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THE DEVELOPMENT OF 800 DAYS OF SOLITUDE: A CONJURING: A PLAYWRITING THESIS

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF 800 DAYS OF SOLITUDE: A CONJURING: A PLAYWRITING
THESIS

by

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B.F.A., DePaul University, 2013

M.F.A., Southern Illinois University, 2018

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts in Playwriting

Department of Theater
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2018

THESIS APPROVAL

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David Dudley

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in the field of Playwriting

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

David Dudley, for the Master of Fine Arts Degree in Theater/ Playwriting, presented on April 4, 2018, at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

TITLE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF 800 DAYS OF SOLITUDE: A CONJURING: A PLAYWRITING THESIS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Jacob Juntunen

This thesis document is a presentation of the process and production of my play, *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*, which was presented in the Moe Theater Lab March 22 through 25 2018. This play endeavored to tell the story of a young man who was wrongfully imprisoned, and then forced into solitary confinement.

Chapter 1 contains a detailed account of the pre-writing process, including early inspirations, impressions of what the play might be, and character bios. Chapter 2 is a narrative account of the writing of *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*, along with key inspirations and how I used them to shape the text. Chapter 3 recounts the pre-production process, including production meetings with the director and design team, the process of auditions, and rehearsals. Chapter 4 discusses the production of *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*. Chapter 5 is the Conclusion, wherein I reflect on my time before SIU, as well as my time here. I then revisit my goals and weigh in on whether I achieved them. Then I speculate on what the future may bring. This is followed by the Works Cited. Appendix A contains the production script of *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*, followed by a gloss of terms. Appendix B contains an early draft of *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*.

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CHAPTER 1

PRE-WRITING

The idea for this play came to me as I read about Kalief Browder – specifically, the rage I felt at the injustices this young man suffered while in custody of the purveyors of justice. The idea that an endless chain of loopholes created the conditions in which a teenager languished for three years on Rikers Island, 800 days of which were spent in solitary confinement awaiting trial for a misdemeanor, is incomprehensible.

Having spent time in juvenile, I am painfully aware of the “community” in which Browder found himself, and the difficulties he faced while adapting to its rules. These rules are enforced by two separate groups: the guards, and the inmates. The guards set extremely rigid limits on what an inmate can and can’t do, and they mercilessly enforce those rules with harsh penalties. Likewise, Browder’s fellow inmates enforced their own rules (don’t sit on the bench in front of the TV, face the wall while in the shower, get our permission before using the phones, etc.).

Thus, it should be common sense that this is no place for a young man to find his way in the world – i.e., how to become an integral member of the community, how to make positive contributions to society as well as one’s family, how to behave appropriately in various settings. In short, the young men and women who are incarcerated have a much rougher time adjusting to society than their free peers. And yet these incarcerated young people are already struggling to adapt to society and its rules. So, why lock them up in the first place, when more effective solutions must exist?

Instead, through the abuse by people who wield an arbitrary power, those like Browder are never given the space and the support they require to become anything other than what their

oppressors wish them to become. Not only is this oppression destructive for the individual, but it's counterproductive for society as well: It creates throngs of ill-adjusted young people who become threats to themselves as well as others. As numerous studies, including the Stanford Prison Experiment¹, show, prison brings out the worst in us. And, in extreme cases, such as Browder's, we may never be able to get back to our better selves.

Goals

Should we, as theatre artists, place ourselves in the roles of traditionally oppressed peoples? My process in writing this play will experiment with strategies for liberating performers from this troubling dichotomy, opening possibilities for low-/ no-budget productions, and remaining true to the play's content. In doing so, my goals at the time I began are as follows:

1) To create a piece of theatre that dispenses with the protagonist (and thus a performer assuming they are "better" than their fellow performers due to the status of the lead), thereby creating a democratic mode of theatre, without sacrificing forward motion in the narrative.

2) To confront the audience with the story of a prisoner in order to compel them to act, or at least think, on the crimes committed by the criminal justice system.

On Style

Playwrights are often faced with impossible decisions regarding setting and casting. University productions especially struggle to find age-appropriate material, and budgets for building big, extravagant sets are lacking. Do we do anyone a service when we attempt to convince an audience of educated people that the 21-year-old junior playing King Lear is really in his 60s? No, we do not. We are building a wall between performers and audience. We are

¹ The Stanford Prison Experiment was conducted at Stanford University, by Professor Philip Zimbardo. It was meant to show the effects of perceived power when students were separated into two groups: prisoners and guards. As it happened, the guards became masochistic, while the prisoners lost all hope. (<http://www.prisonexp.org/>)

testing their credulity in a negative way, seeking their acceptance for something unnecessary. Then, when a production entity builds an expensive set, is it really serving the drama (drama being what people do with, to, and for people), or does it simply distract from the drama?

Thus, Brecht's approach to theatre, as described in the Street Scene, wherein performers describe actions and events, is not only the most efficient means to present such material, but it is also the most just. To go a step further, in my own play, *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*, I do not ask any actor to portray the person upon whom the play is based. Rather, I allow the ensemble to paint a portrait of this character through their words.

One of my goals, as stated above, was to move through time in a non-linear fashion. If the play concludes with the protagonist's death, it will likely give audiences the wrong impression: He's dead, so we can move on with our lives.

Instead, I wanted to place his death somewhere nearer to the center of the play, so that we can end on a high note (perhaps when his journals are released, and thus the conditions in which he lived, and the abominations of justice that occurred are brought to light). Thus, I created monologues that may stand alone, so that I can then shift them about to find the order that best revealed the varying levels of complexity of this story.

I also wanted to play with the way the story is presented to the audience. I considered, for instance, not assigning lines to specific actors, but instead, writing scenes that are delivered directly to the audience, incorporating audience participation, and trying to find a way to confront the audience in a more direct way, à la Brecht, Piscator, The Living Theatre, and Bread & Puppet Theater Company.

Genre

The piece should be a tragedy, wherein the character based upon Browder, from hereon called Troy, will be given the chance to admit his guilt, and thus be released from juvenile. Yet he can't bring himself to do this, because, in his mind, he is innocent. I don't believe I should show him to be innocent in the play. Perhaps I should suggest this while allowing this aspect to be cloaked in ambiguity.

As mentioned, my primary challenge would be finding a way to present this tragedy that doesn't end on a note of finality. Just as Browder's story continues to shape change on Rikers Island, this play should encourage people to think about those like Browder who are still in juvenile (and various other institutions where they are being held for no good reason).

After Browder was released, he worked to improve practices in the criminal justice system. Though he was forced to relive traumas each time he told his story to a judge, a committee, or panel, he kept on doing so to make some lasting, positive effect on the system that destroyed him in order to prevent the same thing from happening again.

Another challenge that I had to face is the question of how to present the institution as more than a collection of villains. The people who populate this world must be humans. Only if they are human will the full weight of the tragedy land. Rather than asking ourselves why we hire monsters to perform these tasks, we ought to be asking ourselves: If these roles ruin people, why do we continue to impose them upon people? How can we change the system, so that it will not go on destroying the lives of these young people, and warping their guards? While I have serious doubts about the efficacy of theatre that embraces the challenge of changing people, I still believe I should try.

Character Biographies

TROY: Teens. A sweet, smart kid from Brooklyn. Sure, he has had to develop a tough exterior (to ward off predators), but he has a gentle heart, and a peaceful demeanor. For all that, he is powerful. When in 5th grade, a bully was picking on Troy's friend, Joell. Troy discovered the bully digging in Joell's pockets one day after school and blacked out. When Troy came to, he discovered the bully lying on the ground, holding his head, bleeding. Joell was shocked: Troy had taken the lid off a nearby garbage can and hit the bully upside his head with it.

Troy was just as shocked to learn of this, but he was thankful that Joell didn't have to deal with the bully anymore. In fact, Troy never saw the bully bothering anybody again.

Troy was wicked intelligent. He read the books his teachers assigned, and eventually knew more about those subjects than his teachers. Of course, Troy's intelligence often got him in trouble. Instead of completing class assignments, he would argue the worth of such assignments with his teachers. They quickly grew wary of his persistent questions, as he asserted the worthlessness of their projects. They wished that he would apply his sophisticated analytical skills to his work – to contribute something meaningful to his community – rather than wriggling his way out of doing the work.

Naturally this does not bode well for him, as he remains more or less unchanged by his schooling. As he enters high school, Troy appears to be on the wrong path. Joell is more or less a good kid, but Joell's older brother, who was killed in a shooting the year before, was a bad influence on him. Joell steals stuff, and hustles to make money. Naturally, as they spend a lot of time together, Joell drags Troy into his quick money schemes.

It's one of these quick money schemes, in which Joell attempts to rob a young man of a pair of Yeezy's, that lands Troy in Juvenile.

Troy, being innocent, and believing in the snitches get stitches code, refuses to tell the police who really committed the crime.

Ironically, it's in juvenile that Troy discovers an outlet for his intelligence, creativity, and frustration. Troy documents his mistreatment while behind bars in an EP (a short-form album that contains somewhere between two and 10 tracks.).

Still, stubborn as ever, and loath to admit his guilt, he languishes behind bars, where he is subjected to tortures that his sweet, gentle nature cannot sustain. Thus Troy buries a final call for help between tracks on the EP, and tries to give the tape to his mother.

JOELL: Troy's best friend, teens. Joell has had a rough life. He and his brother, Joey, bounced around a lot as children. Their parents were addicts, so Joell lived in foster homes. Joell's primary frustration lies in the fact that his dreams and reality are severely disconnected. His ambitions – to become a successful businessman, like Donald Trump – are out of line with his means: He can't even get a job at a fast-food restaurant because his clothes are shabby and oversized.

For most people, this wouldn't be a problem, but Joell fixates on his appearance. Joell turns to stealing when he gets some size. He's not afraid of going to jail, because he's been in the system since he was a child. He knows what to expect; he knows how to handle himself in those situations.

And yet, for all that, Joell loves Troy like a brother. While Troy has book smarts, Joell is street-smart. Together they make a great team: Joell cooks up schemes that land them in trouble; Troy uses his mind to help them escape.

Still, when Troy goes to Rikers, Joell feels responsible.

OFFICER REGINA CASE: Regina was born and raised on Gun Hill Road, in the Bronx. What does that mean? Though she's short, she's tougher than nails, and has a relentless inner drive to prove herself. Once, when she was in fifth grade, a boy named Cory was picking on her. He was much bigger than Regina, so he kept calling her "shorty." She didn't know it at the time, but Cory had a crush on her. His way of showing his fondness for her was to tease her. He didn't know it, but he was pushing her buttons.

One day, during lunch, Cory asked Regina if he could have her milk. (She was obsessed with milk, believing it would help her grow big and strong.) She declined but Cory kept pushing. He ended every sentence with "Shorty." The situation escalated quickly, and Regina leapt up from her seat and punched Cory in the face, repeatedly.

Cory wound up with a broken nose. Regina spent the rest of the afternoon explaining the situation to a police officer. Though she was on the verge of being charged with assault, she was in awe of the officer – a woman named Ms. Lee – who looked so beautiful, strong, and professional in uniform.

That was the day Regina knew she'd become a police officer. Though Regina began as quiet and shy, life in the Bronx, followed by the police academy, compelled Regina to speak up and make her presence known. She's still small, but her personality is matched only by her temper.

THE CROW: I can't speak much about the Crow, as, with all animals, she is unknowable to us humans. As part of the pre-writing process, I ask questions of my characters. Though their responses sometimes wind up in the play, mostly they do not. My approach with this character is to allow my subconscious mind to run free, riffing on themes and variations like a jazz musician, and to allow whatever comes forth to be part of her character, speech, and action.

KURIUS GEORGE: Kurius George was only 3 when his mother, a crack addict on the verge of having her children taken away by the Bureau of Child Welfare, named him “Kurius.” He had big, bright eyes and got into everything from the laundry to the dish detergent. If something was within reach, he’d take it into his hands and try to figure it out: What does it do? How does it smell? How does it taste? What happens if I smear it all over the wall? What if I smear it all over myself?

Thus, when George took a deep pull from the pretty blue liquid under the sink and was rushed to nearby Mt. Sinai Hospital to be given charcoal to drink and have his stomach pumped, the Bureau of Child Welfare stepped in and took George away from his mother.

George did not adjust well to life in group homes and foster homes. He was always in a fight. He was small for his age but, as the years went on, George took it upon himself to build his strength. He was always doing pushups, pull-ups, climbing monkey bars and subway platforms.

George was only 11 years old when he was first arrested for boosting a Polo Jacket from Macy’s. From that day forward, his rap sheet grew: Shoplifting, aggravated assault, loitering, criminal damage, arson, kidnapping (later dismissed as he convinced his girlfriend that he was only playing), possession, conspiracy.

George takes pride in the fact that he knows the system. He began taking advantage of smaller boys as a way to vent the anger he feels toward the guards, who impose their will upon him.

OFFICER GALLO: Officer Gallo, whose first name is known only to those close to him, is an enigma. He lives in the Bronx, near Yankee Stadium, and the zoo, with his wife, Mary. He’s been working at Rikers Island for an indeterminable period – only HR knows. And yet,

while he's a mystery to most, the boys on Rikers Island know him well: He's the baldheaded, well-spoken, seemingly Zen guard who will turn on you in a second.

He goes from telling you too much information – my wife's pregnant, that rash is clearing up, I'm working towards a bachelor's degree in criminal justice – to threatening violence for “too much talk.”

Yes, he drives a 1992 Subaru. Yes, he goes to the zoo every Sunday afternoon with his wife, Mary, to see the gorillas. And, yes, his favorite thing to do is watch the Yanks while eating Chicago style hotdogs and sipping Coors Light.

Gallo feels that he knows better than his superiors. He is torn between doing his job well and recognizing that his job sometimes entails morally suspect activities. This gap between right and wrong compels him to seek a higher position, so that he can enact the changes he feels would improve the situation for everybody: Solitary confinement for those who are a threat to themselves and others; six hours of school five days a week, with physical education, arts, and trades on the weekends; a streamlined visitation process for families of juvenile offenders. The list goes on. Gallo possesses that rare combination of idealism and pragmatism. He could make a real change if he could earn his degree. But he's not a good student. Perhaps this is why he relates to the boys under his care.

MAUREEN: Mother, patient care technician. Born and raised in Bed Stuy, Brooklyn. Before the tragedy that kicks off this play befell her, Maureen was more balanced. Inheriting a natural toughness from her mother, a nurse at Bellevue, and the grace of her father, a choir leader and a music teacher, Maureen has always been emotionally agile and resilient. For instance, when in the second grade she had one of front teeth knocked out by a football, she did not spend much time stressing the gaping hole in her smile. Rather, Maureen found ways to

make use of it: Now she could slip a straw into her mouth, past the teeth, so that, in her mind, the Coke didn't ever have to touch her teeth. She also discovered that, while swimming, she could take a mouthful of water and, by tilting her head back before spitting, she could make a fountain like the marble statues in her favorite historical documentaries.

Though her father paid for music and singing lessons throughout Maureen's adolescence, Maureen was not passionate about singing. She liked to imagine the glitz and glamour of being an entertainer, but her heart was set on caring for others. Maureen saw people like Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, and Whitney Houston and thought they were terribly self-centered and detached from the world. Maureen started skipping her lessons when she fell in love with Gerald (Jerry) Dominguez, a man of mixed race, who was both loving and untrustworthy.

Maureen's naive trust in human beings was crushed time and again by Jerry's dual nature. On Monday through Friday, Jerry was a family man, bringing groceries on his way home from work and helping clean the dishes after dinner. They'd often walk the treelined streets of Brooklyn as the sun set. But on the weekends, when Jerry would take the train into Manhattan where he played with different bands in the Village, he would drink and dope and, when times were rough, hustle.

He was fired from his choir leader position with a Brooklyn Church when one of the congregants reported seeing Jerry associating with men and women of questionable repute (the joke was that the informant had become privy to this fact by associating with them himself).

Thus, Jerry lied to Maureen for years as Troy was growing up in the same streets Maureen had known as a child. Though Maureen was entirely against the idea of divorce, she simply could not stay with Jerry (whose lies had become so frequent that he really was living a double life). He left Maureen to live with another woman but told her he was going on a tour

with his band. Maureen spotted Jerry and his new girlfriend walking out of a Jerk Chicken joint in Bed-Stuy.

Though Maureen was crushed, this event had somehow made her stronger. Whereas before she nursed a healthy fear for those things most humans fear: Death, Loneliness in old age, confrontation with family friends and strangers alike, losing one's teeth before settling down with someone, Maureen had become utterly fearless. So throughout the crack epidemic of the 80s, and the wild 90s, Maureen was never robbed or bothered in the Brooklyn streets. "I am Brooklyn!" is one of her favorite sayings.

And yet, for all of that, she's always dreamed of buying a little cabin near the White Mountains, in New Hampshire. She had been working and saving for years to achieve this dream. But when Troy was arrested at 15 years of age, she depleted her savings trying to keep him out of jail. This didn't take long as she had only saved \$3,746.29.

CHAPTER 2

WRITING

In writing *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*, I employed a number of texts to help me shape the performance text. The most important among them included: an interrogation of Judith Malina's translation of Bertolt Brecht's version of Sophocles' *Antigone*; Erin Mee interviewing her father, Charles Mee about writing; the judicial theory of Totality of Circumstances, according to a police officer I interviewed for an unrelated project; and, finally, Stephen Adly Guirgis's *Jesus Hopped the A Train* and Bertolt Brecht's model for theatre, *The Street Scene*.

Judith Malina, *Antigone*, Troy

While writing *800 Days of Solitude*, I kept returning to Judith Malina's *Antigone* as it relates to Troy's situation. Not only did Malina translate Brecht's version of Sophocles' tragedy, but she also played the eponymous role throughout her career. What compelled Judith Malina (co-founder and director of The Living Theatre) to translate Bertolt Brecht's adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*? Malina described Brecht's own fascination with *Antigone* as that of "a woman alone defying the power of the state – a pungent parable for any time." (v)

But Malina was drawn to the play for her own reasons. Malina, along with her first husband and co-founder of The Living Theatre, Julian Beck, spent her theatrical career making works that endeavored to realize the Beautiful Nonviolent Anarchist Revolution. According to Malina, *Antigone* was "a clarion call to just such a Utopian vision" (vi),

Of course, if we look more deeply into the what was going on in Malina's life at the time, her reasoning clearly runs much deeper than theory. Malina chose to translate Sophocles' tragedy, as adapted by Brecht, because it spoke directly to the relentless tyranny of The State, a tyranny that affected Malina directly.

A month before translating *Antigone*, Malina herself stood before Judge Edmund Palmieri - a representative of The State, not unlike Kreon in his rigid, pigheaded duty toward his fellow statesmen, and the laws they elect themselves to uphold. The worldview of such authoritarians can be summed up by Kreon's speech:

I have no respect for the man

Who values human life more than his country.

But he who serves my State, dead or

Alive, I'll praise him either way. (22)

Just as Antigone stood before Kreon, unwilling to break or even bend before the man who controls her life, Malina was also unyielding in the face of authoritarian justice run amok. When Judge Palmieri found Malina and Beck guilty of tax evasion, Malina said, "The human heart and the human mind have to examine the rigidity of the law" (Weber, 2017).

This statement bears an eerie resemblance to a line from Malina's translation of Brecht's *Antigone*:

Just because it was your law, a human law,

That's why a human being must break it - and

I am just as human as you and only slightly more

Mortal. And if

I die before my time, I think it's

Because it has its advantages; when you've lived

The way I have, surrounded by evil, isn't there some

Advantage in death? (28)

Malina did not translate Brecht until she was serving time in the Passaic County Jail for tax evasion. As many radicals from that time learned, federal judges were not sympathetic to the cause.

So, it was no surprise that Judge Palmieri did not find merit in Malina's call for justice to be reexamined and redefined. Unfortunately, the jurors were equally unmoved. When Judge Palmieri handed down a guilty verdict, effectively convicting Malina and Beck of tax evasion, Malina repeatedly shouted over Palmieri, "Innocent!".

Judge Palmieri tried to silence Malina, who fired back, "You can cut out my tongue, but you cannot stop me from saying that I am innocent. I will not grant you that privilege, sir" (Weber). Still, Malina was dragged off to jail, just as Antigone. Malina's first audience for the text was composed of her cellmates.

For all that, Malina shared more direct affinities with Antigone. Indeed, after being locked away in the Passaic County Jail for 30 days, Malina may very well have seen herself as a modern-day Antigone, and so chose to play the role at various times during her long, storied career. Though Malina played roles in "Dog Day Afternoon," "The Sopranos," and "ER," among many others, she would always return to the role of Antigone.

According to Malina's friend and collaborator, Karen Malpede "Judith would perform the title role while pregnant with Isha Manna, then as middle-aged, finally as an older woman, always with the unwavering, direct idealism of the girl" (Goodman, 2017).

As with most martyrs, life is not glorious. It's filled with traps, treachery, betrayal. Around every corner you may find death waiting in the shadows. Each new friend you make may become the enemy that drives a blade into your back. And the cause for which you are willing to

die may be extinguished like a match in a downpour. Of course, one's actions, though they may be holy, may go unnoticed, or worse, be made the subject of ridicule, as Antigone discovers:

Oh no! They're making fun of me!

Yes, of me, and I'm not even dead yet,

And I still see daylight.

My city! And oh my city's

Wealthy men! You must, yes, must

Bear witness for me, of how and why I go unmourned

By those who love me, and under what

Laws I must go

Into an unheard of grave. (46)

Thus, Troy, like Antigone and Malina, must find solace in a mixture of the little things – kissing one's lover on the lips, sipping black coffee on a cold morning, the comforting embrace of a hot bath – with the pursuit of higher ideals.

In Malina's case, this meant nothing less than a truer, more human vision of justice for all. In one of Malina's last poems, "Hard Lessons", she wrote:

Learn patience first,

And after patience, love,

And after love

The eternal joy

Of having loved. (Malpede, 2017)

For Malina, as with Antigone and Troy, patience was learned, and put to the test, while standing trial. Love of the community, of one's people, of one's lover, was learned while fighting for their

rights. And the eternal joy of having loved was the knowledge that provided peace as these two courageous women crossed the threshold that separates life and death. Fortunately for us, it was also the gift they gave to the world.

