

That's fine with me, sir.

(Bronson has brought out a bottle of bourbon from the cabinet.)

BRONSON

Like a drink?

DES

I'm fine, thank you.

BRONSON

My father always told me 'Pour it anyway. Nine times out of ten the other guy wants one, no matter what he says.' I don't know about you and your father, but I get the feeling mine's watching me - keeping tabs.

(He comes to Des, bearing the drinks.)

I think they do that. Parents, grandparents. All the way back. Watching every move. I really do.

(He hands Des the drink.)

Enjoy.

DES

Thank you sir.

BRONSON

That was quite a letter you wrote, son.

(He sits across from Des in an armchair.)

Anybody know about it?

DES

No sir.

BRONSON

Nobody at all.

DES

No sir.

BRONSON

Nobody at the plant. Your family. Friends.

(The slightest of beats ...)

Girlfriend.

(Desmond is shaking his head no.)

DES

You're the only one Mr. Kiefer.

BRONSON

Because one person knows and that's it: scotches the whole deal.

DES

Yes sir.

BRONSON

Because there are certain outfits, not Kiefer Adhesive mind you, but some businesses, corporations mostly - big international types - they'll spy on a company like Kiefer - small, local business - they'll steal an idea like this as fast as you can say Manishevitz if you know what I mean. And the next thing you know, the little guy - that's us - we're out of business. And the hell of it is, Desmond, that we, you and I, Kiefer Adhesive, in that event we have no legal recourse. None at all. Because this idea of yours cannot be patented. It's not an invention. It's a ... it's a ...

DES

A system.

BRONSON

That's right. A system. An idea. And you cannot patent ideas. First rule. You can patent things, period. You understand this.

DES

Yes sir. I know. I read up on it.

BRONSON

You did.

DES

I went to the library.

BRONSON

(Impressed, and not a little surprised -)
Ah. I see. Good. So you know.

(Back on his stride)

Can't own it, can't patent it. All you can do is get there first, use it first, hope like hell nobody catches on before you knock the other guy out. Because once they catch on, once everybody's got it, that's it. It's wide open. You got six months in this business, and that's it.

You understand this.

DES

Yes, sir.

BRONSON

That, Desmond, is why you're here in this house. Because I don't want anybody to see you going in and out of my office. Because that's going to wag tongues. And we have no idea who might be on the payroll of Mr. Bigshot.

DES

Yes sir.

BRONSON

So man to man, Desmond: I'm going to trust you to keep this to yourself. Not the fellas at the factory, not your family, not your friends, not your girlfriend. Nobody.

DES

Yes sir, that's been my feeling all along.

BRONSON

And you can promise me that.

DES

Yes sir.

BRONSON

(He eases back into the big chair, sizing up Des ...)
Good. Now let's talk about you.

DES

Sir?

BRONSON

Let's talk about Desmond. Let's talk about the future. You must have thought about that. And I don't mean next year. I mean now. This summer.

Make no mistake: things are going to be different for you. Very different. You won't be working in those vats anymore. That I can assure you.

DES

Thank you sir.

BRONSON

Not today mind you. Not this week, or next. It's going to be two months minimum, possibly three. We've got to get this thing set up first.

And it's not just the glue, you realize. We've got to A: package, B: sell, and C: ship. Otherwise we're just up to our asses in a whole lot of glue.

DES

I understand, yes.

BRONSON

And that takes some time. As I say - a month or two, possibly three.

Meantime, though, we're agreed, yes? Anybody asks, you don't know a thing.

DES

Yes sir.

(This Settled, Bronson sizes him up.)

BRONSON

You're a fine young man, Desmond. I'm not going to sell you a load of crap about what a fine example you are. You're better than a fine example. You're one of the finest things in this world, Desmond. You're a businessman. A true businessman. I can see it in you. You want to be paid for your time and your talent, and you want to be paid well. Isn't that right.

DES

Yes sir.

BRONSON

And you will be, son. Paid and repaid.

DES

Thank you sir. That's all I'm asking.

(A pause, somewhat too long)

If that's all then ...

(He stands, as if to go.)

BRONSON

It's not all, no.

(Desmond remains standing, unsure whether to sit.)

I'm curious about something.

DES

Sir?

BRONSON

Your letter.

DES

Yes sir?

BRONSON

How did you get that letter onto my desk?

DES

Sir?

BRONSON

You see, my mail - it all goes through my secretary. Mrs. Sudinksy. She opens it, she stamps it, she sorts it. She puts it on my desk. I don't see it 'til after lunch. Your letter was waiting for me first thing yesterday morning. Nine am. On my desk. Unopened.

DES

(Calm, controlled ...)

I - I don't know sir - I -

BRONSON

How did you swing that?

DES

Oh, it wasn't me, sir // I -

BRONSON

Well, no, couldn't have been you. That's my point. It was someone else.

DES

I, I really don't know, sir // I -

BRONSON

Who do you know in the front office? I didn't realize you knew anyone up there.

DES

No sir, I don't.

BRONSON

No one at all.

DES

No sir, I delivered that letter to reception.

BRONSON

But there it was. Nine am. How could that be?

DES

I don't know, sir.

BRONSON

I see. It's a mystery then, isn't it.

(He checks his watch.)

Well, I've got to get back. I'll bet you good money Ho Chi Minh never shows up late for his draft board, now does he.

DES

No sir.

BRONSON

(Sizing him up ...)

I believe you could go places, Desmond. Do you believe that?

DES

I do, sir, yes.

BRONSON

All you need is a push. That's where I come in. I know just how to push. How, when, and where.

DES

Yes sir.

BRONSON

You go ahead. Finish that drink. Have two. You deserve it.

(Bronson goes out the front door. Des takes his drink and pours it into a potted plant. Frannie comes down the stairs to see him do this.)

FRANNIE

Tough on the foliage.

(He puts the glass back on the side table, looking at her. She sees his dark mood.)

What.

(He goes to the front door ...)

What did he say?

(Des is a swirl of emotions: disappointed, angry, humiliated, scared. He can barely begin to speak ...)

DES

You put the letter on his desk.

FRANNIE

Of course I did.

DES

I told you to put it at reception.

FRANNIE

I put it on his desk so it didn't get lost in the ...

(He's glowering at her and she grows defensive.)

... what? It got his attention, didn't it? You're in his living room.

DES

Frannie, he knew someone else had to put it there. It couldn't be me. I can't go strolling into his office anytime I want.

FRANNIE

He doesn't know it's me.

DES

Why couldn't you just...

(With exquisite frustration ...)

... do what we said.

FRANNIE

Because Mrs. Sudinsky sorts all his mail. She weeds it out!

DES

What do you think, this is some kind of prank?

FRANNIE

It's // not a prank.

DES

Some kind of practical joke on your parents, Frannie? Is that what we are?

(A beat to let this sink in - and to control his temper.)

Because I'm serious about you. But I know what that means. I can't afford any games.

FRANNIE

Neither can I.

DES

They're not ready for you and me, Frannie. Nobody's ready for you and me.

FRANNIE

I know that.

DES

Do you?

FRANNIE

(Placating - but genuine ...)

Yes. I know it.

DES

(Beat)

Because maybe you want people to know. Maybe that's what this is about.

FRANNIE

Des, I love you.

