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Cast of Characters

JOEL PORTER, 55

BEATRICE PORTER, 45, his wife

ALLEN PORTER, 17, their son

VERONICA PORTER, 15, their daughter

WILDER HAWTHORNE, 65, their friend and landlord

LISETTE GRANT, 19, a woman from another neighborhood

Place

The backyard and trophy room of a one-and-a-half-story house in Highland Park, California.

Time

Four days in April, 1992.

Production Notes

The action of the play occurs in a city between wars: the Persian Gulf War of February 1991, during which 115 Americans were killed, and the Los Angeles uprisings of April 1992, in which 58 people died.

Acknowledgements

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THE TROPHY ROOM

by Hilly Hicks, Jr.

ACT I

Scene 1

(The rear exterior of a one-and-a-half-story house in the Highland Park area of Los Angeles. A sparsely furnished back porch gives way to a backyard that is a vivid collage of several shades of green, quietly brimming with life. The yard is bordered by a high wooden fence. In the corner of the yard, a section of the fence has rotted and broken away at the bottom, leaving a small gap. On either side of the porch steps is a small flower garden. The yard is dominated, however, by an impressive vegetable garden, which is bisected by a stone path leading to a tall gate at the end of the property.)

The bottom floor of the house is inhabited by the PORTER family. The top floor belongs to WILDER HAWTHORNE, who owns the house. Receding into the hazy distance are rows of towering palm trees standing like fragile columns wishing they were even taller. The date is projected onto the set: April 2, 1992. Thursday.

As the lights come up, BEATRICE PORTER is finishing her gardening. It appears that she has done substantial work as both flower gardens look freshly replanted. It is hot, though the sun has just disappeared over the horizon. BEA perspires lightly under a sky that glows orange and red.)

WILDER. *(From within:)* Joel? You down there? Hey, Joel!

(WILDER can be seen coming down the stairs inside the house. He emerges from the backdoor.)

Oh. Hey, Bea.

BEA. How you doing, Wilder?

WILDER. I was looking for your husband. You know where he is?

BEA. He's still out on the lot, I reckon.

WILDER. Still? Damn. It's near about seven-thirty. Don't that cat come home no more?

BEA. He's been busy. Says he has more business than he can handle. I guess hot weather makes people want to spend money.

WILDER. Not me. Hot weather make me wanna make money.

BEA. Maybe you should go to work for Joel, then. He said yesterday folks were lined up waiting for him when he got there. Said they'd been waiting since a quarter to seven some of 'em.

WILDER. Well, I'm glad business is good. For *somebody*.

BEA. Must be as good as it gets. He's almost selling out of produce faster than he can get it in. Ha! When he was selling just what I could grow, he used to worry about having too *much*. Couldn't get it off the truck before it started to go bad.

WILDER. I know. You used to cook them bad vegetables up for dinner. Weren't so bad after you got through with 'em though.

BEA. I guess not.

WILDER. Seem like the best tastin' vegetables the ones Joel couldn't sell.

BEA. Mm-hm. He's too fast for me now. Almost too quick for himself, too. Isn't it funny how things turn, Wilder? After a while, he took to yelling at me to grow the vegetables *faster*. Used to drive me crazy. I finally told him one night. I said, "Joel, honey. I been talking to the vegetables. I been sweet-talkin' the turnips. I been baby-talkin' the potatoes. I been pep-talkin' the okra." I said, "Honey, the peppers and the radishes're willing to cooperate. But I think the cabbage and the carrots are going on strike."

(WILDER *laughs*.)

BEA. Funny how things turn. Past couple of weeks seem like they been real fast. People just want to buy.

WILDER. Yeah, I'm glad *somebody's* making money around here.

BEA. Nobody's getting rich.

WILDER. Somebody's trying.

BEA. You trying to get rich, Wilder?

WILDER. Yes, ma'am. Been trying goin' on half a century now.

BEA. What're you up to? Where you been keeping yourself all day? Haven't heard a peep out of you since breakfast.

WILDER. I been doin' some bookkeeping. I been figuring out how much disposable cash I got.

BEA. Yeah? How much you got?

WILDER. That's between me and my books. And the books say Joel still ain't give me last month's rent check. And y'all already two weeks late this month!

BEA. Joel's been working himself to the bone, Wilder. He hasn't had time to work out all the bills, yet.

WILDER. Work it out? All he got to do is reach his hand up in that mattress an' tear me off some of them hundred-dollar bills he always braggin' about.

BEA. He hasn't touched that money in 25 years. 'Cept to add to it. He says Harvard keeps driving their price up.

WILDER. That's wonderful. Allen and Ronnie'll be sittin' pretty up in Harvard and I'll be standing out on some off ramp shakin' a tin cup.

BEA. Oh, hush!

WILDER. He ought to put that money in the bank where it belong. A bed ain't no place to be putting that kind of money.

BEA. I think the smell of it makes him sleep better.

WILDER. The whole neighborhood's gonna be sleeping better the way he be running around braggin' about how much he got all the time. Somebody's liable to sneak up on him while he's havin' one of them sweet dreams.

BEA. Nobody ever messes with Joel. He's too big.

WILDER. I don't care how big he is. You seen the kids runnin' around here now? Half of 'em skippin' out on school so they can strut up and down the street acting crazy. The other half going to

school to learn how to act like the crazy ones. I'm glad I'll be dead when the crazy people start having babies.

BEA. There've been crazy acting people since the beginning. That's nothing new.

WILDER. It's new on my street. (*Beat.*) Little girls with tattoos and earrings sticking out all over their bodies is new. Little boys walking around showing off their pistols is new. Never used to have any of that in front of my own house.

BEA. I've never seen anything like that around here.

WILDER. You don't have to see it. You can tell just by looking at 'em. None of these kids wanna sell you any Girl Scout cookies. We living in a war zone, Bea. This here a war zone, now. You got ten million armies in this city. And every one of 'em at war with every other one. Black folks. Yellow folks. Red folks. White folks. Young folks and old folks. Women folks and men folks. Rich folks and dirt-ass po' folks. Police folks. Criminal folks...

BEA. Landlord folks and tenant folks...

WILDER. That's right. Every which kinda folks. Every last one of 'em at war.

BEA. I'll tell you something, Wilder. You walk around being afraid of crazy kids all the time, you're just gonna make 'em scared of themselves. That doesn't do anybody any good.

WILDER. If you look in the mirror and the fella staring back at you got a pierced nose, pierced eyebrow, tattoos up and down his back, and a gun stuck down his pants, and you not scared, something wrong. They better be scared of themselves. 'Cause trouble's headed their way. They either gonna make some or get some. But trouble is definitely in the cards.

BEA. You're the one that's talking crazy, Wilder. Talking about living in a war zone. This isn't a war zone. I been in this city 30 years, and the only thing changed is the date. Kids still act like kids. Some of 'em wild. Some of 'em quiet. And not all of 'em are crazy, either. Not Allen and Ronnie. Or Lewis. Lewis was just the opposite. Hard working. Knew right from wrong. Brave as he could be...

Me and Joel raised three smart kids. *(Pause.)* One who died a war hero. *(Pause.)* And two more just as bright as he was. *(Long pause.)* Hand me that water, would you, Wilder?

(WILDER takes a bottle of water from the porch steps and gives it to BEA, who takes a long drink.)

WILDER. I still say he ought to let the bank keep his money. Protect himself from all the pierced people. And he could use some of the interest to pay the rent, too.

BEA. You could be right, but he's been stickin' a little bit under the bed every chance he gets for 25 years. That's a long habit to break.

(A pause as WILDER watches BEA work the garden.)

WILDER. What if Harvard don't take 'em...

BEA. What?

WILDER. Suppose Harvard don't want Allen and Ronnie...

BEA. Shoot. Don't let Joel hear you say that. He'd pitch a fit if he heard anybody supposin' like that about his kids.

WILDER. Ronnie still got a couple of years yet. But Allen... Well, that news ought to be comin' down the pike pretty soon.

BEA. We're not worried.

WILDER. I'm not saying you got to be worried. I'm just saying suppose Harvard don't take him— Places like Harvard do that from time to time. Then what do you got? Just a lumpy mattress.

BEA. Allen'll do fine. Harvard's not the only college in the world. He sent off to eight or nine real fine schools. Any one of 'em'd do him good. *(Pause.)* It would be nice, though. With his birthday coming up. It would be nice to have some good news. And some relief.

WILDER. I'll tell you what it'd be nice to have is that rent check. I got to have that money by the first of each month.

BEA. Wilder, Joel's been late with the rent every month for as long as you've known him and you've never said a word.

WILDER. Oh, I say a word. I'm thinking of a couple of words right now.

BEA. What're you so antsy about this time for? You'll get your money.

WILDER. I'm antsy 'cause Uncle Sam just pinched me real good.

BEA. You should pinch him back.

WILDER. If I got the rent on time, wouldn't nobody have to pinch nobody.

BEA. That what your books say?

WILDER. My books say that old beat-up radio I got upstairs ain't gonna do it no more. Told me to carry myself on over to Sears and find me something better. So I did. I was gonna buy a nice new little radio. But the man kept walkin' me around the store showin' me what this one does, what that one has. Time I left, the nice little radio I wanted turned into a great big shiny stereo player with two great big shiny speakers to keep it company.

BEA. You didn't buy that!

WILDER. It'll be here Saturday.

BEA. What do you need with all that? All you listen to is the ball-game.

WILDER. That's what I thought. Then the man *told* me why I need a stereo. Told me how I couldn't do without all the buttons and knobs. Told me what all the numbers and lights was gonna do for me. He said, "This machine make you feel like you part of the 21st century." Said we in the middle of the electronic revolution, and I better get on the bandwagon, or be left behind. You know what, Bea? The man had a point. That old radio I got make you feel like ain't nothin' changed since the New Deal.

BEA. It's your money.

WILDER. That's right it's my money. Only it's gonna be bouncin' all over town if I don't get the rent real soon.

(ALLEN PORTER enters through the gate as WILDER speaks. He carries a backpack and a large drawing pad. Upon seeing BEA and WILDER, he pauses briefly, considering whether or not it is too late to turn around and enter the house from the front. He starts toward the back door, trying to make himself invisible as he attempts to slip quietly past BEA and WILDER.)

BEA. You have a train to catch, Allen?

(ALLEN comes defeatedly back down the porch steps and goes to BEA. He kisses her.)

ALLEN. Hello, Mom. Hi, Mr. Wilder.

WILDER. Hey, there, Big Man.

BEA. You father say what time he'll be home?

ALLEN. I don't know. I didn't go by the lot today. I went to the record store after class.

BEA. Now, what're you spending your money for? You leave the spending to us 'til Saturday.

ALLEN. I didn't buy anything.

BEA. Well, good. Just tell us what you want, we'll get it for your birthday.

ALLEN. I don't want anything. I was just browsing.

BEA. You must've seen something you liked. I hear that radio going in your room every night. There must be something you like to hear. We might as well get it for you. We have to get you *something*.

ALLEN. No, you don't.

BEA. Allen...

ALLEN. Really. It's not a law.

BEA. You don't want any music? Wilder just bought a new stereo. And he sure as heck don't have anything to play on it. He'd let you listen to it.

WILDER. Sure, I would. It got a real nice sound. Clear as a bell. You can listen to it as much as you want. I bet it got more gizmos on it than that boom box you got...

ALLEN. My boom box has a radio, and that's good enough.

WILDER. (*Sotto voce:*) Huh! That's what *I* thought...

ALLEN. They play the same songs over and over anyway. What do I need to own them for? By the time they stop playing a song, I've already grown to hate it. So it works out perfectly.

BEA. Allen, we *want* to get you something. Isn't there anything you need?

(ALLEN *shakes his head.*)

BEA. Don't you need a shirt? You need a shirt.

ALLEN. Mom, I've got 2 million shirts. I have all mine and all Lewis'. I don't need any more shirts. I don't need any clothes at all.

BEA. (*To WILDER:*) We don't have not one clue what he wants. He won't say.

ALLEN. All I want is summer. I want summer to hurry up and get here.

BEA. You don't need art supplies?

ALLEN. No. Do not buy me any art supplies. There's nothing I want less than art supplies. I'd rather have another shirt.

BEA. I don't know what to get you. But we'll find you something.

ALLEN. Like it or not...

BEA. Can't have a birthday party without opening presents.

ALLEN. I hope you're not gonna make a big deal out of this.

WILDER. You turnin' eighteen? That's a very big deal. That mean you just about to be a man, now. You got to celebrate that. Folks'll have to start calling you Mister. Mr. Porter. Eighteen years old. That's the best birthday. That one and 21. Those are good ages to be, man. The worst birthday 65. That one really kicked my butt.

ALLEN. I'm too tired to celebrate.

WILDER. You talk like you turning 65, too.

(ALLEN regards the flowers in the garden as BEA takes a drink from her bottle and wipes her brow.)

ALLEN. Did you plant all these today?

BEA. Every last one of 'em. They're pretty, huh? I been meaning to get to this garden for a week now. Finally got myself over to the nursery this morning. I was tired of looking at a couple of dug-up flower patches. Went over to the nursery and picked up some mari-golds and gladiolas and irises. These here are violets.

ALLEN. You haven't been out in this heat all day...

BEA. Nothing wrong with heat. This is the best time of year to be planting, anyway. Give the roots a chance to grow before they have to deal with winter. Next week, I'm gonna see about patchin' up that hole in the fence to keep the Welles' dogs out of here. They killed just about every last flower last time, tramplin' through here. Julia ought to keep those things tied up before somebody calls the pound.

ALLEN. You don't have to plant everything all in one day, Mom. It's burning up hot out here.

BEA. I like the sun. Most of the time I'm too cold. But this feels good.

ALLEN. Just take it easy, Mom. You have all summer to do the gardening.

BEA. Take it easy? Shoot. Your grandma worked harder than me cleaning houses all day long.

ALLEN. What difference does that make?

BEA. She got up at five-thirty *every* morning. Six days a week. Went out and took the city bus from one house to the next all day long. By the end of the day, she cleaned six or seven houses: windows, floor, walls, sinks and everything. And came home every night smelling like Spic and Span. Worked so hard her hands were covered with great big old calluses that never went away. We had to

bury her with gloves on! That's how hard your grandma worked. That's who we take after.

ALLEN. It's a hundred degrees. It's dangerous out here.

BEA. I want to get the yard looking nice for your birthday party, Allen. Some of your cousins're going to drop by. And Uncle Teddy. He said he's gonna try and make it out here. And I hope you're inviting your friends, too. Whoever you want. There'll be plenty to eat. I'm gonna clean out the grill so your father can tend to the barbecue. And I found some streamers in the basement—the same color as the marigolds! It's gonna look real nice out here.

ALLEN. Can't we do something else this year? Go away or something?

BEA. Where do you want to go?

ALLEN. Someplace where we could all just take it easy. Like Catalina Island.

BEA. *Catalina?*

ALLEN. I haven't been there since I was a kid. We could spend the day there. Me, you, Pop, Ronnie, and Mr. Wilder.

BEA. But you've got a whole family tree who wants to see you.

