

PIPELINE

A play

By Dominique Morisseau

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CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

- NYA - Black woman, mid-late 30's. Single mother. Public H.S. Teacher. Trying to raise her teenage son on her own with much difficulty. A good teacher inspiring her students in a stressed environment. A struggling parent doing her damndest. Strong but burning out. Smoker. Sometimes drinker. Holding together by a thread.
- OMARI - Black man, late teens. Smart and astute. Rage without release. Tender and honest at his core. Something profoundly sensitive amidst the anger. Wrestling with his identity between private school education and being from a so-called urban community. Nya's son.
- JASMINE - Black or Latina woman, late teens. Sensitive and tough. A sharp bite, a soft smile. Profoundly aware of herself and her environment. Attends upstate private school but from a so-called urban environment. In touch with the poetry of her own language.
- XAVIER - Black man, mid-late 30's. Single father - struggling to connect to his own son. Marketing exec. Wounded relationship with his ex-wife. Financially stable. Emotionally impoverished. Nya's ex-husband. Omari's father.
- LAURIE - White woman, 50's. Pistol of a woman. Teaches in Public High School and can hold her own against the tough students and the stressed environment. Doesn't bite her tongue. A don't-fuck-with-me chick.
- DUN - Black man, early-mid 30's. Public High School security guard. Fit and optimistic. Charismatic with women. Genuine and thoughtful and trying to be a gentleman in a stressed environment. It's not easy.

Note About The Setting:

Not necessarily NYC, but definitely modeled after it. Can be any inner city environment where the public school system is under duress. However, the quick pace of the language is NY-inspired and should be maintained in any setting. Present Day.

Also, we have Undefined Space. This is a place where location doesn't matter. It is sometimes an alternate reality bleeding into reality. It is sometimes just isolated reality that doesn't require a setting. Only words.

This play is for my mother, a master-educator and proud public school teacher for 40 years in Highland Park, MI.

This isn't her story. It's just a similar world in which she was a fiercely committed educator, and worked very hard to help her students transcend. I salute you, Mama.

Love, Dominique😊

1.

Lights up on NYA. She is on the phone, though we don't have to really see her holding anything. She is living the call.

As she speaks, images flow behind her. Camera-phone video clips of school fights. Disjointed and perhaps emerging less into video and more into large overwhelming shadows.

NYA

Hey it's.... it's me. I know I shouldn't.... but I don't know what else to.... we need to talk. It's about our son. He got in a fight. On school grounds. They're going to... ... they're talking about.... they're talking kicking him out. They're talking pressing charges. They're going to... ... I don't know what they're going to... ... I'm just... *(beat beat beat)* I'm exhausted. You know that? Like there is no more helium. I'm sinking. Like there is all this... weight... I can't fight gravity. You know? Like I just can't even fight this pulling down...taking all of my --- --- --- I don't know. I don't know. I don't even know. *(beat beat beat beat beat)*

(Then randomly enthusiastic:)

So anyway! Give me a call back when you get a moment. So we can talk. Talk about. Your son. Our son. Us....

...

...

(Long awkward pause)

Yep. Ok. Bye.

(quick pause)

I um... I also miss you.

(beat)

Fuck. I shouldn't have said that. I'm gonna... I should delete that. I'm gonna delete that.

She pushes a button. We hear the prompt that says *"To erase and re-record, press 3"*. She presses 3.

Then, very professionally:

Hey Xavier, it's Nya. Calling to talk to you about our son. Give me a call back when you get this. Thanks. Bye"

Nya stands in silence for a moment. Then lights a cigarette. She leans her head to the side.

Puffs. We hear a school bell ring.

The distant sound of a school day starting. Hallways filled with lockers closing and gossip and trampling feet.

A PA Announcement comes through. It is fast and static.

PA
(o.s.)

Good morning students, welcome to another glorious day at Chadsey High. Please remember to take off your hats. No sagging allowed. New policy in effect today – homeroom teachers are now going to lock your cell phones and other non-school-issued devices in their drawers. You will retrieve them at the end of the day. If you have any objections to this, then you are free to leave your devices at home. If you are caught with any non-approved electronic device in class, this is an automatic suspension. No exceptions. I repeat (loudly) NO EXCEPTIONS! Please do not have your mamas coming up here demanding to get your smartphones back. We have the city government behind us. You cannot win. I repeat (loudly) YOU CANNOT WIN! Also, there is a pep rally today after school. Be sure to attend and show your school pride. And finally, have a glorious day students. (loudly) A GLORIOUS DAY!

Nya puts her cigarette out on her shoe. Waves the smoke out the window. Then she moves toward a door and opens it.

NYA

Morning class. Pull out your pens. Pop quiz today.

Groans and sucking teeth are heard. The shadows become harsh florescent lights. They bleach us into blindness.

2.

A girl's dormitory. Bedroom.

JASMINE and OMARI.

JASMINE

Tell me you wasn't lookin' at her.

OMARI

I wasn't lookin' at her.

JASMINE

Oughta cut her face.

OMARI

I wasn't lookin' at her.

JASMINE

Thinkin' she's so cute.

OMARI

I wasn't lookin' at her.

JASMINE

She ain't that cute.

OMARI

I was kinda lookin' at her.

JASMINE

What?

OMARI

Just like a little bit.

JASMINE

What's a little bit?

OMARI

Like modestly. With no intention. Just observing.

JASMINE

What you got to be observing for?

OMARI

To take in my surroundings. Learn the world. Not be just tied up in my own existence and nothin' else.

JASMINE

Everything's more important to you than me.

OMARI

You important to me.

JASMINE

Not hardly. You just biding your time. Til' you figure out what to do next. Ain't that it?

OMARI

Why would you say that?

JASMINE

Cuz I don't like to talk at nothin'. I like to say exactly what's what.

OMARI

You wanna know what's what?

JASMINE

Yeah. I wanna know.

OMARI

I don't know where I'm gonna be two days from now. Or two hours. And I can't be pretending we in some fairy tale fantasy where all I need to do is chill with you in a castle with our horses or whatever.

JASMINE

Horses?

OMARI

Or whatever. I 'ono. Whatever they got in castles. Truth is I got too many worries and bein' with you don't make 'em go nowhere. You feel me?

JASMINE

You sayin' I'm addin' to your stress level?

OMARI

I'm sayin' I got stresses. Real ones. And hiding out in your dorm ain't 'doin nothin' but prolonging the inevitable.

JASMINE

This some wack version of a breakup?

OMARI

It's just me bein' honest.

JASMINE

Well fuck your honesty. Seriously Omari, you gonna make my heart explode with all yo' back and forthness. One minute you tellin' me I'm the cure. Next minute, I'm the cause. Maybe you your own stress problem and I ain't got nothin' to do with it.

OMARI

Maybe I am.

JASMINE

(Pssshhh) Fuck you.

OMARI

Maybe I'm confused.

JASMINE

That's the realest shit you ever said.

He tugs at her needfully.

OMARI

Yo, this could be our last time.-

She snatches away.

JASMINE

You kiddin' me right now?

OMARI

I'm just seeking intimacy.

JASMINE

You seeking to get socked in the eye. I don't turn on and off like no stove.

OMARI

You mean a faucet.

JASMINE

I mean a stove. One minute you got me hot. Next minute fire's out. Quit gassin' me up and killing my fucking spark.

OMARI

Can't nothing kill your spark. You always gon' be fire.

JASMINE

And you always gon' be crazy.

Beat.

OMARI

(truth)

I'm scared.

Jasmine looks at him and wants to say something. Then decides against it. She just looks at him with concern.

JASMINE

Why you fight him O?

OMARI

Why you say you gonna cut Keely's face?

JASMINE

She thinks she's cute.

OMARI

So you wanna mess that up?

JASMINE

Maybe it would make things balanced.

OMARI

Like what?

JASMINE

Like she wear on the outside what I feel on the inside.

OMARI

That's messed up.

JASMINE

So I'm messed up. (beat) Your moms knows?

OMARI

She probably already planning her speech. Threatening to send me to my pops. But Dude wouldn't go for that in a million years.

JASMINE

You ain't supposed to even be here right now. If anybody finds us-

OMARI

Where else can we meet? They won't let me talk to you anywhere on the campus. Supposed to be packing my stuff to go home. Ain't like I could visit you back at your folks' crib. They won't let me nowhere near you.

JASMINE

Teen pregnancy stats got 'em spooked. They have no idea who or what I am.

OMARI

I know what you are.

JASMINE

You don't even know yourself. How you know me?

OMARI

I know you.

JASMINE

What you know?

OMARI

You're a metamorphic rock.

JASMINE

Here you go.

OMARI

What?

JASMINE

Science references from Mr. Peterson's class ain't gonna save you from my wrath.

OMARI

Not trying to get saved. Just makin' an observation.

JASMINE

Explain.

OMARI

Metamorphic rocks. They change in form. Made from heat and pressure. That's what makes 'em so rare and interesting.

JASMINE
And that's me?

OMARI
That's you.

Jasmine considers this.

JASMINE (cont'd)
I think I'm in love with you.

OMARI
I think I'm leaving.

JASMINE
Where you goin'?

OMARI
Somewhere else. I got some money saved. Child support stash from the ol' man.
Shit adds up when you don't spend it.

JASMINE
You gonna just run from your problems?

OMARI
What else I'm gonna do? Stay and let 'em take away my life? My future?

JASMINE
Maybe not.

OMARI
They recorded it.

JASMINE
So threaten anybody who put it up.

OMARI
I'll never be able to trace it. If it goes viral, I'm a wrap. And it's gonna go viral.

JASMINE
Fuck it then. You'll be a celebrity.

OMARI
I'll be public enemy number one.

JASMINE

You won't.

OMARI

I'll be a monster.

JASMINE

You'll be that motherfucker nobody'll fuck with.

OMARI

That ain't the legacy I was trying to leave.

JASMINE

What legacy you gonna leave now? Runnin' away?