Malina, Antigone, and Troy are, in this sense, like Antonin Artaud's ideal actor who is burned at the stake, while signaling through the flames.

This description applies to Troy as well: Defiant, self-righteous, unflinching in the face of authority when he knows he is in the right. Despite the limitless power this authority exerts over Troy's situation, he still maintains his innocence. He's willing to hold his innocence at all costs. But, like Antigone, Troy is also digging his own grave. The mental pressure of being imprisoned, isolated is too heavy a burden. He carries this weight for as long as possible but succumbs to the trauma in the end.

Antigone's situation, as well as Judith Malina's, helped me to shape Troy's journey, which is the plot of the play buried beneath the words linking each monologue. In the end, Maureen prepares herself for a similar fight. But she has the advantage of being free while she wages war. The system, in short, is challenged to defend its innocence though the evidence suggests otherwise.

The Influence of Chuck Mee

In relating the style of performance called for by a Chuck Mee play, his daughter, Erin Mee, says "The emphasis of the performance is not on what the story is (the plot) but on how it is told . . . what the performers bring to it, what they make of it" (Mee) In writing *800 Days*, I challenged myself to write a play that was specific in detail, and, through the dialogue, character, situation, and action.

What does this mean, exactly? It means that the director is expected to make contributions to the staging of the text beyond what the playwright suggests. The playwright “wrights” a performance text, leaving much of the performance open for interpretation. When Joell says, “We were huddled behind two blue recycling bins,” there is no stage direction that repeats such information, because it may not be the most interesting choice for that moment. I want to leave it up to the director to decide if indeed the performer is huddled behind two blue recycling bins, or if the performer telling the story is instead standing downstage center, speaking directly to the audience. In this way, the playwright takes on the role of collaborator in a manner that is more open, fluid than that of Eugene O’Neill, or Samuel Beckett. (This is not meant to detract from the work of these two giants of the theatre, but rather to differentiate methodology, objectives, and sensibilities).

In the time O’Neill and Beckett were working in the theatre, much was made of the playwright’s vision. The playwright, through the text, sought to display one’s vision of the world as one experienced it. They were, in short, authoritative. But O’Neill and Beckett were both deeply affected by World War II, and the Holocaust. Theodore Adorno famously asserted (or questioned) whether poetry was possible after the Holocaust. There’s much argument and conjecture surrounding Adorno’s statement (Is that what he said? What did he mean, if so?). While Adorno may have asserted that to write poetry about Auschwitz was barbaric, I’m going to extract that sentiment and apply it to aesthetics in general.

I wonder: If the Holocaust was the result of one person imposing his uncut, unfiltered worldview upon a whole society (Hitler’s murderous prejudice against the Jewish people), what other horrors become possible when we blindly accept the worldview of a given individual? Though it may be hyperbole, I wonder if playwrights ought to be trusted to know all things about

their plays – including such woolly and vast webs as the milieus in which they are wrought, the blind prejudices lurking in their psyches, and the intentions borne of these prejudices.

To many playwrights, such questions are heresy. But I'm compelled to interrogate myself as well as the accuracy and scope of my own views. Is it possible for me to see the world in its staggering complexity, its infinite totality? Thus, I sought to create a form that was open to various interpretations, while being specific in detail and intention. My intention, throughout the process of writing *800 Days*, was to confront the audience with the story of a young person whose punishment was not befitting of the crime – whether or not said crime was committed.

Totality of Circumstances

When police officers are asked whether Michael Brown deserved to be shot, they often refuse to answer in a straightforward manner if they offer an answer at all. Though this is frustrating, we must defer because their reasoning is sound. I once asked a police officer what he thought of the Michael Brown case, and the officer responded: “I wasn't there, so I cannot attest to the totality of circumstances.”

The totality of circumstances encourages us to remember that no single perspective can ever represent the truth in its entirety, that, to know what really happened, we must consider a multitude of facts from various sources to arrive at something that may be defined as truth.

Thus with *800 Days*, I'm creating an event in which the totality of circumstances may be revealed. Notice, for instance, that the perspectives included are those of a friend, a family member, the arresting officer, an animal, a cellmate, and a corrections officer, all of whom bear witness - and in some cases play party - to Troy's demise. Once this theoretical lens found its way into my process, I realized that a series of monologues would be the most effective way to tell this story: Each monologue would reveal a different aspect of Troy's situation. And, when

considered together, they would reveal a broader picture of Troy's situation than any form that sought to convey a singular narrative.

Moreover, with *800 Days*, I'm extending an open invitation to my collaborators – director, performers, designers, and audience members – to contribute their own experiences and sensibilities to the performance that will be. In doing so, it is my hope that they will play the roles of generative artists rather than interpretive ones. I'm striving for a more democratic method of creating theatre, and thus attempting to avoid the pitfalls of barbarism that Adorno suggested.

Jesus Hopped the A Train Combined with Brecht's "Street Scene"

It was my intention all along to keep Troy offstage. My reasons for doing so are twofold. First, I do not feel as though I have permission to tell Troy's story (which is based upon Kalief Browder's), in the way Hollywood, and mainstream theatre would tell it. These production entities would lean on the notoriety generated by the story. They would cast a star in the lead role (Troy), and that person would pretend to undergo the unspeakable horrors of solitary confinement.

I wonder: Is this just? In the case of Stephen Adly Guirgis's play, *Jesus Hopped the A Train*, it may be. The protagonist, Angel Cruz, is imprisoned for the assault of a cult leader, and the audience is invited to travel through the dark underbelly of the criminal justice system. My understanding of Guirgis's play, which influenced my work, is that it is based upon a personal experience. Guirgis himself tried to save his best friend from surrendering his autonomy to a guru. Guirgis was doing what all the great writers have done: write what you know.

We are with Angel when he's locked up in The Tombs (a holdover for prisoners being transferred from local jails on the island of Manhattan to Rikers Island, where the hardcore

criminals await fresh blood), attempting to recite “The Lord’s Prayer”. We are with Angel after he makes the journey, when he is confined to a tiny visiting room, and subjected to the maniacally comedic mix-ups that plague low-income prisoners - it should be noted here that nearly all prisoners come from low-income households, and the overwhelming majority of them are black. We are with Angel, too, as he takes his exercise in a little holding pen that affords him an hour of sunshine, God willing, or an hour of oppressive gray skies. And we are with Angel as he wrestles with the demons that haunt him as he struggles to accept his responsibility in the death of the cult-leader who stole away his best friend.

But must we believe, in the sense of verisimilitude, that what is happening onstage is “real”? Must we believe that the performer playing Angel Cruz is Angel Cruz, or is it enough to simply allow the text to do this work? Moreover, is it just if the performer playing Angel Cruz, who may come from any walk of life, but has never felt the uncertainty that comes from being locked away from one’s family, from one’s home, and finally, away from one’s life, where some degree of autonomy exists?

To my way of thinking, I should not attempt to render Troy onstage as Browder. I should not create a role that may compel actors to compete with one another for the privilege of playing this role, for playing the role of an oppressed person is not something we should aspire to, let alone compete for. It is something that must be spoken about in plain terms, and with some distance from the event itself, so that the audience may feel some degree of this person’s pain, this person’s struggle without being exhausted by this process. Upon receiving this information in the form of a story – which communicates emotionally as well as intellectually – the audience may then choose to go out into the world again knowing that the criminal justice system may be broken, and in urgent need of repair.

I had to reckon with the fact that I was making art out of the story of a young man – unknown to me – who committed suicide at the hands of a relentless body of people composed of corrections officers and fellow inmates. How do I tell that story? I found the answer in Brecht’s model of the Street Scene. It offered aesthetic challenges that would compel me to grow as an artist, while offering a way to remind the audience that we are performers presenting a singular version of this tragedy, for the sake of increasing awareness of this young man’s plight, and the crimes committed by the people responsible for upholding the law.

While the Street Scene offered solutions to certain ethical and aesthetic challenges, I still had to figure out what to do with Troy. For this, I looked to Roberto Bolano’s *Savage Detectives*, wherein the novel’s dual protagonists never appear in the novel, but for the words of other characters.

This created a whole new challenge: How to tell a story without the protagonist? The text, in its current iteration, is composed of six monologues. In each of monologue, the speaker addresses the audience – who become different beings in different places: costumed kids roaming through Brooklyn on Halloween; fellow police officers; a murder of crows; inmates on Rikers; and, finally, Maureen’s neighbors in Bed-Stuy – as they reveal Troy’s story, piece by piece. In this way, the performers open up and speak directly to the audience, thereby expanding the boundaries of the stage to include the audience. Each character tells their own story, which happens to be about a meaningful event that included Troy. Though Troy never makes a concrete appearance onstage, he is ever-present in the imagination. This should not, however, overshadow his absence, for it is meant to evoke presence through absence. We must consider that his absence is the most tragic presence in the theater that night.

CHAPTER 3

PRE-PRODUCTION

Pre-production was a fairly quick and painless process. In early meetings, Kelley Jordan (Director) and I discussed theme, narrative, and possible production style. From the beginning, I stressed the importance of the actor. Like theorist/ practitioner Jerzy Grotowski asserted, I too believe that the actor's body, speech, and actions are key. Thus, I didn't want anything to distract from these elements, which are, to me, the most important in theatre, and especially to this play.

“What about sound?” Kelley asked. I suggested that the actors make whatever sounds the text demanded, as well as those Kelley deemed necessary. The text called for whispers to accompany Joell's monologue. The whispering acts as an onstage manifestation of Joell's paranoia. As he tells his story to a group of trick-or-treaters, he can't escape the feeling that something's gone horribly wrong, and that he is responsible for whatever goes wrong. They had to come from the performers in the space, so that we, the audience, could feel the visceral effect of voices closing in around us.

With this explanation, Kelley seemed satisfied and ready to solve whatever problems might arise. Sound Designer, Noah Murakami, was on board as well. He went off and began gathering “instruments” – that is, objects that could be used to create sounds in service of the characters' inner states. Though Noah had never worked this way before, his positive attitude and enthusiasm confirmed that I was on the right track.

When I first met with Costume Designer, Wendi Zea, our conversation turned quickly to the less-is-more model of theatre, and Wendi made notes. Each sketch she made of the characters helped me to see own vision coming to life. The palette Wendi and Kelley agreed upon – black, grays, an a few browns to add a pop – was a perfect match for my text.

During one production meeting, I asked for a couple of extra items, notably, a Morty mask, and a pair of knock-off Yeezys. The Morty mask was meant to reveal character (Joell is Morty, the kid, while Troy was Rick, the mad scientist). The Yeezys would go a long way to draw in the younger audience for whom I wrote this play.

During my first year at SIU, my adviser, Dr. Jacob Juntunen, said that one of his greatest challenges was to make an audience composed of Theater 101 students (known for being bored, unruly, and totally indifferent towards theater), laugh *and* cry. While he added the extra challenge of doing so within the span of a 5- to 10-minute play, I settled with doing so with my full-length thesis play.

One of the problems I saw early on was that we weren't including much in our writing that made this demographic lean forward with the enthusiasm of someone who is being let into a world both strange and familiar. Yes, we include emotional terrain common to all of us, but we rarely include the objects and icons that this demographic has come to identify with themselves. So, I challenged myself to learn more about the world as they see it, and what matters to them. Many are obsessed with fashion. The phenomenon of Yeezys was particularly fascinating and troubling. These shoes are iconic of a whole subculture, many of whom attend THEA 101, so I made a point of speaking to them with this text.

The Yeezys, therefore, had to be present. But this notion was challenged early in the process, as budget quickly became a primary concern for the design team. I knew that I could acquire a pair of knock-off Yeezys for \$20.00 to \$50.00, so I suggested that I buy the pair to be used in performance and then keep them after the show closed. This was shot down quickly as it was not professional. While this was frustrating, I saw that it was unprofessional, and also posed liability issues. I fell back and gave the problem time to work itself out.

It was around this time that I shared a practical philosophy with Wendi. “I grew up painting graffiti and playing basketball,” I said. “I have a rebellious streak, but it is always in service of principled art. And, on the basketball court, I played point-guard. My job is to know my teammates, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and set them up to play the best game possible.”

Wendi nodded. I believe we made a connection in that moment. She saw that I wasn't her enemy, I wasn't going to fight her on this. I was a collaborator willing to give and accept compromises. I was thrilled when, some weeks later, she announced that we had indeed acquired a pair of knock-off Yeezys.

Scenic Designer Christian Kurka brought wonderful ideas to the table early on. He was on-board with the less-is-more aesthetic we had all adopted and brought in an abstract model of the space itself. It included an open performing space – it would be performed in the round, as I had hoped – with three screens that would enable us to use projections floating above. While I was skeptical about the projections (should we spend valuable resources on something that may only distract us from the actors?), I came to see the value in having them. If we chose effective images, we could create an effect similar to Brecht's Epic Theatre: Projections, if used correctly, could drive home a given scene's point with a potent image. And drawing the audience's attention to something other than the performers may create the feeling of being inside of the action one moment, then being pulled out of it another, only to be drawn in once again. All exciting stuff.

Lastly, I met with Lighting Designer, Sam Costello. Sam brought in a number of captivating images that captured different atmospheres that could be used to communicate

different feels for various moments within the text. Sam bounced ideas off of Christian and Wendi, and the three of them combined to create a vital, functional performance space.

Early on, when they announced that I would not have a budget to build, it seemed that people expected me to be upset. On the contrary: I didn't want a budget to build. I only wanted what I believed the text would need: a budget for the little costume pieces. Theatre, to my way of thinking, doesn't need to be much more than the games we played as children, coupled with a need to tell a certain story for a specific purpose, and the training to do so with a combination of serious technique and a sense of defiant playfulness.

Revisions

I've thought often of the reason for the shift I made to the play from an open, narrative driven piece to a series of monologues. I know the answer, but I'm hesitant to speak it: I don't trust my collaborators. This is not meant to be a knock against them, but rather an interrogation of experimental work. Namely: Of what use is an experimental form, if it confounds one's collaborators? (See Appendix C for the first complete draft of *800 Days of Solitude*.)

When I taught Play Analysis, one of my primary objectives was to encourage my students to look deeply into a play at both the micro and macro level. What does the play mean to you? How do you tell that story, moment by moment, in such a way that the audience feels as though they are your collaborators?

Most of those students looked at me askew. "Isn't that the director's job," one asked. While that student was technically correct, I argued that it was also the performer's job. What kind of performer reads the text only to be told how to perform it by someone else? While the actor's art is undoubtedly an interpretive one, I want performers to command more agency in the presentation of a given text. I want performers to give the director, the playwright, more than

they expect. In short, I want performers to become more autonomous. This is not a dig at my collaborators, but a serious question every playwright must ask oneself before they ask a company to perform a given work. Is it right for that company?

In the instance of the first narrative-driven draft, the play is not quite right for Kelley. If the performers are to become more autonomous, and without the benefit of stage directions to guide them, the director must have a working knowledge of various performance styles. Then the director and performers must sculpt a fully fleshed-out performance from a spare text. When I shared these aspirations with Kelley, early on, her eyes glossed over, and I heard her groan. Though she may have been joking, I believe that she was also implying that I was about to subject her to a process that would be more painful than need be. Thus I wanted to give Kelley, and the actors, something they could sink their teeth into, rather than a text that would confound them

U.K. based playwright Tim Crouch said in an interview, “I need the audience to see the play in their heads. I’m interested in what their ears see. It comes to them as much through their ears as their eyes. I’m very interested in when there is a contradiction between what the eye sees and what the ear sees. All of these things are geared to try and engage an audience in feeling needed and of being co-authors of the experience” (Jester and Svich, pg 223)

When the play was open, it asked a lot from my collaborators. After teaching play analysis, and seeing firsthand that many of my potential collaborators are not prepared to make many decisions on their own, to exercise any meaningful degree of autonomy, I saw a glimpse into the future: The director would get a play that was more open than anything they had dealt with before, maybe even read, and they would progress quickly from nervous excitement to panic-fueled overcompensation to despair. They would either be going through the motions,

leaning too heavily upon me to make decisions, or, worse, inaction fueled by frustration. This is not my intention.

Note that I am not bemoaning my situation, or the state of theatre education. I'm articulating a discrepancy between my idiosyncratic approach to theatre and that of people trained in more traditional ways. I was fortunate enough to identify this discrepancy in the early stages of discussing my work with my collaborators.

I took the initiative to correct the problem textually before we got into meetings and rehearsals. Here's the trick: I made the play more accessible for my collaborators without sacrificing my original impulse to make a work in which the audience would be my co-authors.

The monologue form that I decided to use creates the conditions for the performers to speak directly with the audience, in some cases leaving space for the audience to respond. It gives a lot of information, in the vehicle of story, while being porous enough to invite the audience to try and fill in the gaps.

It occurred to me that they ought to speak to as many specific members of the audience as possible. Of course, they should aim some of their speeches at a broad swath of audience, to rest their minds, to reset. The pattern will establish itself, and the audience will know that, at any given moment, they may be approached. Thus, they will not be permitted to sit quietly, in the safe space of their minds. Rather, they will be alert, knowing that at any moment they may become the target of a performer, and everyone will be watching the interaction (as it is in jail/prison).

The monologue form, too, was revealing itself to be a formidable mode of storytelling. We are confronted with characters who have affected, or been affected by, Troy. Each character reveals as much about themselves as Troy, and, moreover, about the world in which they/ we

live. What we sacrifice in velocity, and the need to watch competitions between at least two competing parties (a la sport), we win in economy of thought, idea, action, and, for future, the ability to pull any and everything in existence into the frame of the play.

I return again and again to Roberto Bolano (*The Savage Detectives*), wherein the twin protagonists never appear in the book, but through the words of others. The theatrical event, then, becomes an ensemble guiding the audience through the twists and turns of a multilayered story, in the space, as simply as possible. The performance takes on a choreographic quality, with occasional lapses (from reality to unreality, tragic to comic, audience address to dialogues, serious to silly, staged to improvised, etc.).

Moreover, in doing so, we give the audience the gift that film can never achieve: We compel the audience to collaborate with us. This will turn off many theatre-goers, to be sure (those who would rather be given Gerber instead of a hearty home-cooked meal), but we can't please everybody all of the time.

Thus, the sense of risk becomes real: How will the audience, a paying audience, react to this experiment? I must redefine success for myself, and this project specifically. It will be the foundation of my theatrical endeavors moving forward.

Auditions

Auditions are perhaps my least favorite part of the process. Each performer stands before the director's table and, though they perform their monologues dutifully, only the most skilled actors can do so with any subtext other than, "Love me." This is off-putting, because, as a human, I love all other humans. But the competitive nature of this process reminds me of King Lear's daughters vying for Lear's favor: those undeserving will work hard to try and convince you that they deserve love; while the truly deserving refuse to do the dance.

Still, a handful of performers stood out.

Briar Fortkamp's energy could be felt across the great divide between the stage and us. Kelley leaned over and whispered to me that she's been wanting to work with him. "He's a hard worker, and people are afraid to cast him in dramatic roles because of how good he is at comedy." This is intriguing, but I wonder what role he'll play. He looks older than the other males auditioning. At this moment, I could see him as a candidate for Gallo.

But the front-runner for Gallo was Rob. In his first audition, he was almost perfect: His voice carries effortlessly: he had clearly broken his monologue into sections, playing each beat in a simple, compelling way; and I know his work ethic from previous collaborations. He, too, is clearly older than the other performers.

Abbie Warhus gave what was perhaps the most interesting audition monologue. Her character told the story of a relative who cautioned against walking out a window at the top of the stairs. Then that relative, under mysterious circumstances, did just that. She walked right out the window. During the monologue, Abbie climbed up on a chair. As she told us of the woman walking out the window, while standing upon the chair, Abbie pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, and let it fall to the ground. This was by far the most creative moment performed by any of those auditioning. Most performers simply stand in one place, waving their hands about and raising their voice during what they perceive to be the climax. Abbie, on the other hand, is disciplined, controlled, projecting effortlessly, and transforming the space with her words. I put her on my short list for the crow.

Jasmine Wiley was perhaps the only person present who could truthfully communicate the emotional weight of Maureen's situation, unless an actress I haven't yet met were to appear at the audition. Having consistently worked with Jasmine since my first Big Muddy Short, I

know that she gets my work, works hard, and is equally skilled at playing comedy and tragedy. Her audition monologue was suspect (something from O'Neill's obscure works), but she still somehow managed to engage my emotions. She is older than most people present, and that's a good thing: Kelley and I put her on our short list for Maureen.

Tim Ellis, who would wind up playing Georgie, did not immediately capture my attention. His audition was strong – he has a physicality to his work that is hard to teach (I would later learn that he was in the U.S. Army), but it wasn't until he read cold for Georgie that I knew he was the one. Georgie requires a certain kind of performer: One who is fearless, can put his ego aside while playing the role, and will not be afraid to say nasty things to random audience members. Tim proved he could do this in callbacks – while performing the text – and I was all in.

Izzy Graves was the last person we saw. I know Izzy. She went from a solid student in my Theatre 101 course, to a standout student in Play Analysis. Then she showed up to auditions and floored us with her piece. She is also a hard worker, and showed herself to possess raw talent that, if given room to grow, may become a formidable force.

When taken together, I saw that this was the best possible ensemble. Though I should note that Martin Rasheed made a strong impression upon me (from the first moment I met him in Play Analysis), as did Jahi Parham (who was unknown to me until now). I may not get to work with them before I move on, and this fact saddens me.

Rehearsal

The first table reading revealed much about the play, as well as the ensemble. The play is powerful, moving, and surprisingly funny. Especially in the beginning, before we realize the

weight and the relentless oppression that imprisons Troy, the characters are jittery, vulnerable, drenched in pathos.

Still, some actors were indicating: They telegraphed the heavy ending by reading each line lugubriously (“You are now watching a tragedy,” they seemed to say.). They often missed the humor in the monologues (I asked them to study standup comedians for instruction on how to deliver their monologues). The first four monologues are full of jokes and humorous perspectives on subjects that are important to the speakers and are only loosely associated with Troy’s struggle.