ALLEN. Pop wants them to see me.

BEA. 'Course he does. The man is proud of you.

ALLEN. *(After a beat; checking his frustration.)* You want to buy me something for my birthday? Buy me a trip to Catalina. *(Beat.)* You'll have fun, Mom. I promise.

WILDER. What you got against celebrating? A bunch of people wanna get together and cook and have a good time and throw some presents your way and you gonna turn 'em down? What kinda sense does that make?

ALLEN. I need a break. I just—I need to rest.

WILDER. Then go to bed. Damn! What's so hard about that? You go get you some sleep and come back out when the party starts.

BEA. I know you're tired, sugar. With all the things you do. I know you must be worn out.

ALLEN. I'm not tired of the *work*. (*Beat.*) You know what I want to do? I want to learn how to sail. Then we could rent a boat—just big enough for five people—and *I* could take us to Catalina. And then maybe we could have lunch there. Or a picnic. But it wouldn't be especially for me. It'd be for all of us. I wouldn't be the center of attention. Nobody'd be talking about me. Nobody'd be bragging about me... It would just be the Porters taking time out.

BEA. We're only doing this because we're proud of you.

WILDER. That's right. I'm proud of you and I ain't even related to you.

ALLEN. That's...that's fine. Be proud. I want you to be. It's just...sometimes I want to be left alone. Pop never leaves me alone.

BEA. He is devoted to you and Ronnie.

ALLEN. (*Bitter:*) Just like he was "devoted" to Lewis? (*Sotto voce:*) Who needs that kind of devotion?

BEA. What? What did you say?

ALLEN. Nothing.

BEA. I won't tolerate any nonsense in this house. You show a little graciousness. And some respect, if you don't mind.

ALLEN. Respect? It's only been a little more than a year since Lewis died, and I think I've heard Pop mention his name exactly once without having to be pressed. Respect? It's like Lewis never even existed.

BEA. You hush up talking like that! Nobody's stopped loving Lewis. Or missing him. Nobody.

WILDER. What you wanna say a thing like that for? Sure your daddy miss him. Maybe you can't tell sometimes 'cause he a tough man. But I known him a long time. I can see it in his eyes.

BEA. What's gotten into you?

ALLEN. You asked me what I want for my birthday, and I told you.

BEA. You don't want to celebrate? You want me to pull up all these flowers? Tell everybody to stay home? You wanna run away on some boat? We can do that. It'll be just how you like it. Won't anybody have any fun. *(Beat.)* I'm sorry. We can't be proud and be quiet at the same time.

(There is a pause.)

ALLEN. I've been in class all day. From sun up to sun down for as long as I can remember.

BEA. I know.

ALLEN. Nobody's in class *all* day. By the time I get done, everybody else's been doing their own thing for three or four hours already. Even Ronnie. She's at a school game right now. Me, I hardly have time to eat before it's time to go to bed.

BEA. You let everybody else do their own thing. And you do yours.

ALLEN. It's not my thing, Mom. That's what I'm saying.

BEA. Allen, you're wrong—

ALLEN. I mean seven hours in school, physics at city college, drawing class at the Art Center, tutors on the weekends... And all these things I'm doing...because somebody decided I should. Okay, maybe I can pull some of it off. But some of it I definitely cannot. Some of it's a complete flop. But I keep on doing it because I'm told I "just should."

BEA. What're you talking about "a flop"? It doesn't look like you're flopping to me. Looks like you're doing fine.

ALLEN. Look at my art class, for starters...

BEA. What about it?

ALLEN. I can't draw!

BEA. Allen...

ALLEN. It seems to have escaped everyone's attention. But the fact is I cannot draw to save my life! Okay? I can doodle. I can doodle just great. I can scribble. But I cannot draw.

WILDER. You coming along with it. That's what you supposed to be doing. If you was Picasso already, you wouldn't have to take no class.

ALLEN. I don't expect a miracle. I'm only looking for some reason for me to be there. Some sign of progression. And it's not as if I don't try. My skin is rock hard here from choking the life out of my pencil. But I've been in that class six months and nothing's changed. I don't draw any better now than the day I started.

BEA. You are something else. I never saw somebody so hard on himself.

ALLEN. I'm not going to kid myself.

BEA. You don't have to kid anybody. Just give yourself some credit. Why are you carrying on like this?

(ALLEN opens his drawing pad and holds up a drawing before BEA.)

ALLEN. Does this look like a natural gift to you? This is nothing, Mom. This is a fight between my head and my hand. *(Beat.)* It's supposed to be a basket. A wicker basket.

(He flips the pages, showing her one drawing after another.)

What about this one? It's a squiggle attempting to be a bowl of fruit. Where's the natural gift here? And this one? And this one? Look. Look at these drawings. If there's any indication, somewhere in these pages, of a natural proclivity for art, I'd like to know where it is. Look. That is a shoe. That is a shoe with nothing to say. It doesn't even want you to look at it.

(BEA gently takes the drawing pad from ALLEN.)

WILDER. *(Not about the drawings:)* What's wrong, Big Man?

ALLEN. You should hear what the teacher says about my work. She gives everybody notes. On proportion. On negative space. On interpretation. Then she comes over to me, and I get: "You're in a place where you need to be, Allen. Keep going." That's it. She leaves. "Allen, that looks like something you need to draw. Own it. Keep going." *(Beat.)* I don't need that.

(BEA has been looking through the sketchpad slowly, taking in each drawing. She stops flipping the pages and just stares at one drawing for a moment in silence. She sits on the porch steps.)

BEA. *(More to herself than to ALLEN:)* What is this one?

(ALLEN sits beside her. A pause as ALLEN looks at the drawing.)

ALLEN. That's Lewis. In his Marine uniform.

(WILDER stands behind them, looking at the drawing.)

BEA. I like this one, Allen.

ALLEN. I traced it. From the picture hanging in the trophy room. *(Beat.)* I like it, too. Here, I did another one.

(ALLEN finds another drawing and shows BEA and WILDER. They are solemn as they stare in silence at the drawing.)

ALLEN. That's how I imagine him in Saudi Arabia. That's not how I imagine him, but that's the closest I could come. It's not very good. I didn't have a picture to go from.

WILDER. That's good enough reason to be in art class. That picture there.

ALLEN. I can't just keep drawing Lewis. I also have to draw apples and baskets and soup cans... *(Pause.)* You know, Lewis would have told me the truth. He was always straight with everybody. That's why he could stand up to Pop. 'Cause he wouldn't stop being honest with himself.

BEA. What do you have to stand up to your father for?

ALLEN. *(Standing and moving away:)* Nothing.

BEA. Not nothing. Why did you go out of your way to come home today? Why didn't you stop by your father's truck?

ALLEN. *(Very sincerely:)* I don't know.

BEA. What don't you know? Something happen in school today? What is it? What's happened, Allen?

(A brief pause.)

ALLEN. I got an 'A' today. On my government report. Point-wise, I got the highest grade in the class, Mom.

BEA. Well. That's wonderful...

ALLEN. An 'A' on the history of the state legislature. I was gonna tell Pop. But, I don't know, I couldn't. I don't know why. I spent most of art class rehearsing what I was going to say to him. I went over it in my head on the bus after class. And when I got to my stop, I started whispering it to myself as I walked. But the closer I got to the lot, the less I could bring myself to say. I was only a few blocks away when I finally couldn't say anything at all. Not one word. I don't know why. So I turned the corner before I got to the lot and went to the record store. I had to go another way. *(Beat.)* Something's happened. Just like it does every day. It's good and it's bad at the same time. Just like it is every day. It's good because it's supposed to be good. It's bad because it's happening to me. *(Beat.)* I didn't plan to take a detour today. I wasn't angry. I was... *(Realizing for the first time:)* I was afraid. I was so afraid...

BEA. Of your father?

ALLEN. No... I don't know.

BEA. But you have *good* news, Allen.

ALLEN. I was afraid!

BEA. You've been working hard on that paper. You deserve an 'A.' That's the kind of news he likes to hear. What're you being so gloomy about? It seems like you have all the reason in the world to celebrate.

ALLEN. No. That's not true.

BEA. That report didn't write itself. Give yourself credit!

ALLEN. For what? For what? I'm just doing what I'm *supposed* to do. Nothing's mine. Nothing at all is mine.

(ALLEN gathers his drawing pad under his arm and begins to exit into the house.)

I need a nap.

WILDER. Take a nap.

ALLEN. Maybe I'll skip dinner tonight. I feel like going to bed early. *(Pause.)* Lewis did great things. He made an impression. He built himself up and made people want to look up to him. But he didn't owe it to anybody but himself. I hate that he died. I really hate it.

(ALLEN exits into the house. BEA stands a moment staring at nothing in particular. WILDER watches as she slowly turns to the garden. She kneels and begins picking up her tools and cleaning up. WILDER walks slowly down from the porch and kneels beside BEA. He puts an arm around her.)

BEA. Is it all right if I use your stereo when it comes, Wilder? I'm thinking about buying myself some music to play.

(The lights fade on the backyard.)

ACT I**Scene 2**

(The lights come up inside the house in the trophy room. It is a little later in the evening. This room was formerly Lewis' bedroom, but has been converted into a kind a memorial to him and his accomplishments. Dominating the room is a tall and wide shelf system upon which sit several beautiful trophies, recognizing Lewis' diverse achievements; from football to dancing; from baseball to science. On the walls and adorning a table and cabinet are a few medallions and smaller awards, as well as three or four pictures of Lewis and his family. The most prominent picture is a large portrait of Lewis in military dress hanging in the center of a wall opposite the trophy shelf. There is a small sofa and a chair in the room.)

Despite the array of awards and pictures, this room does not have the extreme quality of a shrine. It is, rather, a very warm, comfortable, and tastefully appointed sitting room; a place for quiet reflection; a room for remembering.

ALLEN is seated on the sofa, polishing one of the trophies from the shelf with an old T-shirt. On the table are two more trophies and a box containing a couple of small cans of polish and more rags.)

RONNIE. *(Off:)* V-I-C, V-I-C-T-O-R-Y! Anybody home! V-I-C, V-I-C-T-O-R-Y!

(VERONICA PORTER enters wearing a cheerleader's outfit and a backpack, and shaking a couple of pompoms. She is bursting with energy.)

RONNIE. Hey, Allen! Guess what?

ALLEN. *(Sarcastic:)* We won?

RONNIE. You shoulda seen it. Rolo Turner scored seventeen points in the first half. And then they fouled him. This big ol' fat guy knocked him in the jaw with his elbow and sent him to the nurse. He kept saying it was an accident, but it didn't look like anybody's accident to me. You shoulda been there, Allen. A fight almost broke out! But Mr. Yarborough broke it up and made everybody stop cheering.

ALLEN. I'm sorry I missed it.

RONNIE. You always miss it. How come you never come to any of the games?

ALLEN. I'm busy.

RONNIE. You've been busy for four years straight?

ALLEN. I've been to school games before. I used to go to everything I could. Basketball, football, track meets. It's no big deal.

RONNIE. I wasn't there yet when you used to go. You've never even seen me on the pep squad. Mom even took Wilder to see me once.

ALLEN. Oh, yeah?

RONNIE. At the Turkey Tussle. You should've come that night. You coulda told Mom which team to root for. Every time anybody made a touchdown, she would stand up and cheer. Didn't matter which team it was. She would stand up and say "Go Veronica!" I was so embarrassed. You know what the drill team calls her?

ALLEN. What?

RONNIE. Queen Mama. Isn't that cute? Everybody always asks me when Miss Queen Mama Porter's coming back.

ALLEN. Incredibly cute.

RONNIE. I told Mom she's our new mascot. Which we need. Whoever heard of a hurricane as a high school mascot? It's so embarrassing. I'm supposed to write a letter to Mr. Yarborough on behalf of the entire pep squad. We're making a list of animals that aren't being used by any other schools in the district. So far we have bulldogs, mustangs, crocodiles, panthers, and unicorns. If you can think of anything, let me know...

ALLEN. Ronnie. I'm busy.

RONNIE. Oh, I forgot.

(There is a pause.)

God. You polish those more than Lewis did.

ALLEN. They're covered with dust.

RONNIE. I don't see any dust. (*Silence.*) Can I help?

ALLEN. Fine. Go ahead.

(*RONNIE takes off her backpack, kneels at the table, and begins to polish a trophy.*)

ALLEN. Just be careful. Don't put too much polish on.

RONNIE. (*Reading the inscription:*) This is kind of big for a debating trophy. Academic awards are usually so light. My seventh grade science trophy floats. (*Pause.*) I don't remember him winning this one.

ALLEN. You were just a baby.

RONNIE. I wasn't a baby. I was... (*Looks at the date*) I was ten.

ALLEN. We drove down to San Diego to watch him compete. Every time it was Lewis' turn, we all held hands.

RONNIE. I wish I could remember that. (*Pause.*) There's a game on Saturday. You should come. And bring Queen Mama. And Daddy. He's never seen me do my cheers, either. We're playing at home.

ALLEN. My birthday's on Saturday, remember? Mom's planning a party.

RONNIE. The party's in the afternoon. The game doesn't start 'til seven.

ALLEN. I have my English tutor at six-thirty. And Pop wants to talk to him. Besides, I've seen you in the pep rallies.

RONNIE. It's not the same. That's just a warm-up. Can't you cancel something just once. Ask Daddy. He'll let you. I mean you're practically out of the house already.

ALLEN. Oh, he's already been generous enough to let me cancel my three-thirty pre-calculus tutor.

RONNIE. But it's your birthday. It's a special occasion.

ALLEN. Apparently not that special.

RONNIE. There's somebody who wants to meet you.

ALLEN. Who?

RONNIE. Belinda French. You've seen her. She's a senior. She has a head, a neck, and the rest is legs. She's been on the drill team for three years. And she told me she thinks you're suave.

ALLEN. Come on, Ronnie...

RONNIE. She did! I'm not making it up. She likes you!

ALLEN. She doesn't even know me.

RONNIE. *Therefore*, she wants to meet you. Please come to the game. Allen...

ALLEN. Ronnie, I wish you wouldn't try to play matchmaker with me.

RONNIE. But you don't do anything anymore. You don't see anybody. It seems like you're sad all the time.

(ALLEN gently strokes RONNIE's hair.)

You're gonna go off to college. And she's gonna go off to college somewhere else. And you'll spend the whole summer sad because you didn't go to one little basketball game.

ALLEN. I'm going to miss you.

RONNIE. It's gonna be weird around here. I'll be the last vestige of youth. God. I think I'll light a candle when you leave.

ALLEN. To youth!

RONNIE. To brothers!

ALLEN. To sisters!

RONNIE. To Belinda French!

ALLEN. To the Jefferson High Hurricanes!

RONNIE. I gotta write that letter *tonight*. Hey. You're not leaving right after school gets out, are you? We could do something over the summer. Go camping or something.

ALLEN. I gotta get out of here, Ronnie. I don't fit right in this house anymore. I wish I could've left a year ago. Spare myself some of this bullshit.

(There is a brief pause.)

RONNIE. I'm glad you're stuck here. It's gonna be so lonely.