(He hasn't heard this before. They look at each other, astonished.)

I do.

(They move towards each other, ending in a kiss. From upstairs we hear ...)

SYRIE (O.S.)

Frannie, did you see my car keys? They're not in my purse.

(Des and Fran push apart. Syrie is closer now, but on the stairs: visible to us but unseen by them.)

Who is that? Is that Desmond?

DES

Yes, ma'am.

FRANNIE

He's just leaving. They're in the bathroom.

(To Des -)

Tonight.

DES

What time?

FRANNIE

Ten o'clock.

DES

Lincoln Park. By the fountain.

(He turns to go)

SYRIE (O.S.)

They're not there! Did you mean your bathroom or my bathroom?!

DES

(He stops, turns)

I love you too.

(He goes out the front door. Frances - today's Frances - comes down the stairs with a sheaf of papers. The lights make a cross fade as she speaks to us...)

FRANCES

Meanwhile, current events. Megan disappears.

(Megan goes ...)

Gordie turns the focus of his addictive energy on *Jamal's* engine. And Jamal and I, we work out the details. That's where God is, after all.

Isn't he?

(Frances sits on the floor with her folder of papers spread before her. Jamal has entered and is at the window seat, squinting into the sun - musing, only half listening to her.

As the general lights rise -)

FRANCES

All I do is write a check. It's that simple. If that's what you want. But you've got to consider taxes, you know. So you might want the property in Door County instead. Or maybe both. We never use it. Five acres on the water. Or I could sell it and divide it up. Anyway, that's one question. And there's the media.

JAMAL

(Suddenly attentive ...)
Media?

FRANCES

Well they do pick things up. Stories like this. But I thought we should hand them something, you know - write something out - so I immediately thought Megan because she's such a good writer.

JAMAL

I don't know about that, Frances.

FRANCES

By the way, have you seen her? She might know how much that land is worth too. God, I hope she didn't take the car, not in that mood.

JAMAL

(Looking out the window.)
It's in the driveway.

FRANCES

Wait a second. What am I thinking? I've got an assessment somewhere. Now where is that?

JAMAL

Can we go back a second? This media thing, writing something -

FRANCES

Well, people won't know if we don't tell them.

JAMAL

Frances, I'm not sure I'm even doing this.

FRANCES

Of course you are. What do you mean?

JAMAL

I'm still thinking about it.

FRANCES

You don't believe I mean business, is that it?
Like Megan?

JAMAL

No, I believe you.

FRANCES

I am going to do this, Jamal. Today. Before you
leave. And when I do, when the check is written,
we want people to know, don't we?

JAMAL

Do we?

FRANCES

Well I just assumed ...

JAMAL

Why do people have to know? I mean, it's just us,
isn't it?

(Pause. She smiles.)

FRANCES

No, of course. You're right. No statements. No
media. Just us.

(Another pause. She looks down to her
papers. He stirs, working on a hunch -
vague, but nagging.)

JAMAL

How well did you know him?

FRANCES

Des? Oh, I don't know. Couple of months.

JAMAL

Not how long. How well.

FRANCES

As well as anything, I guess. We both worked at the plant. He was back in the vats of course, but we'd see each other at lunch. There was a little patch of grass out back. Just an acre, not even. But I'd go out there with a sandwich. And he'd come out and we'd talk and laugh and be silly and swap lunch goodies, just like grade school.

JAMAL

Did he tell you about the system?

FRANCES

No.

JAMAL

Did you ask?

FRANCES

I knew he wanted to talk to my father.

JAMAL

And you arranged it.

FRANCES

In a way, yes. I helped.

JAMAL

Why would you do that? Why would you help him?

FRANCES

(She puts down the folder)

Well, it's obviously not much of a secret is it. Otherwise you wouldn't ask.

JAMAL

I'd like to hear it from you. So I understand.

FRANCES

We had two months, that's all. May and June.

(Frances turns to us and speaks.)

It's true. That's all it was. I had to think for a moment - how short it really was - until I had to tell Jamal.

(Jamal goes ...)

Two months in spring. The season of love.

(Bronson enters, leaves a couple bags on the floor, and exits again.)

In July, much to my dismay, we left town. We always went north in July, up to the cottage. That year, of course, it was slightly different.

(Older Frances goes.)

The Young Frannie has come downstairs during this. She sees the suitcases, stops, listens.

She is about to go back upstairs when Bronson comes in.)

BRONSON

I hope you're packed. I want to be on the road before eight.

(Without stopping, he goes up the stairs.

Her only reply is a long, sleepy yawn.

There's coffee. Help yourself.

(He is gone. She looks after him and starts to follow - and to say something - but then decides against it. She comes into the room, sitting down as he immediately comes back down the stairs.)

BRONSON

Why is your door locked?

(Coming into the room)

I don't like locked doors in this house.

FRANNIE

Daddy, don't you ever take a day off? It's so early.

BRONSON

I want to get your bags into the car.

FRANNIE

I'll bring them down myself. Give me two seconds.

BRONSON

You are packed, aren't you?

FRANNIE

(No attempt to hide the sarcasm.)

No, I forgot all about it.

BRONSON

(Coming to her, quieter, but with a new firmness ...)

Frances, I want you to come upstairs and let me into that room.

FRANNIE

(Looking at him evenly; simply...)

No.

BRONSON

Frances.

FRANNIE

Stop bullying me. It doesn't work anymore.

BRONSON

(Seething ...)

I suppose this is your way of saying you don't want to go with us this summer.

FRANNIE

It's my way of saying I'm an adult and I'd like some privacy.

BRONSON

You have all the God damned privacy a person could possibly want. Nobody goes into your room without asking!

FRANNIE

You just tried, didn't you?

BRONSON

(Stymied, he retrenches ...)

Okay.

(A deep breath and a new tone ...)

Truce. Okay? This is our vacation. I don't want to fight.

(He comes to her, sits near her, choosing his words ...)

You've been feeling boxed in lately, haven't you.

FRANNIE

To put it mildly.

BRONSON

Yes, well, I've been thinking about that.

(She looks at him, paying attention now ...)

Maybe - ... maybe it's time for you to move out. Live on your own. Is that what you'd like?

FRANNIE

Do you mean that?

BRONSON

I'm saying it, aren't I?

FRANNIE

(This is unheard of ...)

I don't believe it.

BRONSON

Frannie, I know what it's like. Me, I was gone at eighteen. On my own. Out the door.

(Beat; gently-)

You and I are a lot alike, darling. Even if you do hate to admit it.

FRANNIE

It's not that I don't want to be here it's just that // I want my freedom -

BRONSON

I know. You want your freedom.

(He looks at her fondly -)

Of course you do. Who doesn't?

(Pause)

Well? What do you say? There's an offer on the table.

FRANNIE

Well, yeah - I mean - of course.

BRONSON

Good. I've got one request. We don't tell your mother. Not yet. I've got a month in Door County to get her on board. So you let me take care of that. Deal?

FRANNIE

(Delighted in spite of herself)

Deal.

(He gets up but before he's even standing -)

BRONSON

Oh, and one more thing.

(She looks at him silently)

Gimme a smile.

FRANNIE

(Embarrassed, as he intended -)

Oh, Daddy ...

BRONSON

You work on it.