The question is: Is this in the writing? Or is it the early reactions of the performer, and their own clichés? I knew I must keep vigilant watch. If it’s the writing, I intended to correct it. If it’s the performers, I had to trust that Kelley will guide the performers to more truthful performances.

Ideas for revisions flooded my mind during the discussion:

The Crow’s language must be made strange.

Maureen’s monologue may be made into a perception shift, wherein we think she’s describing a family reunion, prompted by Troy’s return home, until she reveals that, in fact, it’s a funeral.

Officer Case’s monologue must reveal her complicated feelings about arresting Troy. She’s a rookie who’s made her first collar. While she’s bragging about it to her peers, doubt creeps in, and she is left wondering if she did the right thing.

I must layer in the tape, and what it means to the story, as well as the performance.

All good ideas, but I wonder if I'll be able to implement them fully before my deadline? I don't want to create obstacles to the performers memorizing their lines, naturally, but I must also make sure to give the play its proper attention.

The following day, before another table reading, Kelley and I discussed the tone of the reading, and how the performers must allow comedy to mingle with tragedy in the space as it does in the play. The impact of Troy's death will land, and carry more weight, if we are allowed to laugh and forget his struggle momentarily.

Before this reading begins, Kelley asks the actors to read the words as they are written (too many ad-libs the previous night). I second the notion, relating the attention to detail I employ when writing.

After Joell reads (he has put some thought into his work since last night, and his performance shows it), Kelley asks him a series of questions meant to get Briar thinking about the allusions and given circumstances that pepper his speech. This proves useful to Briar and me. Taking notes, I discover ways to make Joell's monologue more compelling, tighter.

We move on to Izzy, who plays Case, and I can see that she, too, has put thought into her work since last night. This is comforting: I feel that Kelley and I have a solid cast, willing to do the work. As Izzy reads, I'm reminded of the need to make Case a rookie. It is her job to bring criminals to justice. But there's something in the way Troy behaves that screams guilt, but whispers innocence. She must do the work of listening more closely to the evidence at hand, and, more importantly, to her heart.

Tim (who plays Georgie), performs the following day. Kelley stops him occasionally to ask questions. "Why do you think he says, 'I, I, I' there?" Tim has no answers. "Because he has a

heart,” Kelley responds. “He knows he’s the reason Troy is in the bing, and he feels bad about it. That’s in the writing, the punctuation. It’s so telling.”

This kind of thing helps me so much. I’m normally way too sensitive towards the things I’ve botched. My shortcomings loom large and blot out whatever I’ve done right, so I rarely need someone to tell me what I’ve done wrong. But what about what’s working? I need to be aware of this stuff, too. If everything’s wrong, why keep on? If nothing’s working, why even try? Not that I need to be patted on the bum and told what a good boy I am, but, man, we need to find a way of talking about the stuff that’s working, so that writers can build their toolkits.

When I got home, after rehearsal, I went for a walk. While walking in the darkness and thinking about the performers who will be in the space for the duration of the show, I asked myself what they would do (Don't know why I was thinking this, but it probably has to do with the way transitions orient characters and scenes within the play's structure, and so give me something to lean into as I write). While that’s mostly Kelley’s problem, there are ways I can contribute, I can help this process.

What would happen, I thought, if Case glared at Joell as Joell’s monologue ends, and Case takes the stage? Likewise, what would happen if the Crow called out in the darkness as Case caps her monologue? These transitions seem full of rich potential to introduce characters and scenes, while lending the play a more solid foundation.

Taking it a step further, what if designated performers spoke the scene titles and stage directions between scenes, as part of the transitions? This would give those performers something to do, a moment to drop character, and it will also lend the piece a ritualistic feel, which will further reinforce Noah’s live/ acoustic sound design.

Kelley asks me to attend the first rehearsal that our sound designer, Noah, will attend. He was having trouble coming up with live/ acoustic sounds to accompany the text. This put me in a strange situation, as I promised myself to give everyone room to create, to contribute, to add themselves to this piece. I'm disheartened, but I also see an opportunity:

How can I suggest the sounds I think the piece needs in such a way that Noah can follow my lead, and then run with it to create his own sounds?

At rehearsal, I ask Noah to look at the text and tell me about the sounds he's considering, and what moments/ words compel him to add those sounds? As he does, the problem presents itself quickly: He's looking for moments within each monologue that suggest literal sounds. The car, boots crunching in gravel, etc., etc. But we need sounds that are borne of the characters' emotions, sounds that communicate those emotions to the audience.

This challenge is equally daunting to me. So, I said to Noah, "I don't want to tell you which sounds to put where, because it would be akin to giving the actors a line reading." But Noah wants me to suggest sounds and bring in objects and instruments to generate these sounds. Again, I don't want to tell Noah what to do, but Noah is genuinely interested in what I have to say. He wants to contribute to telling this story, so I must contribute to him.

Mentally, I return to one of my primary goals: To be a positive presence throughout this process. This means that I should give creators room to create, yes, but I also must share my knowledge and experience in moments where the cast and crew need guidance.

I draw upon my experience with Bread & Puppet, where as performers we make sounds with our mouths, bodies, and junk instruments.. Thus, I begin with questions inspired by close reading of my own play.

For instance: What kind of sounds may reveal Joell's mind to us, while at the same time influencing his behavior during the scene? Almost as soon as I've asked the question, a response presents itself: Whispering. Joell is telling his story to a group of trick or treaters. And they must be having reactions to Joell's tale of Troy and a robbery gone wrong.

They whisper. They gossip. And this whispering is deeply upsetting to Joell. What are they saying? Are they calling the cops? Are they going to rat?

I demonstrate and then ask the cast to whisper, *sotto voce*, into their cupped hands. Then I ask Joell to read the text. The result was stunning. It immediately added another layer of tension to Joell's situation, and another outlet of expression for the performers. I watched Kelley's face light up as she watched and listened.

Then, as Joell read, I suggested that the whispering die out for a moment, so that Joell may speak in silence. As Joell's monologue reached its peak, I thought that we needed one more sound to tighten the screws. I picked up two sticks that I brought from home and clicked them together in a staccato rhythm.

The moment popped. It was electric. Joell was compelled to run by the whispers; the sticks clacking revealed his fear. As he speaks his final words, everyone falls silent. After a moment of silence, he leaves the space, and the new energy in the space is palpable. We've taken a problem, found a solution, and thereby turned a challenge into the inspiration, the foundation, for the performance.

I will layer sounds into the script at precise moments where they will enhance the story.

After being sick for a solid week – sinusitis, so writing was physically impossible – I decided I need to reevaluate my ambitions. I was obviously working too hard and set up too

many time-consuming, labor-intensive goals for myself. Each process differs, of course, but I knew I should not aim to make seismic shifts at every opportunity to revise.

Rather, I should listen during rehearsal, cut what needs cutting, clarify what is unclear, and commit myself to making this draft the best it can be.

Still unhappy with the ending, I decided to revise Maureen's scene. Does it pay off questions in a compelling way, that leaves room for the audience to interpret the play's meaning? What if Maureen draws Troy's body on the ground, for instance, with the chalk, as though he was killed there, on the sidewalk?)

During a run, Izzy approached me. She performed the interrogation moments from her monologue. Before she did this my mind was wandering (the lights? the water? which unpaid bill?), but the moment she locked eyes with me, I was rapt. With each question, I found myself drawn into her performance more deeply. I felt, in rapid succession: Intrigue, fascination, intimidation, fear, loathing, and the need for flight. In short, her performance was working because the text reflects my intention to connect with the audience before we confront, provoke, prod, intimidate, cajole, debate, and challenge them, to name a few.

The rest of the run-through went well. I made significant cuts, mostly whole passages that did not push the story forward or introduce us to new information. The show moved more quickly, but people were still memorizing. This was not discouraging, as I could see that the performers had been working. Each performer had made significant strides in character, text, and performance.

Watching the scene between Gallo and Georgie, I learned something new. If you listen to the dialogue, you can hear these two jockeying for power, for control, to establish who's boss. Georgie might have a shot if the fight was a fair one, but it is far from fair. Gallo has weapons

(he should have an expandable baton, pepper spray, plastic cuffs, etc.), and backup. Georgie would have backup, too, if the prisoners, who far outnumber guards, were more fearless. Thus, the scene is all about Georgie's front (Georgie: I'm the man in here! This is my world!), and how Gallo knocks him down a peg.

Specific choices in blocking must help to tell this story. I did not put in the stage directions that Gallo physically restrains Georgie because I thought that the lines were communicating the need for those decisions to be made. And yet, before this run, no choices had been made, other than to have them walk around, huffing and speaking loudly.

The more I watch a scene, the more it says to me. As I saw Georgie defy Gallo's order to get to work by delaying the inevitable, and instead doing pushups, a little voice inside of me spoke up: Gallo sees Georgie down on the ground and takes the opportunity to put Georgie in his place. He puts his boot squarely in Georgie's back on the downswing of Georgie's push-up, pinning Georgie to the ground.

When I suggested to Kelley that Rob (Gallo) impose some kind of force upon Tim (Georgie), she responded with a quizzical look. I tried to finesse the words, to try and get her to arrive at a solution to the problem herself, but she still wasn't grasping what I was after. So, I finally said, simply, "Ask Rob to use his boot to pin Tim to the ground."

This lesson harkens back to my original intention with the whole experiment: Leave the text as open as possible, allow the director to stage the text in whatever way one feels it should be staged. But I am expecting too much of directors in training. A practiced, skilled director will read a line and eventually the line will speak for itself. Within its specific context (of event, character, and moment), there will only be so many possible interpretations. It seems, sadly, that

people are less inclined to think and act with a reasonable degree of autonomy than they are to experiment and play and embrace risk as a key ingredient to making transcendent work.

During the final run through, it became apparent that the actors were relishing in each moment they share with the audience. As I watched them playing their monologues around the space, approaching various watchers, I leaned forward. I've always thought that real theatre ought to be incomplete without the audience. Thus, readers theatre, while it serves some useful purposes, is largely inadequate to communicate what the theatrical experience might be: The true piece of theatre requiring an engaged audience in order to function. And, if we're making theatre, how can we restrain it to staged readings?

While this may fall beyond the scope of the playwright, I am also intrigued by the energy in the room. With *800 Days*, it was mostly positive, with performers engaging as an ensemble. They help each other at every opportunity, they are genuinely friendly with one another upon arrival, as well as in the heat of group sound-work and transitions. Though the play is composed of monologues, there is no discernible competition between the actors?. I am exceedingly pleased with this, as I've always thought that actor training that feeds into the high-school musical model (we're all decent, talented people, but only one of us can land the lead role) is detrimental to the culture of theatre. To create a piece where everyone has their moment to shine has neutralized much of the energy that would be wasted by unnecessary animosity.

Thus, one of the playwright's many tasks should be to create work that encourages the company to become a healthy, functional community— One that asks of each member to put their own personal desires, idiosyncrasies, and ambitions on the backburner for a while, and simply bring these characters, these moments, this story, to the audience, and in turn invite the audience to become part of this community.

Theatre (the art and the place) is uniquely situated to provide this service. If we are serious about community-building, we ought to consider ourselves equally in service of the art, the audience, and the community.

CHAPTER 4

PRODUCTION

The production process is perhaps my favorite time to work in the theatre. As a person who has studied a great deal of theory, and internalized much of it, production allows me to put theory into practice, and to test theories in the space with my collaborators. While I love theory, I'm well aware of the fact that the majority of what passes for theory is not practicable. Thus, I welcome the opportunity to move from the page to the stage, and with contributions from my collaborators, find ways to make this text work. Then, in performance, we see it all come together. And we see whether our theories are successful through the results of our practice.

Performance

Opening night was a bit of a let-down. The audience was sparse, and they did not bring much energy to the event. They were clearly not prepared for what they were to see. As the actors approached the audience, they often froze, smiled, or spoke under their breath, again, not knowing what to expect.

While I could blame the audience, performers, or the director, I choose to take responsibility. I've created a piece that is not what people are used to seeing, especially here in Carbondale, which straddles the Midwest and the South. Though I've been told that we are in a "blue" island, personal experience has taught me that we are in a vast red sea. Will people care about this impoverished young black man from Brooklyn? The thought makes me feel anxious and sad. Sitting in the dark, I find myself watching the audience more than the performers.

Still, some moments offered a glimpse of what the piece could be. It is fascinating to watch as the performers approach other audience members. How will they react, one wonders, as each character approaches them? This is part of the show, too, and perhaps one of the more

compelling aspects of the performance. Because I can't foresee how they will react, I lean forward each time the performers interact with the audience.

For instance, as Izzy approached an audience member in the front row, she launched into interrogation mode: "Where'd you get the bag, punk?" As she progressed through the steps of an interrogation, I saw the person she was speaking to, a young man, go from an awkward smile to a look of confusion to a look of genuine fear. Though Izzy is small in stature, she is lion-hearted.

Though the evening began as a downer, the laughter and tears offered by the audience serve to remind me that the play is the thing, and, even though the house wasn't packed, the play itself is still funny, compelling, and deeply moving.

The second night is much livelier. The house is near capacity, and I see many familiar faces. Not that I prefer having certain people in the audience, but with an audience full of performers, I foresee unpredictable, challenging exchanges between performers and audience members.

Georgie's monologue always makes me nervous. Because he is so aggressive, I never know how people will take his shenanigans. He aggressively bullies the audience as though they are fellow inmates in the juvenile quarters of Rikers Island. He makes people feel uncomfortable. If he's really on, he makes people want to leave.

Thus, when Tim approached a young man in the military, and asked: "What would you do if I hugged you right now?", and the young man looked, smirked, then said, "I wouldn't want to do that if I was you", I couldn't have been happier. I've been waiting for someone to stand up to Georgie.

My intention with Georgie is to intimidate the audience, to scare them, of what awaits those who find themselves in juvenile. It's a scary place for those who don't belong there. It is

equally so for those who keep returning, but they learn to hide this from others. What most people fail to recognize is that everybody there is afraid: the guards, the inmates, the visitors. It's a horrible place. Georgie is meant to act as a clarion call, to show, in no uncertain terms, that jail is the last place on earth anybody would ever want to be.

And yet, for all that, Tim plays Georgie with such relish that the comedy lands. Again, people laugh nonstop during Georgie's section. And the wind is taken out of the room when Gallo shows up.

Tonight, there is a post-show talkback, led by dramaturg Martine Green-Rogers. Though I've always been skeptical of the usefulness of talkbacks (they often wind up as intellectual wrestling matches), Martine is enthusiastic and generous in spirit. She got the audience to share what they saw and how it made them feel. Many people called the play beautiful. Just as many claimed it made them sad. I was waiting for someone to say that they intended to check on the welfare of juvenile offenders in their community, but this didn't happen. I wallowed in that failure until my adviser, Dr. Jacob Juntunen chimed in.

Dr. Juntunen said that when I decided to make the play a series of monologues, he thought I was going through a phase, and that I would return to the previous form after I saw that the monologues didn't work. When he acknowledged that, indeed, the monologues worked, I felt the specter of failure depart the space.

The third night was much like the first, in that the audience was sparse and low energy. Or so I thought. Once the play began, the audience immediately engaged with the performers. When Joell asks, "What are you supposed to be?", the audience member responded, "Myself. And that's good enough for today". I was proud of this audience member for standing up to the bullying. Of course, the audience dissolved into laughter as Joell says, "My bad."

Then, as the Crow stalked the space, collecting twigs, I saw people looking at her, wanting to help. When she approached one audience member, to ask for help, the audience member gave her what she asked for: a bunch of trash from the woman's purse. While Abbie wasn't too pleased with the materials, we were all thrilled that the audience member was so keen to help.

I was also thrilled to hear an older man respond to Georgie's inquiry of the man's age: "None of your F***ing business!". Again, I want the audience members to stand up to mistreatment. I want them to say, "No, you will not treat me like I'm not human". This will inevitably beg the question: Why is it the inmate, then, that makes them feel that way instead of the guard? The answer to that question is simple, if not obvious. The inmate is as much Troy's enemy as most of the authority figures. When we see how Gallo treats Georgie, we should realize where Georgie learned this behavior. It is my hope that people will despise Georgie, and then feel sorry for him when Gallo invades the space and bullies the young man.

Closing afternoon was bittersweet. The audience was a good size, and they brought good energy, but everybody involved in the production was sad to be performing in our last show. But the following Wednesday, when we performed for five groups of high school students, our spirits were lifted once more. After the first show, all the students said they loved it. They were drawn into Maureen's story, and felt the gut punch of learning that Roy had committed suicide. As they prepared to leave, many asked: When can we see the full show?

To tell them the time had already passed had a mixed effect upon me. I was sad that we couldn't share the full performance with these young people, but I was also gratified that, after seeing a sample, they wanted to see more. We're talking about high school students, who

generally never admit to liking anything. So, in that sense, I had succeeded in writing a play that would engage young people.

Student Reactions

As part of an extra credit assignment, I asked students to attend *800 Days*, and respond to three questions:

- 1) What was your favorite part of the play?
- 2) What was your least favorite part of the play?
- 3) Was Troy guilty?

The first two questions are simple, direct. I wanted students to tell me directly what they liked and disliked about the play. I assured them that I wanted them to pull no punches. The last question appears to be direct, too, but it is deceptive. To answer the last question intelligently, one must really be engaged by the play, which requires being present with the performers, and reflecting upon what one experienced well after the lights went down on the play.

To the first question (What was your favorite part of the play?), I received many interesting responses. But the overwhelming majority of them pointed to Maureen's monologue as their favorite part of the play. This is not surprising as the ending is what we take home with us. We walk out into the night talking about what happened in the end. Each play poses a dramatic question. If the answer pays off what came before in an inevitable but surprising way, we feel rewarded for the effort we gave to watching the play. The question the play posed was: Will Troy survive this ordeal? It was paid off in Maureen's monologue, but not before I suggested that he may come home. When we realize he's not coming home, delivered in a single line about his funeral, it's like a punch to the gut.

Aristotle said that spectacle was the least important aspect of the tragedy. But my students seemed bent on disproving this theory. While they were moved by Maureen's speech, the thing that drives home the impact of Troy's death more than anything else is the writing on the sidewalk, Maureen's personal statistics:

"How many times has he called home to discuss his struggles in med school," Maureen asks before slashing the floor with white chalk: "Zero."

"How many times has Troy brought his family over for Sunday dinner," Maureen asks, before slashing the floor once more with the chalk. "Zero."

"How many sons I got," Maureen asks with finality, before gently making her final circle. "Zero."

Even as I write this, my eyes tear up. Her words – a kind of poetic equation of memory, desire and the negation thereof – accompanied by the spectacle of numbers written in white chalk upon the black floor – a physical action that becomes an onstage manifestation of her life and her feelings about the turn it has taken – are distilled into a single, potent image. I have succeeded in engaging the audience's thoughts and emotions with this spectacle. And the spectacle, in this case, has overshadowed the plot.

To the question of what they disliked most, I received a wide variety of responses. For the sake of clarity, I will only address those that respond to the uncomfortable environment in which they found themselves.

For instance, one student commented on how he was made uncomfortable by Officer Case's interrogation. I believe this is an important point. It is instructive to point out that the discomfort that student described was not borne of boredom but, rather, the play was landing. Troy, too, was made uncomfortable by the time – an infinitesimal eternity – he was held in

interrogation. Time moves differently when one is held captive by another. Even if police have been made to look like heroes, when one finds oneself in a jail cell, reality is distorted: The police become the criminals. The sweet embrace of sleep becomes the realm of nightmares. To play on the yard makes one more vulnerable to attack. Thus, the student who felt discomfort from? Case's interrogation was not criticizing an unnecessary passage in the play. He was telling me that that moment worked.

Another student said that Georgie's monologue was "terrible," and that she wanted to see it cut. To be sure, Georgie is not the kind of person I want to hang out with after work on a Friday night. But that is precisely the point: Georgie's antics are meant to shake people up, to educate the audience on what it's like to be locked up with people who really ought to be buried in a hole for the protection of society. But there is a twist to all of this: Georgie wasn't born that way. He was made that way by society. Jails and group homes are not nurturing environments. They destroy the children they are meant to protect. But the reason this student cited was a valid one: The actor playing Georgie called this particular student a "stupid bitch." Again, while her reason is valid, it is not about a deficiency in the script. Rather, it's about the way Georgie makes people feel—that is, uncomfortable, unable to defend themselves, unsafe. So, again, that moment worked.

Another student said that he didn't like that the characters were talking to him, and he couldn't respond. This is unfortunate as the play, and the performers, make space to do just that. This student is expressing discontent with the rules that the theatre, and society at large, have imposed upon him. He feels that, when people are speaking harshly to him in public space, he cannot respond. This is deeply disturbing. What kind of world do we live in where people are rewarded for repressing that which must be expressed? Those audience members that did

respond may or may not have felt the freedom to respond to the performers, yet they did so anyway. They were compelled to respond. And their fellow audience members approved or disapproved of a given speaker's responses based upon the degree of resistance to the characters expressed by the speaker. That my play created space for audience members to become part of the play is exciting. But what's truly important here is that my play created a space in which audience members could stand up and say, "I will not be treated this way." I wish the aforementioned student had made better use of the moment where he was invited to speak.

Lastly, I'll discuss the question as to whether Troy was guilty. There are only two possible answers to this question: Yes, or No. However, as I expected, students would modify their answers with opinions. He was guilty, many said, but the punishment wasn't fitting. He wasn't guilty, many said, because he tried to return the bag. That kind of response shows that certain students privilege emotion over reason. Not necessarily a bad thing, but it is important to note that my play is engaging both reason and emotion, intellect and heart.

By far the most sophisticated response was the briefest. One student wrote that "Troy was not guilty because he was never convicted". That response, coming from a student who had never been to the theatre, represents the ultimate mark of success for me. To arrive at such a conclusion required her to watch the play with a degree of detachment. How could anyone who was swept away by the plot, of pity for Troy, articulate such a perfect response to such a complex question? Secretly, I had hoped some audience member would arrive at that very conclusion. However, I knew I'd never know if anyone had arrived there if I suggested it somehow. Throughout this past year, as I've listened to the responses of countless peers, professors and students, I've waited to hear that response. For how can the criminal justice system be deserving of such an important responsibility, if they dole out death sentences to

children who haven't stood trial? Is this not the ultimate failure of justice? That this student arrived at that complex conclusion, based upon words I've written, affirmed my belief that I don't have to spell everything out for the audience.