ALLEN. What're you talking about? You have more friends than Jesus.

RONNIE. I only have one brother, Allen.

ALLEN. You'll be fine. You're charmed. Wish I was.

(JOEL PORTER enters carrying Allen's drawing pad and a bunch of pencils. He is still in his apron, jacket, and hat, having just gotten home. RONNIE jumps up and goes over to JOEL.)

RONNIE. Daddy! I have a game on Saturday and I want you all to come. Okay?

JOEL. Wait a minute, pumpkin. *(To ALLEN:)* What is this?

ALLEN. Ronnie wants us to go to her game...

RONNIE. Daddy?

ALLEN. Let me talk to your brother now, sweetheart. *(To ALLEN:)* Answer me, son. I found these in the garbage can.

ALLEN. I threw them away. I'm quitting my drawing class, Pop.

JOEL. It's not over yet. That class ain't through.

ALLEN. I'm done, Pop. I'm not going back.

RONNIE. Daddy, this might be the last game of the school year. And the party'll be over in time for you and Allen and Mom to—

JOEL. I don't have time for cheerleading right now, Ronnie. I have something important to talk to Allen about.

RONNIE. It's just for a few hours...

JOEL. Girl, do you hear me? Go help your mother set the table.

(RONNIE sits on the floor, silently pouting.)

JOEL. What did I just say?

RONNIE. I'm tired. I've been jumping up and down all day. *(Beat.)*
I'll be quiet.

(JOEL just looks at RONNIE, then turns his full attention on ALLEN.)

JOEL. What's this all about, Allen? Explain this to me. Put that down.

(ALLEN puts the trophy on the table.)

What're you doing throwing away good material? I didn't buy these for the trash man. Trash man don't need no art lessons. These are yours.

ALLEN. I'm sorry...

JOEL. You haven't got anything to be sorry about. You just take these on back in your room and get ready for dinner.

ALLEN. *(Cautiously:)* I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But I can't go back. I can't keep beating my head against a wall.

JOEL. Now, I don't wanna hear any of that. You take these and put 'em where they belong.

ALLEN. I'm no good at it. I tried it for a while, and I'm no good at it.

JOEL. What're you talking about you *tried* it? You *tried* to draw? I'm not paying for you to try it. I'm paying for you to learn it.

ALLEN. I'll pay you back. I'll start right now. I'll pay you back for every class. Believe me, I'm not going to end up cleaning toilets because I didn't take a drawing class.

JOEL. You're not gonna pay me nothing. Your Uncle Teddy says inside every great architect there's the soul of a great artist. You go talk to Teddy. He'll tell you every building's a sculpture.

ALLEN. *(All nervous energy:)* You think it's easy. Just pick up a pencil and presto!

JOEL. I don't think nothing like that. It's tough. I know that. Anything worth doing well's gonna be tough. But I know you well enough to know you got the talent. And you can sure as hell finish that class. *(Beat.)* This is a good pad, son. And good pencils. You throw this stuff away now, you're throwing away a whole lot more than supplies. You got a natural gift, but you got to shape it. Discipline it. This is your future. What do you think Uncle Teddy was doing when he was your age? He was out there training himself. Doing everything he could think of. I'da been right there with him if I didn't have your grandfolks to look after. If I didn't have to feed them, and my brothers, I wouldn't be pushing produce from that old truck.

ALLEN. *(Quietly:)* No matter how much you say it, it's not going to make me an artist. You know? Maybe I should be concentrating on something else.

JOEL. You talk to your Uncle Teddy. He'll be here for your birthday. He'll tell you. We all knew from the beginning you had a gift just like him.

ALLEN. *(Practically to himself:)* How long did it take you to convince him of that?

JOEL. Even you knew it. Couldn't anybody tell you different.

ALLEN. Things have changed. I'm not so sure anymore.

JOEL. That's why I'm telling you to talk to Teddy. He'll set you straight. He'll tell you hands down you got something special. Ask him can you work in his office this summer. You'll see for yourself.

ALLEN. Pop...

JOEL. Ask him if I'm lying. *(Beat.)* I'm telling you the truth, son. You're gonna rise up fast. Get you a big office like my brother has. A secretary. Big desk. Big computer. Big machines all around you. You better tell Teddy to clear you out an office right now. 'Cause you're coming on.

ALLEN. *(Nervous:)* Pop, what if, what if I don't want to do all that?

JOEL. What? If?

ALLEN. My interests are not the same as they were when I was seven.

JOEL. What kind of interests have you got?

ALLEN. I've been thinking about teaching.

JOEL. Oh, Lord.

(JOEL places the pencils and drawing pad in the chair and begins to remove his hat, coat and apron. RONNIE is very interested. She has never heard this before.)

RONNIE. What kind of teaching, Allen?

JOEL. It don't make any kinda sense to—

RONNIE. Wait, Daddy. Listen to him.

(There is a pause.)

ALLEN. I was thinking of elementary school.

JOEL. Elementary school. *(Pause.)* So you dropped architect, passed right by politician, doctor, banker, astronaut, saw lawyer, kept on going, and stopped at schoolteacher...?

RONNIE. What's wrong with being a teacher, Daddy? Allen'd be good at it. Evelyn across the street almost has her certificate, and she said she can't think of doing anything else.

JOEL. Alright. That's good for Evelyn across the street. That's a good enough job for a lady with nothing better to do than babysit every day of the week. You talk to her, all she can talk about is how many times she had to change the Whitcomb baby. Nobody wants to hear that mess. *(Beat.)* Anybody can *settle* on something just to pay the landlord. *(Turning to ALLEN:)* But when you have a calling...

ALLEN. How do you know what my calling is? How can you be so sure? What if I thought my calling was somewhere else?

RONNIE. There's nothing wrong with teaching. *(Beat; then quietly:)* I was thinking of being a teacher...

JOEL. Don't drop your plans too fast, Allen. Every choice you make has consequences.

ALLEN. I haven't made any choices yet, Pop. It's something I was thinking about. That's all. I just wish you would get it out of your head that I'm somehow predestined for a career in architecture.

JOEL. You oughtn't be concerning yourself with what's in my head.

(JOEL picks up the pencils and drops them on the table in front of ALLEN. He waves the drawing pad in ALLEN's face.)

You ought to be concerned about your God-given gifts. You ought to think twice before you go and let all your plans rot in the garbage!

ALLEN. My plans haven't even entered into the equation.

JOEL. *(Overlapping:)* You're the one told me, "Pop, I wanna build buildings." I heard that from your mouth. "I wanna make skyscrapers." You're the one couldn't stop making toy towers and model houses. Had so many miniatures and toys around here, you got the backyard looking like downtown Chicago.

ALLEN. I was a child. Those were the toys I was given. *(Beat.)* Okay. I thought about it. I considered becoming an architect. For a long time. For years. Because you had me convinced that I did have a special knack for it. Just like you convince everybody that I'm some kind of prodigy.

JOEL. Doesn't take any convincing.

(ALLEN's nervousness causes him to stutter slightly. He attempts to conceal his anxiety by avoiding eye contact, but his tone remains quite resolved.)

ALLEN. Then why don't you ever stop?

JOEL. What?

ALLEN. Why are you trying to sell me to Uncle Teddy and to my teachers and to total strangers? They don't need to be sold on me. They don't want to be sold on me. Eventually, they're going to want to see what I can do without a backstage dad to tell them how they should feel about it.

JOEL. I'm not stopping you. Go ahead. Show 'em what you can do.

(ALLEN reaches into his backpack and pulls out a bound report. He lays it on the table.)

ALLEN. I did.

(JOEL picks up the report and slowly flips through the pages, pausing on the last page to read the comments. JOEL looks genuinely moved by what he sees.)

JOEL. *(Reveling in it:)* One hundred percent. *(Pause.)* Ha-ha! This is something! Now, maybe I talk too much sometimes. But look at this.

(He shows the report to RONNIE, who takes it and begins to look through it.)

JOEL. *(Beaming now:)* Look at what your brother can do! A solid 'A'!

RONNIE. That's good, Allen.

JOEL. You got a son who can do this, it makes you wanna talk a blue streak.

ALLEN. *(Still nervous:)* My government teacher, Mr. Turubian, graded it. He said it was an example of outstanding scholarship and flawless composition. That's exactly what he said. In front of the entire class. He said it was a provocative report with original ideas, and that it went way beyond the requirements for the assignment. Then after class, he said it could only be better if I had actually written it myself...

RONNIE. But I saw you writing it. I saw you...

JOEL. What's he mean if you wrote it yourself? He calling you a liar?!

ALLEN. He called me a plagiarist. And it wasn't just him. The whole class was thinking the same thing. *(To RONNIE:)* You must've heard rumors by now...

RONNIE. I haven't heard anything.

ALLEN. You will. It'll get around. Something like this was just waiting to happen. Just waiting to bust.

JOEL. You earned that grade! That's yours. What's his name again? That teacher? He thinks he can mess with us like that, he's got another thing coming. You're gonna get that grade!

ALLEN. Please don't talk to him. Please don't talk to the school anymore, Pop. I have been under suspicion since I got into the class. My *intelligence* has been under suspicion. Everything I think and do. Nobody believes I belong in that class because my father hounded everybody from the principal to the janitor 'til they let me in. Don't you see? You've created a situation for me that's, that's impossible! The judgments and the distrust and the scrutiny—all year long...

JOEL. I see you wasting your time in one class, I'm gonna make damn sure you get into a better one. I'm your father. I'm supposed to stand back and let some ignorant counselor counsel you into the dust? They don't know you. They don't know you from a hole in the wall. So they go to the system that always works for 'em: the darker the dumber. (*Beat.*) Naw, naw. I didn't create no impossible situation for you. That's that junk out there in the world. (*Beat.*) That teacher's gonna give you that grade!

ALLEN. It doesn't matter. In the end, the grade really belongs to you.

RONNIE. Don't listen to Mr. Turubian, Allen. Everybody knows you belong in the honors program. Mr. Turubian's a big idiot.

ALLEN. (*Quiet:*) I've struggled...

JOEL. What?

ALLEN. In that class. In all my classes. My grades were falling at the beginning of the year.

JOEL. I know.

ALLEN. I've had to struggle to bring them back up.

JOEL. You had a little trouble in the beginning of the year. I know.

ALLEN. That's going to keep me out of Harvard, Pop. It's gonna keep me out of a lot of places.

JOEL. We'll see. When you've got a gift for something, nothing can hold you back.

ALLEN. Maybe I should have stayed in a regular class for a while. Until I could focus on things a little better. Maybe *I* should have been responsible for moving up to the next level.

JOEL. You were responsible. One hundred percent!

ALLEN. No. Even with all the pressure and all the suspicions hanging over me, even though I knew how important it was, I couldn't focus. Those first months of the school year. I couldn't concentrate for very long...before I started to see Lewis. I swear he was as real to me as he ever was. And for those moments, I wasn't in a classroom. I was with Lewis. I could see him. And hear him. I could touch him, he was so real. I saw what would have been. I saw the past. I saw us walking home together. Me, eye-level to his chin.

JOEL. Allen...

ALLEN. Kenneth and Anton Fowler are coming up behind us. Coming up behind me. To pay me back for ratting them out when Kenneth Fowler stole my backpack. I get hit in the head with a book or something, and it makes me fall to the ground. On my face. I look up and see Anton holding Lewis back. I see Lewis' mouth wide with rage, shouting something. And I feel...

JOEL. (*Firmly:*) Allen.

ALLEN. I feel Kenneth kicking into my side. And I'm holding on to his leg. Trying to keep it from coming so hard. But I can't hold on tight enough, so the kicks keep coming harder and harder. Then I look back around for Lewis, and he isn't there. I'm still holding Kenneth's leg, but the kicking stops. And then there's Lewis, on the other side of me now, pushing Kenneth in the chest. Kenneth trips over me and falls. But Lewis picks him up and pushes him again. He pushes him into his brother and says something to them, but I can't hear it. Lewis hasn't so much as scratched them. But whatever he's doing, it's enough. And they're staring us down. Lewis helps me up, and we're walking away. I think my rib's broken, but I'm just walking like nothing happened. Now, I'm a little bit afraid they're gonna come running up behind us. But Lewis is just walking, eyes straight ahead. So I am, too. (*Beat.*) We haven't said a word to each other the whole way home. But just before we get to your

lot, Pop. He turns to me and says, “I’m gonna be a Marine, Allen. What do you think about that?” I just say, “The Marines are lucky.”

JOEL. (*Forceful:*) Allen! You listen to me! You’re just about through with high school. Time to start concentrating on the future, how you’re gonna get to be part of Teddy’s office. You’ll rise up fast there. Maybe you’ll run it some day. Time to start concentrating on the next step.

ALLEN. (*Distinct; cold:*) Getting that grade...?

JOEL. That teacher—what’s his name again?—you’re gonna get that grade, goddammit!

(There is a long pause, during which ALLEN picks up a trophy and begins to polish it again.)

ALLEN. Mr. Turubian doesn’t know what to do. He can’t substantiate any of his accusations. He doesn’t want to give me the grade. But what else can he do?

(JOEL picks up a trophy and replaces it on the shelf without stopping to look at it. He goes back for another one.)

ALLEN. Pop. I’m not done polishing them.

JOEL. Let’s put these away, now.

ALLEN. I’m not done.

RONNIE. I’m helping him, Daddy. We’re almost finished.

JOEL. Leave ’em be. They don’t need shining.

ALLEN. I think they do need to be shined. (*Beat.*) This room is *my* responsibility. You said I could take care of it.

JOEL. Allen, I want you to pick up this room and get ready for dinner.

ALLEN. (*Softly:*) I’m not coming to dinner tonight.

JOEL. You’re not gonna upset this household.

(RONNIE is silently bringing the trophy removed by JOEL back to the table. She returns for one trophy after another, filling the table with them, as JOEL’s indignation grows.)

JOEL. Ronnie...! Girl, what do you think you're doing? Put these back.

RONNIE. They look kinda dull. We have to polish all of them. (*To ALLEN:*) Don't we? (*Returning for more trophies*) We're gonna make them all shiny.

JOEL. Clean this mess up!

ALLEN. (*An unexpected explosion:*) Jesus Christ! Why can't we take care of these trophies if we want to? Why can't we be allowed to remember? I won't just write Lewis off!

JOEL. Nobody said that. I didn't say nothing like that. But listen son, there's no use in trying to hold on to something that's not there.

ALLEN. It is there! It's here! Maybe you can't see it. And you can exhaust yourself trying to forget it. But it's here. And it will always be here.

(There is a pause.)

JOEL. Let me tell you something about Lewis. You can paint him all golden in your mind if you want to, but that boy was more trouble than you know. Didn't have any self-control. And that was a shame. 'Cause he had talent like you. He always did good in his studies. Kept reading. He could've gone off, got a degree, and be doing proud by his family. But that boy wouldn't pay me any mind. I'm sitting up here telling him from *experience*—I've got 55 years hard experience—and I'm telling him what that experience taught me. But he just ignored me. I told him to keep working on his drafting. He didn't listen. I got a friend who gave him a fellowship application. Not one drop of ink touched that paper. I tried to get him to prepare himself, but he wanted to take the easy road. He got lazy and shiftless. He got so he wasn't gonna be good for anything—

RONNIE. (*Overlapping:*) Stop! Daddy! I can't believe it! How can you say that? He's your son!