(Beat)

I'm going to put some gas in the car. You go see if she's up.

(As he goes)

And bring the damn bags down. I want to get this show on the road.

FRANNIE

Daddy?

(Hard to say, but necessary ...)

Thank you.

(He smiles and goes out. She goes to the window and watches as we hear the car engine turn over and pull away. She goes halfway up the staircase, calling in a whisper ...)

FRANNIE

Hey. Hey.

(She makes a gesture to come down.)

Come on. He's gone.

(Des appears. He meets her at the bottom of the staircase. They kiss quickly.)

DES

I'll see you ...

(He starts to go, but she won't let go of his arm.)

FRANNIE

Wait.

(She glances up the staircase as if to reassure herself that no one is there. Then, as she takes him into the room.)

It was the nightingale, and not the lark that pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.

DES

It was the lark, the herald of the morn.

FRANNIE

I'm the one who made you read it and I say it was the nightingale, now c'mere.

(She throws her arms around his neck, and they really kiss this time. Finally, their lips part and she sinks into him.)

DES

Fran, hey - I gotta go.

FRANNIE

No.

DES

Frannie -

FRANNIE

He went to get gas.

DES

And what about your mother?

FRANNIE

So she comes down. So what? She knows everything else, she might as well know this.

(Quickly - she knows that he's right about leaving ...)

Des, I want you to think about something.

DES

What?

FRANNIE

Your promotion ...

DES

I can't talk about that. I promised him.

FRANNIE

But you will get it, yes? By the end of summer, like he said.

DES

(With a shrug -)

That's what he told me.

FRANNIE

Because he said something - just now: I'm moving out - in September - when I get back. And I thought - well, both of us, together: we'd both have money. We could get an apartment, near campus maybe.

Would you?

Live with me?

DES

You're crazy.

FRANNIE

That's not an answer.

DES

Yes. I would.

(They look at each other a long moment, then kiss - this time long and lingering ...)

FRANNIE

I'll write you.

DES

Yes.

FRANNIE

I'll write you everyday. We'll make plans.

(From upstairs, we hear -)

SYRIE (O.S.)

Frannie?

DES

I gotta go, baby ...

SYRIE (O.S.)

Frannie? You awake?

DES

Gonna miss you.

FRANNIE

G'bye --

(They kiss.)

DES

Gonna think about you all the time baby.

(He starts to go one way ...)

SYRIE (O.S.)

Frances, wake up. We've got to get going.

(She guides him another direction.)

SYRIE (O.S.)

Why is your door locked? Are you in there?

FRANNIE

I'm downstairs mother!

(To Des)

I love you!

(Another kiss, and he goes as Syrie comes down the stairs. She is dressed but very groggy.)

SYRIE

Why is your door locked?

FRANNIE

(Non-chalant -)

Why does anyone lock a door, mother. There's one very common reason.

(She comes into the living room. Syrie stares after her, dawning ...)

SYRIE

Oh Frannie... please God, he's not in there. Did he spend the night here? Frances, look at me.

FRANNIE

I'm going with you aren't I? You got what you wanted. Isn't that enough?

SYRIE

What if your father found that door locked?

FRANNIE

He already did.

SYRIE

Where is he? Is he up there right now?

FRANNIE

You just missed him. He says hello, see you in September.

(Syrie sinks into a chair, frazzled, tearing up. Fran's cold facade melts into something like annoyance ...)

What?

(Syrie literally shakes)

Mother, what. You knew about this. Don't act like you didn't.

SYRIE

I can't take it. I really can't.

FRANNIE

Well, it won't happen again, I'm moving out.

SYRIE

(Looking up; a fresh disaster -)
... what?

FRANNIE

It was Daddy's idea. When we get back. I'm going to find my own place. Something down near campus, maybe, so I can walk to class.

SYRIE

(With a tremendous mournful sigh...)
Oh God...

FRANNIE

You're acting like it's a calamity or something. I'm not some little girl.

SYRIE

No, I understand. I'm fine.
(Pulling together -)
It's just - it's the mornings. Those pills he gave me ...

FRANNIE

So stop taking them.

SYRIE

Well, I've got to sleep, don't I?
(Dry now, shoulders squared -)
Look, I'll be fine once we get up to the cottage. I just need to get away. Get your bags darling. We've got to go.

FRANNIE

I don't know how you do it, Mom. I really don't.

(Frannie gives her a kiss on the forehead and goes up the stairs.

Jamal has appeared and steps into the place we last saw him.)

FRANCES

It was all so ... I don't know. I won't say innocent. It wasn't that. Sweet, though. And true. And good.

Now I sound like Ernest Hemingway.

Should I stop?

JAMAL

What else is there?

FRANCES

No, I'm asking you. Do you want more.

JAMAL

Yes.

FRANCES

Are you sure.

JAMAL

Yes.

FRANCES

All of it.

JAMAL

Yes.

FRANCES

It's not pretty.

JAMAL

Go ahead.

FRANCES

I loved Des, and he loved me. That's true. And he was robbed, that's certainly true. But it's not all.

(To us ...)

Summer ended. We came back to the city, like migrating animals, down from the north woods, into the suburbs for the winter.

(Jamal goes ...)

September came. Then October. Winter coming on.

(Frannie enters with a book in her hand. As she passes Syrie, she deposits a small, fancy shopping bag at Syrie's feet, then flops on the couch, reading.)

FRANCES

But things were not the same. Things were very, very different.

FRANNIE

How was shopping?

SYRIE

Exhausting. And the traffic.

Is your father home?

FRANNIE

No, he called. Draft board again. He'll be home by seven.

SYRIE

(Coming into the room.)

What are you reading?

FRANNIE

(Still in the book, but pleasantly)

Camus. The Stranger.

SYRIE

School work?

FRANNIE

No, I just like it.

(Re: the bag)

You found something.

SYRIE

Oh it's darling. You've got to see it.

(She produces a porcelain teapot from the bag.)

FRANNIE

(Dazzled)

Mother.

SYRIE

Like it?

FRANNIE

It's gorgeous.

SYRIE

It better be.

FRANNIE

(Full of dread -)

How much.

SYRIE

(Hand to breast -)

My lips cannot form the words.

FRANNIE

(A warning note ...)

Mother ...

SYRIE

Your father gave me a limit and I came very close.

FRANNIE

What kind of limit?

SYRIE

Seven.

FRANNIE

Seven what.

SYRIE

Hundred.

FRANNIE

What?

SYRIE

And fifty. And I was a hundred fifty over -- but I paid cash for that part. He'll never know.

FRANNIE

Since when do you have a thousand dollars for teapots?

SYRIE

It's hand painted.

(She offers it to Fran, who refuses.)

FRANNIE

I'm not touching it. Put it back. You're both nuts.

SYRIE

(Putting it away, allowing a long silence;
then ever so casually ...)
Going out tonight?

FRANNIE

(Back to reading)
I don't think so. I'm not really in the mood.

SYRIE

You could call Brian Asmuth. You haven't seen him for ages. He called you at least twice in the past month.

FRANNIE

I really just want to be alone.

SYRIE

You've been alone for a long time now, Frannie. I don't like to see you like this.

FRANNIE

Like what?

SYRIE

Spending all day on the couch reading French novels about suicide.