OMARI

I just gotta go Jasmine.

Pause.

They look at each other.

Jasmine's eyes well up.

JASMINE

I know what you are.

OMARI

What am I?

JASMINE

A lunar eclipse.

OMARI

How's that?

JASMINE

Rare and hiding in the shadows of the earth. Always ready for an escape.

OMARI

Mr. Peterson's science class is the best.

JASMINE

Don't leave.

OMARI

I think I gotta.

JASMINE

I can't survive this prep shit without you.

OMARI

You can survive anything.

JASMINE

Don't leave.

OMARI

Can I kiss you one last time?

JASMINE

Make it last forever.

He kisses her. It lasts an eternity.

3.

Teachers Lounge. Afternoon.

LAURIE enters. Goes to refrigerator.
Pulls out her container. Puts it in
microwave. Sits and waits.

Nya enters and goes to the fridge. Pulls
out a salad.

LAURIE

Fucking fifth period.

NYA

You turn in your reports?

LAURIE

Not yet. Humphries is on my ass. English Department head or not - I told him to
give me a damn break I only just had my face reconstructed. Asshole.

NYA

You look good Laurie. I can't even tell.

LAURIE

My husband can. And my daughter. I freak her out, she says. Everything freaks her
out that isn't painted with at least a gazillion ounces of mascara. Or liters. Or
however the fuck you measure mascara. She's fucking obsessed with it, that's all I
know. I mean, what the hell happened to teenage hood? I remember dyeing my hair
orange and piercing my nose to rage against the status quo. That was a sort of
cause, y'know? But now, it's just all mascara and fashion and next top supermodel
housewife of bla bla bla ---- what the hell are we doing, you know? Are they growing
down?

NYA

Probably.

LAURIE

And the substitute was an idiot. I asked my kids what'd they do while I was gone.
Three weeks while I was gone. You know nobody could give me a straight answer?
Then Alejandro finally cracks. Watched The Wire, Season Four - he tells me.

NYA

The Wire?

LAURIE

Said the sub was trying to show them what not to do. You fucking kidding me?

NYA

Which sub was this?

LAURIE

The cute young blonde straight outta Teacher's College. Patricia or Patrice or some shit. What the hell are they teaching them over there? The last sub they sent me showed 'em Dangerous Minds. Do they really believe public school is Michelle Pfifer and Hillary Swank and corny fucking music and close ups? I'm a white chick who has never had the luxury of winning over a class full of Black and Latino kids. This is war. Got my fucking face cut by the family of a failing student. Fuck them and their lies and the substitutes that show them these dumb ass godforsaken setting us back 300 educational years bullshit flicks. TEACH you assholes! I left you lesson plans for fuck's sake!

NYA

They should've gotten you Smith. She's a substitute teacher from the gods. When I was gone that week for Omari's pneumonia, I came back and my kids had already moved onto the next chapter of Invisible Man. Had their papers graded and everything. Impressive.

LAURIE

An enigma in this place.

NYA

You gonna retire or what?

LAURIE

Fuck them and their retirement. They're not gonna force my hand. Try to move me from 9th grade, to 10th grade, to 12th. I'll outlast 'em all – bastards.

NYA

You're a pistol, woman.

LAURIE

I'm a goddamn machine gun.

They pause. Eat for a second.

LAURIE

How's your son?

NYA

Troubled. Next question.

LAURIE

You figured out what you're gonna do about-

NYA

No. I haven't figured out a thing. I'm slipping off the edge of the earth and there is no answer in the dark dark universe.

LAURIE

The world isn't flat Nya.

NYA

Mine is Laurie. It's flat and coming to a quick and fast end. And I can't stop it.

LAURIE

You can. Just got to grab it by the balls and turn it around. That son of yours needs a swift kick in the ass.

NYA

That's not what he needs.

LAURIE

I remember when parents would give permission for you to spank their kids in class. You old enough to remember that?

NYA

We teach teenagers.

LAURIE

Especially the teenagers.

NYA

I don't think I remember that.

LAURIE

That was the best. I'm telling you. I had this one kid, Louie Gaspacho. I remember him real good. You know how some of 'em stay with you for a lifetime. He had kind of a schizophrenia thing going on. Undiagnosed, but I knew. They should let us prescribe the drugs instead of these bogus doctors. I know these kids inside and out. I knew Louie. Another kid I think Ritalin ruined. But his folks listened to that sorry excuse of a counselor, Ms. Esselman- who would recommend a drug to Jesus if she couldn't get him to sit still for five minutes. Never figured maybe it was her tactics and not the kid- but whatever. His folks would never get him tested for his mental health. Couldn't afford the medical bills. Half these damn kids are suffering

from mental illness. That's what the real problem is. A classroom can't fix that shit. And neither can Ritalin. But what do they know? Nothing, that's what. I know what these kids need, but who listens to me? Anyway- what the hell was I talking about?

NYA

Louie Gaspacho?

LAURIE

Exactly. He could be a terror if he was really having a day. So one time he threw a book at me. Nearly knocked out the smart little West Indian girl that sat right in front of him-

NYA

Ummm, maybe you shouldn't call her /that

LAURIE

I grabbed his little scrawny ass in the middle of class and gave him three licks to his backside. Never a book thrown again. That kid got almost straight A's that year. They don't give me my credit for that because he got institutionalized a couple years later and pulled out of school, so it's like he never existed. But I had him functioning high- you know? A good old ass whipping can teach a lot.

NYA

That's not O's problem, Laurie.

LAURIE

I wasn't saying that. I just---

NYA

It's too many things. It's me. I'm the source and I know it and I just can't talk about this anymore if I'm going to get through the rest of the day, okay? Gotta drive upstate to pick him up after work and I'll finish stressing then.

LAURIE

Don't panic honey. We're all a bunch of screw ups trying to figure out our mess. You'll figure it out.

NYA

Screw ups?

LAURIE

Figure of speech. Don't take that literal. It's not literal.

NYA

Right.

The door to the Lounge swings open.
DUN enters.

DUN

Ladies, what it do?

LAURIE

What it do back to ya, you sexy bastard.

DUN

You trying to get me in trouble on school grounds again, Laurie?

LAURIE

Just a little flirtation between a young, hot security guard and a very agile old teacher. Harmless.

DUN

Face lookin' good girl. Got you all brand new.

LAURIE

They can't keep a white chick down.

DUN

Glad to have you back. (shift. Looks at Nya with concern) Afternoon Nya.

NYA
(dryly)

Hey Dun.

DUN

How you doin' today?

NYA

Survivin'. Like everyday.

DUN

Good for you.

NYA

Yep.

Dun goes to the freezer. Pulls out a frozen meal and sticks it in the microwave.

Nya sits at a table and pulls out a stack of papers. She begins to sort through and check.

DUN

Careful in the lot today after work. They been jackin' cars again.

LAURIE

Still haven't deterred those bastards?

DUN

Not yet. Principal Colden says we're working on getting more surveillance.

LAURIE

What the hells the point of the security cameras they put in if it's not going to scare off these hoodlums?

DUN

I'm gonna be stationed out there from 12-3pm. Don't worry. I won't let 'em lay a hand on your Benz baby.

LAURIE

Fuck you funny man. My shit Oldsmobile hasn't failed me yet. Like having an ugly faithful husband. Nobody wants him but me and that's good for us.

DUN

Nothin' wrong with your car baby. Got character. Just like you.

Laurie stands up and discards her lunch scraps.

LAURIE

Well that's enough socializing for me. I've got to get my room in tact 'fore the next set of hooligans comes in.

DUN

You need me to come up there for any reason, you know how to buzz me. I got you on priority.

LAURIE

Don't worry about me. Take care of these young gals who don't know shit about how to fend for themselves. Me? I'm an old dame. A little reconstructive surgery and I'm back in the game.

DUN

Got it mama.

Laurie walks to the door. Takes a strange and revealing inhale.

LAURIE

This is my den, you know? This is always my den.

She exits into the hallway.

Dun looks at Nya, who has been buried in papers.

He eats silently. She ignores him. Then finally.

DUN

You been alright?

Nya looks up, faking surprise.

NYA

You talking to me?

DUN

Nobody else here.

NYA

You don't need to do this.

DUN

What's that?

NYA

Make small talk. Check on me. Pretend to give a damn. Really. I've got lots on my mind and lots to do and I don't need to fill the space. I'm cool with the emptiness.

DUN

Guess you are.

NYA

What?

DUN

Nothin'.

Pause. Nya tries to go back to her papers.
She's too distracted.

NYA

You got a smoke?

DUN

Can't do that in here.

NYA

I'm going to take it outside.

DUN

Don't wanna have to bust you.

NYA

You being funny?

DUN

Will it make you smile?

NYA

I'm out of smiles for today.

DUN

That's too bad. What's left for your students?

NYA

Gwendolyn Brooks.

DUN

The poet.

NYA

You know her?

DUN

You think I spend all day guarding a school and some of the knowledge don't rub off on me?

NYA

Lots of folk spend all day in a school and don't learn didley. It's very possible.

DUN

True dat. But I'm not one of 'em.

NYA
Well that's good.

DUN
So you alright?

NYA
Why do you keep asking me that???

DUN
I want to hear an answer that makes me satisfied.

NYA
I'm not here to satisfy you.

DUN
Didn't say you were.

NYA
Then let it go.

DUN
I never hear from you anymore.

NYA
Don't do this here.

DUN
That never happens to me.

NYA
First time for everything.

DUN
I do something you don't like? You can just tell me. Don't gotta do the cold shoulder.

NYA
This isn't a cold shoulder.

DUN
What is it then?

NYA
Sanity. Coming back to senses. Professionalism. Intelligence. Appropriate behavior. That's what this is.

DUN

You gonna play by the books on me?

NYA

I'm not playing anything. Jesus. I can't do this right now.

DUN

Alright. Don't do anything.

NYA

Okay.