JOEL. The waste is over. The disrespect. The war. Crying like a whisper. That's all over! *(To ALLEN:)* Get it out of your head! Get him out of your head and think about what comes next!

RONNIE. He's your oldest son! Doesn't that mean anything?

JOEL. *(To ALLEN:)* You talk to Teddy Saturday. He'll tell you—

ALLEN. I'm not going. I won't go to that party.

JOEL. What? You have to go. This is your birthday.

ALLEN. Pop, please...

JOEL. I'm telling you, you are going to be there.

ALLEN. No. I'm not.

(There is silence.)

JOEL. *(Slowly, somberly:)* Alright. Then you call Teddy and tell him not to come. Tell him to forget everything Joel said about his son. Tell him there won't be any party. Tell him Joel's made an ass of himself.

ALLEN. I'm not trying to humiliate you.

JOEL. What are you trying to do?

ALLEN. The opposite. I want to make you proud, Pop.

JOEL. You're lying to me.

ALLEN. No! It's the truth!

BEA. *(Off:)* Dinner! Allen? You gonna eat?

JOEL. It's a lie.

ALLEN. Oh, God, Pop. I want to make you proud.

(ALLEN places his hand on JOEL's arm.)

ALLEN. I want to—

JOEL. Don't touch me.

RONNIE. Daddy...

ALLEN. *(More desperate:)* Pop, I want to make you proud. I do! And I want to be proud of myself!

(JOEL makes a move to leave, but ALLEN holds him, still more desperation creeping into his voice.)

ALLEN. Do you hear me, Pop? I want to make you proud. I've always wanted to. And so did Lewis. And so does Ronnie...

RONNIE. Allen, stop... Please stop.

JOEL. Let go of my arm, Allen.

ALLEN. But I want to make myself proud, too!

JOEL. Let me go!

ALLEN. Just tell me I can do it without everything being choreographed and plotted and laid out for me... *(Silence.)* Please, tell me...

BEA. *(Off:)* Ronnie? You in the house? Joel? Wilder?

(The two men have not noticed that RONNIE has begun to cry softly.)

BEA. *(Off:)* Come to the table! Dinner's ready!

(The lights fade on the trophy room.)

ACT I

Scene 3

(The lights come up on the backyard. It is a bright early evening of the following day. A large barbecue pit has been moved out into the yard. ALLEN is sweeping dirt and leaves into a pile on the porch. This chore is a welcome diversion for ALLEN; the simple repetitive motion and the solitude relax him. After a moment, a voice can be heard from the other side of the gate.)

LISETTE. *(Off:)* Mrs. Porter? Mrs. Porter? That you?

ALLEN. She's at the market.

LISETTE. *(Off; cautious:)* Who's that?

ALLEN. Who are *you*? (A small pause.) Hello?

LISETTE. (Off:) That Allen? That you?

(ALLEN crosses warily to the gate and opens it. LISETTE GRANT stands in the gateway. She wears a weathered sundress and well worn sandals. Despite the lightness of her clothes, there is an aura of unyielding hardness about her. Her presence takes ALLEN by surprise.)

ALLEN. Oh.

LISETTE. Sorry. Did I interrupt something?

ALLEN. No. Just chores...

(An awkward moment passes.)

LISETTE. You don't remember me, huh?

ALLEN. Yeah. Lisette.

LISETTE. I didn't even know if you guys were still here. Somebody told me y'all moved.

ALLEN. No. I don't think my parents would be capable of change on such a radical scale.

LISETTE. I walked by your daddy's truck on my way over here. I forgot he worked there. I waved, but he was helping a customer or something... I just kept walking.

ALLEN. He works pretty late usually. (Beat.) Everybody's out. Which is unusual. I hardly ever get the house to myself.

LISETTE. So you having some kinda wild party in there or something?

ALLEN. (A nervous giggle:) No... Just chores...

LISETTE. You look different. I haven't seen you for— Well, it's been a few years, huh?

ALLEN. At least.

LISETTE. Guess I'm not used to looking at you eye to eye. I used to could see the top of your head when I talked to you. You still have that bump on your head?

ALLEN. I grew into it.

LISETTE. My mama used to say a bump like that meant you were gon' be fat when you grew up.

ALLEN. Sorry to disappoint. That seems to be my specialty.

LISETTE. Do I look different?

ALLEN. Well, no. Not really.

LISETTE. I don't look different to you at all?

ALLEN. I don't know. Just...more mature, I guess.

LISETTE. Do I look good?

ALLEN. (*Nervous:*) What do you mean? Yeah, you look great.

LISETTE. I always think people won't recognize me. 'Cause I don't even feel like the same person I used to be.

ALLEN. Well, you look like her.

LISETTE. My eyes are getting puffy.

ALLEN. You...you look great, Lisette.

LISETTE. When's your mama getting back?

ALLEN. She'll be back soon. She only went to the corner. (*Beat.*) Do you want to wait for her?

LISETTE. I'll come back. Thanks.

ALLEN. Yeah...

(She turns to leave.)

ALLEN. (*Quickly:*) It's good to see you again.

LISETTE. You, too.

ALLEN. I tried to reach you. (*Beat.*) God, I don't even know if you know... Lewis... He died.

LISETTE. I know.

ALLEN. I tried to get in touch with you. For Lewis' memorial service. I thought you might want to be there.

LISETTE. Yeah, I wanted to be there. I found out too late. Sorry.

ALLEN. I put together a scrapbook for the service. You know, pictures, newspaper clippings, some letters and things he wrote. He mentioned you in some of them. *(Beat.)* Would you like to see it?

LISETTE. No. I gotta go.

ALLEN. She'll be home any minute. Why don't you wait?

LISETTE. I have some things to do. I'll come back later.

ALLEN. *(Hopeful:)* Tonight? *(Beat.)* My mom just went to go pick up some things at the market before everybody gets home. *(Pause.)* She'll be right back.

(After a moment, LISETTE turns around and enters the yard.)

LISETTE. Mind if I wait out here?

ALLEN. No. Make yourself comfortable. Do you want something to drink or...

LISETTE. I'm okay. *(Beat.)* Your mama's still growing her garden, I see.

ALLEN. She works on it day in and day out.

LISETTE. She feeds you good, huh?

ALLEN. She likes to fill up the table. She's obsessed with leftovers. *(Pause.)* Stay here. I'll go get the scrapbook.

(Before she has time to object, ALLEN has disappeared into the house. LISETTE is clearly uncomfortable in this space. She sits down on the porch steps, fanning herself nervously with her hands. There is a sound on the other side of the fence. LISETTE stands.)

LISETTE. Mrs. Porter?

(A couple of dogs begin to bark from the other side of the fence. LISETTE resumes her seat on the steps. The dogs continue to bark. A few moments later, ALLEN returns with a large leather-bound album.)

ALLEN. We put this out with some of his things at the service for people to look at. Here.

(He gives her the album. She looks at the cover, running her hand over it.)

LISETTE. *(Not at all sentimental:)* It's pretty.

ALLEN. Some of the pictures are missing because I had to put them back in the family album. But the captions are still there.

(LISETTE begins to look through the book. The dogs' barking subsides, and now there is silence. ALLEN stands at a distance, staring at LISETTE.)

ALLEN. You should have seen all the people who came. It was like he was some kind of celebrity. All his friends and teammates and teachers. A lot of his military buddies showed up. All in uniform. And there were a bunch of people I didn't even recognize. Friends of friends. People who had just heard about him from somewhere. There was a crowd of people I never saw before standing up in the back because every pew was filled...

LISETTE. I don't think your daddy would've wanted me there, anyway.

ALLEN. Lewis would have. *(Beat.)* He wrote to me from the Gulf. He wanted me to see how you were. I tried to find you, but it was like you disappeared. I didn't know what to tell him. I think he was really concerned about you.

LISETTE. Concerned...?

ALLEN. Look at the letters. Those are just a few. I have the rest in a box in my room. I asked around for you, but nobody knew where you were. After the funeral, I stopped looking.

LISETTE. Things weren't good between us when he died. I hadn't even seen him in more than a year.

ALLEN. He missed you. *(Beat.)* I don't understand why you two split up in the first place. I thought you were inseparable.

LISETTE. I wonder what Lewis thought. *(Beat.)* He's the one who disappeared. I didn't even know we were breaking up 'til he was gone. He barely said anything. Just started avoiding me. Then I heard he was joining up in the Marines...

ALLEN. He was going to try to find you when he got back.

LISETTE. I could barely get him on the phone even. Most of the time, your mama or your daddy would answer. If I ever got Lewis on the phone, he always had to go. He wouldn't say anything, except that he had to go, and then he'd hang up.

ALLEN. I know he loved you. Maybe he made a mistake. But I'm sure he was still in love with you.

LISETTE. We both made a mistake. Sorry. I shouldn't be talking like this.

ALLEN. That's okay.

LISETTE. I don't think about it, I don't get mad.

ALLEN. You're mad at him?

LISETTE. Look, I'm trying not to be disrespectful. I just came out here to see if your mama could help me out with something. She's the only one I know who I could turn to.

ALLEN. For what?

LISETTE. I need some help. It's private.

ALLEN. *(After a beat:)* Why are you mad at Lewis?

LISETTE. 'Cause... *(Beat; bitter:)* I wish he would've told me *something*—why he didn't wanna be with me anymore, at least.

ALLEN. But he did want to be with you.

LISETTE. You don't know that.

ALLEN. I know my brother.

LISETTE. You don't think I knew him, too?

(There is a pause.)

ALLEN. *(Delicately:)* Do you miss him?

LISETTE. Why're you asking me that? You think I'm some kind of cold woman? I gave a lot of love to him.

ALLEN. It's not that. We just haven't seen you in so long. I wondered if you think about him at all. *(Beat.)* You can come to our house any time. Okay? If you ever get sad about it. Or mad...

LISETTE. I've been trying so hard not to miss him. But sometimes I get back into my old habits. Everyday, I try not to think about him. Sometimes, I don't. *(Beat.)* Then sometimes somebody'll say something or I'll see something that... But I try not to.

ALLEN. But—didn't you love him?

LISETTE. If I'd've known what he was gon' do to me in the end, how he was gonna walk off, I would've never... My first mistake was when I looked at him.

ALLEN. How can that be a mistake?

LISETTE. 'Cause he looked back. *(Beat.)* The smart ones and the ones you knew were gonna do something with their life didn't used to look at me. But Lewis was aiming them low-lidded eyes right at me. At first, I didn't talk too much 'cause I couldn't think of anything somebody like him would want to hear. Plus his friends treated me like I was stupid. But he always stuck up for me. Then I knew. I knew I didn't have to be shy with him. Or scared of him. Or not say things I felt like saying to him. *(Beat.)* I'll tell you a secret. I had a dream—more than once—that we were a family. And we were old.

ALLEN. Did you tell Lewis about it?

LISETTE. That was a little girl dream. Little boys don't dream that.

(There is another silence as LISETTE stares at the letters and pictures, becoming overwhelmed by them, angered.)

LISETTE. These pictures... *(Closing the album)* This is a nice book. You did a good job.

(She gives the book back to him somewhat hastily, and moves away from the porch.)

ALLEN. Where do you live?

LISETTE. Over in Echo Park.

ALLEN. That's not so far.

LISETTE. Nobody said I was far away.

ALLEN. Do you live alone?

LISETTE. Why? You looking for a roommate or something?

ALLEN. No... I just—

LISETTE. Yeah, I live by myself.

ALLEN. Oh. I'm going to be out on my own pretty soon.

LISETTE. Oh, yeah? Where you gonna go?

ALLEN. School. I don't know where yet.

LISETTE. Well, enjoy being home while you got one. 'Cause this is the last time anybody's gonna wanna take care of you.

ALLEN. I'll be all right.

LISETTE. You're gonna miss your mama's cooking when you leave. (*Re: the barbecue pit:*) Y'all gonna barbecue tonight?

ALLEN. Tomorrow. For my birthday. In theory.

LISETTE. Your birthday's tomorrow?

ALLEN. Number eighteen.

LISETTE. Shit. Happy birthday.

ALLEN. My mom wants to throw a party. But I won't be here, if she does.

LISETTE. Why not?

ALLEN. I'm sure it'll be much more fun without me.

LISETTE. Who're they gon' sing "Happy Birthday" to?

ALLEN. Maybe they'll call it off. That would be the reasonable thing to do.

LISETTE. You got other plans?

ALLEN. I'll think of something. (*Sotto voce:*) Maybe I can get to Catalina by myself.

LISETTE. You don't have anything better to do, but you just wanna avoid that party? That doesn't exactly sound reasonable to me.

ALLEN. It's never just a birthday party. Nobody gives a shit about my birthday. It's something else they want.

LISETTE. Do they embarrass you or something?

ALLEN. No. Yes. It's all an embarrassment.

(A small pause. Then...)

LISETTE. Boy, you better go to that party!

ALLEN. I can't. I don't want to be paraded around anymore. I'm almost on my own.

LISETTE. Then let 'em have you for your last birthday at home. Who cares what they want? If I was you, I would just go. And let 'em fuss about whatever they're gonna fuss about.

(A small pause as ALLEN moves closer to LISETTE.)

ALLEN. Lisette.

LISETTE. What?

ALLEN. Will you come?

LISETTE. What? To your *party*?

ALLEN. I'll go if you go.

LISETTE. Uh-uh. Sorry. I just came here to see Mrs. Porter, and then I'm gonna go.

ALLEN. Not for good, though. Right?

LISETTE. *(A gentle protest:)* Allen...

(The dogs have begun to bark again on the other side of the fence. ALLEN pays no attention to it, but LISETTE is bothered by the sharp sound.)

ALLEN. Come to my party. You don't have to stay the whole time. Just come and talk to me for a little while.

LISETTE. Your daddy doesn't like me. And to tell you the truth, I don't like him any better.

ALLEN. It's my party, isn't it? I can invite whoever I want.

LISETTE. I've got nothing in common with y'all anymore.

ALLEN. What about Lewis? We have that in common.

LISETTE. *(Impatient:)* Allen, quit it. You're making me—

ALLEN. I don't want it to be a birthday like all the rest. You can help me. *(Beat.)* Just an hour. Half an hour.

(There is a long pause, during which LISETTE fans herself emphatically with her hands. She stares at ALLEN. Then finally...)

LISETTE. *(Quietly:)* I'll try.

ALLEN. *(Slight relief:)* Please come...

(BEA's voice can be heard on the other side of the gate as she confronts the dogs. Both LISETTE and ALLEN tense somewhat at the sound of her voice.)

BEA. *(Off:)* Shoo! Shoo! Get on back over to your own yard! Go on! Shoo! Don't you— *(Calling:)* Julia! Come get your dogs! *(To the dogs:)* Get out of here!

(The dogs' barking fades only slightly as BEA enters, carrying a small bag of groceries. Upon seeing LISETTE, she freezes.)