And yet, for all that, how could I feel as though I've succeeded if the other side of the coin – the police, the prisons and their guards – are denied an equally uninflected perspective? The last student response I'll mention did not respond to my three questions. Rather, she saw the play and decided to share her thoughts with me in person. A criminal justice major, she intends to become a police officer when she graduates. Perhaps the toughest test *800 Days* could face would be to move a police officer, or a future police officer in training, to consider the lives they affect in their daily work.

The student I'm speaking of said to me that the portrayal of the situation was even from all sides. She saw how people who supported Troy could feel the way they felt. She, too, was moved by Troy's plight. And yet, she knows that a policeman must somehow rise above their emotions to protect and serve the community. So, when she said that Officer Case was unapologetically human, revealing the doubt that comes with making calls that directly affect people's lives, I leaned forward. While she did not ultimately take Troy's side – we had witness testimony from Joell, implicating Troy as an accomplice – she said that the story made her realize how important it was to know all the sides of a given story, and to give equal weight to each. For, if this was ignored, as in the case of Troy, Kalief Browder, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and so many others who have wrongfully died at the hands of the police, the status quo would persist.

This, to me, represents the play's most far reaching effect. I knew it wouldn't be difficult to marshal support for Troy from the black community, the liberals or left-leaning community.

But to change the thinking of a future police officer? That would be difficult, if not impossible.

Hence, this student, with whom I had no conversations about the play beforehand, reflected to me what I had hoped to achieve all along: a direct change in the way the police treat people.

Hopefully she won't forget this as time goes on. I know I won't.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the following, I intend to discuss my conclusions. I will begin with the years leading up to my arrival in Carbondale. Then I will discuss my previous works and how they influenced *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*. I will then revisit my goals and weigh in on whether they were achieved. Then, I will speculate on what the future holds, both artistically, and with regard to the general direction my life is going.

Before SIU

Before being accepted to the graduate playwriting program at SIU, I lived and worked in West Glover, Vermont. I move there to work with the Bread & Puppet Theater. While I knew they didn't have any need for my plays, I have been a consistent presence in their performances since 2010. As performer, Peter Schumann demands a high level of discipline, absolute flexibility (to work with or without mask, to speak, sing and dance, to become whatever the show requires of you), as well as the ability to think for oneself, and thereby color performances with your own unique qualities.

I met many people there, both locals and traveling artists. I was often met with confused looks when telling people that I was a playwright. "Then, what are you doing here?" they'd ask, knowing well that Schumann uses his own mixture of found text, his own writing, and what I call composing in the space. It is this last technique that I gravitated towards. I knew that Schumann didn't just make stuff up. Rather, through years of experimenting, he discovered theatrical forms that worked within many different narrative contexts. The Suitors, for instance, were a group of well-dressed, pasty men in suits. They were invented as the relentless pursuers of Odysseus' wife, Penelope. But they served equally well as the benefactors of a rotten system

that grows fat from the labor of others. They are no doubt cut from the same cloth as Uncle Fatso, the archetype of war profiteering and exploitative business practices. Their movements – raising a hand, pointing a finger to the sky; their bodies slowly rising and falling; then flailing strips of red cloth as they are inevitably struck by Odysseus’ mythical arrow – act as their only means of communication.

This image, one among many, speaks to the side of myself that has been denied all along by my colleagues in the theatre. I was first a visual artist. From my humble beginnings as a graffiti artist (the art that saved me from the life of serious crime so many of my childhood peers embraced), through my work as a photographer/ cameraman, I have always been a visually oriented person. I know in my heart that the best way to drive home a point, whether in text or performance, is to craft an image that unifies two or more narrative threads. The more unexpected the image is, the greater its chance of lodging itself in the hearts (emotions) and minds (intellects) of the audience. Though I have always felt this, I’ve been alternately discouraged and complimented for this aspect of myself as playwright/ artist. Thus, I am only now coming to accept it and really try to use this asset to my advantage.

For instance, when I wrote Maureen’s monologue, and the image of her writing on the sidewalk surfaced in my mind (taking me back to my own days of defacing public property), I had to silence any number of inner voices telling me that I should rely solely upon the dialogue. When Jasmine Wiley (Maureen) put white chalk to the Moe’s black floor, I knew that I had succeeded. I had created an image that was inspired by Schumann’s work, but not derivative of it. I had also created an image that served the play.

It was also during my time in West Glover that I began working consistently as a journalist. Between my job at the local paper – where I covered sports, politics, and wrote

profiles – and my work for American Theatre Magazine and HowlRound.com, I gathered stories and ideas for my work as playwright. Whether it was a beloved soccer coach who had a troubled home life, or a reclusive goat hoarder, every person I met, every story I gathered, offered raw material waiting to be shaped into a play. Likewise, every theatre-maker I interviewed – Anne Bogart, Jose Rivera, Steve Cosson, Caridad Svich, to name a few – all heroes of mine – offered new ideas and approaches that I might employ in making new work.

This text is full of their ideas, as is *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*. Their influence is present and fluid. To them, I am indebted.

Previous Works

During my first year at SIU, I wrote a full-length play called *The Goat Jumped Over the Fucking Fence*. While I enjoyed writing the play, I feel that it failed to fully engage the audience. They laughed at many of the jokes (the play was a mixture of comedy and drama), but I couldn't tell whether the heaviness of the situation was landing. Gabby, the reporter at the center of the play's action, is struggling with the trauma of accidentally killing a motorcyclist. Just as Nan is haunted by her dead husband, Gabby is haunted by the ghost of the cyclist. Up to this point in my work as playwright, I had been fascinated by ghosts upon the stage. I'm interested in onstage manifestations of internal phenomena – which is what ghosts are: apparitions of a troubled mind.

I remain fascinated by ghosts, but I was leaning upon them too heavily. By putting the ghosts onstage, I was indulging my desire to overexplain things to the audience. Thus, when the idea for *800 Days* started kicking around in my head, it occurred to me that I should challenge myself to keep the dead off the stage. Troy's absence would be one of the key elements of my dramaturgy. It would create a series of challenges that, if faced head-on, would generate clear, compelling choices. And the void where Troy should be would invite the audience to fill that

space with a mixture of what the characters said about Troy, and what each individual audience member would bring to the material.

My second full-length play, *Devil's Night*, employed a similar device. Erik's father, based upon Ajax, commits suicide before the lights rise on the play. That action compels all that follow. As Erik wrestles with the crimes committed by his father – slaughtering every animal in the neighborhood, including Tele's goat – the city, as well as Erik and Tele's friendship, burns. While I was mostly pleased with the play, I still felt I couldn't include as much of the world in the frame of the play as I had hoped. The interactions between the characters were surface level at best. To go deeper within the characters would have required many, many more pages. But the plot already seemed to drag so I did not want to go that route. So, as I geared up for my next play, it occurred to me that I should try to write something where narrative – storytelling – would be a significant part of the theatrical event. I needed something that moved faster, something that encouraged confession, something less encumbered by the clunky movements of the stage.

While I've written at least twenty-seven short plays since my first year at SIU, perhaps the most important one is *Uprooting Oaks*, which was based upon a newspaper article about a man who was killed by a stray bullet. The play, while running a mere 6 minutes, tells a man's life story within the amount of time it takes for a bullet to exit the barrel of a pistol, and enter the man's brain. The play is essentially a monologue. Tim's Soul, a character in the play, tells us what's happening, how Tim feels about it, and puts it all into context by narrating as his life flashes before his eyes.

I was first introduced to this mode of theatrical expression by my mentor, Carlos Murillo, who demanded that everything one need know about the play be contained in the dialogue. This idea was advanced and expanded upon when my adviser, Dr. Juntunen, suggested that conflict,

the backbone of all plays, exists in the mind of the audience. These two key concepts, accompanied by my own idea that I should write a play in which the protagonist never appears onstage, laid the theoretical foundation upon which *800 Days of Solitude* would be built.

Goals Revisited

From the outset of the process that would eventually become *800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring*, I had in mind a play that would do away with the protagonist, in order to combine dramatic and narrative storytelling upon the stage and encourage that kind of society I believe we ought to be moving towards: That is, one of direct democracy, wherein the perspectives of all participants are taken into account before making decisions that will affect the lives of each participant. In my abstract, I set two goals for myself: 1) To create a piece of theatre that dispenses with the protagonist (and thus a performer assuming they are “better” than their fellow performers due to the status of the lead), thereby creating a democratic mode of theatre, without sacrificing forward motion in the narrative, 2) to confront the audience with the story of a prisoner in order to compel them to act, or at least think, on the crimes committed by the criminal justice system.

These challenges compelled me to write a play in which the person at its center would never make a physical appearance but would instead be the subject of much of the dialogue, as well as the driving force beneath it. To many, this was an unwise decision. It’s common knowledge that monologues almost always bring a play’s momentum to a halt. While there are many potential reasons for this (if it’s true at all; recall, for instance the function of the Messenger in Greek tragedy, who brings messages of grave misfortune, colored by minute details of Antigone’s suicide, Pentheus being ripped apart by the Bacchantes, thus driving the

action nearer to its conclusion), but perhaps the primary reason is that we Americans have been trained to watch for people trying to wrest things from others.

My problem then became: How do I give each speaker a reason to speak to the audience? To have the speaker engage the audience's collective imagination to pull them from the comfortable safety of a darkened theater, and into the performance space, seemed the logical, if not perfect solution. Doing so would require the performers to speak directly to the audience, in lieu of the ether to which soliloquies are directed, as well as playing tactics and actions to try and get something from individual audience members.

This idea excited me, because it created a space in which each performance, no matter how rehearsed it was, no matter how studied the speaker was, held moments of unknown interactions between actor and audience.

I've long been devoted to John Cage's work, especially chance operations. When Cage composed *4'33*, it was his intention to allow whatever sounds that invade the space to become part of the composition: a siren, a crying baby, the A train passing beneath the building, a man coughing in the next row. I wanted to place moments in which chance could enter the play's frame, upon the stage. However, in theatre, chance tends to create work that is not only boring, but simply annoying.

How can one bring the element of chance into the theatre, then? By creating space for audience interaction. Give the actor something to say that demands a response and see what happens. Thus, when the performer playing George asks an audience member, "Hey, are you gonna eat that?", the audience member, whether one is eagerly engaged or dozing, snaps to as the comfortable boundary between performer and spectator is shattered. The audience member doesn't often speak, prompting the performer's following line, "I said: Are you gonna eat

that?”. For those who do respond, such as the elderly professor who, when asked his age by the performer playing George, said “None of your f***ing business!” they become collaborators whose contributions could not have been foreseen, thereby opening up a normally closed communications loop, wherein the performers do all the talking, and invite new voices into the fold.

Now that the audience realizes they are not safe to sleep, text, or daydream, they know they must pay attention. Especially if they want to make a meaningful contribution, as in the case of the elderly professor mentioned above. His contribution was a powerful one, as George’s intimidation tactics get old quickly. He taunts and abuses audience members, trying to get a rise, defying them to stand up for themselves, to resist his bullying- in short, to revolt.

Perhaps one of my secret goals was to compel the audience to walk out, staging their own revolution within the theatre. Though many may see such a defiant act by the audience as a failure, I welcome such a coup: When we are mistreated we ought to speak up; we ought to walk out; we ought to find other worthy endeavors to which we may give our time and attention. Though we did not have a single audience member walk out, I was thrilled by the audience members who chose to speak with the performers as though they were part of the play.

Seeing this helped me to realize another of my intentions buried beneath the challenges I faced: Through direct address the audience was compelled to act within the theatre. They were all challenged to engage with the play, to think and act for themselves. Though the play was confrontational, it was also entertaining. The audience laughs heartily at many of the jokes, eagerly awaiting the next bit of information, the next piece of the puzzle, so that they can see the picture clearly in the end.

While I did not state this goal up front, I have taken a page from Anne Bogart's book. Bogart once said to me, in an interview, "Each play is an attempt at society. How do we learn to live with each other? How do we fix what's broken? How do we recognize and celebrate what's working?" (Dudley, 2016). In rehearsal, I promised myself to stay true to my vision for the play while being a collaborator, that is, someone who contributes meaningfully to the process. I did this by leading analogue soundscape workshops, posing questions instead of giving orders, making a point of recognizing people's contributions and complimenting what was working. This was infectious. I saw these performers who, though they had to earn their place in this itinerant ensemble, worked hard on their own speeches while supporting others. There was no competition among them to outshine their peers. Instead, they each contributed their own piece of the story as simply and directly as possible. In the end, I witnessed no bickering, no toxic power struggles, no dysfunction. That is a resounding success, especially since there are so many variables it's virtually out of our control. And yet, for all the potential pitfalls, everyone worked together beautifully to create a production that can be attributed to no single person – just as the successful society ought to be.

As in all good tragedies, laughter eventually gives way to tears. Sitting in the Moe night after night with strangers, peers, collaborators and associates, I heard laughter, grumbling, and, finally, sniffles as Maureen delivered her mournful speech. When her own tears give way to rage, it was my hope that audience members, too, would let their guards down and perhaps march on City Hall, shouting, "What are you doing to our children!?"

Of course, they did not. Hence, while I did successfully craft a play that disposed of the protagonist, confronted the audience, and asked them to act and/ or think, I failed to stir them to

action. Stirring them to action will give me a goal for the works to come when I have earned my degree and moved on to the next phase of my life as artist and citizen.

The Future

As with most people in my situation, I am unsure of what the future holds. I want to talk about my art, but life and the necessity of earning a living crowds in. I'm reminded of traditional wisdom: Plan your work and work your plan. Of course, I have plans.

The first plan, and I prefer this, is to go wherever I'm hired to teach or work for a news outlet. This line is a scary one, as there are not as many places hiring for either of these jobs as in decades past. And, for those few jobs that are hiring, there are exponentially more qualified candidates. A friend of mine who works as an adjunct professor in Chicago, for instance, said that during his institution's last round of hiring, he saw a long list of candidates whose credentials were not only intimidating, but they also made them overqualified for an adjunct instructor job.

What troubles me most about this course of action is that it's all out of my control. I have no agency. I must simply wait until something comes up and then grab hold of whatever opportunity presents itself. Of course, I'm no stranger to such a lifestyle. Before returning to school, I spent eight years working as a freelance journalist and film professional. I thought that, in earning a degree, that lifestyle would be a thing of the past.

My second plan is to return to Chicago. But, given the above, how likely is that I'm going to waltz into a university, or one of the three steady papers there, and be given a job? So, returning to Chicago will mean that I'll work whatever job I can get and make theatre by night and on weekends. But if memory serves, Chicago, for all its beauty and opportunity, is an expensive, high-stress place. Can I really survive working in a kitchen – the only jobs that are

readily available are in service and healthcare – while raising my son and making theatre in my spare time? Perhaps the real question is: Would such an arrangement of life and work be sustainable?

My third plan, and the most attractive at present, is to return to Vermont. I could ask for my old job at the paper, and work with Bread & Puppet Theater when I'm not writing profiles of Vermont's people, politics and sports. The quality of life will be much greater, as the cost of living is lower, and my credentials carry more weight in the Green Mountain State. The great con here is that Peter Schumann, one of my favorite directors working today, has no use for my plays, and there are no other serious theaters in the area. Of course, that may not be such an issue. I can keep writing and submitting to companies from afar, writing stories for *American Theatre Magazine*, and developing relationships with theaters with whom I wish to work.

Though I haven't yet committed to any of the above plans, I am committed to my work as a playwright. I will keep writing plays – or, as I move forward, performance texts; existing forms are no longer capable of capturing and communicating what life is like right now. Thus, I will dedicate myself to finding a specific form for each new performance text I create. Does this mean that I will do away entirely with the history of dramatic literature? No. In fact, I intend to begin with a specific form – to give the text a solid structure, or scaffolding, as Dr. Juntunen may call it – and work to explode it into something new and altogether its own.

I am also committed to work that is civically engaged and striving for social justice. While my future works needn't be categorized as issue plays, I can't imagine creating a performance text that lacks the fire generated by articulating some societal problem, and wrestling with the content to try and arrive at some essential truth. If the text can generate change in my collaborators, as *800 Days* did, then each time one of my works is staged, I will be making

a positive contribution to my community. And that – more than critical acceptance, more than commercial success, more than any kind of fame – is what is most important to me. If I am consistently successful in achieving that little attainable goal each time I write a performance text, then other forms of success will come in equal measure.

As for the art itself, I have grown significantly. In writing *800 Days*, I taught myself to work with a sparsely structured plan, and to fill in the gaps between steps with stuff from my life, reacting to the world in which I live in a given moment. I intend to make my texts more self-contained, less technical, and thus performable in whatever space my company, or any other company, may have at their disposal. These texts will eschew the protagonist in favor of ensemble and include stage directions that may be spoken (for no-budget productions), or realized in the space, for those who have more resources and creativity at hand. This way I will remove obstacles from my path during the writing process, thereby creating more opportunity to join and build with my collaborators.

Hence, wherever I go, whatever I do from here, I will strive to keep writing, submitting my work to theaters, and, most importantly, I will initiate my own projects in whatever community I choose to call home.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

800 Days of Solitude: A Conjuring

a play
by
David Dudley

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The Roles

(3m / 2f / 1 open)

Joell, a young Brooklynite

Regina Case, a policewoman

Crow, a crow

Kurius George, a juvenile delinquent

Gallo, a corrections officer

Maureen, a mother

Setting

The theater; here and now.

Notes on staging/ production: The space should reflect the impoverished state of the incarcerated. Scene titles and stage directions may be spoken or projected, depending upon your resources.

Synopsis

When Troy is arrested for a crime he claims he didn't commit, his friends, family, and people in the criminal justice system all think that he'll be out before he knows it. But when Troy goes from spending the night in a holding pen, to the Tombs, to Rikers Island, to solitary confinement, everyone begins questioning how far Troy will go to assert his innocence. Through a series of monologues that reveal the many sides of a situation fraught with misunderstandings, loopholes, and inaction, the portrait of a misunderstood young man emerges, along with the crimes committed by those meant to uphold the law.

A Conjuring (Scenes List)

A-Side:

1. HOW RICK SANCHEZ COPPED LOUIS VUITTON
2. GOOD COP, BAD COP, DEPENDING WHAT DAY IT IS
3. THE CROWS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

B-Side:

4. T.R.O.Y. (THEY REMINISCE OVER YOU: REDUX)
5. THINGS FALL APART (PICKING UP THE PIECES)

1: HOW RICK SANCHEZ COPPED LOUIS VUITTON

JOELL appears in a pool of light. We're in an alley in Bed Stuy, Brooklyn. JOELL wears a Morty mask and carries a pillowcase - presumably for collecting Halloween candy. He lifts his mask, takes a bottle from his pillowcase, drinks, then speaks to a motley crew of costumed teenagers:

Trick or treat, bitches. Gimme all of your shit! Run your candy! Run your iphones! Run your shoes! *(Beat)* Ha! Nah, I'm just playin with y'all. I feel like we gotta have fun cuz life is too short, you know?

Nah but forreal, have you seen a dude with a Rick mask? You know Rick Sanchez? Like Rick from "Rick and Morty?" He's wearing a lab coat and a bugged out white wig? I'm Morty, see? My friend, he's the smart one. He's the professor, the doctor, the mad scientist.

This was all his idea.

I mean, the costumes.

I've only seen "Rick and Morty" like, once or twice. But Troy? He's obsessed with it. That and "Dexter's Lab." He loves that shit. *(Beat, zeroes in on an audience member)* What the fuck are you supposed to be? Yourself!? Oh, my bad. I thought that, you know, cuz it's Halloween, you might be a little more, festive? I dunno. Halloween's my favorite shit cuz you get to be someone else for a night. Know what I mean?

(Drinks, thinks, then:)

Just a few hours ago, shit was all good. It was me, Troy, Chill Will, and Stupidass Stephanie. It's Halloween, right? So we gonna have a little fun. We were smoking the lala. And . . . Yeah, see, most people, when they smoke the lala, they get all stupid and shit, right? They start laughin and wanna eat all the food in the kitchen. But not me. When I smoke the la, I get like, smart? And ambitious? I'm like Tony Montana sniffing coke! Like, I wanna take over the world and shit, you know? Like Pinky and the Brain! That's another show Troy likes, but I like that one, too, cuz Pinky? He's cold. *(Imitates Pinky:)* What are we going to do tonight, Brain? *(Beat, then Scarface:)* First you get the money, then you get the power, and then, and then, you get the girl.

(As self) That's what I was thinking when that Mexican motherfucker with the Yeezys and the Louis Vuitton backpack walked by: First, you get the money. Then you get the power. Then you get the girl. That's life, right? That's living.

(Beat, he drinks. A disquieting wave of whispering fills the space.)

Y'all not cops, right? Y'all don't speak with the cops, right? You know how that goes: Snitches get stitches.

Right? *(Beat)* Right.

So Stephanie, though she had been with like all my boys, she was lookin at me like I was somebody, like I was somebody like she might like some Joell in her life. And I was thinkin why the fuck hasn't she ever been with me? I'd really like some Stephanie in my life, too, shit. But, see, I've got this thing where, like . . .

(Trails off, beat)

The thing is, I've been poor my whole life? Like the clothes I got are all hand-me-downs, and my kicks are whatever's on sale when my Nana takes me to the Chink's. She never takes me to the Adidas store, at Barclays? Nah, not for me. And usually the girls aren't lookin at me like they want me in their lives but they're lookin at me like, How did that motherfucker get so bummy?

But every time Stephanie passes me the dookie she brushes her hand against mine, and she's like lookin me in my eye and shit? And smiling and laughing at my jokes. And I'm thinking, I'm thinking that tonight it might be on.

I deserve this, right? I deserve a little fun in life. I deserve to enjoy myself. I deserve a little love.