Dun eats. Nya heads to the door.

NYA

Got ten minutes before my next class. You sure you don't have a smoke? I really need it. Today. I need it today.

Dun reaches in his pocket and tosses her a pack. She takes out a cig and places the pack on the table.

NYA

Thanks.

DUN

That's something we do well together ain't it?

NYA

What's that?

DUN

Vices.

NYA

I don't.... I guess...maybe...

Nya takes an inhale that is revealing, and then exits in the hallway.

Dun stays in the room. Eats an apple. And sighs.

4.

Nya in Class. On the board: the lyrics to the Gwendolyn Brooks poem "We Real Cool".

Omari in Undefined Space – he and Nya are not visible to each other but are somehow strangely connected. As he embodies the words of the poem, they are magically/profoundly written on Nya's chalkboard.

NYA

Class, today we're going to look at one of my favorite poems by Gwendolyn Brooks. "*We Real Cool. The Pool Players- Seven at the Golden Shovel.*"

OMARI

We real cool.

NYA

I want you to look at this poem in both versions that I'm sharing with you. Notice it's layout.

OMARI

We left school.

NYA

These are from two publishers. One - Harper Collins, a known White American company. The other - Broadside Press, one of the first major publishers of Black revolutionary writers.

OMARI

We lurk late.

NYA

Revolutionary. (to student) Come on Tiffany, you know what that means. Think about it. Yes, change. Thank you for the assist Tomika.

OMARI

We strike straight.

NYA

In the Harper Collins version, the layout is pretty common. Large title. Words at the beginning of each stanza are capitalized. There is almost an attempt to erase the idea that the piece is written in "broken English".

OMARI

We sing sin.

NYA

But in the Broadside Press version, the font looks like graffiti writing, not what we normally see in our textbooks. (to student) That's right, DeShawn. Because graffiti writing reps the hood. I would agree that it doesn't get the same respect.

OMARI

We thin gin.

NYA

So why do you think this independent Black press decided to lay out the poem in this broken graffiti style? What do you think they're saying about structure and rules? What do you think they're saying about the education of the young men in this poem?

OMARI

We jazz june.

NYA

The pool players in this poem are teenagers. And what if I told you it was the middle of the day on a schoolday? What are they doing in a poolhall on a schoolday?

OMARI

(as if getting stuck)

We di---- di----- di-----

NYA

Ms. Brooks is talking about something here. She is saying they are skipping school. Hanging around bars and thinning gin. Jazzing June. (to student) Yes, June is a girl's name Darnell. So "Jazzing June" means what? (a response) Okay, Paul I think you can find a better phrase, but "laying that pimp game" will do for now.

OMARI

We real cool.

NYA

Some people might look at the Broadside Press version and think it's invalid because it doesn't follow the rules of English grammatical structure.

OMARI

We left school.

NYA

It looks like street writing.

OMARI

We lurk late.

NYA

But sometimes, rules are meant to be broken.

OMARI

We strike straight.

NYA

Sometimes the street has valuable lessons too.

OMARI

We sing sin.

NYA

Ms. Brooks has her own rules.

OMARI

We thin gin.

NYA

She breaks up the “We’s” on each line because she wants us to pause.

OMARI

We... .. jazz june.

NYA

She wants us to think about that “We” before the next line.

OMARI

We... .. di--- di---- di----

NYA

Each “We” questions their existence and worth.

OMARI

We... .. di--- di--- di---

NYA

Because who are they? At pool halls. Skipping school. Drinking. Having sex. Hanging late. What will they become???

	OMARI	
<i>We</i>		
	NYA	
Gwendolyn Brooks gives us the answer in her last line.		
	OMARI	
<i>We</i>		
	NYA	
A line that haunts us all.		
	OMARI	
<i>We</i>		
	NYA	
A line that will be their epithet.		
	OMARI	
<i>We</i>		
	OMARI/NYA	
<i>We die soon.</i>		
		Pause. Nya hears herself. And possibly Omari. It is disturbing.
	NYA (to Omari)	
What?		
	OMARI	
I said – <i>We die soon.</i>		
		Uncomfortable moment. Nya looks around herself. A little hot.
	NYA	
I... um....		
		Nya looks at Omari. But also through him. It isn't literal, but his presence has definitely intercepted this lesson.
		Nya looks back out at the audience. At her class.

NYA

I, um.... I seem to have forgotten... can't find my place in my....

...

...

Nya stops. Looks out into the class again.

A small and audible gasp. A little admission of failure.

Stillness.

NYA

No, I'm fine Shawna. Thank you, I--- I think that's enough of that for the day, so...

....

....

I'm sorry. I've got to step out for a sec but... you can work silently, okay? Work on your own response to this poem. I'm going to step out. Please, don't get out of your seats. Darnell. Paul. I'm serious. Thank you.

Nya immediately walks out of the class. A light sharply disappears on Omari and the classroom and reveals Nya outside of the door.

She slumps down and begins to weep uncontrollably. Suppressing the sound of her own cry. Clinging to her composure.

A moment.

Dun appears up the hallway. He notices her and rushes over.

DUN

Yo, hey hey you alright?

Nya immediately stands erect and straightens her clothes.

NYA

Shit. Yes. I'm fine.

DUN

You sure?

NYA

No. Yes. I'm perfectly---

DUN

Cuz if one of those little suckas is in there causing problems, you know you just gotta hit me up, right?

NYA

I'm fine. I can handle my son just fine. I don't need your help.

DUN

Your son???

NYA

My what? I said my students. Why are you---

DUN

Cuz you just....

NYA

I have work to do.

DUN

You... okay?

NYA

I'm goddamn amazing.

Nya disappears into the classroom. An abyss of darkness. Dun stands after her. Questioning...

5.

Jasmine at a dorm. She paints her nails.
Puts makeup on. Packs a bag of clothes.
An earpiece in her ear.

JASMINE

Our school is fuckin' fucked. Bitches can't never mind their own damn business. Gossip whores at every level. It's like- private school for what? For who? Ain't nothin' you do here private! My parents are stupid crazy paying all this money to keep me away from all the kids in my neighborhood cuz they're so damn spooked I'll get pregnant or shot or some shit if I go to Public, but I'm like – they must not've ever been in the staircase here at freakin' Fernbrook cuz for reals... it's all types of teen fuckery going on and these rich bitches are the nastiest – straight up. It's like they privilege bought them some extra freak or somethin', or maybe they ain't never known what it's like to be desperate so they rather figure that out through sex or whatever. It's tragic. And I cannot keep myself in this wasteland of talent. Stuck up girls in my dorm acting like I'm gonna steal their fabric softener or grab their granny panties out the laundry cuz I don't have my own or whatever. Like are you serious? Bitch I may not have your money, but I have BOTH my mother and father at home workin' their asses off at two jobs just to have me study up here with the rest of you cuz they think your privilege will rub off on me by association or some shit. Or maybe they believe in the false God of this freakin' Fernbrook Academy that somehow it produces better people and I keep trying to explain to them that someone like me would actually survive better in an environment in which I am COMFORTABLE instead of being the token poor girl of color that everyone thinks is trying to sleep with their pussy ass boyfriend or take their goddamn cocaine or crystal meth or whatever, meanwhile the worst shit my friends from the block are smokin' is weed. If it wasn't for Mr. Peterson's science class and Omari, I would slit my wrists. That's why I'm goin' after O. He's not leaving me here to rot with these bougie brainwashed brats. I'm followin' my man. You gonna read about this in one of them urban romance novels. It's called ghetto love.

A knock on the door.

JASMINE

Yo, I got company- lemme call you back. I got more bitchin' to do. That was only half.

She hangs up the phone. Goes to the door.

Fuck. It's Nya. She looks distressed.

Jasmine.

NYA

Hi... ..

JASMINE

Can we talk?

NYA

Ok... ..

JASMINE

Jasmine steps aside. Nya enters.

I came up to get Omari.

NYA

I figured that.

JASMINE

NYA

He was supposed to be here. With his things. Meet him downstairs. But he's not here. Not in his room. Nowhere.

JASMINE

Really?

NYA

You know where he might be?

JASMINE

Sorry Ms. Joseph. I don't know.

NYA

Are you sure?

JASMINE

I'm sure.

NYA

Did you see him at all today?

JASMINE

Earlier. I... I saw him earlier.

NYA

And did he seem—upset? Was he himself or...

JASMINE

I know what happened. I mean, I wasn't there. Didn't see him actually put his hands on... .. But I was informed. I was in class at the time. He was having a bad day, I think.

NYA

A bad day?

JASMINE

Sometimes somebody mess with you on the wrong day... it's like THEY don't know it's your last straw. But they ain't seen how many times you been sucked of everything you got. They go pickin' at you like lent, and be lookin' surprised when you knock 'em flat the hell out.

NYA

Jasmine.

JASMINE

Yes.

NYA

He's my only son. You know?

JASMINE

I know.

NYA

I don't... I'm not here to hurt him. I'm here because I love him and I want to help make things alright. You understand that?

JASMINE

'Course I do.

NYA

So I need your help.

JASMINE

Miss I don't know.

NYA

Ok. I hear that. It's just ... you're the one he talks to the most. Did you know that?

JASMINE

Am I?

NYA

Absolutely. The most. And if anybody... if he would tell anyone his plans... more than anyone in the world. It'd be...

JASMINE

Me?

NYA

Exactly.

JASMINE
(almost proudly)

Wow. That's real.

NYA

Jasmine, I don't want to make a big deal of this to the school right now. He was supposed to get his things and be waiting for me downstairs. This is our normal routine. His counselor left him to go and pack his bags. And now, no Omari. If I ask the school, they're going to sound the alarm. Make more of a problem. And then whatever trouble Omari is in, he'll be faced with more. You understand?

JASMINE

God, Miss Joseph. They are unreasonable.

NYA

Ok. What does that mean?

JASMINE

He's not a criminal.