ALLEN. Mom...

BEA. *(Barely audible:)* Oh, my Lord.

LISETTE. Hello, Mrs. Porter.

(The dogs become quiet once more. BEA walks uncertainly toward the porch.)

BEA. What, why are you here?

LISETTE. I just came by, Mrs. Porter, 'cause you were nice to me before and...I need to talk to you about something.

BEA. You need to talk to me...? I can't right now. I got to get this on the stove. We're getting ready to eat.

ALLEN. Maybe she can eat with us?

BEA. It's a family dinner.

LISETTE. I'm not trying to bother y'all or anything. But this is important. For both of us.

(BEA turns to ALLEN with the bag of groceries.)

BEA. *(Fear in her voice:)* Allen, take these inside. *(Re: the album:)* What is that?

ALLEN. The scrapbook from Lewis' memorial. I was showing Lisette.

BEA. Take that back inside. And take these and put 'em away for me.

(BEA gives the bag to ALLEN. He walks slowly to the back door, trying to hear as much as he can.)

BEA. You shouldn't have come back here. We're trying to get on with our lives. You should do the same thing.

LISETTE. I am. But it's getting harder, Mrs. Porter.

BEA. We can't do anything about that. We got our own problems...

LISETTE. I've been working. At a restaurant by where I live. But they closed down last month. I haven't found anything since.

BEA. I can't help you.

LISETTE. Yes, you can. I know it.

BEA. There's nothing I can do. You'll go get yourself another job somewhere. You don't need to be coming around here.

LISETTE. There's nobody else I could think of... Mrs. Porter, I'm either working or looking for work. Or I'm at home trying to figure out how to go on...

BEA. That's none of my business—

LISETTE. I don't have the spirit to do much of anything else. So I'm just trying to get on with it, Mrs. Porter. That's all I'm trying to do.

BEA. *(Seeing ALLEN still on the porch:)* Allen! Go inside!

ALLEN. What's wrong?

BEA. Go put those things away like I asked you.

(ALLEN exits into the house.)

BEA. You can't come around here anymore, girl. I told you.

LISETTE. I need a little help. You were so nice to me before...

BEA. I wasn't nice. You were making up stories.

LISETTE. I didn't make anything up.

BEA. You ought to be ashamed.

LISETTE. I'm not trying to hurt anybody—

BEA. I won't let you hurt anybody.

LISETTE. I got an eviction notice. They're gon' kick me out of my apartment!

BEA. It's none of my—

LISETTE. Mrs. Porter, I need some money! Please. Don't make me do this...

BEA. You're a young woman. You have a healthy body. Use it. Go out there and go to work. We don't have anything to give you.

LISETTE. (*A threatening tone:*) I know you can help me. I know you will.

BEA. Don't you bully us.

LISETTE. It could've turned out so much different than this. You know it's not all my fault I have to beg like this. I was kinda counting on something different. But *you* know what I've been through. It could've been so much better.

BEA. (*Indignant:*) You just keep your stories away from my family!

LISETTE. I don't have any stories! That's not my problem. My problem is I have the truth. Weighing down on me ever since your son came in my life. (*Beat.*) I have tried to get him out—

BEA. Just keep away...

LISETTE. I'm *still* trying to get him out of my life. but he's hanging on. He's hanging on to me!

BEA. We never did you any wrong. Never.

LISETTE. I didn't come here 'cause I wanted to. I had to, Mrs. Porter. I don't have anywhere else to go. *(Beat.)* I don't need much. Just a little to help me while I'm trying to get work. To keep a roof over my head. And some food on my table.

BEA. We don't have anything...

LISETTE. I know you can help. I heard Mr. Porter's got some kind of fortune in there. *(Pause.)* A lotta people would be interested to know what kind of man your son was.

BEA. Everybody knows what kind of man he was. You ought to be ashamed of yourself acting like this. Why can't you leave us be?

(ALLEN comes back out onto the porch.)

ALLEN. Mom? Is everything okay?

(BEA looks at ALLEN for a moment, then turns to LISETTE.)

BEA. This is the last time.

(BEA goes up the porch steps tugging on ALLEN as she passes him.)

BEA. *(To ALLEN:)* Come on inside the house. You put the groceries away?

(ALLEN remains still. BEA gives him a look, then LISETTE. She rushes inside the house.)

ALLEN. What's so important?

LISETTE. You should do like your mama says and go back inside.

ALLEN. Her hands were shaking when she went past me. *(Beat.)* Maybe I just never noticed it before.

LISETTE. Sorry you have to see her like that. And me like I am.

ALLEN. Why are you sorry?

LISETTE. I'm in trouble, Allen. Your mama's gonna help me out.

ALLEN. Is there anything I can do?

LISETTE. No.

(A small pause.)

ALLEN. I'm going to see you tomorrow, right?

LISETTE. *(After a pause; very soft:)* Right.

ALLEN. I'll be waiting for you.

(BEA comes back outside holding a small paper bag folded neatly around a stack of bills. She walks right past ALLEN to LISETTE and places the bag firmly in her hand.)

BEA. *(Rather confidentially:)* No more. You hear me, girl? No more.

LISETTE. No more.

BEA. Go on. Leave us alone. You have what you want. Leave us alone, now.

(LISETTE turns and exits through the gate. The dogs can be heard barking in the distance. BEA goes to ALLEN and holds him firmly by the shoulders.)

BEA. Let's let your father relax tonight, sugar. He doesn't need to hear about this.

ALLEN. What happened, Mom?

BEA. Nothing. She's trying to stir things up. But she won't be coming back around here. I made sure. She won't be back. Don't bring this up anymore. Your father's got plenty to worry about without hearing about that girl and her troubles. Now come on inside. We have work to do.

(BEA ushers ALLEN inside. The dogs' barking has grown louder as they have once again approached the fence. BEA turns around and picks up the broom with which ALLEN was sweeping. She moves with swift fury to the gate and opens it. She bats at the offstage dogs with the broom as she shouts at them.)

BEA. You damn— Get away from here! I said go! Go away!

(The dogs have stopped barking and moved on, but BEA continues, screaming at them.)

Go away, you little raggedy mutts! GO AWAY! GO AWAY!

(Blackout.)

ACT II

Scene 1

(The lights come up once more in the trophy room. It is late in the afternoon. The date is projected onto the set: April 4, 1992. Saturday. The trophies have all been placed back on the shelves. Each has been carefully polished and their golden metal shines unnaturally bright. Scissors, a roll of streamers, uninflated balloons, party hats, and gift wrapping paper are lying around the room. Backyard party decorations are partially visible out of the window, and the faint sound of R&B music and people talking and laughing can be heard from outside.)

JOEL, dressed in an old suit, but probably his best one, is staring out of the window at something. BEA enters wearing a paper party hat. On the surface at least, the party atmosphere has made her giddy and excited. She revels in her role as hostess. But, as with all of the Porters on this day, there is an underlying tension and nervousness that threatens each moment.)

BEA. Ella Jane's boys're hungry again. They're asking for more patties. They already had three or four apiece. They act like they haven't seen food in I don't know how long. You know Ella Jane's a vegetarian now. She doesn't even eat cheese. Lord only knows what she's feeding those kids. I told 'em I'd put some more meat on the grill, but they said no, they want Uncle Joel to cook it. They only like it when you cook it for 'em.

JOEL. Mm-hm...

BEA. You seen Wilder?

JOEL. Huh? No.

BEA. He went out to pick me up some candles and matches. I was just about ready to bring the cake out, but I only had eight candles left!

JOEL. He hasn't been in here.

BEA. What're you doing inside the house?

JOEL. Allen's talking to Teddy.

BEA. *(Going to the window:)* Yeah?

JOEL. Allen looks good today, don't he?

BEA. Him and Ronnie both. *(Beat.)* He shouldn't be wearing a suit today, though. You, either. It's so sticky outside. We'll have to take 'em down to the dry cleaners come Monday.

JOEL. Teddy sure likes him. Ever since he was a little baby. Look at him smiling.

BEA. Mm. I'm glad you don't smile like that. Got too many teeth showing. *(Beat.)* And I'm glad you and Allen are being good to each other.

(JOEL moves away from the window and sits in the chair. His mind is somewhere else.)

JOEL. Teddy's gonna do alright by Allen. It's gonna work out fine.

BEA. *(Still gazing out of the window:)* It turned out to be a real good day, didn't it? I wish Lewis could've been here to see his brother turn eighteen. That's the only thing I wish... *(Pause.)* Tsk! Look at my flowers. I can't believe those dogs got to 'em again. They haven't been in the ground 48 hours and it looks like they've been hit by a hurricane. I heard Ella Jane and Roselyn giggling about it, too. They thought I planted 'em that way! Said they thought maybe I was in a hurry.

JOEL. Hm...

BEA. I should build me a scarecrow.

JOEL. What?

BEA. *(Moving away from the window:)* I have had it with those mongrels. I should build a big, fat scarecrow. And put a skillet in his hand. Show those dogs I mean business. *(Beat.)* I hope Julia comes over here today so she can see what they did. I told her to keep those wild things in her own garden. If I see 'em loose on Monday, I'm calling the pound.

JOEL. I thought you were friends. I see you two gabbing out on her front steps every other night. Can't get on the phone when she calls up and you two get to yapping.

BEA. Julia is my friend. Lulu and Rocky are my worst enemies. Every time I go over there, Julia promises me she'll tie 'em up. Next thing you see Lulu's chasing after cars, and Rocky's snapping at the postman. Julia's just as nice as she can be. You'd never guess two mean old dogs'd belong to a nice lady like her. She said her husband got 'em for her for protection 'cause he works the late shift. But I don't see how they're gonna do her any good when they're halfway down the block, running after babies and digging holes in folks' yards most of the time. I told her, the way they run around, Randall didn't just get a couple of dogs for her. He got a couple of dogs for the whole block! *(Beat; cautious:)* Julia was telling me something yesterday, Joel... You know that grocery store where Randall works? She said they're still looking for an assistant manager.

JOEL. Uh-huh.

BEA. You should look in to that.

JOEL. Uh-huh.

BEA. You know. So you could work some regular hours. You're getting too old to be working off the truck.

JOEL. I'm not too old for nothing.

(There is a pause as BEA moves around the room, collecting the decorations and putting them in one spot.)

BEA. They give good benefits at that store. Takes care of Randall and Julia. They've got a plan for the doctor and the dentist and the eye doctor... *(Silence.)* And a retirement plan.

JOEL. I take care of you and the kids, don't I? Give you a place to live? Make enough money for you to buy things and plant your garden? I'm doing fine on the lot. And nobody's there telling me what to do.

BEA. But you'd be one of the bosses. Assistant manager. Of the whole store! It'd be you telling people what to do.

JOEL. If it's such a good job, you go down there and take it. You go down there and get you some benefits and plans.

BEA. (*Quietly:*) I was thinking of you when Julia told me about it. 'Cause you have some good experience. You're already dealing in groceries. And you built your own business. I think they'd like a man who knows how to run a business. (*Beat.*) And you're getting to the age...

JOEL. What age?

BEA. You can't keep doing this forever.

JOEL. I can do it as long as I need to. Been doing it this long.

BEA. You could be making more money and you wouldn't be there but eight or nine hours a day. Five days instead of six. Shoot, Joel. I want you around the house more. I hardly get to see you.

(*JOEL takes BEA's hand and caresses it.*)

JOEL. When I get Allen and Ronnie's education paid, I won't have to work so much. (*Beat.*) Everything'll be fine. I've spent fifteen years on the truck. Got a whole lotta people who've been loyal to me for a long time. I don't have to worry about steady money. I've got steady money and I don't mind working for it.

BEA. I don't mind it, either. As long as it's reasonable. It's time to start working reasonable hours for reasonable pay. You've been slaving for years, Joel. We need to start planning ahead, now. We've spent our lives getting our children ready for life without us. But we're not doing one thing to get ready for life without them. I'm talking about you *and* me. (*Beat.*) I *am* thinking about going back to work.

JOEL. (*Caught off guard:*) Doing what?

BEA. I could do some work in human resources again. I'll find me something. I won't have to look far.

JOEL. I'm taking care of everything, Bea. We got nothing to worry about.

BEA. Allen and Ronnie have nothing to worry about. But we're not leaving hardly anything for us.

JOEL. I been putting money away for later.

BEA. All we have is our little savings account and what you keep hidden in the bedroom. I counted it, Joel. It's not gonna take care of us for too long. We've got to think of something else...

JOEL. What were you doing counting that money?

BEA. I wanted to know how much was there. When was the last time you counted it? *(Beat.)* After tuition, it's not gonna be too much. We've just got to tend to ourselves a little bit, and figure out what we're gonna do?

JOEL. What we're gonna do? Our future is right outside that window! Our future is looking good today! Sharp as a tack. Teddy sees it. The whole family sees it! They all see what I knew from the day he was born! Our son is gonna do some great things, Bea. I'm not worrying about the future 'cause I already know it's bound for greatness!

BEA. We can't just wait on Allen to take care of us. We've got to look after ourselves.

JOEL. He's getting some good opportunities. Those are our opportunities, too. Those are opportunities for the whole family!

BEA. I reckon so. But I'm telling you, you're looking opportunity right in the face, too. What gives you the right to ignore it? What makes you so special?

(JOEL looks strangely at BEA. WILDER enters carrying a small plastic bag. He takes in the atmosphere before speaking.)

WILDER. This a private talk? Silence always sound serious to me.

BEA. Never mind, Wilder. You get my candles?

WILDER. *(Holding the bag up:)* Candles and matches. I hope you like 'em. I hope they the best candles you ever lit 'cause I feel like I just ran a marathon getting 'em.

(WILDER gives the bag to BEA. She puts it down with the other decorations and takes a change purse out of her dress pocket.)

BEA. Thank you, Wilder. How much were they?

WILDER. Aw, don't worry 'bout that. Feels kinda good to move around. First two stores I went to were out of candles. Third one

only had candles in the shape of the number two and the number seven. I was about to come back and tell you to just stick the damn matches in the cake! I finally found some in that little bitty Mexican grocery store on Saylin Lane.

BEA. I should give you something.

WILDER. Ain't no need: Joel gave me the rent check last night. I deposited it this morning. And when I got back, the Sears truck was here with my stereo. So I'm doing just fine.

BEA. You got it hooked up yet?

WILDER. Yes, ma'am. Haven't got a chance to play it, though. But I'm gonna try it later on when I get back from my mama's. I'm gonna turn it up real loud and make the pictures on the wall shake.

JOEL. Don't be keeping us up with that racket.

WILDER. You got to play it loud. That's how it works. The louder you play it, the younger you feel. Hell, just having it in the house make me feel like a middle-aged man again!

JOEL. You don't look any different.

BEA. What kind of music're you gonna play, Wilder?

WILDER. The youngest kind there is. Hopefully, something where I don't have to work my hips too much. My joints're locking up on me—

(ALLEN enters, surprised to find the room occupied. He appears older and more mature than he did in the previous act. In his dark suit and tie, ALLEN is transformed into a man. JOEL hurries past BEA and WILDER and brings ALLEN into the room, his arm around his son's shoulders. JOEL is anxious and excited. But there is something too forceful in the way JOEL touches ALLEN.)