Why not?

But I notice that Stephanie's looking at Troy, too, giving him the eye.

And Troy? Troy's like my brother, but he's kinda like my competition for the night. Cuz I'm gonna go home with Stephanie. No matter what.

Then this Mexican dude with Yeezys on his feet, and a Louis Vuitton backpack on his back, he walks by. *(Beat)* Motherfucker, are you stupid? This is Bed Stuy! This is Brooklyn! It's not the way it used to be, but it's still stupid to walk around with a few weeks' pay on your feet.

On Halloween night!? You're asking for it, man! You're fuckin asking for it!

(Drinks; a wave of whispers fills the space.)

How did that motherfucker get those shoes? How did he get that bag? I'm only 16, right, so I can't get that shit. Unless I get a job but ain't nobody hiring. Unless I sling dope but I'm not gonna do that shit. My older brother went to jail for slinging. My dad is an addict. My mom was addicted to coke for years. Nah I'm not getting mixed up with dope.

But I will take a motherfucker's shit. Believe that. I will take a motherfucker's shit.

I'm looking at Troy: He's watching the Mexican. Chilly Willy? Watching the Mexican. And Stephanie? She's taking a deep pull from the blunt. And whereas before she was lookin at me and smilin while she was pullin on the lala, now she's watching the Mexican as he ducks into the alley.

I want those shoes; I want that bag; I wanna be able to feed my people. Provide, right?

Cuz while I get all ambitious and shit, Troy and Chilly Willy and Stupid-ass Stephanie, they get the munchies and they gotta eat. And I can't lie: My belly is rumbling, too. So, if I make this shit happen, if I can get my hands on those shoes, and that backpack, we can all eat. Shit, with that kind of loot, we can all eat for like, a month.

But this Mexican is kinda big, right? I need somebody to watch my back. When you do shit like this, you never know what's gonna happen. The popo could roll by on bicycles. We catch a case. Some old man who goes out to buy bananas and Ensure might walk by and see us. That's a witness. We catch a case. Or, the Mexican might know kung-fu, or he might have a pistol or some shit. You never know what the fuck's gonna happen.

So I look at Chilly Willy. *(As if to Willy:)* Hey, Willy, I'm about to bust this move real quick. You got my back?

But Willy's too zooted, right? He's too high. Stephanie? Nah. I look to Troy. He's kinda tall, right? He's taller than all of us. Skinny but tall. I look to him, and I'm like, Troy, you wanna bust this move real quick?

He looks at Stephanie, and she kinda smiles at him. And I see it, man, right there, in fuckin slow-motion 5k HD: He's gonna do it. To impress Stephanie.

I shouldn't have asked him to do it, but I did. And he was with it.

He looks back at me, through his mask. He's got his mask pulled down, so I'm like, talking to Rick Sanchez? And I'm all high and shit so it's weird as fuck when Troy slash Rick Sanchez looks back at me, and nods.

But I'm not thinking consequences. I'm thinking that we're gonna get paid. And Stephanie, though she's looking at us both, she's gonna choose me cuz I'm the mastermind behind this shit.

(Drinks, whispers fill the space)

I lower my mask, and we dip.

Rick and Morty are about to cop some Louis Vuitton, right!?

(Beat)

We trail the Mexican for a minute. I'm thinking about all the bullshit we gotta put up with everyday: Going to some bullshit school, and learning to behave on the job. Shut the fuck up and do what the boss tells you, right? Don't think for yourself. I'm thinking about the police in the schools, frisking you as you go to the bathroom. I'm thinking about the bullies who take my pocket money on the daily. And that's it, man.

I blackout.

Next thing I know, I'm right on the Mexican's head. He tries to run but I don't even think; everything just goes red. Troy, I don't know what the fuck he did, but I screamed like a fuckin warrior.

You ever seen that movie about the soldiers? Where the drill instructor is like, "Lemme see your war face!" Me and Troy, we had definitely had our war faces on.

We took dude's shit and then we ran and ran and ran. Past the jerk chicken joint on Bedford and Nostrand, and on into the alley behind the school on the corner of Macon and Nostrand. My lungs felt like they were on fire.

We stopped by these garbage cans to catch our breath. But see, I'm not stupid, I'm not stupid, so I go around the garbage cans to hide, and fuckin Troy, he's like, What did you get? I got the Yeezys, right? And Troy got the Louis Vuitton backpack.

(JOELL drinks, pulls a Yeezy out to show us, and then slides it back into the pillowcase)

Then we heard a car come whipping through the alley. I can see it through the space between the garbage cans and it kinda looks like a cop car. You know, a Crown Vic? So I duck and hide. Troy doesn't know what to do, so I pull him down with me, and we're close, like really close. I can smell his breath, and it smells bad bad, like he hasn't brushed his teeth today? Fucking smart people are so stupid sometimes. But the smell of sour trash is like, the smell of sour garbage is like overwhelming? The Crown Vic comes barreling down the alley - it's going way too fast to be your average civilian. It's headed straight for the garbage cans where we're hiding. The car skids and stops right by us. Like right there. The door swings open. Steve Earle's "Copperhead Road" is playing, real loud. Troy and I look each other in the eye, and I'm scared as fuck. Is it the police, you know? Is it the Guardian Angels? Is it some vigilante red-neck who packs a .38 special? He saw the whole shit and has taken it upon himself to hunt me down and try to perform a citizen's arrest? *(Beat)* The man, a bald-headed white dude, is definitely wearing a uniform: I see him through the space between the garbage bins. His boots crunch in the gravel as he gets closer. *(Beat)* He's real close, right? So close I can't even look.

But then I hear a sound I know real well . . . He pulls down his zipper, whips it out, and starts pissing, right, right, right fuckin there! by where me and Troy were huddled up!

There's a pile of stolen goods between us.

This fuckin guy prolly just got offa work. He's mumbling to himself. Something about losing a game of pool. He's just come from the bar. He's a little drunk.

(Drinks)

When he finally sees us, you'd think he'd be embarrassed, standing there, holding his dick while two teenage boys watch. But he's not embarrassed at all. He looks right at us while he finishes draining his lizard. He assesses the situation. I can see the gears turning in his head as he asks himself: What's going on here?

I'm terrified he's gonna turn us in so I'm getting ready to run.

Cuz fuck going to Rikers Island.

Then he looks at us, and says: (*Imitates man:*) What are you two doing back there?

(*As self:*) I don't know what to say, cuz I'm aware of how it looked.

But Troy, the smart one, said (*As Troy:*) Taking mold samples. For a science project. (*Beat, as self:*) Taking mold samples, bitch!

That's why I let him wear the fuckin Rick costume. He's a fucking genius.

But the dude, he doesn't believe it. He saw the fancy shit laid out between us, he noted how close we were to one another, he sensed the nervous energy in the air. He smiled a little, licked his lips, then said (*Imitates man:*) You know, if you two need a room, I've got you covered. My place is just down the street, off of Halsey. My wife's home, but she knows the deal. Twenty bucks an hour, or \$100.00 for the whole night. (*Beat, as self:*) Troy says (*As Troy:*) Nah, our parents are cool with us loving each other, so we don't have to hide it.

My boy is something else.

The man said (*Imitates man:*) Fair enough. I need a switch up spot every now and again, too. Y'all have fun.

(*As self:*) He put his shit back in his pants. Zips up. Gets back in the car and drives off.

I looked over at Troy; he's looking down at the ground, at the backpack. There's diapers and baby bottles and formula spilling out of the backpack and onto the ground.

Troy's tearing up.

Turns out that the Louis Vuitton backpack? Like, I guess that Mexican was a dad?

That really fucked Troy up. I don't know why, but Troy was like, quiet?

(*Drinks, whispers fill the space*)

He, he started shoving all the stuff back in the bag, and then he gets up and walks away without talking to me. He gets up and starts walking away with the fuckin, with my fuckin bag!

I'm like, Hey, hold on, that's my shit! And Troy turned around and gives me this look like, Try to take it, motherfucker, see what happens.

So I let him go. Shit, I'm gonna go back to where Stephanie and Willy are waiting for us. And I'm gonna show Stephanie what I got, and she's gonna be like, *(Imitates Stephanie:)* Damn, Joell, you're sexy.

(Drinks, whispers fill the space, more urgent now)

I shouldn't have brought him.

The thing about Troy is, he doesn't really belong here, in Brooklyn. There's too much temptation; too many chances to go wrong. See, he's got a future. He's gonna do something, he's gonna be somebody.

You know how, when you're in school, the teachers and the principal and shit, all those motherfuckers are like *(Imitates principal:)* You might find a cure for cancer, You might find a cure for AIDS, You might be the first motherfucker to walk on Saturn.

They say that shit to get you to shut the fuck up and behave, like good little worker bees. Well, for Troy, that shit's real. He might be the first motherfucker to do all that shit.

But me? What kind of future do I have? My parents left me a long time ago. I've got nothing, and that's the way it's always been, that's the way it'll always be. They don't want us to have nothing.

This shit out here, it's not for him. I shoulda protected him, but.

(Drinks, long, deep, tormented pull)

I need to find Troy. Cuz, right now, I'm afraid. I'm afraid he's in trouble.

(Beat, looks up and down the alley as whispering fill the space)

Fuck. Fuck! FUCK!!!

(Beat, whispers fill the space, louder, more insistent)

Who the fuck is whispering!?

(Whispering stops)

I'd give anything to see him walking down this alley. Cuz I'm afraid that the cops might have picked him up.

(Whispering again)

In Rick and Morty, Rick has the ability to like make a wormhole wherever he wants? So him and Morty travel through different times and places.

(Whispering gets louder, forcing JOELL to speak louder, in order to be heard)

I wish I really had one of those. I'd shoot a wormhole onto this wall here, and go back to three hours ago. Before the bag, before the Mexican, before Stephanie. Before all of this shit.

(Pause as JOELL sees something the rest of us do not; Whispering, accompanied by sticks, gets louder, more insistent)

Oh shit . . . Is that the police?

(Whispering, still louder, still more insistent)

Look, I gotta go.

(Whispering, still louder, closing in on him, on us)

If you see a dude wearing a Rick Sanchez mask, and a Louis Vuitton backpack, tell him Joell's waiting at the Navy Yard!

(JOELL shoves bottle into pillowcase, slips mask down onto his face, disappears. Whispering and sticks go silent.)

2: GOOD COP, BAD COP, DEPENDING WHAT DAY IT IS

In darkness, a phone begins ringing, accompanied by the cacophony of noises one finds in a police station on a Saturday night. A pool of light rises on another area of the stage. There's a single, empty chair in place. OFFICER CASE enters in street clothes. She sips coffee - black, no sugar - in a little styrofoam cup. She walks into light, sips coffee, glances at watch, then at theater doors, then addresses her fellow officers.

I gotta get outta here.

I'm late for a date.

But.

But we got this kid in there, in interrogation. He's my first arrest. I mean, I've given tickets to a few homeless people. I ticketed a Brooklyn hipster chick for speeding on her bicycle, but this is my first real collar.

I should be proud, right? I am. I should celebrate, right? I will.

You've been on the force a long time, right? So you're probably looking at me like, Rookie, get your shit together.

But, man, I just don't know.

The young man in question, whose name I shouldn't say because questions of, of privacy. He was over by the Navy Yard, walking fast, faster than most people walk. That's what caught my attention. He was walking so fast, and he was looking at everybody like he wanted to reach out to them and ask for help? But the weird thing is, he's dressed like an old man. A doctor or a scientist or something?

And he was carrying the backpack in his hands, right? Who carries a backpack by hand? Nobody I know. He fit the description, so we stopped him.

I called his Mom several times, but she's not answering. She'll just have to pick him up tomorrow, I guess.

(CASE sips her coffee, glances at her watch, the phone is still ringing)

Is anybody gonna answer that fucking phone!?

(Phone goes silent)

(A mantra:) Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I smile.

I'm gonna let this kid cool off for a minute. Maybe get him some pizza and a pop.

I don't have time for this shit. I'm supposed to meet my fiance at a club, up in Washington Heights. I've spent the past three months learning the Merengue. See, my fiance, Juan Emmanuel, before he proposed, he said to me, Baby, if you wanna marry me, you need to learn to dance. Cuz that shit you're doing now, The funky worm, or whatever the fuck you call it, it's not working.

I knew I loved him, even then. So, I've spent every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday night learning to dance in Dumbo.

Juan thinks I'm cheating on him.

Fucking men, right? They think, if you're not always by their side, they think you're fucking somebody else. He's probably at the club right now, drinking rum, worrying about me.

But when I get there, and show him my new moves, he's gonna be like, Damn, mi amor, you know how to dance!

And I'll tell him about the lessons, and we'll laugh and drink and kiss between dances.

(Sips coffee, glances at watch)

That kid that was just in here, with the stolen backpack? I know I can get him to sign a statement. But something's off.

(Phone begins ringing)

I'm just doing my job, right? I don't pick on people. I have no racial bias, no bigotry. My Father's from the Dominican Republic. My Mother's German, Irish and Lebanese, so. I inherited my temper, dark hair, dark eyes, and my love of good rum from my dad, and everything good from my mom.

(Beat, phone keeps ringing)

Fuck. My shift was almost over when we spotted this kid carrying a Louis Vuitton backpack like it was a smiley-face fuckin bodega bag.

My partner, Slater, he approached the kid pretty quickly, aggressive. I was just kinda rolling along, trying not to arrest anybody, because of my date. But I knew that wasn't gonna happen when I saw that the kid was carrying that stolen backpack.

He matched the description, that's the thing. I mean, I'm not just looking to snatch anybody off the streets, you know?

We caught up to the kid pretty quickly, because we were on bicycles. We identified ourselves, and asked the kid to stop. But he kept walking, walking faster, in fact. Slater asked the kid to stop repeatedly but the kid kept walking, acting like he can't hear us.

So Slater's pissed. He hops off his bike, draws his firearm, and tells the kid one last time to stop otherwise he's was gonna shoot. *(Beat)* The kid stops but doesn't turn to face us. I ask the kid to put his hands up, and face us, you know, make it easy on himself. He doesn't respond.

The kid's unresponsiveness made me nervous. You've got to protect yourself at all times. Especially now. Everybody's struggling. Everybody's getting high. With all the drugs people are using? You never know when you're gonna stop somebody high on angel dust, or bath salts.

Has anyone here ever been around somebody high on that shit? Those people eat faces, like the "Walking Dead".

And then people are just afraid of the police now in a way they weren't ten, twenty years ago.

A woman who went through the academy with me was shot, recently, point blank in the head while she was sitting in her cruiser eating a turkey sandwich. *(Beat)* Things are so . . . Fucked up right now. You just. You never know, you know?

So, I asked the kid again: Put your hands up! Again, the kid didn't respond. Again, I asked: Put your fuckin hands up! Turn and face me! I don't wanna shoot, but I'm thinking about Juan, you know?

We're gonna get married. We're gonna have kids one day.

I don't need all this drama in my life, all this uncertainty.

Is somebody gonna answer that fucking phone???

Jesus fucking Christ, I . . .

(Phone goes silent)

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I smile.

There's a part of me. There's a part of me that wants to quit the force. It's too crazy in these streets. Police have lost the people's trust. It's sad but hey what am I gonna do?

Slater, I could see he was getting irritated. I see him take aim, steady his hand, fix the kid in his sights. He slides the safety back, cocks his firearm, and . . .

Then, miraculously, the kid turns to face us. Slater's wound up. He shouts *(imitates Slater)*: Don't fuckin move, man, or I'll shoot! And the kid - I'll never forget this - he looked . . .

His eyes were . . . He looked scared? He really looked scared. But it's hard to tell because that's just a tactic, you know, that they use to get us to go easy on 'em. *(Beat)* Because in his hands, plain as day, there's the Louie Vuitton backpack.

I ask where he got it, and the kid says he found it. I ask what he's doing with it, and the kid says he's looking for the man who lost it.

Now I'm no Sherlock fuckin Holmes, but tell me this: How the fuck does the kid know it was a man who lost the backpack?

Un. Be. Lieveable.

That kinda shit burns my ass.

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I smile.

There's a part of me, the soft part, that just wants to let the kid go. Just take the bag and say, Get outta here, kid, like they did in the old days. But now, you can't trust that they'll learn their lesson.

And you can't have these kids out here thinking it's okay to steal. No, it's better to get them when they're still young, right? Show them how the world works. You steal from somebody, there's consequences. Nobody's immune to this basic law. Nobody.

But I was supposed to meet Juan at the club - way uptown, in Washington fuckin Heights, by 11.

And here I am, it's half past midnight, and I've been tied up with this thing. I need to go, but I can't shake this feeling. Something's wrong with this picture. It doesn't add up.

(Pause, phone begins ringing)

I wanna get him pizza and pop. Let him eat and drink a little, get cozy. Make him think I'm his buddy and the way I acted in the streets isn't the real me. I was just upset.

You know me, I never get upset.

Yeah right!

(Laughs, snorts, beat. Phone stops ringing)

I'm gonna walk in there, all nice and calm. Give him the pizza and the pop, smile, ask him if everything's okay. And then BAM! I'm gonna hit him with the questions:

(She aims the following statements at individuals in the audience, as though she were interrogating them)

Where'd you get the fuckin bag you little prick!?

I got witnesses saw you at the scene!

I got witnesses saw you snatch it from Mr. Gonzalez!

. . . That's a made up Mexican name, by the way, to protect the victim's privacy . . .

And don't gimme any shit about wanting to return the damn thing!

Because if you wanted to return it: Why the fuck did you take it in the first place!?

You're not very good at this, kid.

You're guilty.

I see it in your face.

I can feel it in the room.

You're fucked.

You. Are. Fucked.

You know that, right?

There's really no way out of this. You're either gonna admit what you did, and they'll probably go easy on you, cuz you got no priors,

Or, Or, Or, you're gonna fight this thing, play the good samaritan - which we both know is a buncha bullshit! - and they're gonna call it like they see it: A goddamn, manipulative, low-life fuckin lie! They're gonna throw the book at you, kid, and they're gonna lock you up and you don't look like the kinda kid that belongs on Rikers.

Better come clean, kid. Maybe we'll go easy on you if you help us. And, you'd better move quickly, cuz I'm missing a date with the love of my life for this bullshit.

Then I'll throw in my little mantra:

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I smile.

(She breathes in, out, in, out, in, out, smiles. She sips coffee, glances at watch, then at doors. The phone begins ringing again.)

I mean, even if I'm wrong, he'll be on the streets by tomorrow, right? He's got no priors, no attitude, and the jails are full. So, accounting for error, the kid'll just wind up spending the night in the station, right? He'll do some community service and we'll call it a day.

(Another phone rings, a cacophony of staggered ringing)

His mother will come in the morning, and he'll go home.

(Phones get louder)

And, even if he didn't steal the damn thing, he'll never even think about stealing. Right?

(Phones louder, still)

Right?

(She sips coffee but it's empty. Phones stop ringing)

Huh. Empty.

(Pause)

Guess I'd better get to it.

(CASE disappears)

3: THE CROWS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

We hear crows cawing during the transition. The CROW appears atop a ladder, or some other elevated platform. She pleads with her fellow crows for help.

I was on the fence.

No, not figuratively: literally.

I was on the fence, like I am now, but I was stuck.

My wing was caught on this stuff, this jagged, twisty, wiry, stuff see? I was stuck so I was thrashing around trying to get unstuck. But it wasn't . . . It wasn't helping. I just couldn't.

I've got baby crows in the nest, like many of you, and they're depending upon me. They need me. Not just to feed them but to protect them. What with all the hawks and falcons and squirrels?

Why are you all looking at me like that?

You know squirrels eat baby birds, right? You think I'm lying?

(A crow responds with a Caw!)

I lost a young one to a squirrel a few years back. *(Beat)* I've never seen anything like it. I had some beetle mush in my beak and I was bringing it back to the nest to feed to my babies, when I saw a squirrel sitting on the branch near my nest, eating something. You know how they do, crouched up with their little hands putting things into their fat little mouths?

I thought it had some nuts or something, so I didn't think too much of it.

But then I saw the little black feathers poking out of its mouth. It was unmistakable cuz our color - the color of crows - doesn't occur anywhere else in nature.

That was my baby it was chewing on.

The squirrel didn't see me.

So I dove.

I picked the little fucker up with my talons, and carried him up, up, up. Higher and higher.

I was so . . . Numb?

I was so numb I didn't feel it tearing at my belly. I just kept flying higher and higher.

And then

I

Just

Let

Go.

(A thud, somewhere in the space)

If you didn't know, don't ever, ever in your life, fuck with a baby crow.

(A bunch of crows respond in affirmation)

Where was I?

Oh, yes, yes, so I was stuck on the fence. It was a hot day, like today, and I had been thrashing so I was overheating. It wasn't pretty. I was thinking: This is it. I'm going to die today. If I was alone in this world it wouldn't have bothered me at all. We've got one life to live, and I've lived. I've loved. I've raised babies and I've dropped a squirrel from way, waaayyy up. I have no regrets. *(Beat)* Except, maybe, that I've lived on this island for my whole life? So I'm going to die. Peacefully. Stuck on this barbed wire.

But then, then I see this boy from far away. He's climbing the fence. And the guards are yelling at him: Stop! Or I'll shoot! And I think: Ain't this a bitch? I'm gonna be roast crow any minute now, and this one's gonna come climbing up here and get himself shot. But he keeps on climbing. He's getting closer and closer.

Another thought pops into my head: What if he's gonna try and eat me? Right? Why else would he be so intent on climbing up this fence to get me? Now I'm panicking again. Nah, it's cool, I tell myself. He's not coming to eat me. He's coming to free me! But I can't shake the thought of him tearing into my flesh with his incisors, and grinding my bone and gristle with his molars. So I'm thrashing about and I start to feel myself breaking free . . .

Till I realize that I'm about to tear my wing clean off.

Hhhhhhhh.

Hhhh.

I'm tired.

So tired.

The challenge is: How to find peace in my last moments on this earth? Life's a cycle, right? I eat things to live. So it's only right that something should eat me to live. That's the cycle of life, right? So why not just let go? Accept your fate and let life do the damn thing.