FRANNIE

Murder.

SYRIE

What?

FRANNIE

It's not about suicide. It's about murder.

SYRIE

And you haven't done a thing about moving out.

FRANNIE

I thought you didn't want me to!

SYRIE

Frances ...

(Going to her, sitting on the couch...)
... it's over, darling. You've got to let it go.

FRANNIE

Mom, you don't understand.

SYRIE

I understand well enough. You think I never had my heart broken?

FRANNIE

It's not that simple.

SYRIE

Then why don't you explain it to me.

(Genuinely -)
Really, I'm serious. Tell me. I want to know.

(Frannie sits up, puts the book down.)

FRANNIE

I know you think it's a question of facing certain facts, but that's not it. I'll face facts. Show me a fact, I'll face it. But it has to make sense first.

SYRIE

He left you, darling. Boys do that. It was a summer thing. You were gone for six weeks. That's all he needed.

FRANNIE

Des wouldn't do that, not that way.

SYRIE

But he did.

FRANNIE

And apparently vanished into thin air besides.

SYRIE

Maybe he left town.

FRANNIE

Where would he go? He has nowhere to go.

SYRIE

He might have family in Chicago, or down South. We don't know.

FRANNIE

I went to the factory.

SYRIE

(Beat)

What do you mean? When?

FRANNIE

This morning. I went back to the vats. I thought the other guys might know something.

SYRIE

And?

FRANNIE

Oh, you know. They just mumbled something or other. They didn't have a clue.

SYRIE

Well there you go. He was young. He wasn't ready. And you know darling - and I say this with ... I mean, you know I was fond of Des - but don't you think it's possible that maybe he was right? In the long run I mean. Maybe he thought this was best.

FRANNIE

Well, you obviously think so.

SYRIE

Darling, it's not what I think. But someday, and it won't be long, you'll look back on all this - with a kind of, I don't know ... fond regret.

FRANNIE

(A bitter laugh ...)

Fond regret!

SYRIE

Why is that funny?

FRANNIE

I wish I had regrets. I keep feeling like I should know ... that I should - whatever it was I ...

(The laughter turning to tears ...)

... I did. Or didn't do. Or -

SYRIE

Oh darling...

FRANNIE

I mean, then at least I'd know. I could regret it, and feel stupid, and hate myself ...

SYRIE

No, no, no ...

FRANNIE

But this, I'm just - there's nothing. I don't know what I did.

SYRIE

Frannie, you didn't do anything.

FRANNIE

(Real tears now -)

Then what happened?

SYRIE

It's not important now.

FRANNIE

(Weeping)

It is important!

SYRIE

Honey, don't, please ...

FRANNIE

(Barely choking it out, sobbing ...)

It's the only thing that is!

SYRIE

(She goes to Frannie.)

We'll go away again. We could go somewhere for Christmas. New Mexico, maybe. Or Switzerland - skiing. That shouldn't be hard. We're doing so well now - it's not just teapots.

FRANNIE

(Crying)

I don't want to go to Switzerland. I like being here. I want to be here. I'm not going to start running away just because - ...

(With an impotent fury -)

I just ... hate him. I hate him so much.

SYRIE

Well, maybe he got what he deserved, darling. You've got to think of it that way. And the only thing you can do is just move on.

(Beat. Frannie looks at her curiously.)

Syrie, believing her better, releases her.)

I'm going to make us both some hot tea. Then I think we should go out for dinner, don't you? All three of us go out. Like a family.

(She goes to the staircase.)

FRANNIE

Mother.

SYRIE

Yes?

FRANNIE

What did he deserve?

SYRIE

What did who deserve?

FRANNIE

Des. You said he got what he deserved.

(Beat.)

SYRIE

No, I didn't.

FRANNIE

Just now. You said, maybe he got what he deserved.

(Frannie stands and goes to her.)

What did that mean?

SYRIE

I don't have any idea. It was just something to say.

FRANNIE

No, it's not. You don't say that if you don't mean something. What did he deserve?

SYRIE

Frances, you're being silly.

FRANNIE

I am not silly and I'm not hearing things. You said something. What did you mean?

SYRIE

(With a nervous laugh-)

I don't know what you're talking about. I don't even have a -

(Frannie takes the teapot and smashes it on the floor with a tremendous crash.)

- oh my God!

FRANNIE

What did you mean?

SYRIE

Frannie, you broke it!

FRANNIE

Tell me what you meant!

SYRIE

(Tearing up)

You've broken the teapot!

(She picks it up.)

FRANNIE

TELL ME WHAT YOU MEANT!

SYRIE

What is the matter with you?

FRANNIE

TELL ME!!

SYRIE

I can't!

FRANNIE

WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM?

SYRIE

Nothing! - it was nothing ... !

FRANNIE

You said he got what he deserved. What did he get?

SYRIE

Frannie, it's all done now. It's over.

FRANNIE

(Pause; quieter now, almost afraid)
You did something terrible, didn't you.

SYRIE

... no, it was ...

FRANNIE

You did something terrible. Oh my God, oh Jesus
...

SYRIE

It was your father, it wasn't me ...

FRANNIE

What did he do?

SYRIE

Please Frannie

FRANNIE

Mother, look at me. Is he alive?
(Beat. He seizes Syrie by the arms.)
Is Des alive?

SYRIE

I don't know.

(Frannie slaps Syrie.)

FRANNIE

Tell me if he's alive!

SYRIE

I don't know!
(Frannie slaps her again.)
It wasn't me, it was your father!

FRANNIE

What did he do?

SYRIE

(Fiercely, as if angry)

Can't you figure it out?! Are you so thick? He's on the board, Frannie!

FRANNIE

What board? What kind of ...?!

(Then slowly she gets it.)

... oh my God ...

(Frannie's hand goes to her mouth as though she might gag.)

SYRIE

He didn't tell me. Frannie. You must believe me.

FRANNIE

Then how did you know?!

SYRIE

He said it was already done.

(Pause; she is nearly in tears -)

I'm sorry Frannie, I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do.

(Syrie kneels, picking up pieces of the pot. Frannie thinks out loud, trying to figure things out.)

FRANNIE

He's there right now.

SYRIE

I suppose so, yes.

FRANNIE

They stay for a year.

SYRIE

Yes.

FRANNIE

If they make it.

SYRIE

That's right.

FRANNIE

And a lot of them don't, mother, you realize that.

SYRIE

I realize, that // of course, but ...

FRANNIE

And you - you just ... went along with this.

SYRIE

Frannie, what could I do? I couldn't stop him. He wouldn't listen to me.

FRANNIE

You told him, didn't you. You told him about us.

SYRIE

No -

FRANNIE

You told him.

SYRIE

He found out on his own Frances! I don't know how and I didn't ask.

FRANNIE

No, of course not, mother. You never ask. You never question! Not you!

(Bronson has entered. He comes into the room. Silence.)

BRONSON

(To Frannie)

Ask about what?

(To Syrie)

Ask about what?

(To them both)

What is this? What's the matter? Talk to me.

FRANNIE

We can talk, Daddy. It's just that there's nothing left to say.

BRONSON

(To Syrie)

What is going on here?

SYRIE

I'm sorry, Bron.

FRANNIE

Mother, don't apologize.

SYRIE

I said something I shouldn't have. I wasn't //
thinking.