JOEL. Allen!

WILDER. Hey, Big Man.

ALLEN. Is this the birthday committee?

JOEL. I saw you talking to Teddy outside.

ALLEN. Yeah. *(Beat.)* I just came in to sit down for a second. I didn't know anybody was—

(JOEL moves ALLEN further from BEA and WILDER.)

JOEL. Seems like everybody can't wait to talk to you, huh? I've hardly had a chance to talk to the birthday boy myself.

ALLEN. I guess not.

JOEL. You and your uncle were sure talking a long time.

ALLEN. He likes to talk. And he likes to touch my nose. Every time he makes a joke, he touches my nose. As if pressing it will make me laugh.

BEA. He's been doing that since you were a baby.

ALLEN. Did I like it then?

JOEL. He's excited to see you, huh? It's been a long time.

ALLEN. I don't think he realizes how long. He still treats me like a kid.

JOEL. *(Too anxious:)* What did y'all talk about?

ALLEN. I'm sure you can guess. I'm sure you've been imagining the scenario all morning. *(Uncomfortable beat.)* He asked me if I was still serious about becoming an architect. I said I hadn't made up my mind for certain yet, but that I was curious about what day-to-day life in the architectural field was like. And he said, "Oh, you mean day-to-night-to-day-to-night-to-day!" And pressed my nose for effect. Which was only making me more nervous.

JOEL. You don't have to be nervous around your Uncle Teddy. He's family.

ALLEN. I couldn't help it. *(Beat.)* He complimented me on some artwork I did years ago. I told him how much I admired his work, which I haven't seen in years. Then I asked him if there was any possibility that I could hang around the office this summer 'til I start college. And he said yeah, there were four intern positions and only two were filled so far.

JOEL. *(Ebullient:)* What did I tell you?!

(JOEL hugs ALLEN quite suddenly. It is a closeness that ALLEN has been missing, but the embrace ends far too soon. JOEL turns to BEA and WILDER.)

JOEL. You hear that? My son's gonna be working in a firm with Theodore W. Porter.

ALLEN. Working *for* Theodore W. Porter.

BEA. That's wonderful, sugar. You'll like working for Uncle Teddy.

WILDER. Theodore W. Porter and Nephew! How that sound?

JOEL. You wait and see. After this summer, they'll be holding that door open 'til you come back with your degree!

ALLEN. One thing at a time, huh, Pop? When I told him I want to see what it's like, I meant it. I want to see...

JOEL. All right. Okay. One step at a time. You know what you're doing. *(Laughing)* You're eighteen years old!

ALLEN. Besides, I think Teddy's thinking more in terms of Theodore W. Porter and Daughter. He said Patrice'll be through with her master's degree in a couple of years, and she can't wait to start designing. She's already won some university award.

JOEL. That may be. But he owes this to you.

ALLEN. Pop. He doesn't owe me.

JOEL. How do you think he got to where he is? He built his success on my back!

BEA. Joel! Don't raise your voice. Allen's a smart boy. He'll be able to work anywhere he wants.

JOEL. Yeah. That's right. *(To ALLEN:)* But don't you let Teddy go and ignore you. He owes it to you to give you a good shot. I'm the one stayed behind and took care of our folks and the house. Worked like a dog since I was fourteen so he could go off and make himself into something. I sacrificed for him. He owes me this much! Don't forget that. He owes this to me!

(There is silence. ALLEN is stunned.)

ALLEN. (*Barely able to get it out:*) Yes, Pop.

WILDER. Well, one thing about working in Teddy's office, I bet they got air conditioning. That's the best thing about working in an office building. Air conditioning and water coolers. That'd do it for me. Up in my tiny little room, I break a sweat if I change my mind too fast.

JOEL. Teddy say if you were gonna get your own desk?

ALLEN. He didn't say. He didn't say much about what I'd be doing at all. I won't need a desk if I'm pushing a mail cart.

JOEL. If he don't give you enough to do, you think of something to do.

ALLEN. Yes, Pop.

BEA. (*Eager to break the tension:*) Come on! Let's go bring out the cake. It's getting late. Everybody must be ready for dessert...

ALLEN. No, wait. Not yet.

BEA. Why not? We're not gonna have any time for the presents. You should open your presents before everybody leaves.

ALLEN. We have to wait for... I invited Lisette...

BEA. (*Her heart sinking:*) What...?

WILDER. Lisette? Georgia Grant's daughter?

ALLEN. She said she'd be here.

BEA. (*Almost confidential:*) Oh, now, Allen... Allen, why'd you do that?

JOEL. You talked to her? She been around here?

ALLEN. She came by yesterday.

JOEL. Yesterday. Goddammit. I knew that was her getting off the bus. (*Beat.*) You invited that girl into this house?

ALLEN. She never got to say goodbye to Lewis, Pop. She had to come back.

JOEL. *(To BEA:)* And you saw her, too? *(A thick silence.)* And didn't nobody say nothing to me about it?

BEA. *(Fearful, but not of JOEL:)* Look, Joel. There wasn't any sense in getting you all upset. I told her to leave, and she did. I didn't know she was coming back again today.

JOEL. What did she want?

BEA. I got rid of her, Joel. I told her not to come—

JOEL. Why was she here? What did she want?!

BEA. Well, I...

ALLEN. Pop, she misses Lewis. She misses Lewis. I know that's hard for you to comprehend. But a lot of people miss him. A lot of people right out there in our own backyard. *(Beat.)* She wanted to talk to somebody.

BEA. *(Nervous:)* Don't start carrying on now, you two. Let's go outside.

JOEL. I don't want that girl in this house, you understand?

ALLEN. *(Firm:)* I invited her.

JOEL. You leave that girl alone. She's got no business here.

ALLEN. She's a friend.

JOEL. Not to this family! She was trouble for Lewis. She's still trouble.

ALLEN. You don't know anything about her.

JOEL. I know enough. I got a customer by the name of Jack Richardson. Works in the courthouse downtown. I told him I thought I saw Lisette getting off the bus. He told me she just got out of jail for beating up on some other woman. Not even two weeks ago. Fighting over a ten-dollar bill. And that's not the first time she been locked up, either. Jack says she comes through that courthouse all the time. Georgia didn't do right with that girl.

ALLEN. Well...there must be some reason—

JOEL. She's no "friend." The girl's a convict.

ALLEN. *(After a beat:)* I don't care what she did. Or why. She's my guest today.

WILDER. She ain't nobody's guest yet. Y'all squabblin' over nothing. It's already pretty late and she ain't here.

BEA. That's right, Allen. Folks'll start leaving shortly.

ALLEN. *(Quietly:)* She said she'd come...

BEA. Don't worry about her.

WILDER. Yeah. Seems a shame to go and spoil the day like that. *(To BEA:)* You got anymore of them hats left, Bea? I need one of those.

BEA. Well, let me see...

(BEA finds a stack of paper party hats in the pile of decorations. She gives one to WILDER, who puts it on.)

WILDER. There. *(Beat.)* Gimme another one.

(BEA hands him another hat. He snaps it onto ALLEN's head.)

WILDER. There! That looks good on you, Big Man!

ALLEN. *(Flat:)* Thanks, Mr. Wilder.

(Someone taps on the window from outside. BEA goes to the window and talks through the glass.)

BEA. *(Over enunciating:)* Something wrong, Ella Jane? *(Beat.)* Give 'em the patties on the grill. *(Beat.)* I said there's more patties on the grill. *(Beat.)* They ate 'em? Well, tell 'em to breathe for a few minutes. We'll be out there momentarily. We're just getting the cake together.

RONNIE. *(Off; from hallway:)* Hey! Where is everybody?

BEA. *(Turning away from the window:)* Ronnie!

(RONNIE enters carrying the mail. She is perky and smiling brightly. She dumps all the mail in the chair, save for one large envelope.)

RONNIE. Guess who got an envelope from Stanford?!

ALLEN. It's here?

(Excited, ALLEN grabs the envelope from RONNIE's hand. The room is suddenly energized as everyone gathers closer to ALLEN who opens the envelope.)

BEA. Oh, my Lord...

WILDER. That's a big damn envelope.

(ALLEN pulls a folder out of the envelope. It is obviously an admissions packet. ALLEN is smiling, perhaps for the first time in this scene. He reads the cover letter.)

ALLEN. *(Simply:)* I did it, Pop. I got in.

JOEL. I knew it! I knew it! Lemme see that! That's my son! We got to show this to Teddy! We got to show everybody!

(ALLEN gives the letter and folder to JOEL, who can hardly contain his excitement. There are rounds of hugs and cries of excitement. ALLEN reaches for BEA.)

ALLEN. Mom...

BEA. *(Hugging him:)* We are so proud of you, sugar.

RONNIE. I knew you'd get in.

WILDER. Let me shake your hand. I don't get to shake too many college boys' hands. Congratulations, Big Man.

ALLEN. Thanks, Mr. Wilder.

WILDER. *(To RONNIE:)* Here, let me shake Ronnie's hand, too. You'll be going off to college before too long yourself. And I never shook hands with a college girl!

BEA. We're gonna miss you, Allen.

ALLEN. Mom, I'm working for Uncle Teddy, remember? I'll be here all summer.

RONNIE. *(Surprised; elated:)* You're staying for summer?

(ALLEN nods.)

WILDER. This what they call a red-letter day. You got you a job and you got into school on your birthday! I always knew you were lucky.

(RONNIE bursts into her cheerleading dance.)

RONNIE. V-I-C, V-I-C-T-O-R-Y!

(ALLEN begins to dance with her.)

ALLEN / RONNIE. V-I-C, V-I-C-T-O-R-Y! V-I-C, V-I-C-T-O-R-Y!

ALLEN. Go Hurricanes!

RONNIE. Happy birthday, Allen!

WILDER. When's the cake coming out?

BEA. That's right! We should be getting back outside...

(While the rest of the family has been celebrating, JOEL has been looking over the admissions packet. He has his eyeglasses on, and his smile has been replaced with a furrowed brow. The rest of the family begins to leave, until...)

JOEL. Allen...

ALLEN. Yeah, Pop.

JOEL. *(Holding a letter:)* What's this summer program they're talking about? Why are they talking about minorities and "economically disadvantaged"? You got these letters and pamphlets in here... And they're talking about "promoting equality of opportunity for minorities..." What is this?

(There is silence.)

ALLEN. It means I get a chance to really excel. It means I won't be ignored, Pop. Just like you said.

JOEL. Does that mean they're gonna be watching you the whole time you're there? Counseling you? 'Cause that doesn't sound like a chance to excel to me. Sounds to me like an excuse to fail.

BEA. Joel, we'll talk about this later on. Help me bring out the cake, now.

WILDER. Yeah, my sweet tooth's acting up.

JOEL. (*To BEA:*) Go get your goddamn cake! I'm asking my son here what the hell is this nonsense I'm reading!

ALLEN. It's not a bad thing, Pop. Stanford's a good school. They've got great resources and professors and...I mean, nobody's exactly slacking off up there.

RONNIE. And it's not even that far away, Daddy. If he goes there, he could take the train down for Thanksgiving...

JOEL. The other night, you were standing there telling me about all the pressure you have on you, and how you can't get anybody to trust you. How do you think *this* is gonna make 'em think of you?

ALLEN. This is legitimate. It's going to give me a shot! That's what you wanted, isn't it? (*Beat.*) It was all right for you to fight for special consideration for me to get into an honors class. Why shouldn't I get special consideration to get into college? That's how it's done, isn't it? Isn't that how you'd do it?

JOEL. I never fought for you to be judged in any special way. This *isn't* how we get by. Doesn't anybody have to lower their standards for us!

ALLEN. I'm not lowering anybody's standards. It's my choice. (*Beat.*) I'm doing it for you.

BEA. It's Stanford, Joel. We have a son who got into Stanford. That's doing real well.

JOEL. That's nothing! (*To ALLEN:*) You got it backwards, son. A program like this'll make people look down on you. People who would've respected you will despise you. 'Cause they won't just think you're keeping somebody better out, they'll think you're bringing down the level of the whole place. You don't need a program. They'll program you to death if you let 'em. And when you get out in the world, everywhere you go—your job, your parties, your PTA meetings—that program'll go right along with you. Folks'll just keep on treating you like you're on a program. Like you didn't earn what you have. And they'll go on hating you for having it.

RONNIE. It's Allen's birthday. Why are you guys fighting? Today's Allen's birthday!

BEA. Let's be quiet... We have to get back to the party...

ALLEN. *(To BEA:)* I can't win. Nothing I do is right with him.

JOEL. There's got to be a better reason to be black.

ALLEN. What am I supposed to do? Turn 'em down? Turn them all down?

JOEL. *(Quietly:)* You're supposed to earn this envelope!

ALLEN. I won't turn them down, Pop.

JOEL. Well, you better do something, 'cause I'm not paying for anybody on a program.

ALLEN. What?

BEA. Wait, Joel! If he needs that money, we ought to—

JOEL. He'll earn his way in, or he can pay his own way.

ALLEN. Pop, I've earned it! My God, after all these years, I've at least earned your support, haven't I?! You promised! I was counting on that money.

JOEL. So was I.

ALLEN. What're you going to do, just keep it buried in your mattress?

JOEL. Don't you worry about what I do with my money—

(LISETTE appears in the doorway. RONNIE gasps audibly and touches her mother's arm.)

RONNIE. Mom...

(Everyone in the room falls silent. The festive sounds of the party filter through the air. LISETTE is wearing a slightly ill-fitting dress that she might also wear to church. She still wears her old sandals. She is holding a small gift-wrapped package. For the Porters, looking at her is like looking at a ghost. ALLEN comes to her.)

LISETTE. *(Nervous:)* They told me you were in the house. *(Beat.)* I'm late. Sorry.

ALLEN. *(Nervous:)* Um. Come in. I'm glad you made it.

(She remains in the doorway.)

LISETTE. I would've waited outside, but I can't even stay that long.

ALLEN. Come in. *(Escorting her into the room)* You remember everybody?

LISETTE. *(Feeble:)* Hi.

ALLEN. *(To everyone:)* Lisette's living in Echo Park, now. She has her own place.

WILDER. My, my. It has been a long time. Georgia Grant got a girl old enough to live by herself. Mm. Where your mama move to?

LISETTE. I haven't seen her too much lately.

WILDER. Oh...

(There is a very strained silence. Then...)

BEA. *(Equally strained:)* Do you want a paper hat, Lisette?

LISETTE. No, thanks. I'm gonna go pretty soon.

WILDER. You just got here. We just about to bring out the cake...

LISETTE. Oh. I was afraid I was gonna miss everything.

WILDER. No, we still waiting on the cake.

RONNIE. You look really pretty, Lisette.

LISETTE. So do you.

RONNIE. I like your dress.

(This comment makes LISETTE more self-conscious, almost ashamed. She folds her arms over her body.)

BEA. *(Still strained:)* You wanna help us sing "Happy Birthday" to Allen before you go?