Easy, right?

Now he's right up on me. I can see in his eyes as he takes my wing in his hand. And I see that he's seen things most men never see. The pain, the fear, the uncertainty. He's placed his life in someone else's hands. So I should be able to do the same, right?

Right?

But then, as I'm making peace with myself, and the world, and the idea of myself leaving the world, you know what else I see? He's not gonna try and eat me!

The guards are still shouting at him. Still, he's got ahold of my wing, and he's moving it this way and that. It hurts so I close my eyes, real tight, and I stiffen up cuz it's almost too much to bear. But he does this little motion, like this, and the next thing I know my wing is free.

Oh shit!

I beat my wings against the air. Thank God I'm not hurt too bad. I'm free. So I fly away. I return to my babies, and none of them were eaten by squirrels. Thank God.

Did any of your babies get eaten by squirrels today?

That's good.

God is good.

Yes, She is.

(CROW climbs down from ladder, searches and gathers the things she describes from the ground)

That was like, four hundred suns ago? When the boy first got here. But I don't forget him. He comes out every day to play by himself. Not with the other boys. No, instead, he plays in this cage. And it looks kinda barren, you know?

So I wanna. I wanna help him out. Make some kinda peace offering, some kinda thank you, you know? I want to help him build a nest, a home. Cuz that cage? It's not gonna protect him from the weather. And it's not gonna hide his babies from squirrels.

And that's why I need your help.

Alone, I can only fill up one or two of those links in the fence per day. But if you all help me, those of you that know how to build nests, we could make his cage into a nice little nest within five suns.

Why are you all so quiet?

(Silence)

Look, I know you've got your own babies to take care of. But if we all work together, those who can't help gather mud, twigs and leaves, they can watch our babies while we build this nest.

And we can put our mission to take over the world by 2020 on hold. Just for a few days. I mean, we're doing really, really good on that front, right? The humans, they don't suspect anything. And we're stockpiling food, weapons, supplies, nuclear warheads.

We're doing really good. So why can't we take a moment, and just give back?

This boy, he's like one of us. He needs protection from the heat and cold, from rain and snow, from the prying eyes of strangers.

I'll do most of the work. Just, if you find stuff, on the ground, or in the garbage, and you've already got enough for your own nests, I would really appreciate it if you'd give those extra bits to me, so we can make a nest for him.

Is that cool?

(Silence)

Are you all with me?

(A few crows respond positively)

I wouldn't ask if I could do it myself. But I feel . . . Connected to this boy? Because he saved my life. And because I worry that his mother is sitting at home, all alone, and she doesn't know whether or not her son's been eaten by a squirrel.

(The CROW disappears in the midst of Cawing and wings beating against the air.)

4: T.R.O.Y. (THEY REMINISCE OVER YOU: REDUX)

KURIUS GEORGE appears in a pool of light, watching TV. We're in the Day Room on Rikers Island. There's a sleeping bag laid out on the floor, with a plastic pillow. Nearby there are two institutional food trays: One is empty, the other untouched. There are two milk cartons, too. One empty, or so we believe, the other untouched.

Yo, you gonna eat that?

I said, Yo, you gonna eat that?

Damn, mothafuckas rude up in here.

Look, if you not gonna eat that, which I advise you do, cuz it's a long way till morning and these Nazi-ass correctional officers definitely do not do snack hour, I advise you eat all that shit.

Lissen, I can see that you're nervous.

It's your first time in here, right? I'd be nervous too, but forreal, you gotta eat cuz if you don't eat, you'll get sick. Trust me. I know.

I know it's nasty. They call that shit sal-is-berry steak, right? What the fuck is a salis-berry anyway? You ever seen a salis-berry tree? I dare you to tell me what kinda meat this is. Look at it. Look at it! See? What kinda meat you think this is? (*Beat, marveling at the steak*) That shit's nasty, right? And these green beans? It looks like green bean casserole but it don't got the fuckin, the fuckin, crispies and shit? And the creamy shit's all watery. Nah, nah, that shit's gross. And these mashed potatoes look like white baby shit, forreal.

But the roll? That's good shit. The fruit cup? Good shit.

So what I'm saying is, if you're not gonna eat that, you should just send it thisaway.

You're still not saying anything.

You're still quiet.

Okay, so, if you want me to eat that shit, don't say nothin.

(Silence)

Lemme put you on to the program:

You give me food when I want it.

You wash my tighty-whiteys when I want.

You do what the fuck I say, when I say, with no lip.

Or I crack your fuckin head open in front of everybody on the whole damn cellblock.

Understand?

That's the program.

You with it?

I'm gonna eat now, cool?

Cool.

(GEORGE eats)

You're cool, you know that? These other motherfuckas in here, these rude ass motherfuckas, they'd kill anybody - anybody - tryna touch they food. They have no con . . . con . . . uh, contraceptive? Is contraceptive right? Is contraceptive a word?

I wish they still had classes in here, so we could learn and shit. Motherfuckers in here is supposed to be in school, and they got us on lock-down all motherfuckin day. What kinda sense does that make?

Con. Truh. Sep. Tiv.

Sounds right.

There was this dude in here - been here for like, two years now? They threw his ass in the bing a few months back cuz he got into a fight. He was smart as fuck. He would've told me real quick whether or not that was the right word.

He knew his shit. I asked him to share his food, too, and he said, Nah. At first. But then, after I told him the deal, you know, who I am, and the way things work in here, he was more respective and shit.

Respective?

Thass a word, right?

Yeah. Yeah. Thass a word. And it rhymes with what? Contraceptive! Haaa!

I feel like, if I wasn't in here, I could be like a comedian and shit? Like Richard Prior, or fuckin Lenny Bruce, or Andy Kaufman, or John Leguizamo? I love those guys.

Sometimes, when I'm in a good mood, I can be funny as fuck. But when I'm in a bad mood, which is most of the time, cuz shit's fucked up in here, I'm not so good at jokes.

Anyway, these rude ass motherfuckas have no contraceptive about sharing, caring, and community. Sharing is caring, right?

(He tries to slap five with three audience members:)

Gimme some love. Okay fuck you.

C'mon, man, gimme five. You're cool, right?

Can somebody gimme a nod, then?

Something? Gawdamn.

Sharing is motherfuckin caring, am I right?

Yes or no?

Howbout a good look mothafucka damn!?

I miss that dude though. He knew what was up. His name was Troy, and he gave me this tape. Well, he didn't actually give it to me. He left it behind when they dragged him out of the cell, kicking, screaming and bleeding all over the floor and shit.

It's like, a bunch of songs he wrote to his mom? They used to let him use the computer for some kinda work, I don't know, I don't understand computers so don't ask me shit about them. But he used the computer to make these songs right before he was dragged off to the bing - that's solitary confinement for you lames that don't know the lingo.

Why you lookin at me like I'm lying? What? I'm a trustworthy dude. I've got my mission, and I'm gonna carry it out, right? I'm gonna hold him down.

Why?

Cuz sharing is caring - stupid ass bitch!

Look, it gets boring as fuck in here, if you didn't know it. We don't get no cards, no chess . . . I mean, I don't know how to play chess, but, yo, I could learn. There's a CO in here, named Gallo. He tried to teach me to play once, but he didn't like how good I was. I have a natural talent. I was just like, a game or two away from beating him. And then he just stopped playing with me.

It's all good, cuz we still got TV. We could see the Knicks . . . I mean, the Knicks suck anyhow, especially after that big white guy went down. His name is Poor-dingus or some shit. But, yo, we still got the Mets. And and and those bitches? In the toothpaste commercials? The way they be smiling and shit? And lookin at the camera like they want something else all in their teeth . . .

Ohmamothonafuckingawd, I would . . .

What I'm saying is it sucks up in here. So you should prolly wanna, I dunno, try and make some fuckin converse, convass, I mean we should really try and talk and shit, before I get bored.

You don't want me to get bored, cuz, yo . . . When I get bored, I start thinking about shit. (*Beat; he thinks:*) Like, who's fault is it I'm in here? And why the fuck do I gotta be in here anyway, when I should be out on the street, chasing after Cracked-out Sheila's daughter? And how are my boys out there, smoking la-la and drinking forties of King Cobra and shit, spilling a little for the homies thass dead or locked up?

I should be on the outs. And that shit makes me mad as fuck. Makes me wanna pound mothafuckas heads into hamburger.

Dyou hear me?

Are you listening?

Oh shit! You nodded! Yes!!! That's a nod! I mean, not really, cuz you didn't come back up, but, fuck, thass the first fuckin time you moved, so, yeah, I'll take it.

Haha! Sharing is caring! You gawdamn right, boy.

And thank you. I appreciate you being con . . . Uh, consumate, and, uh, you know, thinking of the environment and shit. Cuz all that food they waste up in here? It's bad for the ducks and shit. I read that shit somewhere. One day when I was out on the yard, I swear to gawd, a duck swimmid swam swum? A duck swimmid swam swum by . . . I swear to gawd that motherfucka had two heads and shit. Thass from all that nasty ass food we be wastin up in here! Think I'm playing? Go read some science books, lame. They'll tell you.

Damn, there are a lotta people up in the day room today. Lotta fresh fish I see. How old are you, anyway? Howbout you? How old are you?

You look like you're 12. Like you could be my little brother.

Forreal, you remind me of my little brother.

I miss that boy. (*Beat*) When we was home, when I was home, we'd always fight over the Wii controller.

My Gram? She could only afford one of those shits, so we couldn't play two player on Mario. No Luigi up in that bitch. You ever played Mario? That shit is cool as fuuuck, boy. And if you could like, play two player, like with a friend, or a brother, you'd have help against all the enemies that be comin at you. The fuckin Goompas and the fuckin little turtles with wings and the fireball spitting Bowsers and shit?

Instead, we'd like, the second player was more like a coach? We'd tell each other what to do. Like: Jump! Jump!! JUMP MOTHAFUCKA JUMP AHHHHH!

And we'd get real mad at each other, like really, really mad. Like incommensurate with the offence and shit. (*Beat, did he just get the meaning right?*) Then I'd be like, Yo, why didn't you jump? Stoopid mothafucka you shoulda jumped you stoopid.

And he wouldn't say nothin, kinda like you, cuz he knew he fucked up.

Why you in here, anyway?

What'd you do?

Nah, but it was like, worse? Cuz he knew that I knew that he fucked up. I mean, it's two different things, right?

Like when you fuck up and it's your own secret, private thing? You can hide it from everybody, so you never have to face that shit.

But then, when you fuck up and everybody else knows, like when they're all in your biz and shit. Then it's different. Cuz then you gotta face your problems.

Troy? He knew he fucked up cuz he had that bag. He got caught with that shit. But the judge and the prosecutor they, they wanted him to cop a plea. But he didn't. He refused. He refused cuz, as he said, he was tryna give it back to the dude it belonged to? And I was like, damn, Troy, thass fucked up you got it like that homie.

Cuz that fuckin bag is evidence.

Howdafuck is he gonna say he didn't steal the bag when he's got the stolen bag right there in his fuckin hands and shit?

Howdafuck you gonna say you didn't steal the bag when you standing in front of the cops with the stolen bag in your fuckin hands and shit?

They definitely ain't helping him. He doesn't even have a record, but his mom can't afford the bail, and they won't let him go till the trial.

But then, they keep delaying the trial? Cuz they want him to cop the plea but he just keeps pleading Not Guilty.

In his head, he's not guilty.

Shit's fucked up.

And now he's in the bing.

Mothafuckas crackup after a week in the bing.

He's got another court date comin up soon, and I, I, I hope he pleads guilty, cuz the bing ain't nothin' to fuck with.

And Troy, he was like my little brother. Not my forreal forreal brother but like my brother from another mother. There are nights in here, when it gets so cold, and lonely, you need somebody to kinda cuddle with you, hold you, tell you everything's gonna be all right. Troy did that with me.

My little bro Troy.

I miss my real little brother, too, don't get me wrong. When I get home, first thing I'm gonna do, I'm gonna give him a big ass hug.

Like, I can't hug mothafuckas in here cuz they get weirded out.

Like, what would you do if I came up to you, and just hugged you?

Right now?

You don't like that idea, huhn?

I see it in your face.

I see you, motherfucker.

Remember what I said about the program. Cuz I could be a comedian, but there ain't a damn thing funny when it comes to the program.

Think I'm playing?

Lemme ask you this: if I wanted to hug you, right now, and you didn't want it, who's gonna stop me? You understand? I'm the man in here. I do whatever the fuck I want. This is my world.

I remember. When I first got here, I wasn't even worried about, like, being on Rikers? I was worried about getting fucked and shit. I didn't even shower for, like, the first month I was in here? Cuz I thought, hey, if these dirty mothafuckas want some ass, they prolly want it to be clean, right? So I left my shit all . . . Like a dirty ass goat or some shit? With the dingle berries all dangling, and . . .

Nasty.

Look, all I'm saying? I know how it is. Okay? I know how it is. I'm not gonna try to fuck you, if that's what you're afraid of. Okay?

I like women and shit. And, yo, nohomo, nohomo, you're a good lookin dude. I bet you get all kinda ass on the outside. Am I right? Gawdamn right I'm right. Look at you, smiling. Thass good. Thass good. Smile. You gotta smile. Cuz if you don't, your fuckin face might freeze into a fuckin frown. And Gawd knows we don't need no more ugly, frowny-face motherfuckas walking round this earth, acting like everybody else is the problem.

Nah, we need to clean this shit up, forreal, for the babies and shit.

(GEORGE looks around, makes sure nobody's looking, then pulls a rope made up of braided, knotted sheets from under his sleeping bag. He works, braiding the sheet, while he speaks)

Nah, you don't even gotta say nothin, cuz I know whatup.

You gotta look about you. You gotta energy. You gotta light.

But you definitely ain't a woman. So, yeah, depending upon your per, uh, your per . . . uh, you got lucky. Cuz it has been too long since I had some lovin.

But forreal, are you gonna get out soon? I need to find a way to get this letter to my man Troy's mom. You don't have, like, a down ass bitch who'll visit you, and sneak this shit out? Cuz this is like, all that's left of Troy. Till he gets out of the bing. And they do not give you pens and paper when you're in the bing. Hellsno. So, I don't know, I don't know when or if Troy's gonna be able to write his mom again. And that's fuckin with my head. That shit fucks me up.

I miss Troy cuz he was like my little brother. But just in case he can't take it in the bing, I gave him a little insurance policy. If you can't take it in there, you take one of these, tie it around your neck, and then attach the other end to the faucet, and, like -

(GALLO appears. GEORGE shoves the rope and the letter into his sleeping bag, pretends nothing has happened)

GALLO
Georgie!?

GEORGE
The fuck you want, Gallo?

GALLO
That's no way to greet me, now is it? Let's try again: How are you today, Georgie?

GEORGE
Cool.

GALLO
That's it? You're "Cool"?

GEORGE

Hey, Hector told me that Gallo means “cock,” in Spanish. Is that true? Your name means cock?

GALLO

Technically, it’s “Rooster,” Georgie. As in I’m the ruler of this roost. Now, let’s try this greeting thing once more, shall we? How are you today, Georgie?

GEORGE

I’m cool. How are you, Cock?

GALLO

I’m fine, thanks. That rash is finally clearing up. My wife is pregnant. And I’m going back to school to get my bachelor’s degree in criminal justice. I got plans, Georgie, goals, visions of climbing the ladder, becoming more tomorrow than I am today. I’m gonna be warden here, Georgie, mark my words. I’m in a philosophy course right now. They’ve got us reading . . . Blaise Pascal. And, get this: with this nifty little book, I can learn Pascal’s whole philosophy in 90 minutes. Fascinating stuff. What’s popping in the day room?

GEORGE

Did you see the new Crest commercial!?

GALLO

Television tells lies to your vision, Georgie. Rots the brain.

GEORGE

Truuuuue. But that bitch in the new Crest commercial? She fine a.f.

GALLO

A.F.? What’s that?

GEORGE

Nevermind. You old, Gallo. I see where you’re trying to be like us, like young at heart and stuff, but you old.

GALLO

I’ve just got an old soul.

GEORGE

(Sarcastic:) Yeah, like father time. Old as dirt and shit.

GALLO

Know what time it is, Georgie?

GEORGE

Nah what I look like? I don’t got a watch.

GALLO

Time for work, Georgie. You got kitchen duty. Get up and get your ass in gear. Let's go.

GEORGE

Damn. Daaaaaamn. You're fuckin my shit up, Gallo. I was just schooling these fresh fish.

GALLO

They'll be here when you get back, Georgie. Promise.

GEORGE

Can I at least do my pushups first?

GALLO

Whereas you do not have a watch, I happen to have a Rolex on my wrist. I'm joking. I have a Timex. Nothin fancy but it gets the job done. It is now a quarter past 8 p.m. Know what that means? You're already late, Georgie. That's another day of work duty.

GEORGE

That's bullshit!

GALLO

You're awfully riled up, Georgie. Do you need to spend a few days in the bing? Take a little time out? Cool down?

GEORGE

That is fucking bullshit!

GALLO

Tsk. Tsk. You're never gonna get outta here with that attitude. *(Beat)* Wanna piece of advice? Get your ass in gear and get to the kitchen, pronto, before you piss me off, and I crack your fucking head open then drag you - kicking and screaming, or unconscious, your choice - to the bing. *(Beat)* How's that sound?

GEORGE

Nah, I'm good. I just need to get myself in the right frame of mind, you know?

GALLO

(Threatening) I can help to put you in the right frame of mind, if you want.

GEORGE

Nah. Nah. Fuckit, I'm out.

GALLO

Georgie?

GEORGE

What!?

GALLO

Dyou wanna tell me what I'm gonna find when I toss your shit?

GEORGE

What you mean? (*Off GALLO'S look:*) Some chick flicks and a fifi. Feel free to use 'em, if you want. Sharing is caring, right? (*To audience member*) Thanks for the food. I'll holler at you later tonight, when it gets cold and shit.

(Exit GEORGE)

GALLO

Have a good day at work, sweetheart!

(GALLO snaps on latex gloves, scans GEORGE'S stuff)

GALLO

Lot of you are new here, huh? Well, let me ask you this: What am I gonna find when I toss this shit? Tell me now. I don't wanna get poked with a syringe.

Why are you so quiet? Are you protecting that piece of shit?

Did he play that whole little brother thing on you?

I don't know why I framed that as a question. Of course he ran the little brother thing on you. To give you an idea of how fucked up that boy is, that's how he "seduces" his cell-mates.

We watch him very closely but we can't be everywhere at all times. We can only be in some places some of time.

Howzat for logic? Ha!

(GALLO lifts pillow, removes pillowcase; a plastic baggy filled with Vaseline falls out, along with chick flicks, as promised - real and pinup types - in various states of undress)

Anybody know what a fifi is? They take little baggies like this one here, fill it with Vaseline, and, uh, pleasure themselves. It's supposedly more lifelike than, uh . . . You get the picture. Disgusting. Depraved. But I understand. Drastic measures taken in drastic times.

(GALLO picks up flicks from the floor. One flick catches GALLO'S eye - it shows GEORGE and another boy, perhaps GEORGE'S brother. He shows it to audience)

Aw, isn't that cute? Must be his little brother he's always going on about. Almost makes you sad. Georgie's been here for while. Georgie was cell-mates with that other young man, whose name I can't say. The one who got caught with the stolen backpack?

See, now there's a difference between a young man like that, who doesn't belong in here, but is forced to be here anyway, because he got caught up in the wrong movement, and Georgie, who, let's face it, is nice enough, and probably at one point or another had a chance, but today, well, today, he's lost. And though I have faith that he may one day find light at the end of the tunnel, well, the truth of it is that he may be on his deathbed before it happens. And you do not want a young man like that out on the streets, in classes with your daughters and sons.

Trust me.

That other boy, the one who stole the backpack, I'll tell you what, his story messed me up. The others, most of 'em, they're animals. They belong here.

But Troy . . .

Whoops.

I shouldn't have said his . . .

You all know how to keep your mouths shut, right? Cuz I have ways of keeping boys quiet. Or, I make it so they can't say words, anyhow. It's hard to articulate your thoughts clearly when you're screaming and writhing in pain.

Why are you looking at me like that? I'm a pacifist, actually. I just have to bash some heads on occasion.

Do we have an understanding?

Good.

So, Troy got caught up with the wrong people, made one stupid decision, and he's had to fight every day of his life since then just to survive. Trust me, I've worked here long enough to know. I can see it the moment I lay eyes on 'em.

(Beat, fixes his gaze upon an audience member:)

Like you: I can see you're hiding something. I can see that, after years of committing countless indiscretions, you finally got caught for something random. It's just the tip of the iceberg for you, isn't it? What else have you done? Confess now, or forever hold your silence.

(Beat - silence? or does the audience member have something to say?)

Okay. Good.

(Fixes eyes upon another member of the audience:)

And you. You look like someone I wouldn't trust to watch my car. What are you in for? (*Beat, nothing?*) Right. I'm sure the sentence is fitting.

But, Troy? He doesn't belong here. And everybody knows it. Not like Georgie, who, let's face it, isn't the brightest bulb in the box. But he will clamp down on you and do whatever it is that he wants to do. He's hurt lots of boys who pass through here. That's why he keeps winding up in the bing. He's got no conscience. No morals. See, like this here:

(GALLO lifts what appears to be an empty milk carton, sniffs it, gags)

The sonofabitch has been saving his fluids in this empty milk carton. Piss, shit, snot, spit, semen. They save it all in here and, when some poor, unsuspecting person walks past the cell, they splash 'em with it. It's called splashing. A piece of advice to fresh fish: Watch your back and your front at all times.

(GALLO places the milk carton off to the side)

The way Troy wound up in solitary was, besides everybody picking fights with him all the time, Georgie here tried to punk him. Tried to make him his wifey. Right here in the day room. I caught him in the act. Troy was trying to fight Georgie off but let's face it: Georgie is bigger than most of the boys in here. It takes two or three of us to subdue Georgie. Troy, alone, had no chance. But then, because he was fighting, trying to defend himself. Troy got thrown into the bing.