NYA

I know that, Jasmine. I don't think he's a criminal either. I just want to know where he is.

JASMINE

Sometimes people push you too far. Make you feel like an animal from another jungle. Like you don't belong even when you're here. Cuz they got expectations that you of the wild. So you become the expectation. But it ain't born in you, know what I'm sayin'. It ain't what you want to be. It's what you become. That's the crazy of Fernbrook.

NYA

Jasmine.

JASMINE
He's my heart, Miss J. I love him.

NYA
Then tell me where he went.

JASMINE
I ain't no snitch.

NYA
Snitch?

JASMINE
I still come from what I come from. This place don't change that.

NYA
Jasmine, you know where he went.

JASMINE
Not exactly anyway.

NYA
What...what does that even... what does that mean?

JASMINE
I got ideas. If I'm in his head right. But I don't know nothin' for sure.

NYA
Give me some ideas.

JASMINE
I can't do that. Don't ask me. Please Miss. I'm not his betrayer.

NYA
His betrayer?!?

Nya breathes. Composes herself.

NYA
I'm... trying here Jasmine. To be calm. I'm trying not to unravel. Unleash.

JASMINE
I don't wanna see you unleash.

NYA

I know you think you're being... This isn't an act of loyalty. Not for real. In your head, maybe. But not in reality. In reality, you're sentencing him to... .. I need to find him.

JASMINE

You look real stressed Miss.

NYA

I'm very stressed. He's my son.

JASMINE

I understand. I know what it feels like to love him hard. Believe me.

NYA

Do you.

JASMINE

I mean his unpredictability is manic. It's excruciating sometimes. Like nails going straight through the heart muscle. But inside you know he's like an infant needing some kinda nurture. And there's a sweetness to him that make you wanna give it. Make you wanna give up everything to hold him tight.

NYA

Jasmine, this is not helping.

JASMINE

Did you ever like me Miss?

NYA

What?

JASMINE

When I'd come over. You hardly ever really...it's like you was polite but not nice. I know the difference.

NYA

I don't see what this has to do with—

JASMINE

I'm not trying to grill you or nothin'. I was always just curious. Like if I did something wrong I didn't know about. Sat in your favorite chair once or drank the last of some juice I didn't know was near empty. Like if it was some action of mine or just my presence alone. I would understand either way. I just always wondered.

NYA

Jasmine, I don't dislike you.

JASMINE

Yeah, but you don't like me either, right? I mean, "*I don't dislike you*"... that's like passive aggressive sorta. It's not committing to loving or hating. It's almost worse. Like indifferent.

NYA

I... don't know you well enough to... It's hard to like someone you don't know beyond a few hellos.

JASMINE

Someone smart and cute – most days.

NYA

Still someone you don't really know.

JASMINE

Someone with a heart so big the sky couldn't hold it.

NYA

Someone I'm sure is great in her own way.

JASMINE

Someone definitely great in every way.

NYA

Okay, sure.

JASMINE

But someone also dating your son.

NYA

My only son.

JASMINE

Exactly. Like the way you just said that. That was kinda like... I mean that was almost a threat.

NYA

A--- --- what do you mean?

JASMINE

Like, and excuse my language please – but it was like – Yeah, bitch, that's my only son and you trying to take him from me or whatever.

NYA

...
...
...

JASMINE

I said excuse my language please. I hope you heard that part.

NYA

I heard that part.

JASMINE

Ok.

Pause.

NYA

Jasmine, do you have any brothers or sisters?

JASMINE

This like a bonding question? Or an interrogation question?

NYA

Whatever kind comes with answer.

JASMINE

I'm only child. Like O. We connect that way.

NYA

I see.

JASMINE

But I have one older cousin and one younger. Both boys. They like brothers to me sometimes.

NYA

You ever know what it's like to care for them? As a woman? Worrying about what can happen to them when they leave out into the world everyday?

JASMINE

Um... they just my cousins, so...

NYA

It's a gamble, Jasmine. All the time. You send your young man out into the world everyday, or away for a weekend. A semester. A schoolyear. But you don't know... you have no idea if they're safe. You have no idea if one day someone will try to

NYA (cont'd)

expire them because they are too young. Or too Black. Or too threatening. Or too loud. Or too uninformed. Or too angry. Or too quiet. Or too everyday. Or too cool. Or too uncomposed. Or too mysterious. Or just too TOO. You don't know, Jasmine. And it's frightening. It leaves a tremble in your heart on a daily. And if someone could ease that tremble by unveiling just a little piece of the puzzle.... It would mean everything. You know what I'm-- --- You get me?

JASMINE

Men are a puzzle, straight up. I get you.

NYA

I know you want to protect Omari. I know you care about him deeply.

JASMINE

So deep I got indigestion over him.

NYA

But keeping his whereabouts a secret. That is not helping him. You hear me? Not even a little bit.

JASMINE

What you gonna do if you know? Go follow him? Convince him not to do something he set his mind to? You really think that's possible?

NYA

I wouldn't be worth my salt as a mother if I didn't.

JASMINE

Miss Joseph, I know you think maybe I'm not good enough for your son. My parents think nobody's good enough for me. I get it. Nobody's good enough for nobody. But me and Omari, we got something real and even if you think I'm worthless, I'm still gonna love him.

NYA

I don't think you're worth-

JASMINE

Nah, you do. You don't want to, but you do. I can smell when I don't make sense to somebody. I make you afraid. Just like O makes my parents afraid. It's like you send us here to become these different people. You want us to have so much and you want to protect us from ourselves. You love us and we know that. But you hate us too. You hate us having a mind of our own. You hate that we can't be exactly what you imagined in your head. And that scares you. That we don't belong to you. That someone can come along and we might love them more than we love you. You hate us for that. We can feel it inside and it will make us leave and never come back.

A moment.

Nya moves closer to Jasmine. Almost threateningly close.

NYA
(a chilling tone)

Where. Is. My. Son.

JASMINE

...
...
...

Jasmine and Nya have both nearly stopped breathing. They stare into each other.

JASMINE

...
...
...

NYA
(threateningly)

Jasmine.

JASMINE

Maybe the train station.

...
...

Or the bus.

NYA

To go where.

JASMINE

Didn't say. But he said it was goodbye.

NYA

Someone come to pick him up?

JASMINE

Caught a ride with Brian. He told the Counselor he was coming up to pack his clothes. They let him go and he...

...

...

Snuck out with Brian.

Nya gasps.

Another audible failure.

JASMINE (cont'd)

I tried to convince him not to go. To stick out his fate like a man. But he... didn't want to be a burden no more. To you.

Nya's breathing accelerates.

NYA

Why would he--- --- ---

JASMINE

They videoed him Miss. It's gonna go viral. Somebody already sent me a text.

NYA

Jesus.

JASMINE

He thought he'd bring so much shame. He thought he'd ruin you.

NYA

And he didn't mention a place? I need to know now. I need to know.

JASMINE

I'm telling you everything I know. Betrayal all day.

NYA

Think for a minute. I need to know before I leave. I need to know if he mentioned any other place.

JASMINE

I told you what I know for sure.

Nya eyes Jasmine's bags of clothes.
Registers them for the first time.

NYA

You planning to go home early for the weekend?

JASMINE

Hunh? Um...

...

...

NYA

Jasmine. Do not bullshit me. You planning to meet him somewhere?

JASMINE

I was plannin' on... searching.

NYA

Searching where?

JASMINE

The train station. The buses. I swear that's it. I don't have nothin' else. He kept sayin' he had to do this on his own. Had money from his father. Child support stash. Said he would be okay.

NYA

Has he called or text you?

JASMINE

No. I wish, but no.

Nya walks close to Jasmine again.

NYA

Listen to me. Listen. If he calls, texts, gets online, or does anything to reach you, you call me immediately. You understand me?

JASMINE

He won't miss. You're cut out and so am I.

NYA

Just do what I say.

Nya storms out.

6.

Nya's living room. Darkness except for one lamp.

Nya smokes a cigarette. Pours herself a drink. She is sleepless.

Donny Hathaway plays on some speakers. Nya sips and smokes, interchangeably.

The door rattles. She sits erect. It takes a minute to open. Finally it does.

In walks Omari.

NYA

...
...
...

OMARI

I'm back, Ma.

NYA

...
...

I see.

OMARI

I um...

...
...

NYA

Where've you been?

OMARI

With some friends.

NYA

Friends.

OMARI

Was tryin' to catch a bus over to Philly.

NYA

Philly? What were you gonna... Philly???

OMARI

My boy Rashad. Got a small crib there. From when his father passed. Said he had a couch... ..

NYA

So that's the plan, hunh? Run off and not face any of this. Leave me here to deal with the mess. That's the plan?

OMARI

It was somethin'. Don't know 'bout a plan.

NYA

Well what happened? Plan go awry?

OMARI

Naw I just...

...

...

Omari fights the urge to cry.

I don't know, Ma. I just came back.

NYA

I see.

A moment of silence.

OMARI

You been smokin'.

NYA

You've been fighting.

OMARI

I—

...

...

You wanna hear? Or you even care.

NYA

Don't do that Omari.

OMARI

Do what?

NYA

Ask if I care. Put this on me. Deflect. That is not going to float right now.

OMARI

I'm not trying to deflect, Ma. I'm askin' if you care to hear or if you prefer not to hear cuz maybe the details won't make it better right now.

NYA

I always care.

OMARI

I'm not saying you don't.

NYA

Then yes. Tell me the gory details. I want to know what devil got into your hands and made you attack your teacher.

OMARI

You don't understand, Ma.

NYA

Make me.

OMARI

I wanna start by sayin' I'm not justifying. There is no way to--- I'm not justifying. But everything I say now is just the how. You know? The how and why. But not the excuse. I'm not making none of those no more. I'm done.

NYA

So give me the how.

OMARI

I couldn't see straight. That's what I know for sure. It's like I went blind for a second. No insight and no outer. I was just trying to get through the week.