FRANNIE

No apologies. Not to him.

BRONSON

Frances, I don't know what she's told // you but -
-

FRANNIE

She didn't tell me anything I didn't already know.
You're on the draft board. That's public
knowledge.

BRONSON

Syrie, for God's sake.

FRANNIE

You're a criminal.

SYRIE

Frannie, don't say that.

BRONSON

Let her talk.

FRANNIE

You're a criminal. Do you realize that?

SYRIE

I can't listen to this.

(She starts to go.)

FRANNIE

You're married to a murderer, mother. You'd better listen to it.

BRONSON

Frances, I don't think you understand my work on the board. His number came up. There was nothing I could do.

FRANNIE

You pulled his number. You waited until I was five hours north of here, with no phone, and you pulled his number. You rigged it. You sent him away.

SYRIE

He's sent a lot of boys darling. That's // his job.

BRONSON

Syrie, for God's sake, would you shut up?

FRANNIE

He's right mother. You don't really have the knack for this.

BRONSON

I did what I thought was best for both of you. I mean that Frances. The longer it went on, the harder it was going to be. These things don't work. They never have and they never will.

(Beat)

SYRIE

Please come to dinner with us Frannie.

(Fran ignores this.)

He might be fine - for all we know. Lots of boys come back. Most of them do. It's not a death sentence. Lots of them come back.

FRANNIE

I can't explain this to you two. I know that. But after you're both gone, I'll still be here. With this. No matter where I go, what I do. For the rest of my life. That's what you've both done.

BRONSON

I've got no apologies for what happened.

(Pause)

I love you Frances. This was for you.

(Silence)

SYRIE

I'm going up to change. Please come with us.
Frannie? Like a family?

(Jamal enters, bewildered but furious,
breaking through Frannie and Bronson, who
scatter into the dark ...)

JAMAL

... you *knew*?

FRANCES

Not right away.

JAMAL

But you *knew*.

FRANCES

Yes.

(She goes to him but he bolts -)

JAMAL

Stay. ... away.

So - when you found out. What then? What did you
do?

FRANCES

(Knowing where this is going ...)
What could I do? He was gone.

JAMAL

So you did nothing.

FRANCES

He was long gone, Jamal.

JAMAL

Nothing at all.

FRANCES

I was a girl. A teenaged girl. A college kid. I was ...

JAMAL

You were helpless.

FRANCES

I couldn't face him, that's all.

JAMAL

Why not? It wasn't you. You didn't pull his number. You didn't pack him up and ship him off like so much cattle. That was your father. That was his doing. That's what you're saying, isn't it?

FRANCES

You want an answer. I don't have one.

JAMAL

You do, though. You don't like it, is all.

FRANCES

Then you tell me.

JAMAL

You got rich didn't you? Remember that? That was the same year you turned into a rich girl. The money - you didn't know where it came from, did you. It just kept coming, every month, every week, more of it, by the bushel, by the truckload. Where did it come from? You had no idea, did you. Did you.

FRANCES

No!

JAMAL

Where could all this money come from? What a coincidence. The quirky twists of fate that life delivers. First my father kills off the nigger who's been fucking his daughter - and now look, we're rich. What are the odds?

FRANCES

I didn't know!

JAMAL

You didn't want to know! People don't - not if it means living off the blood and the sweat of the man they sent up the river.

(A beat; then cooler, thinking through it now ...)

He was back in a year. That's all they did: one year. Where were you? Did you drive down out of Whitefish Bay down to the dark part of town? Did you call even? Did you send a note? Did you sit him down and discuss the financial situation with him? The property in Door County maybe. Or the stock portfolio. Did you hand him his money, while he was still here to take it? When it might have done him some good?

No, what did you do? You did nothing. You said nothing.

(He exits, done with it. She speaks to us.)

FRANCES

He was right. I didn't. I have no excuse.

But the thing you can't imagine - and he can't imagine - is how strange it seemed. Like another life. Some other girl. Day after day after day, all through the fall, all that winter, and the summer after that, and on and on. Another life - all of it new, and confusing, and strange, and distracting, and so, so seductive. Long trips to faraway places. New cars, and new clothes, and wonderful dinners, and money to burn. Money to just throw away.

And I said nothing. I did nothing.

How is that, you ask.

Well, there is a moment - I remember the night - when it all seemed very clear. Not now, not anymore, but it did then.

1969. November. Johnson's out, Nixon's in.

(She goes as Bronson enters. He goes to the mail on the table. He selects an envelope, opens it, looks at the sheet, his eyes running down the page. He shakes his head.)

BRONSON

Jesus Christ.

(He stuffs the paper back into the envelope. With a weary sigh he comes into the room, going to the liquor cabinet to make a drink. Syrie comes down the stairs with needlepoint.)

Where is she?

SYRIE

Who knows? She has that car now. She could be in Gary, Indiana for all I know.

(Beat)

You're late tonight.

BRONSON

Well, if you want something done right ...

SYRIE

Did you hear the speech?

BRONSON

On the radio. Most of it anyway.

SYRIE

What do you think? Is that what we are? The silent majority?

BRONSON

Well aren't we?

(He hands her a drink - it turns out he has been making two.)

I know I keep my mouth shut most the time.

SYRIE

I got the feeling he doesn't have any intention of ending the war at all.

BRONSON

(With his own drink now, joining her -)
He'll get us out of there. Don't worry about that. Dick Nixon's no dummy, whatever else you want to say.

SYRIE

(Zero interest in a fight, or even a discussion)

I suppose that's true.

BRONSON

She's got class in the morning, doesn't she?

SYRIE

I think so.

BRONSON

I don't like her out like this. Who's she with these days?

SYRIE

I don't know. Some boy she met at school.

BRONSON

What's his name?

SYRIE

I don't remember. I only met him once. I've asked her to bring him by again. I ask her with all the boys. Every time I get her to say yes, though, she breaks up with them and gets somebody new. I'm never sure if she doesn't want us to meet the boys, or she doesn't want the boys to meet us.

(He has gone up to the foyer and gotten the stack of mail.)

BRONSON

Or both.

(Coming back with the mail in hand -)

Take a look at this. Bank statement.

(He hands her the mail; she opens the already opened envelope.)

SYRIE

Oh my God. Oh dear.

BRONSON

She certainly learned how to write a check, didn't she.

SYRIE

This can't all be for herself.

BRONSON

Of course not. That's the point. She's spending it on this ... this whoever he is. Some draft dodging pot head for all we know.

SYRIE

Gordie.

BRONSON

(Not hearing -)

What?

SYRIE

That's the name of the new one. Gordie. Gordon. She met him at school.

BRONSON

What's he like?

SYRIE

(Immediately equivocating -)

Oh he's very nice ...

BRONSON

What's he like?

SYRIE

He's charming actually. He's quite bright. Nice looking. Clean cut, really. I mean for these days. No mustache or anything.

BRONSON

What about his family?

SYRIE

(Again, the instinct to avoid -)

What about them?

BRONSON

Who are they?

SYRIE

Oh I don't know.

BRONSON

Yes you do. It was the first thing you asked her -
the second he walked out the door.

SYRIE

His father works for Power and Electric.

BRONSON

Doing what?