ALLEN. You're not going to leave right away, are you?

LISETTE. I should. I just stopped by to give this to you...

(She gives ALLEN the gift.)

ALLEN. Aw, Lisette. You didn't have to get anything.

LISETTE. *(To no one in particular:)* It's nothing much. Y'all've always been so nice to me. I wanted to let you know how much I appreciate it.

ALLEN. Thanks.

LISETTE. You can open it.

ALLEN. Maybe we should wait so everybody else can—

BEA. Open it, Allen.

(ALLEN unwraps the gift. It is a small, painted ceramic apple tree. It is rough to the touch, not extraordinarily well crafted, but simple and appealing.)

LISETTE. It's an apple tree. My father made it for me when I was little. He told me it didn't need water, but it'll always have fruit on it.

ALLEN. Lisette, I... Do you really want to give this away?

LISETTE. It's nothing. Just something to put on your shelf.

ALLEN. Thank you, Lisette. I like this.

LISETTE. You do?

(ALLEN awkwardly embraces LISETTE. This is a difficult moment for everyone in the room. The embrace ends. A pause.)

RONNIE. Did Allen tell you who has a crush on him?

ALLEN. Ronnie, not now.

RONNIE. Belinda French on the drill team. Do you know her, Lisette?

LISETTE. No.

RONNIE. She hangs out in the popular crowd. She's a senior.

ALLEN. Ronnie...

RONNIE. *(To BEA:)* Everybody says Allen and Belinda would be perfect together, Mom. I tried to get her to come to the party, but she had to visit her grandmother in the hospital—

ALLEN. Ronnie, shut up.

BEA. Allen, don't talk like that.

ALLEN. She's always bothering me about Belinda.

RONNIE. I wasn't even talking to you.

BEA. Hush, both of you. We have a guest in our house. And she's in a hurry.

ALLEN. *(To LISETTE:)* You can stay for a little while, can't you?

LISETTE. I felt a little bit sick this morning. I wasn't gon' come at all, but I felt like...I oughta just drop by, at least. 'Cause it was nice for you to ask me.

ALLEN. Stay a while. Have something to eat. *(Beat.)* We can talk.

LISETTE. Um...

RONNIE. *(To LISETTE:)* Do you remember Lewis' old room?

LISETTE. It looks different.

ALLEN. Mom...

RONNIE. Allen fixed it up with all Lewis' trophies and awards and stuff.

LISETTE. It's nice. It's—

RONNIE. There's a lot of trophies, huh? I bet you didn't know he had so many, did you?

LISETTE. I've never seen 'em all together like that.

RONNIE. And look. There's his picture. See?

(LISETTE catches sight of the portrait of Lewis on the wall. She is completely still as a wave of memory and emotion moves through her. She does her best to remain composed.)

RONNIE. So he can always keep an eye on everything. It's his room, after all.

LISETTE. It's real nice in here...

RONNIE. We call this the trophy room, now.

LISETTE. Oh...

RONNIE. *(To ALLEN; re: the ceramic tree.)* Can I see that, Allen?

(ALLEN hesitates then carefully gives the tree to RONNIE.)

RONNIE. Oh, it's heavier than it looks.

ALLEN. Be careful with it.

RONNIE. I am.

ALLEN. *(To LISETTE:)* Are you going to stay?

LISETTE. Well—

(JOEL loudly slaps the admissions material down on the table.)

JOEL. If the girl's in a hurry, let her go, Allen.

ALLEN. *(Direct and calm:)* Isn't there anything I can do without you jumping on my back about it? Can't I even celebrate my birthday the way I want to?

JOEL. The way you wanna do things is whatever's convenient for you right now. But before you know it, you'll be finding out the hard way there wasn't nothing convenient about it.

BEA. Be quiet, Joel. Let's go sing "Happy Birthday" ...

JOEL. *(To ALLEN; picking up the admissions packet:)* This program isn't convenient. Dropping out of a class isn't convenient. *(Pointing to LISETTE:)* She isn't convenient.

ALLEN. How could anything in my life possibly be convenient when you make everything so difficult?

LISETTE. Mr. Porter, I wanna make my peace with y'all.

JOEL. I'm not gonna stand here and listen to a criminal in my own house!

LISETTE. What...?

ALLEN. For God's sake, Pop. Leave her alone!

JOEL. She should've left us alone.

ALLEN. Aw, what good is it? What's the use fighting with you? I'm trying to make you happy. That's all I'm ever trying to do, and all you can do is cut me down! Just like you tried to do to Lewis!

JOEL. Don't use Lewis on me!

ALLEN. But he wouldn't let you.

JOEL. You can't do that. You can't use that name!

ALLEN. He is your son, whether you choose to remember or not!

JOEL. I remember everything! *(Pause; more composed:)* He wasn't a hero like you think.

BEA. *(Warning:)* Joel!

JOEL. At first, it was all right. He was coming up fine. He had his goals, and he worked hard at 'em. But he was growing up and getting to be restless. He started taking up with Lisette. I told him not to mess around with her. I could tell she wasn't any good. But he wouldn't listen. 'Til one day her mother came to the lot while I was working. She had tears running all down her face. And she was beating on my chest, telling me how my son wrecked her family and he should've known better. And he should've... Lisette was gonna have your brother's baby. She wasn't but sixteen years old. Georgia told Lisette she didn't haven't any use for a girl like that. She told her to pack her bags and go find somewhere else to live.

BEA. That's enough, Joel. Stop it...

(Everyone is visibly shaken. LISETTE's face has grown stony. There is a very brief pause before JOEL continues. His speech takes on a new tone; the sober, reflective tone of a man trying to figure out where and when things went wrong.)

JOEL. Lewis got home late the night Georgia came to the lot, but I was waiting for him. I took him out to the back and we had a talk.

And you know what he said to me? He said, “You were right, Pop. She wasn’t any good for me. *You were right.*”

ALLEN. *(To JOEL:)* Wait... Don’t...

JOEL. I was never the kind of father to hit his children. But that was something— I couldn’t let that go. We had goals, me and him. I didn’t want him straying anymore. So I took off my belt and... Ten times I hit him. And he gritted his teeth, but that didn’t keep him from crying. But he was crying like a whisper. Couldn’t hardly hear him... He was pleading with me not to tell the family. He didn’t want his brother and sister to know what he’d done. I told him I wasn’t gonna say anything to you, but he was gonna have to do some things for me. He had to get his concentration back. He was gonna have to take some more classes. Get ready for college. He was gonna put more hours in at his job, so he could take care of a family. Didn’t matter, though. Lisette disappeared and had her baby somewhere else. He never saw her again. And he was glad. A year or so later she started trying to call him up on the phone. I asked her about that baby. My grandchild. It wasn’t even born alive. *(Long pause.)* But after that night in the backyard... I lost him. He was going all out of control and I couldn’t stop him...

WILDER. *(Sotto voce:)* Won’t that boy ever die...?

RONNIE. *(A quiet gasp:)* Oh, God...

ALLEN. *(Slowly, carefully:)* How dare you.

JOEL. It’s all the truth.

ALLEN. You spend a year pretending that Lewis was never born, and when you finally choose to acknowledge his existence, this is what you remember?

JOEL. I won’t stand by and listen to you giving him glory he didn’t have. Yeah, he had possibilities. But he lost his way.

ALLEN. You mean he lost your way.

JOEL. He found himself a grave! *(Pointing to LISETTE:)* And that criminal showed him the way...

(LISETTE, stone-faced, approaches JOEL with some trepidation.)

LISETTE. Don't call me the criminal...unless you're gonna call me the victim, too.

JOEL. Nobody's gonna feel sorry for you.

LISETTE. Don't call me the criminal, unless you're ready to give the criminal some justice.

JOEL. Oh, listen to you. Sound just like the man the police beat up. Trying to whip everybody up into a heat, so doesn't anybody notice they're making a hero out of a hoodlum!

LISETTE. That's right, Mr. Porter. The criminals want some justice.

JOEL. Don't look for it in my house.

LISETTE. I have to eat somehow. I have to live somewhere. I lost my job, Mr. Porter...

JOEL. That's your own fault.

LISETTE. I didn't expect it to turn out like this. I can't find my family. I ran out of friends a long time ago. *(Beat.)* And I have to steal.

ALLEN. *(To LISETTE:)* He won't listen. You don't have to tell him this.

LISETTE. Yes, I do. See, the criminals want some justice. *(Beat.)* I stole a blanket from the Goodwill store. I got my hand broken trying to steal food. I fought people in the street to stop 'em from looking at me funny. I'm a criminal, Mr. Porter. And I'm tired of being punished.

JOEL. You chose this road. I hope it makes you good and tired.

LISETTE. I'm so tired of being punished. By you. And Lewis. Lewis is still punishing me. He's still...hurting me...

BEA. Lisette, I think you better go.

ALLEN. *(To LISETTE:)* Are you...okay?

LISETTE. I'm not. I'm not. They're lies, Allen. Lewis is punishing me with lies.

ALLEN. What're you talking about?

BEA. She must be sick or something. I'll take her to lie down.

LISETTE. I'm not sick.

RONNIE. What's wrong?

LISETTE. I'm tired of being punished...for being in love with him.

JOEL. You don't know what love is. You wouldn't be getting in so much trouble if you did.

ALLEN. Leave her alone...

LISETTE. I loved Lewis! I trusted him. *(Beat.)* I loved him so much, when I found out I was gon' be a mother, I wasn't even scared. I was happy. I was smiling and singing to myself. I wasn't worried at all. I went in my bedroom and locked the door. And I sat up in front of the mirror and took off my blouse. Took off my skirt. And I stared at myself, looking for the spot where I was gonna get big. I rubbed my hand over it. And over it. And over it. 'Til I thought I could feel my little baby in there... *(Beat.)* I wasn't gon' tell my mama about it. I was just gonna leave and not get her mad. But I wanted Lewis to come with me. I thought we were in love enough to be a family, so I asked him to come with me. *(A pause.)* But he didn't want the baby. He wanted me to give it up. "I wanna live a little more life, Lisette." I told him how happy the baby made me, but he didn't want anything to do with it. 'Cause he wanted to "live a little more life." So I told my mama. I told her I was in trouble... And she told me to leave...

BEA. Be quiet! We don't want to hear your stories...

LISETTE. Let me finish. Let me tell y'all the truth. I moved in with my cousin down in Riverside. But she didn't want anybody knowing about me. She said I was bringing shame under her roof. I didn't see anybody. I didn't go anywhere. I didn't do anything. I was just waiting. I was sitting in front of the mirror, watching myself get big. 'Til pretty soon I couldn't watch anymore. After a while, I would just sit down with a blanket and cover myself up so my cousin couldn't see it and I didn't have to look at it. She said as soon as the baby came, I was gon' have to go. But I didn't wait that long. *(Beat.)* I came back to L.A. I might've disappeared, Mr. Porter. But I came back. And Lewis did see me again. He saw me when I

was as big as I ever got. I found him smoking a cigarette in the parking lot next to that restaurant he used to work at. I thought with the baby almost here, it'd be different. I wasn't smiling or singing anymore. I was scared to death. I didn't know what he was gonna do. *(Beat.)* When he saw me, he had a look on his face like he didn't remember me. I said, "Why're you looking at me like that, Lewis? This is your baby, too." Then he reached down and felt where the baby was, and he told me...he still loved me. He told me it made him sad that I was gone so long. And he wanted to take care of me.

BEA. Stop it. I told you not to come back here. Stop making up stories! Joel...

LISETTE. I'm gonna finish.

JOEL. *(After a beat; looking at ALLEN:)* Let her say what she's got to say.

BEA. She has to leave! *(Faintly to LISETTE:)* You promised...

LISETTE. *(Overlapping:)* I'm gonna finish.

(As LISETTE continues, her face relaxes, and then works itself into a mask of sorrow. ALLEN listens motionless.)

I'm gonna finish 'cause I can't have him holding on to me like he does and making me love him and making me pay for it. I'm gonna finish. *(Beat.)* Lewis got me a motel room to stay in a little ways out of the city. And he came to see me in it every day. I was in that room when I started to feel the baby getting ready to be born. I called Lewis at his job and he came running over. We didn't know what to do. We didn't have a doctor. And he told me not to call the ambulance. But the pain... There was so much...pain. And he kept wiping my face. And kissing it. Trying to keep me from making too much noise. And I felt like my skin was stretching tight all over me. *(Pause.)* And then I heard her crying. My baby. And Lewis was holding her. Up like this— Away from him, like he didn't know what to do with her. He was shaking. I said, "Let me hold her." But he just held onto her. "Lewis, baby, let me hold her..." Then he asked me if I love him. I said yes. He said he wanted to be with me forever. I said so do I. He said, "We can't keep this baby." I said I

didn't know what he was talking about. And he was shaking so much, I was afraid he was gon' drop her. "We can't keep this baby." I said, "Yes, we can, Lewis. We can be a family." But he said he couldn't do it, and he kept asking me if I loved him. And I kept saying "Yes" and I was reaching up for my baby. He said, "Do you love this baby more than you love me?" I said no. "Do you want this baby. Or do you want me?" *(Pause.)* I said I wanted him. *(Pause.)* And he put the baby down on the bed next to my legs. And he laid down over her little body, right next to mine. And he hugged me around the waist. He said, "We'll be together forever." And I couldn't hear her crying anymore. I couldn't hear her...

BEA. Stop her... Oh, Lord! It's lies. She's telling lies, Joel. She's telling her stories!

(WILDER holds and tries to comfort BEA.)

WILDER. *(Very softly:)* Come on, Bea...

ALLEN. Jesus... My God...

LISETTE. He took her away somewhere... And I don't know where my little girl is buried. She doesn't have a name. And her mama never held her.

RONNIE. Daddy, make her stop!

LISETTE. I'm gonna finish. I'm gonna finish. *(Beat.)* I started working. Doing everything for myself. And I used to see Lewis just for a little while every night before he went home. He didn't want y'all to know he was still with me. That he still loved me. And I still loved him. *(Beat.)* But one day, he stopped coming to see me. He didn't say anything. He just stopped. And I would try to call him. But even if I got him on the phone, he wouldn't say anything. I wanted him to tell me what was wrong. So I came over here, looking for him. And I found Mrs. Porter. *(To JOEL; pointing to BEA:)* You told her what Lewis and my mama told you. But I told her the truth... And she said, "Lewis never wants to see you again." And I believed her. *(Beat.)* 'Til Allen showed me those letters yesterday.

BEA. Lewis wouldn't have done such a thing! He must've been trying to help her somehow. She's twisting it all around...

JOEL. (*Very sober:*) The boy was lost, Bea. He wasn't trying to help nobody but himself...

BEA. No! She's been twisting it all around for years so she can bully us...

JOEL. Huh?

BEA. I paid her money, Joel. So she wouldn't go around spreading those lies!

JOEL. What money?

BEA. I took some from the bedroom...

JOEL. You gave her my money?

BEA. I had to.

ALLEN. (*Incredulous; overlapping BEA:*) I. Don't. Believe—

BEA. Joel, Lewis came to me and told me he was seeing her again. He was scared—

LISETTE. He was scared somebody was gonna ask about the baby. People did. We were always scared somebody was gon' figure it out.