NYA

What blinded you Omari?

OMARI

He kept questioning me. In class.

NYA

Questioning you how?

OMARI

Didn't feel like being bothered. I said that to him, Ma. I told him I wasn't in the mood for being questioned.

NYA

Omari he's your teacher. He has the right—

OMARI

Nah... he don't. Not how he was doin' it. Been doing it a lot and I was sick of it. We get to discussing the reading. Native Son- Richard Wright. And he start asking questions. What made Bigger Thomas kill that woman? What were his social limitations? What made the animal in him explode? And who he lookin' at when he askin' all these questions, Ma. Who he lookin' at?

NYA

Omari.

OMARI

Like I'm the spokesperson. Like I'm Bigger Thomas. Like I'm pre-disposed or some shit to knowing what it's like to be an animal.

NYA

Omari watch your mouth.

OMARI

You hear me though? You hear what he doin'? He start picking me out. Askin' me to answer. What did I discover when reading the text.

NYA

He's your teacher. He's supposed to ask you about the text Omari!

OMARI

Nah, he ain't. He ain't just questionin' me about Native Son. He ain't just talkin' text. He sayin' somethin' else. Something beneath the question and it's like I'm the only one who can hear it.

NYA

That doesn't give you the right to lose your cool, Omari. That doesn't give you the right to be the animal.

OMARI

But it's all he seein'. Won't leave me alone. I said, Mr. don't pick on me today. I ain't got nothin' to offer. But he won't leave me alone.

NYA

A teacher is supposed to engage you. Even when you don't feel like it. That's the teacher's job. I've told you that repeatedly.

OMARI

We not talking a teacher doin' their job. We talkin' provoking. We talkin' agitating. We talkin' singling me out. You know that, Ma? On a day where.... Where I don't FEEL like being singled out. We talkin' respecting my space.

NYA

You're in SCHOOL. You're not in your personal space. You're in a collective space. A space to engage and be questioned and be stimulated and be provoked. That is education, Omari.

OMARI

I'm talkin' biased education, Ma. I'm talkin' disrespect. He knows. He knows he wasn't... .. he was sayin' somethin'. Asking me. In that room. In that way. In front of all those students. On THAT issue. He was sayin' somethin' directly to me. I know he was.

NYA

Even IF he was, even if.... what are you telling me? You telling me that makes you attack him? You're trying to draw some perpendicular line here? I'm not seeing where these things cross.

OMARI

I told him to back off.

NYA

You said that already.

OMARI

I told him, Ma. And he kept digging.

NYA

And then???

OMARI

And then he says, Mr. Joseph, your perspective is mandatory here. Tell the class your perspective, or take a zero for the day.

NYA

Still not seeing.

OMARI

You threaten my grades. You threaten to punish me in front of the class because I don't want to be your token responder. That's bullshit.

NYA

Did you also cuss like that? Or are you reserving that disrespect for me personally?

OMARI

I'm sorry. I'm just amped. Making a point.

NYA

You haven't made a point yet. You haven't given any indication for how your behavior was warranted. You haven't done anything but speak as if you're above reproach. And you're NOT.

OMARI

Forget it, Ma.

NYA

No, let's not forget it.

OMARI

No, LET'S. I knew you wouldn't... .. I knew this was futile.

NYA

This is your third strike Omari. The worst one. You put your hands on your teacher! You attacked your teacher.

OMARI

I pushed him! I didn't attack.

NYA

You think they care about your semantics?!

OMARI

I pushed him and he fell against the board.

NYA

You slammed your teacher against the board.

OMARI

Now THAT'S some semantics.

NYA

And it's been recorded by students. No one is going to see anything different. Do you understand that?

OMARI

I tried to get up and leave. He wouldn't let me leave. That's unreasonable. I told him I wasn't in the mood. I told him!

NYA

They don't care about your mood!

OMARI

Exactly! They don't care, Ma. They don't care what space and place I'm in. I know me. I know how to learn. I know when I'm good and when I'm not. And I said it. I'm not good. I said that.

NYA

Then you ask for permission to be excused. You say you need to speak to your counselor, immediately. You don't just walk out in the middle of a lesson as if you are some sort of King or God that no one can tame.

OMARI

Tame?

NYA

Damnit Omari.

OMARI

Tame.

NYA

Do not do that. Do not twist and remodel this convo and change the meaning.

OMARI

I'm not changing anything. I'm repeating. Verbatim.

Pause. Nya takes a breath.

NYA

So why are you here?

OMARI

Hunh?

NYA

What'd you come back here for? Had nowhere else to go?

OMARI

I just...

...

...

Ain't wanna leave that way.

NYA

So what is this? This is our goodbye? You coming to tell me goodbye?

OMARI

Ma...

NYA

You dropping out? Leaving school? A school your father and I vetted for you. A school that was supposed to-

OMARI

Give me all these opportunities. Make me a better man than I'd be if I just went to your school. If I just stayed here. In our neighborhood. (pause) Don't give me his speech, Ma. Those is his words, not yours.

NYA

Your father thought it'd be best-

OMARI

Better than staying with him. "Omari just ain't survivin' in this neighborhood. He's too smart and could be something, Nya. But not in this hood. Let's send him upstate and out of both of our hair." That's what my father thought. That's where his money is going.

NYA

Don't DO that. Don't speak for him or me or us. Don't interpret. You're lost in translation.

OMARI

I'm not lost.

NYA

You are. Shit. You are.

Beat. Omari walks over to his mother for the first time. He takes the cigarette out of her hands.

Gonna kill yourself with these.

OMARI

For a moment, Nya doesn't move. She allows her son to dictate the space. He cleans up her drink. Puts the lid on a half-finished bottle of wine.

You celebrating my disappearance?

OMARI

Omari-

NYA

Not funny. I know. But it's like... like a homegoing or somethin' up in here. I ain't die, Ma.

OMARI

A gasp. Nya exhales against her will. Talk of his death can do that to her. He notices.

Sorry.

OMARI

Pause.

We should, um... get food or somethin', right? I'm starved and... ..

...

...

I'll cook us some pasta.

Nya walks over to Omari. She grabs his face.

What did I do? Tell me.

NYA

Ma, don't do this.

OMARI

I need to know. If I hurt you... if I mis-stepped. If I forgot too much or didn't know enough...

NYA

OMARI

Ma, this ain't you.

NYA

I have tried... like religiously.... like an ongoing prayer... to protect you. I have tried to buffer you from it all. Tried to flee you and free you. Follow instructions from your father. From other mothers. From my own mother. From whomever. And I still don't... .. I don't have the answer.

OMARI
(shaky)

What you want me to say?

NYA

They could press charges.

OMARI

What you want me to say?

NYA

They could take you from me and I wouldn't be able to stop them.

OMARI

I don't know what you want me to say. I just... .. I don't know what.

NYA

I want instructions.

OMARI

...

NYA

I will take a bullet for you. I will suffocate the sun for you. I will steal the sky for you. I will blind Moses for you. I will strip the wind and the rain and the forests for you. Before I let you die or rot or lose your freedom, I will surrender my own. You know that? I would die if you could be born again without this oppressive rage. I just... I don't know what to do. I need you to tell me. Tell me how to save you. Tell me how to give you another life. Tell me what will take this failure away. Because I have listened to everyone else. I'm ready to listen to you. Guide me. Give me the answer. Just give it to me and I'll do it. I swear.

OMARI
(with heartbreak)

Ma...

...

...

I don't...

...

Omari falls silent.

Nya stares into his face. Touching him gently. It is too much for him. He pushes her away.

OMARI

I'm hungry. Gonna cook us somethin'. You gonna eat?

He walks toward the kitchen.

NYA

I'm going to sit here. And wait for instructions.

Omari turns away, and leaves.

Nya clings to sanity.

7.

Images of schoolday disruption. Kids walking through metal detectors. Teenagers smoking weed on the steps of school or somewhere nearby. Teen couples up against a wall kissing. In a stairwell getting intimate. Etc.

Omari's voice as the images run. He is in Undefined Space.

OMARI

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight....
We... We.... We... We...

Strike
Strike
Strike
Strike

Lights crossfade from Omari to Nya.

She is in a classroom, checking papers. It is lunch period. Over the PA system.

PA

Ms. Joseph, please call the main office. You have a visitor. Thank you.

Nya rises from her desk and goes to a wall phone. She dials and listens. The office.

NYA

Hey Hasselhoff, it's Joseph. Yes. He is? Really? (pause) Um, shit. Shoot. Yes, send him up. Thanks.

Nya takes a breath. She fixes her hair. Puts on some blush. Goes for a cigarette. Bad idea. Puts pack away and sprays freshener.

A knock at the classroom door.

Nya takes another revealing breath.

Okay. Now. Go.

NYA

Come in!

XAVIER enters. He is handsome and well groomed.

XAVIER

Hi Nya.

NYA

Hi Xavier.

XAVIER

Sorry to stop by during school hours. They said this was your free period. I didn't get your message until this morning. Lost my phone yesterday. Had a million clients to track down. Marketing accounts went crazy---

NYA

It's fine.

XAVIER

I just took a half day. Left the firm and came straight down here.

NYA

Ok.

XAVIER

Can we talk about what's going on?

NYA

Yeah. Sure. Okay.

XAVIER

He hit a teacher?

NYA

Pushed him. Into the smartboard.

XAVIER

Jesus. Why?

NYA

I'm not sure. He was upset. Said he was having a bad day.

XAVIER

A bad day?

NYA

Said he felt harassed by the teacher. More than the other students. He felt targeted and wasn't in the mood for any of it.

XAVIER

That's no excuse.

NYA

I told him that.

XAVIER

Where is he now?

NYA

Home. I think- home.

XAVIER

You think?

NYA

I--- yes. I left him at home. He's suspended. They're going to deliberate and decide whether to expel him. And also press charges. That's where we are. Letting it cool over the weekend. I'm hoping some of the steam will blow off and they'll be more lenient.