SYRIE

(Beat)

He's a purchasing agent. Assistant, actually.

(He knows he doesn't need to say anything.)

They sound very comfortable. They have a place on
the south side, in BayView.

BRONSON

And they've got a son who doesn't mind letting his
girlfriend foot the bills.

SYRIE

(About this she will argue -)

I'm not saying he's right for her. But so what?

They never last more than a month or two. Let her
go through with it.

BRONSON

And in the meantime I'm supposed to bankroll the
freeloading son of a bitch until she throws him
over.

SYRIE

Maybe she treats the money like that because she
knows where it comes from.

(This was quietly spoken and she allows just
a moment for it to land -)

Her car, her charge card at Marshall Fields, the
house n New Mexico, the trips to Switzerland. All
of it.

(Pause. He is powerless against this, and
she remains quiet, calm.)

You can afford this, Bron. You know you can. It's
a drop in the ocean. She's your daughter, and she
... she deserves - something.

(Another pause)

BRONSON

What's for dinner?

SYRIE

It's in the fridge. I can heat it up.

BRONSON

That's all right. I'll do it.

(He takes his drink and starts to go, then stops, unwilling to concede so completely -)
I want to meet him. You understand me? I want to see that boy here, in my living room. I want to -

(Frannie enters, instantly recognizing the mood -)

FRANNIE

Is that all you guys do, is fight? Isn't there something on TV? Nixon and his Vietnam Christmas list? Napalm in every stocking?

(Bronson has left in the middle of this. She goes right on talking to Syrie-)
Did you hear that load of crap he was selling?

SYRIE

I saw it.

FRANNIE

The silent majority. What a shit head.

SYRIE

(More weary than stern)
Frances.

FRANNIE

(She comes into the room and flops into a chair -)
Anyway. Who cares? I'm drunk.

SYRIE

Is that all?

FRANNIE

(Sneering, and mocking her -)
Yes, that's all.

SYRIE

I'm just asking.

FRANNIE

If I want to smoke marijuana, mother, believe me,
I'll do it, and I won't hide it.

SYRIE

(As though the connection were perfectly
natural.)
How's Gordie?

FRANNIE

(Happy to be on that subject -)
Good. We had fun.

SYRIE

What'd you do?

FRANNIE

Went to a concert. Local band. Pretty good though.

SYRIE

You like him, don't you.

FRANNIE

I like him okay. He's fun. He makes me laugh.

SYRIE

Do I ever get to meet him again?

FRANNIE

Sure. I'll bring him over sometime.

SYRIE

How about this weekend?

FRANNIE

(With a nod towards the kitchen)
No - not when he's here.

SYRIE

Why not?

FRANNIE

Because I'm not going to put Gordie through the
meat grinder known as Bronson Kiefer.

SYRIE

He is your father, dear.

FRANNIE

Really? Can we prove that?

SYRIE

(Letting that go -)

We're only concerned that - well, we want to make sure that he likes you for yourself. It's not just Gordie.

All the boys. Anyone who likes you.

FRANNIE

He just wants a rich girl, you mean.

SYRIE

Well that is the reality now. You've got to get used to it.

FRANNIE

And you mean this as a compliment, I'm sure.

SYRIE

That's all I'm going to say. You can do what you like, but that's the simple fact.

(The slightest beat -)

And I will say that he drinks too much.

FRANNIE

Who? Gordie?

SYRIE

He was only here an hour and he was loaded by the time he left.

FRANNIE

He was nervous.

SYRIE

Not by the time he left he wasn't.

FRANNIE

Right. Well. You'll always find something, won't you. Not a lot I can do about that.

(Frannie is up and heading upstairs...)

SYRIE

I'm sorry about Desmond.

(Fran stops to look at her.)

I've meant to say that for over a year now. So.
Now I said it.

FRANNIE

(Not moving - and as bewildered as she is
curious.)

Okay ...

SYRIE

(She takes a risk and presses forward
against her better judgement)

He must be back by now. I mean, if he's - if he -

FRANNIE

Didn't get himself killed.

SYRIE

The odds are very good actually. The casualty
lists are way down. You've got to give Nixon
credit.

FRANNIE

Mother, what are you saying?

SYRIE

I just want you to do what's good for you.

FRANNIE

You think I should try to find him.

SYRIE

I don't say should. It's an option.

FRANNIE

First of all, I'm too ashamed. Besides ... Des
wasn't right for me.

SYRIE

He wasn't?

FRANNIE

Not for the reasons you think. It's just that I'm
basically a very practical person and he was the
dreamer of dreams. Pie in the sky. And not a
single thing to show for it.

SYRIE

No?

FRANNIE

Like what? You tell me.

SYRIE

You always said he was so clever.

FRANNIE

He always said he was so clever. And I believed him. There was nothing to it. Nothing to show. All talk. Talk, talk, talk.

SYRIE

I didn't know you felt this way.

FRANNIE

Des was a lovely, gentle, beautiful man who barely had a grip on reality. Do you know he told me that that man in there was personally going to promote him to some very fancy position? He was supposed to get this big raise and a promotion because of some - something. I don't even know what. He kept saying it was this big 'secret.' It's sad. I don't blame Des. The life he came from - who wouldn't dream like that? But it's not for me. It was never going to work. I see that now.

SYRIE

It would make your father very happy to hear this.

FRANNIE

I don't want you telling him.

SYRIE

Oh I wouldn't - believe me. I'm with you on this a hundred per cent. He'll never know. I wouldn't want him to.

FRANNIE

(Rather impressed with this -)
Mother ... you do get your own revenge, don't you.

SYRIE

(With a devilish little smile)
Little ones. Little tiny ones.

(They share a smile. Frannie goes to her and kisses her on the forehead.)

FRANNIE

Good night.

SYRIE

Good night dear.

(Frannie goes upstairs.)

FRANCES

(To us.)

And she did of course. Have her small revenges. And not just on my father. You realize: she could have made me see right then - what I would not see for myself.

(Jamal has entered and she turns to him ...)

Now do you see? They won. My father won. Yes.

But it's all come back around. Right back around. As it would, as it had to. And we can change it, Des, you and me.

JAMAL

My name is not Des.

(Long pause ...)

FRANCES

I'm going to find that paper. I'm going to find the assessment. I'm going to get this right.

You stay. We're going to get this done. Today. I talked to my broker. I can literally write you a check, right from the account. It's just that simple.

You stay.

(She turns to us.)

He didn't, of course

(Jamal goes.)

FRANCES (con't)

Megan finds me in my room - digging under the bed for old filing boxes. She chatters on about tax bills and pre-nups. I take this as a good sign and I'm about to say so when I wiggle out from under the bed, spitting dust, and she's gone.

(Jamal re-enters.)

Where to?

Let me guess.

(Frances goes as Megan enters carrying a file folder.)

JAMAL

You disappeared.

MEGAN

So did you.

JAMAL

I needed a walk. Actually I needed a drive but my car was up on cinder blocks.

MEGAN

I was worried you weren't coming back.

JAMAL

Meg -

MEGAN

No - she told me everything. I'm sorry about what I said before. I was just - I was mad at her. You got caught in the crossfire, that's all.

JAMAL

You ought to know, Meg: I gave it some thought.

If she's giving, I'm taking.

MEGAN

I see. Well I guess I'm a little late.