BEA. (*To LISETTE:*) He was scared you were gonna make trouble for him. He didn't know what kind of trouble it was gonna be, but he was scared... He came to me...for protection...

JOEL. Why didn't you say something to me?

BEA. He came to me for protection, Joel... I didn't want him hurt...by *anybody*. I made him stop seeing her, Joel. I told him I wouldn't let anything bad happen to him. Then he said he was going away. Going to the military. When she came over here with her stories, I was glad he joined up. But I still had to protect him, Joel. Wasn't anything else I could do. I had to protect all of us.

JOEL. (*Incensed:*) Protect him? (*Beat.*) Lewis was hiding, Bea! He ran away!

BEA. No, he didn't, Joel. She just wants our money. That's why she's saying those things—

JOEL. Lewis was a coward!

BEA. She wants our money...

LISETTE. No more, Mrs. Porter.

BEA. She's lying through her teeth! *(To LISETTE:)* You're lying, you greedy— I'm not afraid of you!

(BEA moves toward LISETTE, but WILDER holds her back.)

WILDER. All right, now. All right. Come on. *(To others:)* Y'all got to let that boy rest in peace...

(WILDER escorts BEA out of the room.)

RONNIE. *(To LISETTE:)* What're you doing here? Why are you doing this? *(To JOEL:)* Daddy, why did you let her...

(RONNIE exits going after her mother.)

ALLEN. I can't believe what I'm hearing...

JOEL. There isn't any choice, son.

LISETTE. *(Sotto voce; great relief:)* The truth... At last...

ALLEN. That wasn't my brother. I knew him... How can you two stand there and...do this to him?!

JOEL. Put him out of your head...

ALLEN. ...Say these things about him... And walk all over his memory like that. I *knew* him. And I know he loved you both! And now...

JOEL. Think about the future, Allen. We got a future, too...

ALLEN. ...you're betraying his love... Both of you... Because you don't have the strength to believe in it...

JOEL. Allen!

ALLEN. You betray everything that was good about him... Jesus...

(ALLEN exits.)

JOEL. Allen! Son! You come back in here! You hear me talking to you? Allen! Come back! Goddammit! I am your father! Come back!

(JOEL and LISETTE face each other. There is utter silence as the music from the party outside has stopped. LISETTE slowly turns and walks out of the room. Someone begins tapping at the window. JOEL ignores it. He picks up the admissions packet. Slowly, he puts the folder back in the envelope and looks at the address. He finds the box of matches BEA left with the candles and other decorations. He lights a match and sets the envelope on fire. He watches it burn as the tapping at the window grows more insistent. The lights fade on the trophy room.)

ACT II

Scene 2

(The lights come up on the backyard. It is the night of the party. It is dark out, but the gardens are illuminated by a full moon. The guests have gone, and debris and decorations still lie throughout the yard. The flower garden is partially trampled and wilting. JOEL is alone in the middle of the vegetable garden, digging a large hole in the ground. He has removed his jacket and tie, but is otherwise dressed as before. His clothes, however, are heavily soiled. On the ground beside him are the trophies and medals from the trophy room. His digging is feverish, and his voice breathless.)

JOEL. I warned you... I warned you again and again. I told you every choice you make comes with consequences! This is the price you paid! *(Beat.)* You forgot you had a family! You forgot about us! You dragged us all onto that battlefield! Out there pretending to be a hero. You ain't a hero. You're just a runny-nose little brat! No respect for me! For your mother! For yourself! Just a brat...! Scared. Lazy... Look how you ended up— Look— Just look...what you did to yourself...! Look what you did to your family!

(JOEL pauses, unwelcome emotions overwhelming him. He wipes his face and begins to throw the trophies into the hole.)

You think these trophies make you a hero? They make you nothing... You're working on Allen, now. I see that! You're trying to do it again! But I'm not gonna let you... You're not gonna touch him... I've been through this before with you. But that was the last time. You are not gonna do this again!

(He begins to refill the hole with dirt, covering the trophies. His face is becoming stained with tears, which reflect the moonlight and fall into the dirt.)

Not gonna do that to this family twice. If you can forget about us, we can forget about you!

(Hastily, he finishes interring the trophies and wipes sweat and tears from his face. WILDER steps out of the house onto the porch. JOEL struggles to pull himself together.)

WILDER. Joel. You out here?

JOEL. Yeah... What you want?

WILDER. I took Bea and Ronnie over to my mama's.

JOEL. Mm.

WILDER. Ronnie's missing her game tonight.

JOEL. Where's Allen?

WILDER. I don't know. I asked him if he wanted to come with us. He said he just wanted to walk.

JOEL. Allen was supposed to take me to talk to his tutor tonight.

WILDER. Joel... You in no kinda shape to talk to anybody. You ought to take a walk, too. Cool down some. Maybe if y'all took it easy a little more, wouldn't be so much hollering and carrying on around here. *(Silence.)* I told my mama 'bout all the fighting going on today. She said that didn't surprise her. She said she saw it coming last Christmas, ticking like a time bomb 'cause you and Allen're wound up all the time. Like you about to pop any second. *(Beat.)* What you doing out there?

JOEL. I'm digging up these plants. I'm gonna put some grass out here. We're gonna have us some nice green grass to lay on.

WILDER. That all right with Bea? That garden's her pride and joy.

JOEL. We don't need to be growing these vegetables anymore. The wholesaler gives me all I need. And Bea's gonna go out and get herself a job. She won't have time to raise vegetables.

WILDER. But her garden...

JOEL. I want a lawn. I wanna put out some of them iron chairs. Maybe a table, too. All painted white. And green grass underneath. When Bea sees how nice and pretty it looks, I bet she asks me why I didn't do it sooner. There's gonna be some changes around here.

WILDER. Oh, yeah?

JOEL. We're gonna move out of Lewis' old room. We're gonna let you have that.

WILDER. What you wanna do that for?

JOEL. We don't need that room. We don't do anything with it. Besides, you got that big stereo now and don't hardly have any space for it upstairs. You could put it downstairs and have some room to enjoy it.

WILDER. That's your room, Joel. I ain't gonna take that away from you.

JOEL. I'm talking about space. You've got a cramped space up there. You need to spread out.

WILDER. (*Serious; almost solemn:*) Joel. What's Allen gonna say about that?

JOEL. Doesn't matter what he says. Me and Bea knew this was gonna happen someday. We knew someday wouldn't be anymore kids in the house. Just a lotta empty rooms.

WILDER. You know how much that room means to Allen. I don't wanna do nothing to hurt that boy. I like him.

JOEL. (*Emotions swelling again:*) You think I don't like him?! He's my son! My only son...

WILDER. I didn't never have any kids. I knew early on that wasn't in the cards for me. But I always kinda looked at Lewis, Allen, and Ronnie like my own. You know? I feel like I raised 'em, too.

JOEL. So?

WILDER. So don't mess with *my* son!

JOEL. He's only got one father, Wilder. And that's me. And I got to do what I think is best for him.

WILDER. That mean I got to do what I think's the worst thing for him? Hell, you can't make me use a room I don't wanna use.

JOEL. It ain't the worst thing for him. The worst thing's living a life and being closer to the end than the beginning and realizing you didn't get what you wanted out of it... Now it would be a shame if I let that happen to my children, too. Wouldn't it?

WILDER. Listen, Joel. I ain't saying you're not trying to—

JOEL. No, you listen. When there were five of us, we needed a lot of space 'cause the family was growing. Well, we lost Lewis. And if Allen isn't going to school this year, he's going next year. That'll leave three of us. We don't need that kind of space anymore. We got too much of it! You get too much space, you get ghosts rattling through, waking you up when you dream, interrupting you when you're thinking, trying to come back to life. There's too much room down here for us, now! *(Pause; with deep sadness:)* Take that room, Wilder. Just take that room and fill it up with something.

(There is a pause as WILDER studies JOEL as best he can in the moonlight.)

WILDER. Well... I guess I could use the room. My mama can stay in there when she visits. Won't have to climb them stairs no more. *(Beat.)* I'll set the stereo up in there. Y'all can use it whenever you feel like it. And I'll knock a hundred dollars off the rent. That's only fair.

JOEL. Thank you, Wilder.

(Another pause.)

WILDER. I think this yard'd look nice with grass. It'll be hard getting used to. But after fifteen years of looking at a vegetable patch, it might be nice to change. I guess every now and then you just got to start over. Make everything fresh again. Like now. Seems like now we starting over from scratch.

JOEL. We are. We're starting from scratch.

(JOEL takes the shovel and digs a cabbage plant out of the ground. WILDER looks on as JOEL continues to dig up vegetables. The lights fade on the backyard.)

ACT II**Scene 3**

(The trophy room. It is still later on the night of the party. ALLEN enters with an empty duffel bag. He flips the light switch. The light comes on abruptly revealing the room. The trophies, plaques, and other awards are gone. The shelves look naked and insignificant without them. On the floor in a corner sit the components of Wilder's new stereo. They have not yet been placed and hooked up in the room. ALLEN stands facing the empty shelves for a moment. His breathing is almost audible. He moves to the doorway and calls out.)

ALLEN. Pop! Pop! POP! DADDY!

(There is a significant stretch of time before JOEL appears in the doorway. He has cleaned himself up and now wears a robe over his pajamas.)

ALLEN. Where are they?

JOEL. This room ain't ours anymore.

ALLEN. Where are the trophies?

JOEL. They're gone, Allen. We're moving out of this room.

ALLEN. You can't do this.

JOEL. Go get some sleep.

ALLEN. They're not yours.

JOEL. We're not gonna turn this house into a museum. Once you start with Teddy's office, you'll be too busy to look after it right.

ALLEN. What did you do with them? I want them back.

JOEL. You still think he was so special?

ALLEN. You didn't have to say those things today. You didn't have to do that...

JOEL. I didn't do nothing. *You* called up those ghosts. Don't blame me for that. You brought 'em back...

ALLEN. I want to remember...

JOEL. If you're gonna remember, you're gonna remember the whole thing.

ALLEN. Do *you* remember the whole thing? Do you remember that he loved you? (*Silence.*) The trophies...

JOEL. If he loved me...then why couldn't I guide him?

ALLEN. He knew where he was going.

JOEL. Then why is he dead?

ALLEN. I want the trophies.

JOEL. You didn't even know who he was.

ALLEN. He was my brother...

JOEL. That's not enough.

ALLEN. It's enough, Pop.

(*A pause.*)

JOEL. Don't be calling up those ghosts, Allen. 'Cause when you call 'em up, maybe they won't be pretty like you want. Maybe they'll be ugly. Whatever they look like, you got to deal with the whole thing.

ALLEN. It doesn't matter anymore. The whole thing doesn't matter.

JOEL. Yes, it does. When it starts to hold you back, it matters. You got a whole world out there that'll be glad to do that for you. You don't need to be holding yourself back.

ALLEN. (*Exhausted:*) Nobody's...

JOEL. It just don't make sense. I don't understand anybody who does that to himself. When he's able to do so much...

ALLEN. Open your eyes! Lewis didn't hold back.

JOEL. This family's had to fight for everything we have. But it was always a fair fight, and we earned what we got out of it. That's how people measure you up. By what you earn. Doesn't matter who you are. You think Lewis was special? What did he earn? What did he fight for?

ALLEN. Open your eyes...

JOEL. Now they got special programs to keep us from fighting. Special programs to keep the special programs going. That's why white folks think we *need* special programs. And that's why black folks think they're special. 'Cause of people like Lewis. (*Biting, sardonic:*) He just needs a program. That'll straighten him out. (*Beat.*) Give him a program to make that baby come back to life.

ALLEN. Why are you saying those things?

JOEL. 'Cause you need to hear 'em. He's dirty. What he did was dirty.

(There is a long pause.)

ALLEN. Did you love him, Pop? (*Beat.*) Or were you holding yourself back?

JOEL. I did everything I could for him... Just like I'm doing for you. (*Beat.*) Now, Monday morning we're gonna straighten all this out. Gonna start with a clean slate. I'll call up to Stanford and talk to 'em and—

ALLEN. I'm leaving, Pop.

JOEL. What?

ALLEN. I can't stay here. I'm moving out.

JOEL. To where? You got to be in Teddy's office this summer...

ALLEN. No. I'm not going to work for Uncle Teddy. And I'm not going to Stanford.

JOEL. (*His voice catching:*) What?

ALLEN. I did it all for you, and you just take everything for granted. (*Beat.*) It's not your fault, in the end. I'm the one who applied. I asked Uncle Teddy for the job. But I've always let you take me by the hand and lead me wherever you want me to go. I can't live like that anymore.

JOEL. Don't...make a mistake, son...

ALLEN. It's not a mistake.

JOEL. Don't...*do it...*

ALLEN. Just tell me where they are. Pop? Please...

JOEL. (*Faint.*) A father's got to know what's best...

ALLEN. I'm trying to figure out what to make of everything I've heard today. What hurts the most, I guess, is that, whatever Lewis was going through, he didn't feel like he could come to anybody in this family with it. But I have to believe in his love. I have to believe that that's why he suffered alone. Because he loved us so much. (*Beat.*) You want to know what I think—no—what I know Lewis fought for? He fought for our love. If nothing else, he fought to have our unconditional love. He loved us. And guess what? We didn't even have to earn it. (*Beat.*) The funny thing is: I feel his love for you, Pop. And it makes me love you, too.

JOEL. Don't you tell me that, and then go running out of here! Don't tell me you love me!

ALLEN. Where are they? (*Silence.*) Please, Pop... Just one trophy. To take with me. (*Silence.*) Let me take something with me. God, Pop, please! Please! Something... (*Long pause.*) For God's sake...! I believe...in his love. For God's sake... Just one!

(JOEL *stares at ALLEN as the lights fade.*)

ACT II**Scene 4**

(The lights come up on the backyard. Predawn of the next day. The moon has drifted away, leaving the yard fairly dark. There is a light on in the former trophy room. The light spills out of the window onto the porch, where ALLEN sits astride a large suitcase. Beside him, a backpack leans against the house. His face looks extremely weary, and he slouches. A light clicks on in the hallway. ALLEN stands reflexively, tense. The door opens and RONNIE comes out in a robe. ALLEN relaxes. RONNIE looks at the suitcase a moment before speaking.)

RONNIE. What're you doing?

ALLEN. Waiting for the sun to come up.

RONNIE. Oh. *(Pause.)* Can I wait, too?

ALLEN. I don't care.

(RONNIE goes to the edge of the porch, staring into the darkness.)

RONNIE. It got dark out. The moon was so big before. I could see everything in my bedroom, it was so bright.

ALLEN. What're you doing up?

RONNIE. I heard you walking around.

ALLEN. Oh. Sorry.

RONNIE. Daddy was crying.

ALLEN. Huh?

RONNIE. In Mom and Daddy's room. I heard Mom trying to make him stop.

ALLEN. I didn't hear anything.

RONNIE. He went on for hours. I never heard him cry before. Have you?

ALLEN. No.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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