XAVIER

This is his third strike.

NYA

Yes it is.

XAVIER

They're not going to be lenient with a third strike.

NYA

I'm just hoping. He says he didn't slam the teacher. But on the video, I think it looks like-

XAVIER

Video?

NYA
Yes.

XAVIER
There's video?

NYA
The kids. Phones.

XAVIER
How did they... .. I thought phones weren't even allowed....

NYA
They're not.

XAVIER
Then how in the hell... .. They're gonna use that against him.

NYA
He wanted to run away. He tried to run away.

XAVIER
This all happen yesterday???

NYA
I tried to call.

XAVIER
My phone. Shit.

NYA
Yeah.

XAVIER
I give you Sheila's number?

NYA
I don't recall....

XAVIER
I'll give you her number. Next time you can't reach me, call her. She'll reach me.

NYA
(not a pleasant thought)
Yeah. Okay.

XAVIER

Damn, O. How did it get to this? How did he get this far over the line?

NYA

I don't know.

XAVIER

He say anything to you? Give you any answers?

Nya laughs to herself. Incredulous at this line of questioning.

XAVIER

Something funny?

NYA

You think he gives me answers?

XAVIER

I'm just asking. He ought to. He's supposed to answer to you. He's your son.

NYA

He's your son too.

XAVIER

I know that, I--- --- (taken aback) What... what is that?

NYA

What's what?

XAVIER

That just felt like... a little bit of.... accusation....

NYA

I didn't do that.

XAVIER

No???

NYA

No.

XAVIER

Ok.

Ok. NYA

Because we said we wouldn't do that. XAVIER

We're not. NYA

Co-parenting. XAVIER

Yes exactly. NYA

Not a blame game. XAVIER

No one's blaming. NYA

Okay. XAVIER

It just sounded like... NYA

Yeah? XAVIER

You said "He's your son" NYA

Yeah but mine wasn't- XAVIER

It just sounded like. NYA

I'm talking about him. You're his mother. I'm saying he's the son. He should be giving answers when he's questioned. He's the son. XAVIER

Yes. Right ok. But you said he's my son. Not THE son. NYA

XAVIER

I meant THE son.

NYA

Okay.

Pause.

XAVIER

I'm thinking... .. I'm thinking he needs a change. A big one.

NYA

Yes.

XAVIER

Maybe he should come stay with me.

NYA

You and Sheila.

XAVIER

Sheila still has her own place. That's... that's not what it'll be like.

NYA

I don't know about that.

XAVIER

It's important. Maybe they won't press charges if we... .. if we tell them that we are changing his circumstances. I'll pull him out of Fernbrook. He'll get enrolled in the school in my neighborhood.

NYA

Or he can go here.

XAVIER

Here?

NYA

Yes here. Where I teach. And have been doing so for over a decade.

XAVIER

Not here.

NYA

There are some good teachers here.

XAVIER

The school is failing Nya.

NYA

Was failing. Not anymore. They divided us into 4 different sections. We've been doing much better. And that's about student accountability and the school board. That's not the staff here. Not all of us. There're some good teachers here. He knows them. He'll be comfortable. He'll be here and under my watch.

XAVIER

You can't watch him all day.

NYA

Neither can you.

XAVIER

But I can give him a better surrounding.

NYA

Better.

XAVIER

Don't do that. I'm not making judgments. Let's not make it about that. Let's keep it about O.

NYA

It is about O.

XAVIER

You do what you can. I know that. I'm not suggesting you've done anything wrong. But you resist... you and him... the offers I make. I'm not--- --- You can be proud. You can ride or die for this hood all you want. That's good for you. But that's not good for our son.

NYA

And you know? You know what's best? Sending him away to Fernbrook... it didn't stop the rage. You can't solve him from the outside in. Don't you see that?

XAVIER

What does that mean? Outside in? I'm working with the parts I get, Nya. That's all I get access to. He doesn't let me in. That doesn't mean I'm not still active. I work from whatever way he dictates. He always dictates. But he's the son.

NYA

Our son.

XAVIER

And he can't always be the dictator. It can't always be a democracy. Sometimes we have to---- and I try but you... .. it's like we're running two different governments.

NYA

I thought it was co-parenting.

XAVIER

Sometimes it's time---- --- and I'm not saying you don't do your part--- but I'm the man. Not you. And he needs a firmer hand.

NYA

That isn't / blame?

XAVIER

Maybe not always have a choice in the matter. Maybe he's had too many damn choices and he doesn't know how to follow a leader. He thinks it's him. But where is he going?

NYA

And you don't think a firm hand will make him suffocate? You think I'm too loose so he's slipping down the pipe? Which grip is best? Please show me. Please. Show. Me.

XAVIER

You always have to do this.

NYA

Do what?

XAVIER

Make this personal. Make parenting our son a personal battle between you and I.

NYA

It IS between you and I. We made him.

XAVIER

It's not you and I. It's you and him. Me and him. Us and him. That's the deal. You and I without him does not exist.

NYA

Ouch.

XAVIER

No. Not ouch. You don't get to say ouch.

NYA

I don't get to be hurt? I can't feel pain?

XAVIER

No. You don't get to do that.

NYA

Ok. That's fair. It was partly my fault-

XAVIER

I'm not looking backwards.

NYA

I'm not asking you to.

XAVIER

You broke this. Not me. YOU. (pause. Catches breath.) I'm moving on and that doesn't make me a bad father.

NYA

I didn't say it did.

XAVIER

You also didn't tell our son who the real villain is. And he thinks it's me.

NYA

I never let him think you're the enemy.

XAVIER

He thinks it anyway. And now he won't hardly listen to me... won't respect me anymore.

NYA

That's not on me. I never... .. I never bad talk you. If you're upset with me because of... That's fine. That's fair. But you and him and whatever is broken --- that is not me.

XAVIER

Then let him come. Let him live with me. Give me that authority.

NYA

I haven't any to give you. You think forcing him is going to save him, then do it. You want to dictate, try it. You'll have a great rebellion on your hands.

XAVIER

I can handle rebellion. It's you. You're the barricade. When you resist, he can sniff it. And then I become the enemy.

A moment of surrender.

NYA

I won't resist.

XAVIER

I'll talk to the school. On Monday. First thing. That's what I'll do. Pull him out of school and ask them not to press charges.

NYA

Maybe they'll listen.

XAVIER

And then he comes with me. That's the deal. That's how we fix this. You agree?

Nya falls silent. Takes a breath. Deep and painful.

NYA

How did we get here?

XAVIER

Ask yourself.

NYA

(a painful admission)

I miss you.

Xavier feels her words, but he is effective in his masking.

XAVIER

I can't---

NYA

I know.

Pause.

XAVIER

Do we have a deal?

NYA

He will hate us both.

XAVIER
Or maybe just you this time.

NYA
If it saves his life, I'll be the devil.

XAVIER
Okay.

NYA
But we wait. Until Monday. Until I can tell him myself. Until I can effectively release him.

XAVIER
You call me before you do. I want to be on my way. I want him to have nowhere to disappear to. You understand?

NYA
This is a deal.

She holds out her hands. Xavier looks at them. Hesitates.

He finally takes them. It is not really a handshake. It is the closest thing to holding each other.

An elongated moment. Time disappears.

Then finally... a schoolbell sounds.

Xavier pulls away from Nya.

He walks out of the classroom.

Nya gasps audibly.

The fluorescent lights dance wickedly.

Shift.

8.

Laurie and Dun in the Teacher's Lounge.

LAURIE

Don't tell me that shit. That's bullshit.

DUN

You think it's my fault?

LAURIE

Don't tell me you came as fast as you could.

DUN

Laurie, that wasn't me. Okay? I did what I could.

LAURIE

I CALLED. I fucking called and you didn't answer. What do you want me to wait forever? Let them bust their heads wide open? On my watch? I'm supposed to stand back and watch?

DUN

You didn't call right away.

LAURIE

Fuck you.

DUN

You didn't. That's what the kids are saying.

LAURIE

Fuck what the kids are saying!

Nya enters the Teachers Lounge.

LAURIE (cont'd)

Ask any teacher over here. Ask Nya. She'll tell you. It's bullshit.

NYA

You two alright?

LAURIE

Do I look alright?

DUN

Laurie's fifth period. DeShawn and Hakeem got in a fight.

NYA

No, again?

LAURIE

You hear that?

DUN

What do you want me to do about that?

LAURIE

She said "again". That means these two have an ongoing beef. It's like the fucking Crips and the Bloods in my classroom. These kids are at war. You want me to watch them drop grenades and pretend that shit isn't lethal???

DUN

I didn't make up the policy.

LAURIE

Not protect the civilians???

NYA

Did Colden give you shit about it?

LAURIE

Did Colden give me shit about it? Understatement of the year.

NYA

I can speak to him. Those two have been at it in my room too.

DUN

That's not going to help.

NYA

Why's it not going to help?

LAURIE

Because they're throwing me to the fucking wolves / that's why.

DUN

Because you broke protocol.

LAURIE

There is no protocol in war. There is: Stop Two People From Killing Each Other. That is all.

DUN

The broom?

LAURIE

What is it I should've chosen instead? Please tell me how an over-the-hill chick is supposed to stop two tall teenage boys with weightlifting muscles and zero body fat from pounding each other into oblivion without some type of force? Please tell me!

NYA

What happened with the broom?

LAURIE

I hit DeShawn!

DUN

She hit DeShawn *with a broom*.

LAURIE

To save his fucking life. I mean – is that even a factor? Does that even matter?

DUN

I'm not saying it do or it don't. I'm just telling her what went down.

NYA

Shit Laurie.

LAURIE

Shit Laurie?

NYA

Colden knows?

DUN

DeShawn ran out of the room and straight to the office.

NYA

Gotdamn.

DUN

It's gonna be tough one. That broom-

LAURIE

Was all I had.

NYA

What happened to security?