I said to Troy, before they threw him in the bing, You have a great opportunity here, you realize that, don'tcha? Have any of you read Pascal? Pascal said, "All of man's problems come from his inability to sit quietly in a room by himself." The quote might be a little off but you get the idea. Now, because I am a corrections officer, I see a paradox in that quote. If this is man's fundamental problem, how in the hell do we expect all these young men to survive, let alone thrive, making 'em sit quietly alone in these rooms?

It kinda blows your mind, doesn't it?

So I said to Troy, when they threw him in the bing, You have an opportunity here. You could move mankind forward. I'll bring you the books. I'll make sure you get your time out of doors. I'll do what I can to see you through this.

See, I feel blessed. I've been in classes at Bronx Community College for about four years now, on and off. I'm going for a bachelor's in criminal justice. I'm gonna be warden here some day. I've got vision.

That's the problem with most boys in here. They have no vision.

Take Georgie, for example. I tried to teach him how to play chess. What I like about chess is it teaches you so much about life. You've got to strategize. Think about your next move before you make it. But then, if your opponent does something you didn't expect, you've got to adjust in the

moment. You've got to envision how you're going to win the game. If you've got no vision, you've got no chance of winning.

Troy? He's got vision. He wins three out of every four games. Georgie? I've been working with that dunce for over three years now, and he has yet to win a single game.

Pitiful.

I envision myself as a warden. I take the classes. I climb the ladder. I make changes that need to be made, cuz this system, let's face it, is broken. I believe in the basic, uh, the basic rules, but man, in practice?

(GALLO snatches GEORGE'S sleeping bag from the ground, holds it up, shakes it out. A shank falls out of the bag, the sheet-rope, a cell-phone, and the tape)

Jackpot.

See this? This is a shank, a shiv, a banger. He likely made it by heating up the plastic, and rubbing it on the floor until the end got sharp and pointy. It comes in handy when you've got beef. Or, a grudge.

And this? This cell-phone? This is a hot commodity right now. Yessir. This is probably why he's got the banger. Everybody wants one of these. You ever seen an inmate with a Tweeter account? They got the Facebooks and Snap-talks and Instant-grams and all that. You name it, they got it. They post this stuff so their friends can see what they're doing in here. Most of 'em just wanna brag, Hey, I was here, I did this that and the other, what the fuck?

But some, the more industrious ones, the crybabies, they wanna post about how poorly they're treated, and try and get places like this shut down.

I mean, really? C'mon. C'mon!

(GALLO notices the sheetrope)

This, this is the worst thing we can find. Do you know what they do with this? They use these to hang themselves. *(Beat; does GALLO tear up a little, here?)* It's a noose.

They sit in a cell for too long, thinking: Their girlfriends leave them, their dad gets locked up, their mom goes to rehab, the world goes on without them. They lose hope. They lose their minds, all alone, in a little room for 23 hours a day.

Troy's been in the bing for nearly a year, now.

The United Nations says that 15 days in solitary confinement is torture. 15 days is all it takes to break a man. And we're not talking about any man, but a grown man with, someone who has real conviction. Terrorists. Serial killers. Career criminals. They crack in about 15 days.

I don't know what the hell's taking them so long to process Troy's case. It shoulda been easy. Either he'd take the plea, get out on time served, or they'd find the evidence was insufficient to get a conviction. Troy's been to about twenty court dates at this point, and he's come back from each one a little more defeated. Finally, I finally said to him, Hey, why don't you just cop the plea? You don't belong in here, I said, cop the plea, or plead No Contest, and get back to the world where you belong.

But he refused. Like one of those characters from the Greek plays my philosophy professor loves so much? The king says (*Imitates a king*): "Admit your guilt, for you are guilty, and you may go free."

(*As self:*) But the prisoner refuses, and so the king has to show his power, otherwise the world will devolve into anarchy.

I had secretly made it my mission to get this kid back out into the world because he, he clearly don't belong here.

Troy's got a court-date coming up, right? I'm gonna say, Cop the fuckin plea, plead No Contest, Go home! Get on with your life. Cuz this whole innocent thing is killin me. And it's killin you.

So just. Just go, man, just go.

(*Beat; he sees the tape*)

What's this shit? A tape? I wanna say I haven't seen one of these in years but I'd be lying. I've got a 1992 Subaru. It's got a tape deck, so. (*Reads, then:*) This is Troy's handwriting. Better hold onto this.

(*GALLO slips tape in pocket. He gathers evidence, disappears.*)

5: THINGS FALL APART (PICKING UP THE PIECES)

MAUREEN appears in a pool of light, sweeping leaves off of the sidewalk. There's a lawn chair nearby, and a bag.

You ever heard that saying? A watched pot doesn't boil? You could say the same shit for the mailman: When you're looking out for him, he ain't gonna come. I sat out here, in that chair, everyday round this time for nearly three years. Waiting for my son, Troy, to write me a letter.

Did you ever meet Troy?

Oh, he was tall!

And smart.

And . . . Hhhh.

This is hard, because . . .

He was on Rikers Island. Spent a little over 3 years there.

Have you ever been there? Ever seen it? From far away the shit, the shit looks like something outta Star Wars. Like the spaceships? A buncha boxy pods stacked on top of each other. Mostly they're white, or gray, and some of the boxes, some of the pods are blue with little windows.

You can't see 'em but you know there are people in those little windows. Faces looking out. Looking for something, or someone, to hold onto.

“Get me the fuck outta here, please!”

Thousands of people trapped in there with nowhere to go, nothing to do, but wait, wait and terrorize each other. You'd think that, since they're in there together, and they're gonna be with each other for a long time, some of 'em, you'd think they would work together to make conditions better for each other.

Nope.

That's naive, right? I know what you're thinking: Maureen, how you gonna be from Brooklyn and be so naive?

Well, I am from Brooklyn. I've known most of you my whole life. I've known you since you were little. You knew my Mama. You, you're new. You're one of those New Jack - I'm sorry. That's mean. You're one of those hipsters, ain'tcha? I've always wanted to ask you: Why? Why move to Brooklyn?

But I already know the answer: Cuz Brooklyn is the best neighborhood in the whole world.

I'm from Brooklyn and I know that's not how the world works. That's not how jail works.

You know how they do in there: They steal from each other. They beat on each other. They rape and kill each other. I know cuz Troy was in there for a long time.

You know how many days that is? I know cuz I keep track. With this chalk. The rain keeps washing it away so I make new marks every time I come out here. I sweep away the dirt and the trash, and then I write on the sidewalk, where Troy used to play, when he was a little boy.

(Beat, she goes to make a mark on the asphalt, stops)

No, I shouldn't start with that number. I should start with another number.

(She writes the following numbers on the floor as she says them, so that, by the time the lights go down on the play, the floor is totally marked up:)

I should start with how many hours I was in labor with that boy: 26.

26 hours I was in labor with him.

He was born on New Year's Eve, 2003. Me and his daddy thought: This is a new year, a new day, a new life, and we've been given a gift.

Troy was always my gift.

(Beat, smiling to herself, perhaps through tears)

We were young.

And stupid.

Yeah.

We were stupid for believing that he would change the world for us. I mean, he did, in some ways. But see, the thing about kids is: They're your only chance to change the world. Your child is gonna go out there, and contribute whatever you've taken the time to teach them.

(Singles out an audience member:)

You with me on that?

Troy weighed 10.6 pounds when he was born.

I carried him for 10 months. Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. A full term pregnancy is 10 months, no matter what Hollywood tries to tell you. So he musta grown a pound each month.

We went home on New Year's Day, 2004, to this little apartment on Macon Street. How do you like living here, hipster? It's nice, right? Tree-lined streets. Brownstone buildings. I see where coffee shops, juice bars, and wine sellers are popping up all over the place. I like it. I do.

It's not what I grew up with, but I appreciate progress.

Mostly.

I fed that boy somewhere between 4 and 8 times a day for 18 months. That means I fed him 3,444 times, give or take, before weaning him.

During that time, when I was breast-feeding him, I slept 20 hours. Total. You think I'm playing? He didn't sleep. Ever. You ever seen "The Ring"? Where that bitch is talking about that demon, like, "She never sleeps!" That's how Troy was. He never slept. But he wasn't a terror to me. He was my joy.

Cuz even though he never slept, he had the most pleasant demeanor you ever did see. And smart. Scary smart. He was building little Lego pyramids before I bought a camera to take pictures of him building little Lego pyramids.

You know that losing sleep like that fucks with your short-term memory, right? Don't remember where but I read it but I read it. Losing sleep messes with your short-term memory.

I haven't been sleeping lately, so I still don't understand. I still don't understand. I still don't understand where I went wrong.

I wake up at 5 am for work - like everybody else. I thought I was doing okay. I knew what he was doing when he went outside.

But I didn't know what he was doing when he went outside. You know what I'm saying? I knew who he was with, but I didn't know who he was with.

I started feeding Troy real meals when he was a little over 1 1/2 years old. So at three meals a day, I've cooked about 16,000 meals for that boy. Ate 'em too, so I'm not complaining. Just speaking facts.

That's what I like about numbers. By themselves they tell the truth. It's not until human beings start playing with 'em, using 'em for their own ends, that's when numbers go wrong. Like the one time he was arrested. He was arrested only once in his life. For stealing. Or, as he said in the police report, he was trying to return the stolen backpack.

I believed him, still do. I'm his mother. And who knows a boy better than his mother?

When he was arrested he was a sophomore at Boys and Girls High School, over on Fulton Street. Ten years that boy was in school, and not once did he ever, ever get any grade other than an A.

He didn't get along with a lot of his teachers, I'll tell you that. A lot of them didn't like him because of how smart he was. He challenged them in ways that made them uncomfortable. Ways that made them insecure with themselves. You think teachers are your children's allies, but you'd better watch those motherfuckers. Not that they're all bad. They're human, right? But some of them are vindictive humans. Some of them harbor grudges and will go out of their way to make you feel some kinda discomfort, some kinda pain.

So I was very involved with him, the ten years he was in school. I had to be, otherwise he'd have eaten himself alive, from the inside-out.

That's why the whole thing's so hard. I lay awake nights, thinking, thinking the same damn thing: Where did I do wrong?

(She makes hash marks on the asphalt around her, trying to hide the fact that she's weeping)

He missed most of his sophomore year, his junior year, and part of his senior year. In the time since Troy first went to Rikers, three of his friends have already graduated.

Imagine that? His friends are all graduating from high school, but my boy, Troy, is dead.

I saw Joell, Stephanie, and George at the service last week. They all have jobs. Stephanie works at Ricky's New York. I've never been there but she tells me it's a wonderful little place near Washington Square, sells cosmetics, odds and ends. You know what I said: Girl, can I get the family discount? Cuz I love a good salt bath, but those salts are too expensive.

Shit.

Joell and George both work at Foot Locker, over at Barclay's Center. Joell looks like he's doing real good. He gave me these sneakers. Called them . . . Candle Breezys? . . . Candy Dayzies?

I'm getting that wrong. I odn't know what kinda shit these kids are into nowadays.

You'd probably know what they're called. They're named after that rapper, the one who's married to the Kardashian? Joell said they belonged to Troy, and that he had been holding them for Troy, waiting for him to get out. He said he wants me to have them.

And Joell's friend, George, he said he was locked up with Troy. said they were cellmates and all. Oh, he told me stories I couldn't believe. How Troy had to fight to survive. About the cutting. The punking. The program. George didn't speak proper English, but then who does nowadays? George seemed like he was adjusting well.

But I could see that that boy - George - wasn't right. He had tattoos and a look like he'd steal the fur offa fox's ass if it looked away for two seconds. Talking to him, I thought: How is it that a boy like that can get out, and live a decent life? But they'll throw Troy, a teenager with no record, into solitary confinement? And leave him there. 800 Days. And leave him there till he cracks.

Troy used to love to travel. Didn't matter where we were going, he was always happy about it. Whether it's the bus to Coney Island, the A Train to 42nd St, or the Staten Island Ferry. Troy was happy as a clam when we were traveling. He was taking drivers' ed before he got locked up.

He was on his way to getting his license, and then his first car.

He used to say, Mama, you're gonna get me a nice car, right?

And I'd say, I'm gonna get you the nicest car I can afford.

He'd say, How much are you gonna spend? And I'd write:
(*She writes \$500,00 on sidewalk*)

He'd look up at me, with those big golden eyes, and that devilish grin of his, and he'd say
(*imitates TROY*): Nah, I'm gonna get you the nicest car you ever seen.

"Nah."

I don't know why these young people out here gotta speak so poorly. Even Troy spoke like that.

I'd say, Troy, don't you know that cars cost money, boy, how are you gonna get me a car?

And he'd say (*imitates him*): I'm gonna be a doctor. I'm gonna buy you a car that costs this much:

(*She adds a few more zeroes turning the \$500.00 to \$50,000.00*)

And I'd say, That'd be nice, Troy, but you don't have to do all that. All I need is for you to love me. That's all I need in this world.

And he'd say (*imitates him*): I do love you, mama. That's why I'm gonna buy you a car, a house and a vacation to Jamaica.

I never could buy any of that stuff for myself.

And when he needed me the most, I couldn't afford a decent lawyer. One who'd work all the angles to get my boy out of that place. Instead, they held him, and they kept extending his time in there, cuz he kept getting into fights. People kept picking on him. And I couldn't do anything about it.

(*Pause*)

I worked two jobs to pay the rent. This little place: How much you think it cost? It was \$1100.00 a month when we moved here, back in 2003. Today it costs \$1800.00 a month. It has one bedroom. Troy slept on the sofa in the living room. Which was really a bedroom, if we're being

honest. It's not very big. I didn't go in there much, except to look for his dirty clothes and to make sure it was clean.

I sacrificed a lot for that boy.

Most people don't know this, but I was studying math at Brooklyn College, when Troy was born. His daddy was a good man but not really ready to be a father. I mean, he tried but he just, he just couldn't care for anybody but himself. And he failed at that, too, so.

I only married once. Learned my lesson real fast. After that I felt like I didn't need anymore husbands. When I called to tell Troy's daddy what happened, about the arrest, you know, his daddy kinda shrugged it off. (*Imitates Troy's Dad:*) He'll be out before you know it. He doesn't have a rap-sheet.

(*As self:*) When I called to tell him that Troy had hanged himself in solitary confinement, his daddy cried his eyes out. I never heard him cry in my life. Not even when we were going through the struggle, you know, when two people love each other but they just can't seem to hold on.

But he cried on the phone. To tell the truth, I've been crying ever since. I feel like I can't, I just can't cry anymore.

I promised myself ten years ago that I'd never touch that man again in my life. But the way he was crying and carrying on at the service, I had to hold him, to comfort him, and then I had to send his ass on his way.

The service was beautiful. But afterwards, after everybody went home, I was sitting there on a little stone bench beneath a tree. The sun was going down and it was quiet, almost peaceful. Then, alla sudden a crow started cawing:

(*The CROW calls out: Caw! Caw!!! CAW!!!*)

And when I looked up, I never will forget this, but there was hundreds of crows in the tree. They looked like fruit hanging from the branches. It reminded me of Billie Holiday. Minister Killian said it was called a Crow's Mass. They're beautiful, intelligent creatures, he said.

There was a corrections officer at the funeral. I don't remember his name but he said that Troy was like a child to him, and that he did all he could to keep Troy's spirits up, keep him reading and writing, and to help get Troy out. Said he helped get Troy into a program, where they teach you to write lyrics and make music. That's nice.

I thanked him but didn't know what else to say. Then he gave me this tape, on the sly. Troy made it using some kinda outdated equipment they got on Rikers Island.

Troy called it "A Conjuring." I listened to it. And you know what? Troy was good at that, too. I mean, he wasn't Al Green. He wasn't Marvin Gaye. He wasn't Gil Scott Heron. But he was Troy. and that's good enough for me. He wrote songs. Songs about Joell stealing the bag. Getting

arrested. Befriending a crow, imagining what it would say if it could talk. He wrote songs about how the inmates and the guards treated him in there. And he wrote a song about coming home and seeing me again.

I brought this tape player out. Don't know if it works anymore, but I want you all to listen to it. I want to hear his voice in these streets again.

(Silence)

Where did I go wrong?

Troy spent 800 days in solitary confinement. I knew he didn't belong in there but I thought he'd be safer, alone, you know, away from those other boys. The ones who belonged in there.

He had 21 appearances before the judge. They offered him the same plea - one year probation, 100 hours community service, and time served if he admitted guilt. You know how many times he admitted guilt?

Guess.

Zero. Zero.

Zero is a funny number, isn't it? It's something that represents nothing. It's a kind of paradox, right? I used to use all those other numbers to count how many times we did this that or the other. But now I find myself using zero a lot.

Know how many times Troy brought his wife over for Sunday dinner?

Zero.

Know how many times he was married?

Zero.

How many children he had?

Zero.

How many times has he called me in the middle of the night to discuss his struggles in med school?

Zero.

How many times has he helped me buy groceries, now that I'm unemployed?

Zero.

How many times have I heard him say, I love you, Mom, in the past two years?

Zero.

And today, today's Mother's Day.

Know how many sons I got?

Zero.

They made my boy into a zero.

(She draws a chalk outline of Troy on the ground. And, during what follows, she places the Yeezys on Troy's feet)

An absence. A void. Who has the power to do that to somebody? And why?

I don't

I don't know where I went wrong.

But I know where they went wrong: They took my baby away from me, and didn't give us a fair chance to fight. They left me with an absence that's more painful than anything he could've done to me if he was here.

The day after the service, I went to see a lawyer. I played the tape. He says I got a case. We might be able to hold them accountable for what they did. See, Troy slipped a little message into the music.

He gave me dates, times, and locations, on the B-side. I don't know what they're gonna show, but I imagine it's gonna be ugly. He's getting beat, abused. The lawyer's getting the surveillance tapes now.

They aren't ready for me. I'm gonna fight like hell to make sure that their mistakes don't go unnoticed. And that no mother has to suffer what I'm suffering.

Do you all mind if I play this tape? I want to hear Troy's voice again. Listen: Listen:

(MAUREEN plays the tape - but all we hear is hiss - as the tape plays and the lights go down on the play.)

EL FIN ~ 3/2/2018

GLOSS: 800 DAYS OF SOLITUDE: A CONJURING

Blunt: Marijuana wrapped in cigar paper

Lala: synonym for marijuana

Tony Montana (Sniffing Coke): From the film, *Scarface*, starring Al Pacino. In the scene referenced, Tony Montana (played by Pacino) sniffs cocaine. Behind the heaping mound of the white powder, Montana seems small. He's considering the price of money and power. Then a small army of hitmen raids his home. Wild eyed and at the end of his rope, he goes to war.

Yeezy's: Sneakers designed by Kanye West, distributed by Adidas. They retail for \$229.00, but, due to gross imbalance of supply and demand, they re-sell from anywhere between \$400-\$2200 used.

Dookie: Synonym for marijuana.

Hype shit: Beautiful, desirable clothing.

Pour out a little liquor: Libations for the dead.

"Curtis ain't no . . ." : He's referring to Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson, who wrote and starred in the film *Get Rich or Die Tryin*.

Stick-Up-Kid: Someone who is an expert at armed robberies, or, stick-ups.

"Lemme see your warface": From Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*

Copperhead Road: Song by Steve Earle.

Guardian Angels: A volunteer group of civilians who conduct safety patrols in their communities. The original 13-member group lived and worked in New York City in 1980.

Jimmy John's: The food delivery service of choice for those who work long, odd hours in the McLeod and the Moe at SIU.

Merengue: a dance popular in the Dominican Republic.

“Breathing in . . .”: a meditation mantra employed by Thich Nhat Hanh.

Dumbo: An arts-centered, gentrified neighborhood in Brooklyn, just across the water from Manhattan.

Washington Heights: A neighborhood in uptown Manhattan. Traditionally populated by immigrants from the Dominican Republic.

Bath Salts: A drug made infamous by stories such as those published by ABC News.

Fish Tank: A special disciplinary unit in most jails. Inmates who are thrown into the fish tank are visible to other inmates at all times.

Bing: Solitary confinement; the box.

Appendix B

Early Draft of 800 Days

DAY 0: IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE END

1

Summer. Brooklyn -

2

Bed Stuy, Brooklyn -

1

Yes, right, Bed Stuy -

2

Night.

1

No, not quite night -

2

Well, evening, or whatev -

1

Twilight. It's twilight.

2

Yeah, okay. (beat) Snooty motherfucker.

(Beat)

1

If we're going to get it right, let's get it right.

2

Right. (beat) Go on.

(Beat)

1

This is how it happened: Summer.

2

Bed Stuy, Brooklyn.

1

Twilight.

2

Brownstones and trees on both sides of the street.

1

Cars on the curb. An unbroken

2

Line of cars, right. People just getting home from work gotta wait for a spot to open up. Or park out on Coney Island, and take the train -

1

That shit can make you feel -

2

That shit will fuck your whole shit up, like -

1

Ahhh!

2

Ahhh!!!

1

Right?

2

Exactly!

(Beat)

1

Summer. Twilight. Bed Stuy, Brooklyn.

2

Cars and trees up both sides of the street. Two young men walking along Nostrand Ave.

1

The first, the leader, Joell, is black -

2

Is he?

(Beat)

1

I mean, he looks black, so -

2

Nah, but you can't tell just by looking at people. Is he "black"?

1

Well . . .

2

He's Trinidadian. His mom came from Trinidad in the 70s. His dad's ancestors were brought over on slave ships. Though his grandmother came from Haiti.

1

Right.

2

Right.

(Beat)

1

Right. So, Joell and Troy -

2

Troy is the shorter one -

1

Yes. Both fifteen, both laughing and looking at the girls passing them by, eating Italian ices.

Both looking for something to get into -

2

Something to do with their youth -

1

Use it while you've got it, you know -

2

Yes, cuz

1

Cuz you only got it while you've got it. And then -

2

And then it's gone. Like that.

1

Right. Just like that: it's gone.

(Beat)

2

Is Troy "black"?

(Beat)

1

I um. I dunno.

2

Yes. Troy is black.

1

Right.

2

His mom's ancestors came over on slave ships. His dad's ancestors came over on slave ships.

1

But Troy doesn't really think of himself like that.