JAMAL

Late for what?

MEGAN

This.

(She holds up the file in her hand.)

It's a tax return. A joint tax return. Mom and Dad's.

I'm sitting up there while she goes through all her files - and I am surrounded by papers and documents and who knows what. And I notice this small mountain range of them. Ten, twenty years worth. And I'm just flipping through, no reason, just flipping away, and I go, wait a second - ! - that's you and me! That's us. You get it? Jay - that's what happens. Common property.

JAMAL

You mean if we got married.

MEGAN

Yes.

JAMAL

(Not quite on board, but listening -)

Okay...

MEGAN

(Now she sits, close to him)

Don't you see? You don't have to do this. It's all going to be ours someday. Both of us. Together.

JAMAL

We don't really know that though - do we.

MEGAN

Well if it weren't for this, we would.

JAMAL

So you don't really care if half of it's mine. That's not the issue.

MEGAN

Of course not. When we get married - ... that's like any good marriage. Right? Fifty/fifty all the way.

JAMAL

Then why not do it like this? If you're so sure and it's all going to end up in one big pile - what does it matter? Why not take the check?

MEGAN

Because look what it's doing to us.

JAMAL

But it's not doing anything to me.

MEGAN

But it's not your money, Jay.

JAMAL

Your mother thinks it is.

MEGAN

(Pause)

Do you love me?

JAMAL

Meg ...

MEGAN

Do you love me?

JAMAL

Yes.

MEGAN

Then trust me. Tell her you don't want it.

JAMAL

Okay. I don't take it. Suppose. What then?

MEGAN

(A shrug -)

Then nothing. What is there? We just go on like nothing happened.

JAMAL

But Meg that's just it, something happened. Not to us, no. But it did happen.

MEGAN

But that's over, it's done, it's history.

JAMAL

But it changes things. We know it. We can't not know it.

MEGAN

Well I know one thing doesn't change: my mind, about you.

JAMAL

No, Meg - it might.

MEGAN

Jamal -

JAMAL

But that's the point, Meg - something's changing it right now.

MEGAN

I love you! Why is that so hard for you? You're going to have everything you want - all of it: the money, me, everything -

JAMAL

As long as I wait.

MEGAN

Yes.

JAMAL

And keep my mouth shut.

MEGAN

I never said that. All I want is -

JAMAL

All you want is patience.

MEGAN

Yes.

JAMAL

So that you decide. When you're ready.

(How to explain ...)

You love me - I understand that. And I love you. But that's not the point. Because when you decide to make us lawfully wed, and your fortune becomes our fortune - I'll have the money, yes. That's true. Because you love me enough to make it mine. But I don't want it because you love me. I want it because it's right.

MEGAN

And you think she's giving it to you because it's right? Let's not be naive. She's got all kinds of reasons - obviously. We both heard about them. But right wasn't one of them.

What happened was very complicated, Jay. First of all, the business, that wasn't just your father. My grandfather also worked very hard. He was awful, yes, and he did some awful things. No argument. But he also worked himself to death. He gave himself a stroke at the age of 62.

JAMAL

And that's what matters?

MEGAN

It's part of it, yes. You can't just come in here and start making demands because of something // that - ...

JAMAL

Megan, there was no demand.

MEGAN

No but you think my mother ought to get out her purse and write you a check for half of what she's worth. You honestly think you have that coming.

JAMAL

I never said anything about what I have coming.

MEGAN

You don't have to say it. Now please!

JAMAL

I'm here because I think the facts matter. What happened matters.

MEGAN

Oh I see. You're totally neutral. You're just the messenger.

JAMAL

I didn't say that.

MEGAN

No, you don't say anything. You just go along. If she's giving you're taking.

You get what you want, Jay. Make no mistake. You get what's really important. And you know what? I just got it. It's not me. It's my money.

(Megan goes as Frances enters, speaking to us. Jamal remains on stage in the half light.)

FRANCES

In grade school, we used to sing a song. "Oh beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain ..." It was my favorite. It's a prayer, you know. It is. "God shed his grace on thee." The subjunctive, yes? A plea.

But the good verse, the one they made us learn in school: "Oh beautiful for Patriot's dream/that sees beyond the years/Thine alabaster cities gleam/undimmed by human tears ..."

I thought that was pretty nice. An alabaster city, undimmed by tears. Possible? Maybe not. But I was only seven. And the idea that someone even thought to say it, that Katherine Lee Bates had so much hope that she might say such a thing - well, that was the song for me.

And if I still felt that way after as a grown woman? If I still had hope?

I don't apologize for that.

And so, finally, evening. Day's end.

(She goes as Gordon enters. Seeing Jamal, he produces a set of keys from his pocket and dangles them in the air.)

GORDON

Purrs like a kitten.

(He drops them into Jamal's hand and goes to the liquor cabinet.)

And speaking of keys.

(He holds up another key and with a naughty glint in his eye, unlocks the cabinet.)

So much for honor systems.

JAMAL

Mr. LaFavre.

GORDON

"Mister?" Come on now, none of that crap. First names only, my boy. We're intertwined now, double helix. Our fortunes are married. *Mi casa es su casa* - and I do mean that in a more or less literal sense, unless I've been grossly misinformed.

(He takes a drink.)

How about you? Care for one? The workday is done.

JAMAL

No thank you.

GORDON

Oh, but in celebration. An offering to the gods.

JAMAL

I don't drink.

GORDON

Well, come to that, neither do I. Exceptions must always be made. You must know that, of all people. Extenuating circumstances. Et cetera.

(He comes and sits by Jamal...)

I want you to know, my boy, that I for one am saddened by those terrible events of long ago.

GORDON

Saddened but not shocked. Between you and me, her old man was a son of a bitch. My God what a prick and a half. If you ask me - and you notice nobody has - I'd say we deserve everything we get. I think we're getting off easy. Hell, I wouldn't settle for half, not if I were you. Because if you could see inside here, my boy ...

(He touches his head, shaking it fondly -)
... you have no idea. Not the half of it. Filthy thoughts. We all have 'em, you know. Can't help it.

(Closely, so that no one may hear)
We're born that way.

(And he takes a long, satisfied drink.
Bottoms up.

(He gets up to go to the liquor cabinet.)

JAMAL

Mr. LaFavre.

GORDON

(Without looking back -)
Yes my boy.

JAMAL

You're in the program.

GORDON

(A short silence, then in an even tone ...)
That's correct.

JAMAL

Don't you think it ...

(Gordon turns to stare him down and Jamal drifts into silence.)

GORDON

Go ahead. What don't I think.

JAMAL

I'm sorry. It's none of my business.

GORDON

(Coming forward, towards Jamal)

It is though: double helix, yes? Intertwined.
That's what you wanted, isn't it? So go ahead.
What is this thing I'm not thinking? That which
might be. Go ahead, say it. I could say it myself
but it wouldn't be the same. We need the tone of
moral indignation. The condescension. The disdain.
That's the point, after all, isn't it.

JAMAL

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything.

GORDON

But you did.

JAMAL

And I've said I'm sorry. I've said it twice.