DUN

We came-

LAURIE

-Late

DUN

-As fast as we could.

LAURIE

He had him on the floor. Banging his head into the floor. Desks were scattering all over the place. Kids were screaming. I called security and the damn line was busy.

DUN

We were on the phone with Bekim. He was complaining about a kid who was high in his room.

LAURIE

And so what the hell is the protocol for busy signal? What am I supposed to do?

DUN

Stand aside til' we get there.

NYA

That doesn't always work.

LAURIE

Of course it doesn't work. It's stupid. I've got a room full of kids to protect. And myself. I mean what kind of adult just stands there and watches her students fight? What am I supposed to--- ---- he was pounding his head into the floor like this. (she demonstrates) Like he would've killed him. Hakeem's head was seconds away from splitting open. And DeShawn was seeing red. I screamed for him to stop but you think he could hear me? He couldn't hear the voice of God in that moment!

DUN

I'm just saying what the protocol is. I'm not saying you were wrong.

LAURIE

Fuck right and fuck wrong. There is only necessary.

NYA

What'd Colden say?

LAURIE

He's talking to the parents. The superintendent. Now all of a sudden everybody who doesn't know shit about what it's like to teach in a classroom is going to be my judge and jury.

NYA

Is there something I can do to help? You need me to talk to DeShawn's mother?

LAURIE

She's the least of my problems. Fucking kids and their camera phones. Is everything a goddamn youtube sensation with them?!

NYA

They didn't.

LAURIE

How the hell do they get past security with those phones? Tell me that.

DUN

It's back to me again?

LAURIE

It's a simple fucking question.

DUN

Some stuff gets past. It ain't the airport.

LAURIE

Could've fooled me. What's a metal detector for if it doesn't catch all the metal?

DUN

Cell phones ain't the metal we're most interested in. What can I say.

LAURIE

Don't say shit. To me. Ever again.

NYA

Laurie.

DUN

You keep thinking this is me? You act like I did something wrong. What did I do wrong? Was I not able to answer your call fast enough? When it's only eight of us working 4 different schools in one building, did I not reach you fast enough? Did I not run from one hallway to another at a speed that makes you satisfied? I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry that while I'm sitting up here, barely breaking minimum wage and dealing with the attitudes of 100 teens and teachers per minute, that I'm not a suitable servant to your beck and call. I do what I fucking can. I'm not Cox – sitting up here stealing computers from the school lab or Bender- flirting with teenage girls. I'm Dun. I'm the last of the good guys wearing a uniform and greeting kids with a smile when they enter the building. I try to make a sunny day out of shit. And I answer every call I get at the security desk. I do my job, damnit. And this time Laurie, maybe the job got the better of you. That shit happens. But don't go taking me down with you. You get in trouble, you get early retirement. You wanna know what I'd get???? --- --- I do my damn job.

LAURIE

Fuck this job! I gave my life to this place. My entire fucking life!

Laurie falls into a chair from exhaustion and defeat. A beat.

DUN

Look, I'm sorry-

NYA

It's not just Laurie. Those boys fight. All the time. I've tried everything. Talking to their parents. Splitting them up on opposite sides of the room. I've tried to stop it, myself. We've all tried.

DUN

You can't stop it.

NYA

Don't tell me that.

DUN

How you gonna stop it if you don't know the source?

NYA

I'm supposed to know a million and one sources?

DUN

Gotta know what they carry in them. The resentment and the rage... there's a legacy in that. Source of those fights is older than the bricks of this building but nobody's doing they research. You got a bunch of parents. Teachers. Politicians. Whoever.

DUN (cont'd)

Trying to understand these kids. But how you gonna understand a book you only skimming?

NYA

I've got to understand! My son's life depends on it. I've fucking tried everything!

LAURIE

Nya, you're doing what you can. You put him in a good school.

NYA

It doesn't matter where I send him to school, nothing's working! He's being sucked into this void and I keep trying to hold onto him, but the force is so strong...so magnificent ... that I have...to...

Lights up on Omari in Undefined Space.

OMARI

Strike strike strike

NYA

Hold on firm or I'll lose my grip

OMARI

Sing sin sin sin

NYA

Hang on tight or he'll start to slip

OMARI

Thin gin gin gin

NYA

Sacrifice something mightier than my soul

OMARI

Jazz juuuuuuuuuune....

NYA

Sacrifice something mighty

OMARI

Weeeee.....

NYA

Sacrifice

We.....	OMARI
Sacri--- --- ---	NYA
We.....	OMARI
Sac--- --- ---	NYA
	A moment.
Nya?	DUN
Weeee....	OMARI
Nya you okay?	LAURIE
	Nya's breathing becomes rapid and short. She is the only one who sees Omari.
I...	NYA
Di--- di---- di----	OMARI
No.	NYA
Di---- di----di----	OMARI
Don't.	NYA
You okay?	LAURIE

I... (she gasps audibly) I....	NYA
Nya???	DUN
She's not breathing.	LAURIE
Nya???	DUN
I can't--- ---breathe-----	NYA
We die soon.	OMARI
	GASP. Nya looks at Omar in terror. She is the only one who can see him. Clutches her heart.
Get the nurse. Now.	LAURIE
	Dun rushes out of the lounge.
	Nya collapses.

9.

A hospital. Omari and Dun sit.

The PA system in this space sounds
strangely like the school PA.

PA

Paging Doctor Roberts at extension 278. Paging Dr. Roberts at extension 278.
Thank you.

Dun looks at Omari, who taps his foot
nervously.

DUN

You want something?

OMARI

I'm good.

DUN

Sorry about... this.

OMARI

Yeah.

DUN

She'll be okay though. They said.

OMARI

Yeah.

DUN

She's tough. That's what I always dig about her.

OMARI

Yeah.

Pause.

Xavier enters. He stops when he sees
Omari and Dun. Omari looks at him,
suddenly tense.

OMARI
(under his breath)

Pssssh. This nigga.

Xavier approaches Omari cautiously.

XAVIER
Hey. How's she holding up? Any word?

OMARI
(defiant)
Pssssh.

DUN
Just holding her for observation.

Xavier looks at Dun with surprise. Who is this guy?

XAVIER
I'm sorry?

DUN
Overnight. They thought it was a heart attack but now they say it looks like a panic disorder. Just gonna monitor her overnight.

XAVIER
I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were.... ... have we met?

DUN
I'm Dun. Work with her over at the school. Security.

Xavier looks at Dun. A flash of dawning comprehension. Recognition. This is him.

XAVIER
Ah. I see.

DUN
You with the family?

XAVIER
Omari's my son, yes. I'm... family.

DUN
Oh ok.

I'm Nya's husband. Ex.

XAVIER

Dun's dawning comprehension. Tension.

DUN

Ohhhh.

...

...

Ok.

XAVIER

Ok.

DUN

...

...

...

XAVIER

...

...

...

DUN

I should let ya'll...

...

I'll go down to the cafeteria. You want anything O?

OMARI

I'm/ good.

XAVIER

I got him.

DUN

...

...

Okay. Cool.

The tension remains as Dun exits.
Omari and Xavier. Defiance and silence.

XAVIER

You alright?

OMARI
I'm not the one in the hospital.

XAVIER
I know that. I just meant... with all this.

OMARI
Stupid question.

XAVIER
Alright. (pause) A panic disorder.

OMARI
That's the hypothesis. Runnin' tests now and shit. Make sure it ain't deeper.

XAVIER
Thank God she's ok.

OMARI
Thank God.

XAVIER
Might be a long wait. The tests.

OMARI
I'll wait. You don't have to.

XAVIER
That's not what I meant. I just wanted to prepare you for... ..these tests take time and...

OMARI
She'll be straight. I got her.

XAVIER
I know you do.

Pause.

XAVIER
She and I wanted to talk with you.

OMARI
Words ain't the medicine right now.

XAVIER

Still. I wanted to talk with you. Find out about this acting out at school.

OMARI

I already plead my case. Gave her the whole 1-2. I'm sure she told you.

XAVIER

I want to hear it from you.

OMARI

For what?

XAVIER

Because I deserve to know.

OMARI

Deserve? Why's that? Cuz you pay for the education? Am I wasting your money? You want me to pay you back?

XAVIER

Yeah maybe. Smart ass. Maybe.

OMARI

I'll write you a check. You can cash it when hell freezes over.

Xavier grabs Omari by the collar.

XAVIER

Don't talk to me like that! I'm your father, /asshole.

OMARI

Fuck off me!

Omari flinches and jerks out of Xavier's grasp.

A moment. They look around the hallway. People are everywhere.

Xavier is a little ashamed. How does it get this far so fast?

Omari fumes. Hurt and angry. They sit in silence.

Shit. XAVIER

Pause.

We gotta work this out. XAVIER

I'm working my stuff out. OMARI

Nah. With me. We gotta work this out together. XAVIER

You quit together a long time ago. OMARI

I never quit you. XAVIER

You quit her. You quit me. OMARI

I didn't.... You don't know what you're talking about. There's adult business you aren't privy to. You need to keep the issues separate. You're my son. I never quit you. XAVIER

She was creepin'. That's the adult business. That's the grown-up stuff I can't handle? OMARI

Nevermind. Let this go. XAVIER

And you were mean. Cold. Making her feel like shit everyday. You was never happy living over here and that wasn't her fault. Mine neither. OMARI

I took good care of you. Never missed a payment. Never missed a birthday or first day of school. You never went hungry. Always had a shirt on your back. Money in your pocket. Didn't I do that? Is that my sin? XAVIER

OMARI

You know most of these dudes want their ol' man in their life so bad. They think it's the missing link to the equation. The last ingredient to understanding their manhood. But what's having you in flesh? Flesh ain't shit. It ain't no different than perm. It's clinical. It does the biology. It don't do the soul.

XAVIER

The hell you want me to do? You want me to cry and hold you in my arms and rock you to sleep? That's not my gig. I'm still your father. I'm still here.

OMARI

Titles is overrated.

XAVIER

You know what? I don't give a shit if you like me or want to go to the goddamn basketball court with me or pin a fuckin' tail on my ass --- I'm here. I'm the father and you're the kid and that's the law of the land. Like it or hate it. Screw it. I'm here.

OMARI

You ain't here. You there. I'm here. We miles apart.

XAVIER

You're gonna respect me. Don't have to like me. Don't have to enjoy my company. But the respect is non-negotiable.

OMARI

Or what?

XAVIER

You really wanna ask me that?

OMARI

I want to know what if I say no.

Xavier looks at Omari like the Devil. He moves in close to him. Threateningly.

XAVIER

Sometimes I want to grab you by the throat and choke the shit out of you.

Omari stares at his father. Somewhat afraid. Somewhat heartbroken. Tears threaten his eyes.

OMARI

What's stopping you?

XAVIER

Witnesses.

Pause. The men are still. Again, people are everywhere.

OMARI

I was sittin' in class, listenin' to the lesson. Was gonna be a silent observer. Was talkin' about Native Son. I had woke up that day thinkin' 'bout you. Hadn't seen or talked to you in weeks but the check came on time. I woke up with that check in my hands and I had a feeling about that. Like I didn't know what to say but I wanted to say somethin' to you. I called you but you didn't answer. So I went to class. Sittin' there listening to the class talk about Native Son. About the character Bigger Thomas and who he was and what lead him to his act of rage. Teacher kept saying he was "unleashed". I kept thinking – animal. And we discussin' this Bigger Thomas. Discussin' his circumstances and what he comes from and this and that. Single mother. That got brought up. One of the students said he only had his mother. And I'm sittin' there listening to this. On a day where I woke up with you on my mind and tried to call you. Tell you I had this feelin' about getting these checks. Tell you I hadn't seen you in a minute. Wonder where you been. But you didn't answer your phone. So I sat there. Listenin' to single mother poor angry animal Bigger Thomas. And when the Teacher come askin' me what I thought... I felt like he was sayin' somethin' to me. Like he knew I was sitting there, thinkin' about you, feelin' single mother poor angry animal Bigger Thomas-like. And he start sayin' Mr. Joseph- what made Bigger Thomas do that to that girl? What were his social limitations? What made the animal in him explode? And he lookin' at me. But also through me. And I say, I don't want to talk about it. Cuz all I'm thinking about is you. And how I haven't talked to you in weeks but I get this check on time. Like it's automated. Like the bank sends it to me. And I wanted to know if you even mail it. Like is it even personal. Or it is just robotic routine responsibility. And I'm thinking--- who does that??? What kinda nigga just sends checks and calls that fatherhood? And we talkin' Bigger Thomas this and single mother that and limitations and animals exploding and I say DO NOT FUCKING CALL ON ME I DO NOT HAVE THE ANSWER. And he keep pushing me and pushing me. And I stand up to walk out cuz I feel the room gettin' smaller and I'm becoming Bigger Thomas even when I hate this part of the story. And teacher get in my way. Tells me to sit down. Grabs me. Like you grab my arm when you try to play Daddy all of a sudden. When it's convenient for you. And I pushed that bitch. Threw his ass offa me and into the fuckin' smart board. Threw him like he was the monkey hanging on my back. Like he was YOU. And I'm wishing it was you. I'm wishing I could throw him again. Pound his fuckin' face into the ground. Rip that check up and say VOID. But it wasn't you. It wasn't you I pushed. It was my teacher. But I wished it was you. I wished it was you so bad I had to pee. Almost fuckin' peed on myself right there in front of the class. And

I don't know if that is hate or love or somethin' else I was feelin'. But I know why Bigger Thomas did what he did and I hate that I know. But you I hate more. You I hate most of all.

Xavier is silent as Omari glares at him.
Tries to breathe. Can't. He tries to speak.

XAVIER

You know son, I...

But the words fail him. He tries to breathe again. Like someone is stepping on his chest.

Mountains and walls and miles between them.

Xavier is defeated.

XAVIER

When the doctor comes out...

....

....

Text me.

...

...

I'm stepping out. Need air.

...

...

And off.

I'm going to step off. Need air from all of this. You don't want me in your life. And I don't...

...

...

I don't know what to do about that. I wish I...

...

But I don't even know what else to do.

Xavier walks away. Dumbfounded.

Omari sits in the hospital chair. And waits.

10.

Jasmine in Undefined Space. Maybe her dorm.

JASMINE

I was gonna leave you this long ass message, but I'm not sure you'll even get it. And if you do, I'm not sure you'll even respond back. I think we're over and it kills me in a thousand ways. Not because I'll never find love again. I know we're young. I know I'm cute and I'll find somebody else. It's a lot of fish in the swimming pool or whatever. But I'm just sad that this is the end of an era and it's over before it really began. I don't think I got enough chances to fuck up and get mad at you and yell and then make up. I hate that. Every relationship deserves to go through all the colors of the rainbow. That's how you know you had something. Deep. Ugly. Beautiful. Whatever. We didn't get to give all our shit a try. But for the little parts we did have.... For the parts that made me want to cut a chick's face for you turnin' your head in her direction, I want to thank you. For giving me that space. For making me feel room enough to be jealous and mad and whatever. Because I also got to smack you and get it out and then that made me free enough to tell you that I love you. I just really really love you. And I hate you for leaving me and breaking it off and not knowing yourself. I really hate you for being so beautiful and confused. But I'm really glad you aren't coming back here anymore. Because this place can't hold you. This place can't hold none of us. For reals. (beat) And I guess I kinda did leave you a long ass message anyway. But fuck. You know?

Lights crossfade to images of school fights. Kids going through metal detectors. Police handcuffing teenage boys. Stopping and frisking.

PA

Today students we have a special poem being read by our Oratory Speech Winner – Carolina Valdez. Go ahead Carolina.

A voice clears it's throat.

PA (student)

We Real Cool, by Gwendolyn Brooks.

Lights up on Nya in Undefined Space.

NYA

I almost lost it. I almost broke down and stayed somewhere in the between. Nervous breakdown is what most folks call it. Doctors call it panic disorder. I call it my moment of revelation.

Omari in Undefined Space.

OMARI

I'm sorry, Ma.

NYA

All my son's life, I thought there was space for him. A little opportunity and education and he'd be complete. But Members of the Board, I'm here to tell you that I miscalculated. Omari's actions aren't his bag alone. They're mine. All of ours. We didn't carve out enough space. He doesn't belong anywhere. There is no block. No school. No land he can travel without being under suspicion and doubt. No emotion he can carry without being silenced or disciplined. He needed more space to be.

Student's voice continues underneath.
Slow and not necessarily spoken where
marked. Just trailing as background
music.

PA (student voice)

We real cool. We

OMARI

I messed up, Ma. I think there's something wrong with me and I ain't sure what it is...

PA (student voice)

We left school. We

NYA

I want my son to belong.

OMARI

I want to turn myself in, Ma.

PA (student voice)

We lurk late. We

OMARI

I wanna take responsibility. I wanna make you stop smoking and drinking and crying.

NYA

(to Omari) No. That's not your--- --- (to the Board) I want my son to have another chance. Be born again with a slate clean of the baggage. Our baggage. MY baggage.

PA (student voice)

We strike straight. We

OMARI

I want to be better.

NYA

Sometimes I look into his face and I get stuck staring. As if I can see what he will become and the longer I look, the longer his life will be. I want him to find space for his anger. Where it isn't quelled, but put to good use. Where he isn't a product of bias or low expectation. I want him to know love.

OMARI

They see me as a monster.

NYA

To feel love from all places.

OMARI

Online, I'm a monster. The people made comments. Say I should be kicked out. Locked up.

NYA

He is a man. Young. Still growing. Not fully anything.

OMARI

Like I'm an animal.

PA (student's voice)

We sing sin. We

NYA

He's not an animal.

OMARI

Like they expect I would be.

NYA

You're not an animal. No more than the rest of us are. And if so, we built the jungle.

OMARI

I disappoint you.

NYA

I disappoint you.

PA (students voice)

We thin gin. We

OMARI

I can do better, Ma.

NYA

So if you please, let me take him from here. Let me find him a different school. Reset and try again. But please don't... .. don't press charges. Don't lock away what hopes he can become. This rage is not his sin. It was never his sin.

PA (student's voice)

We jazz june. We

NYA

It is his inheritance.

OMARI (cont'd)

I know I can do better.

NYA

And I am here before you to say that I take the blame. It is me. Send me away. Punish me. But my son??? Not my son.

PA (student's voice)

We die soon.

NYA

Not my son.

Lights isolate Omari and Nya. They are now looking at each other.

OMARI

I been thinkin', Ma. About instructions. About what you said.

NYA

Yes.

OMARI

I wrote 'em down.

NYA

Instructions.

OMARI
Yeah.

NYA
For me?

OMARI
For everybody.

NYA
Like a list?

OMARI
Like a scripture.

NYA
Oh. Wow. I see.

OMARI
You wanna hear?

NYA
I'm dying to hear.

As Omari speaks, images of young men in handcuffs, walking to school with bookbags, school fights begin to blend into a wash of colors. Gwendolen Brook's poem overwrites the images. It is a collage of chaos.

Omari's words overwrite them all.

OMARI
One- Hear me out.
Two- Let me chill sometimes.
Three - Know when to back off.
Four - Know when to keep pushing.
Five - Let me have some space.
Six - Don't assume me for the worst.
Seven - Show up. In person.
Eight- Be fair.
Nine - Forgive that I'm not perfect.
Ten -- --- ---

NYA

...

What's ten?

OMARI

...

I don't have a ten yet. I'm still working on it.

...

...

...

These good so far?

NYA

...

...

...

Yeah.

...

...

...

So far...

Nya touches Omari. She grabs his face and looks into it deeply. Studies him for all the answers.

The moment lasts a lifetime.

End of Play.