GORDON

You think you can come in here and tell your
stories. Dredge up all sorts of things that
happened a hundred years ago. Play on the
insecurities of my wife. And on top of that, what
do I hear? "Don't you think." Well no, I don't
think. I really don't. I don't think I need
another fucking medallion for being a good boy.
Ninety days. Six months. One year. It's like the
fucking Boy Scouts. Do I look like a person who
gives a fuck about medallions? I don't need
prizes, my boy, anymore than I need your contempt.

(Megan and Frances enter, Frances with a
piece of paper.)

FRANCES

Gordon ...

MEGAN

What are you doing?

GORDON

The voice of my stern and unforgiving family.

(To Jamal)

Could you explain to them what I'm doing? They
seem to have been struck suddenly and completely
blind

(Frances takes the glass and bottle from him.)

FRANCES
Gordon - that's enough -

(As she guides him to the staircase)

GORDON
When is enough ever really, truly enough? I ask you.

FRANCES
You're going upstairs.

GORDON
Isn't that the family motto? "Give Me More!" I thought that's why I fit in.

FRANCES
You're going upstairs to lie down. Now go.
(He is about to say something ...)
Go.

(Her tone does not invite argument. Gordon goes. Meg retreats to the window seat.)

FRANCES
I'm sorry. I was afraid of that.

MEGAN
How much then?

FRANCES
How much what?

MEGAN
(A nod at the paper)
The assessment. What does it say?

FRANCES
Megan, you don't have to be here.

MEGAN
I'm just asking.

FRANCES
I'm not having any more discussions.

MEGAN

I've got nothing to say. I said everything.
(To Jamal)
Isn't that right.

JAMAL

I think she should be here.

FRANCES

(With a glance to him, then her, then back
to him)
You're right. Yes. Better to do it, get it done.

So. We fold the property into the subtotal - it's
a guesstimate but -

JAMAL

- that's fine.

FRANCES

(She gets out the calculator)
- plus the portfolio ...
(Punching in the numbers...)
- and insurance ...
(More numbers)
- and some bonds. Tax free, you know. Delicious.
(More numbers)
- for a total
(Another button)
One half of which is ...
(One last button)
... right.
(She opens her check book.)
Today is the ...

MEGAN

Eighteenth.

FRANCES

The eighteenth.

(She fills out the check. Behind them, Gordon comes part way down the stairs, listening. She hands Jamal the check. He does not reach for it.)

Go ahead. Take it.

(Still he doesn't move.)

Take the check.

JAMAL

I can't.

FRANCES

Of course you can. Go ahead. Take it.

JAMAL

I can't, Frances. I don't want it.

FRANCES

(to Megan)

What did you say? I'm gone five minutes. What were you two talking about?

JAMAL

I didn't come here for your money. Or an apology. Or anything else. I came because you people mean something to me. Because I was -

(He looks at Megan)

- ... because I am in love. And I could not look you in the face - none of you - I personally could not know this thing and not say it. I had to say it. So you would know. And if you knew - if we all knew - if we all knew all of it and we say it out loud, say "yes, this is true." - ... then we could face it. Yes? Work through it. Cry, yell, scream, I don't know.

But there was a flaw in this little plan of mine: you already knew. You knew more than I did. And it was worse, it was deeper and sicker than even I could imagine. In my worst nightmares - never.

JAMAL (con't)

So I took a walk - yes? - through the neighborhood - down to the lake, all the way over to Lincoln Park and back again. All these leafy streets, wide green lawns, big, white beautiful homes - and I think: why not? Why shouldn't I? Why should I not?

And then I came back. To say yes. Yes, I will take it. But I'm not inside this door ten minutes and it all came back to me: this is not what I came for. What I came for - that's all shit now. You made it shit. But that check doesn't make it any better.

So you keep it. Seriously. It's all you've got.

FRANCES

I don't know what she said to you. Or Gordie, if he did. But that's not me. They don't want me to do this. Don't you see? They'd say anything.

JAMAL

It's not just them, Frances.

It's you. You more than anybody.

There is no such thing as a clean slate. You cannot hand me a check and say now forget all that. I don't want to forget. That was my father. That was true. That was real.

I'm supposed to take that check so that what - you can sleep at night? The sleep of the innocent? I'm sorry, Frances, but it's tougher than that. And more complicated. And it won't happen in one afternoon.

I thought we could do this. I was wrong. We can't. Not now anyway. Not yet.

(Silence.)

FRANCES

So then what?

JAMAL

I think it's time to say good bye..

FRANCES

No - Jamal -

JAMAL

It's the only way. You know that. So do I.

FRANCES

It's not.

MEGAN

Let him go, Mom. He's right.

JAMAL

For now. Maybe sometime, sure. Things change.
Right? Who knows?

(He steps toward her and the lights narrow
onto Frances and Jamal, separating them as
if in their own world ...)
Right now, I gotta go, baby ...

FRANCES

What did you say?

MEGAN

He has to go.

JAMAL

(To Frances ...)
Gonna miss you.

FRANCES

(To Jamal)
Stop it.
(To Megan and Gordon)
Did you hear what he said?

MEGAN

Mom, just - say good bye.

(He offers his hand. She looks at it
warily.)

FRANCES

What is this? What is - ?

(To Gordon)

Gordie -

GORDON

Take the boy's hand, Frances.

MEGAN

Mother ... just do it.

(Frances reaches out and takes his hand. He steps in towards her and kisses her on the mouth - a long, passionate kiss. She finds herself unable to resist it ...)

JAMAL

Gonna think about you all the time, baby.

(He goes and the lights return to normal. Frances is dazed, unsteady ...)

FRANCES

Did you see that?

MEGAN

I thought I knew him. I really did.

(Gordon goes to the liquor cabinet.)

FRANCES

Did you - ?

GORDON

It's not complicated. One part ingratitude, two parts contempt, a dash of entitlement.

(He is pouring a drink.)

FRANCES

God - ! I've been very stupid, haven't I.

MEGAN

Just a little, yes.

GORDON

Just don't let it happen again, darling. That's the main thing.

FRANCES

I should have listened to you. I'm sorry. It just - it seemed to make sense.

MEGAN

And look at the thanks you got.

GORDON

Sweetheart, I'll tell you something. Some banks don't like to settle debts. They're making too much on the interest.

FRANCES

I mean you try your best. You offer someone half - half - and I don't know. Maybe he wanted more.

GORDON

Maybe he wants it all.

FRANCES

Yes. That's right. That's possible, isn't it.

MEGAN

Absolutely.

FRANCES

And the resentment. My God. As if I insulted him.

GORDON

No good deed goes unpunished as they say.

FRANCES

That really is it, Gordie. You're so right. Ingratitude.

(She tears up the check, then speaks to us
...)

So there you have it. I tried. I had hope.

It's like Gordie says though: he likes it this way. He'd rather carry the grudge.

FRANCES (con't)

Some people - the more you try, the more they resent it. The more you listen, the more they complain. Sob stories about all the awful things that happened thirty years ago, or three hundred years, or whatever.

And it turns out - the real kicker now - it's all your fault. Yes, you. The sympathetic one. The one who actually gave a damn. They throw it back in your face and by the way: fuck you.

Well I don't know about you, but one fuck you is all I need, thanks. Never again. No way. I am not a saint. I'm an ordinary person.

Just like you.

(She lets the torn check flutter to the ground as the lights fade to black.

End of play.)