2

No, he's too smart for all that. In his mind, the way it works is: I don't give a fuck what color your skin is, so long as you treat me right, I'll treat you right.

1

Right. He's got a mind like you wouldn't believe.

2

His vocabulary is far beyond his peers.

1

Though he doesn't like to show this.

2

No, he has a way of hiding it when he's with his friends.

1

They pass a man carrying a Louis Vuitton knapsack. Joell says: Yo, did you see that fuckin bag? That shit's dope! And Troy says:

2

Yes, it's opulent.

1

Joell simply stares at Troy, not knowing what the fuck opulent means -

2

But he can guess -

1

Yeah, he kinda guesses it means something like -

2

Dope.

1

So Joell nods as though that's what Troy had said. Then Joell suggests that they find a way to get that bag.

2

What? Like offer to buy it from dude?

(Beat)

1

Yeah, they've got 3 grand burning a hole in their pockets. Nah, man, they're gonna take that shit.

2

Right.

1

Right?

2

Right.

1

Right.

(Beat)

2

It's Joell's idea.

1

Fuckin right it's Joell's idea. Troy is like -

2

Troy has doubts.

1

If Troy spoke his thoughts, he'd say:

2

I have reservations.

1

Exactly.

2

But Joell, who lived with various family-members before being forced to live in a group-home -

1

Who has never had the things he wanted -

2

Fresh Nikes, clothes that aren't hand-me-downs, a Play Station -

1

Or the things he needed -

2

Home-cooked meals, a room of his own, a loving touch at the end of a hard day -

1

Joell sees that, if he can get hold of this bag, maybe he can sell it.

2

Right. He doesn't want it for himself, he wants to sell it -

1

Make a little money, so he can take Jennifer to the movies.

2

He wants to take her to see Atomic Blonde.

(Beat)

1

What the fuck is that?

2

With that blonde actress?

1

Which?

2

With the (breast gesture) and the (butt gesture)

1

Yeah, that narrows it down. I don't watch TV, so . . .

2

It's like a female 007, okay?

1

Right.

(Beat)

2

Joell just wants to have fun.

1

Troy wants to have fun, too, but he's got a different idea of fun -

2

Very different. It's like, Troy would have fun going to Prospect Park, and watching the geeses cooling out in the pond.

1

Watching the squirrels chase each other from tree to tree.

2

Smiling at girls -

1

They have something in common after all, yeah?

2

Hell yeah. But Troy is more crafty than Joell. His imagination is more agile. If Troy had a date -

1

He's got a girlfriend -

2

Right, but I'm saying, if he had a date, he'd find something to do that didn't cost any money. Cuz he doesn't have any.

1

He'd take her to Coney Island. They'd take their shoes off, and walk in the sand.

2

Yeah, right, in the Pelican shit and the needles and the, and all that. Lovely.

1

There's no pelicans on Coney Island. Seagulls, yes, but pelicans?

2

Seagull shit, then. Lovely.

(Beat)

1

Though Troy is smarter than Joell, Joell still has a lot of influence over Troy.

2

Cuz, though Troy is smart, he doesn't believe that he knows everything. He is a teen, after all -

1

Yes, and so he's searching for himself -

2

Trying to discover who he really is -

1

Testing his beliefs against the world -

2

So Troy can be swayed, at times -

1

Such as this one -

2

Where Joell says, Yo, let's take that motherfucker's bag.

1

And Troy says, after a moment's hesitation:

2

I'm down.

1

So they follow the dude with the Louis Vuitton knapsack for a few blocks.

2

Until the dude with the Louis Vuitton knapsack breaks south onto a street that is eerily quiet, and deserted.

1

Joell sees that this is their opportunity.

2

Troy can feel the butterflies in his stomach swirling and churning and screaming:

1

Don't do it! Don't fucking do it!

2

But Troy -

1

Who is usually very in tune with his gut -

2

Troy is swept away in the moment. See, he has this drive to be the best -

1

At whatever he does -

2

So he takes on this whole other persona, in the moment -

1

And he somehow moves past Joell -

2

He pushes past Joell, and throws the first punch -

1

Troy, swept away in the moment, lands the first blow -

2

The dude with the knapsack doesn't know what to think as he feels the blow land -

1

He sees white lights -

2

He's dazed -

1

His knees grow weak and wobbly -

2

And he falls.

(Beat)

1

Joell and Troy pounce upon the dude with the knapsack -

2

Like a pair of hyenas -

1

No, I don't like hyenas -

2

What?

1

Too mindless. Too vicious.

2

Like a pair of Leopards?

1

Yes! Right! Leopards!

2

They pounce upon the man with the knapsack, and take everything they can -

1

Wallet, shoes, watch, a ring -

2

The knapsack.

1

Yes, the, yes.

(Beat)

2

Then they rush off just as fast, just as determined.

1

They run until they are exhausted. They duck into an alley, huddling together behind a stinky dumpster.

2

Feeling safe, and hidden, they check to see what they've got:

1

A leather wallet from Ecuador.

2

A pair of Yeezy's. The zebras.

1

A white gold ring, but they don't know it -

2

They think it's silver -

1

Right, cuz they don't know much about jewelry.

2

They also don't know that it's an engagement ring.

1

Damn.

2

And that the man they stole it from worked and saved for seven months in order to buy it.

1

Right.

2

He knew he wanted to marry his fiancée well before that -

1

Years before that -

2

Yes, but he wanted to have the ring in hand when he proposed, so he had to wait.

1

They also didn't know that the man had a baby.

2

Until they opened up the Louis Vuitton knapsack.

1

Diapers spill out onto the ground -

2

Bottles -

1

Similac and baby wipes.

2

And that's when the weight of their actions hits Troy.

1

He immediately knows he fucked up -

2

And he knows what he must do.

1

While Joell is scheming on how he can keep the ring, the Yeezy's, and wallet for himself, Troy says, simply, quietly:

2

I want the bag.

(Beat)

1

Joell doesn't realize, in the moment, what Troy is after, so he's about to argue when Troy continues:

2

All I want is the bag, man. You keep the rest.

1

Joell can't believe this is working out so well. He simply nods, not wanting Troy to hear the enthusiasm in his voice. And then -

2

And then -

1

a car comes barreling down the alley -

2

A Crown Victoria comes barreling down the alley -

1

It's going way too fast to be your average civilian. It's headed straight for the dumpster where Troy and Joell are hiding.

2

Huddled together.

1

They hear the car skid a bit and stop just a few feet away.

2

The door swings open

1

Steve Earle's Copperhead Road blares into the night

2

A pair of boots crunches in the gravel, approaching Troy and Joell.

1

They look each other in the eye, terrified

2

Is it the police?

1

Is it the Guardian Angels?

2

Is it some vigilante redneck who packs a .38 special? Who saw the whole thing, and has taken it upon himself to hunt them down and try to perform a citizen's arrest?

1

The man, who is large, white, and wearing a security guard's uniform -

2

The security guard's boots crunch in the gravel as he approaches the dumpster.

1

As he gets nearer, Joell and Troy hear a sound that is very familiar, though, in this situation, highly undesirable -

2

The man undoes his zipper

1
Stands at the corner of the dumpster

2
Whips it out

1
Relieves himself, right -

2
Right -

1
Right there, a few feet from where Joell and Troy are huddled together -

2
With a cache of stolen goods between them. The security guard -

1
Who just finished a shift at some office building in downtown Brooklyn -

2
Has just come from the bar.

1
So, naturally, he's a little drunk.

2
He doesn't immediately notice the two teenage boys cuddling behind the dumpster.

1
But when he does -

2
You'd think he'd be embarrassed, standing there, holding his dick

1
But he's not embarrassed at all. Instead, he simply looks at the boys -

2
He assesses the situation, as his training taught him to.

1
And he asks himself: How can I benefit from this situation?

2
As life has taught him to.

1
Troy and Joell say nothing -

2
As life -

1
As school -

2
Has taught them to.

(Beat)

1
Then the security guard says:

2
What are you two doing back here?

1
Joell doesn't know what to say, cuz he is aware of how this looks.

2
But Troy, the smart one, says:

1
Taking mold samples -

2

Taking mold samples, bitch!

1

- for a science project.

2

Genius.

(Beat)

1

The security guard doesn't believe this. He sees the valuable items laid out between the young men. He notes their proximity to one another. He senses the nervous energy in the air. He smiles, then speaks:

2

You know, if you two need a room, I've got you covered. Ten bucks an hour, or \$50.00 for the whole night. My place is just down the street, in the 'ville. (Meaning Brownsville)

(Beat)

1

Troy humbly declines.

2

Joell can't believe what's happening. He's homophobic as fuck, so he's a little offended that this guy would suggest such a thing. But before he can speak -

1

The security guard says:

2

Fair enough. I need a switch up spots every now and again, too. Y'all have fun.

1

He puts his shit back in his pants

2

Zips up

1

Gets back in his car

2

And drives off. Joell instinctively walks in the opposite direction. Then he notices that Troy is not with him.

1

Joell turns to see that Troy is walking the other way -

2

Back toward the scene of the crime.

1

Joell says:

2

Hey, what the fuck are you doing?

1

To which, Troy says:

2

I'm gonna get rid of this bag.

1

Joell says:

2

That's cool, but you shouldn't go that way. The cops are gonna be looking for us, and they're gonna be everywhere.

1

Troy nods then walks away, in the same direction, without a word.

DAY 1: THE ARREST AND A MOTHER'S UNBIASED OPINION

5

He was the sweetest, most agreeable boy you could imagine.

4

The perp was spotted at the intersection of Macon and Nostrand, in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. When myself and Officer Brickowski made visual contact, the perp was walking due west on Nostrand. When the perp noticed that we had him in our sights, he quickly ducked behind a car due north on Macon. This kind of paranoid behavior is usually a sign of guilt. We confirmed that the individual who took the knapsack matched the description of the young man now running northbound on Macon. So we knew we were on the right trail.

5

He rarely cried. He fell asleep most nights with little to no fuss. He smiled and nuzzled into me when he was hungry, instead of screaming and clawing, like some babies are prone to do.

4

We caught up to the perp pretty quickly, because we were on bicycles. We identified ourselves, and then asked the perp to stop. But he kept walking, walking faster, in fact.

5

He was always smiling. He was inquisitive about everything. He looked at strangers with genuine curiosity, never fear.

4

Officer Brickowski asked the perp to stop repeatedly, to no avail.

5

And he was like that - bright, outgoing, egregious you might even say - he was like that all the way up until high school.

4

Fearing that the perp might get away, we drew our firearms. We told the perp one last time to stop, otherwise, we'd open fire.

5

In high school, things changed. Apart from the obvious ramping up of preparing you for the real world, young people, young people can be so mean.

4

He stopped, but didn't turn.

5

They made fun of him for the way he dressed (he dressed in tight jeans, and wore really bright colors before it was cool to wear tight jeans and really bright colors). They made fun of the way he spoke. His voice hadn't dropped yet, and his vocabulary was much deeper than his peers.

4

I asked the perp to put his hands up, and turn to face us. He did not respond.

5

He got to the point where he just stopped responding to them. Because, if he kept meeting them on their terms, he was going to have to fight every day of his life. I think he saw that, he knew that, and he didn't want it. He was peaceful, and gentle. He thought that, by ignoring his attackers, he was doing what one of his heroes (whose name I forget), had advocated. That is, practice nonviolent resistance.

4

Not gonna lie: The perp's unresponsiveness made me nervous. You've got to protect yourself at all times. Especially now.

5

The night he was arrested, I was beside myself. I knew something was wrong. I'd left messages on his phone, and he wasn't calling back.

4

A woman who went through the academy with me was shot, recently, point blank in the head while she was sitting in her cruiser eating a turkey sandwich. Things are so . . . Fucked up right now. You just. You never know, you know?

5

I didn't know what to do. So I called the police. I told them that my son had gone missing. That I needed help to find him.

4

I asked again: Put your hands up!

5

They said they'd keep an eye out for him.

4

Again, he didn't respond. Again, I asked: Put your hands up! Turn and face me!

5

When they called back, a few hours later, they said that had him in custody. I thought, Thank God they've found my boy, and that he's safe in police custody.

4

I don't wanna shoot, but I've got kids at home, you know? Zack's 6, and Leyla just turned 8. I'll be damned if they grow up without a father.

5

But then they told me I'd have to make bail by morning, otherwise they couldn't release him. And I thought, What do you mean release him? What did he do wrong?

4

It's too crazy in these streets. Then, he turned to face us.

5

They told me he had mugged a man for a knapsack.

4

Don't fuckin move, man, or I'll shoot.

(Beat)

5

How did he get like this?

4

When he faced us, I saw it.

5

What did I do wrong?

4

He looked - I'll never forget this - his eyes. He looked scared?

5

This place, sometimes.

4

He looked scared. But that's just a tactic, you know? That they use to get us to go easy on 'em.

5

The world. What it does to us.

4

And in his hands?

5

Still, I don't believe for a second that he stole anything.

4

Plain as day. In his fuckin hands.

5

I still don't believe it. After all this time.

4

There's the knapsack. Un. be. lieveable.

5

Why? Why would he steal a knapsack?

4

It's better to get them when they're still young. Show them how the world works.

5

Where did I go wrong?

4

You steal from somebody, there's consequences. Nobody's immune to this basic law. Nobody.

4 DAYS: THE FISH TANK

1

Troy is thrown into The Fish Tank - a special disciplinary unit on Rikers Island.

2

It's a small, empty, rectangular space enclosed by glass. There's another inmate in there, named Curious George, sitting on a rolled up sleeping bag. The smell in the room is an interesting mixture of piss -

1

And stale cheese?

2

Feet, man, that's musty ass feet.

1

Troy, who doesn't know what else to do, mimics George. He's sitting upon his rolled up sleeping bag, too.

2

Dinner has been served. George, who's nearly finished with his food, eats voraciously. Troy stares out into space, or at the other inmates (i.e. the audience), beyond the glass. George has been watching Troy the whole time without letting on. Appraising.

1

Plotting.

2

Scheming.

1

He knows what he wants.

2

Knows what he needs.

1

And just how to get it.

2

He draws a deep breath after swallowing a big mouthful of Salisbury steak.

1

He decides finally to speak.

(Beat)

3

Yo, you gonna eat that?

1

Troy does not respond.

3

I said, Yo, you gonna eat that?

2

Again, no response. But George knows Troy is listening.

3

Damn, motherfuckas is rude up in here. If you not gonna eat that, which, I advise you do, cuz it's a long way till morning, and these Nazi-ass correctional officers definitely do not do snack hour, I advise you eat all that shit. (Beat) Look, I know it's nasty. They call that shit salz-berry steak, right? But I dare you to tell me what kinda meat this is. Look at it. See? What kinda meat you think this is? And what the fuck is a salz-berry anyways?

1

Troy says nothing but, if you look closely, you'll see the faintest smile form at the corner of his lips.

3

That shit's nasty, right? (Beat) So you don't mind if I get my grub on, right? (Beat) So, say nothing if it's okay for me to eat your food.

2

As George predicated, Troy says nothing, so

3

Hellsmothafuckinyeah!

1

George eats Troy's food, which reveals, among other things

2

that George has no manners whatsoever.

1

Between bites, George speaks:

3

You're cool, you know that? These other motherfuckas in here, these rude ass motherfuckas, they'd kill anybody - anybody - tryna touch they food. They have no con . . . con . . . uh, contraceptive? Is contraceptive right? Is contraceptive a word? I wish they still had classes in here, so we could learn and shit. Motherfuckers in here is supposed to be in school, and they got us on lock down all motherfuckin day. What kinda sense does that make? (Beat) Con. Tra. Cep. Tive. Sounds right. Anyway, these rude ass motherfuckas have no contraceptive about sharing, caring, and community. Sharing is caring, right? Gimme some love . . .

2

Nothing.

3

C'mon, man, slap me some skin.

1

Nothing.

3

Gimme a nod, then, shit. Sharing is motherfuckin caring, am I right?

2

Nothing.

3

Sharing is caring: Yes or no?

1

Mmm

3

Howbout a good look motherfucka damn.

2

Hhh

3

Look, it gets boring as fuck in the Fish Tank, if you didn't know it. We don't get no cards, no chess . . . I mean, I don't know how to play chess anyhow, but, yo, I could learn. We don't get

no T.V. I mean, T.V. sucks anyhow. They don't ever let us put on the Knicks. But those broads? In the toothpaste commercials? The way they be smiling and shit? And lookin at the camera like they want something else all in their teeth . . . Ohmuhmothafuckingawd . . . (Beat) What I'm saying is it sucks up in here. So you should prolly wanna, I don't know, try and make some fuckin conversation, before I get bored. You don't want me to get bored, cuz, yo . . . When I get bored, I start thinking about shit.

1

Nobody wants that.

2

Right.

3

I start thinking about deep shit. Heavy shit. Like, who's fault is it I'm in here? And why the fuck do I gotta be in here anyway, when I should be out on the street, chasing after Cracked-out Sheila's daughter? And how my boys are out there, smoking la-la and drinking 40s of King Cobra and shit, spilling a little for the homies thass dead or locked up. (Beat) Thass me, if you didn't know. (Beat) And that shit makes me mad as fuck. Makes me wanna pound motherfuckas heads into hamburger.

1

Troy lowers his head, out of sheer exhaustion -

2

He hasn't slept in -

1

Hasn't slept since he got here. He's afraid.

2

He's terrified of predators -

1

Rapists, mostly -

2

Right. Terrified.

1

Most people are, when they first go in. But at some point you learn to conduct yourself. To defend yourself.

2

Still, Troy lowers his head, and George takes this as -

3

Oh shit! You nodded! Yes!!! That's a nod! I mean, not really, cuz you didn't come back up, but, fuck, in the past four hours since you got here, that's the first fuckin time you moved, so, yeah, I'll take it. (Beat) Haha! Sharing is caring! You gawdamn right, boy. And thank you. I appreciate you being con . . . Uh, consumate, and, uh, you know, thinking of the environment. Cuz all that food they waste up in here? It's bad for the ducks and shit. I read that shit somewhere. And then, one day when I was out on the yard, I swear to gawd, a duck swimmied swam swum? A duck swimmied swam swum by . . . I swear to gawd that motherfucka had two heads and shit. Thass on my mom that motherfucker had two heads! From all that nasty ass food we be wastin up in here.

1

George is appraising Troy -

2

Watching him very closely -

1

Looking for signs of life -

2

Signs of personality -

1

Signs of fight. How likely is Troy to fight?

2

But, because Troy is quiet, he's hard to read.

1

Is he too scared to speak?

2

Or is he thinking dark, violent thoughts -

1

Thoughts too crazy to speak aloud -

2

Thoughts that, if spoken aloud, could unleash a spell on the whole place -

1

Thoughts that could bring everything to a grinding halt -

2

Free the innocent -

1

Imprison the guilty -

2

And render all of his foes helpless.

(Beat)

1

Nah, George's imagination runs wild some times.

2

Right.

1

He gets carried away -

2

Yes.

1

And has to remind himself that the real world exists independently of his imagination.

3

How old are you, anyway?

2

Nothing.

3

You look like you're 12. Like you could be my little brother. Forreal, you remind me of my little brother. (Beat) I miss that boy. (Beat) When we was home, when I was home, we'd always fight over the Wii controller. My Gram? She could only afford one of those shits, so we couldn't play two player on Mario. You ever played Mario? That shit is cool as fuuuck, boy. And if you could like, play two player, like with a friend, or a brother, you'd have help against all the enemies that be comin at you. The fuckin Goompas, and the fuckin little turtles with wings, and the Bowsers and shit? Instead, we'd like, tell each other what to do? Like Jump! JUMP MOTHAFUCKA JUMP AHHHHH! (Beat) And he wouldn't lissen, so he'd die, and I'd be like, Yo, why didn't you jump? Stoopid motherfucka. (Beat) And he wouldn't say nothin, kinda just like you, cuz he knew he fucked up. Nah, but it was like, worse? Cuz he knew that I knew that he fucked up. I mean, it's two different things, right? When you fuck up, and it's your own secret, private thing? And when you fuck up, and everybody else knows, like when they're all in your business and shit, then it's different. Especially if they don't know you, or care about who you are, and all they

wanna do is like hold that shit over your head? It's fucked up. (Beat) I miss my little brother. When I get home, first thing I'm gonna do, I'm gonna give him a big ass hug. Like this

1

George wraps his arms around Troy and squeezes the shit outta him

2

But Troy is supremely weirded out by the human contact

3

Damn, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go touching you like that.

1

And yet that's exactly what he meant to do.

2

To see how Troy would react.

1

Troy did tense up.

2

His muscles got extremely tight.

1

I hope this isn't distasteful, but his butt clenched.

(Beat)

2

Really?

1

Did it or did it not happen?

2

Hhh.

(Beat)

3

I remember. When I first got here, I wasn't even worried about, like, being on Rikers? I was worried about getting fucked and shit. I didn't even shower for, like, the first month I was in here? Cuz I thought, hey, if these dirty motherfuckas want some ass, they prolly want it to be clean, right? So I left my shit all . . . You know? And . . . Look, all I'm saying? I know how it is. Okay? I know how it is. I'm not gonna try to fuck you, if that's what you're afraid of. Okay? (Beat) I like women and shit. And, yo, nohomo, nohomo, you're a good lookin dude. I bet you get all kinda ass on the outside. Am I right?

1

Naturally Troy smiles.

2

He tries to hide his head, like a fuckin turtle, but

1

but George sees him

3

Goddamn right I'm right! Look at you, smiling. Thass good. Thass good. You gotta smile. Cuz if you don't, your fuckin face might freeze into a fuckin frown. You want that? (Beat) Nah, you don't even gotta say nothin, cuz I know whassup. (Beat) You got a look about you. You gotta energy. You gotta light. (Beat) But you definitely are not a woman. Your anatomy's not right. I mean, it is for what you are. But you're definitely no fuckin woman, so. And I like women. So, yeah, depending upon your per, uh, your per . . . uh, you got lucky. (Beat) But yo, I miss my little brother.

2

George lets that sit for a minute.

1

So Troy can feel the weight of it.

2

George has done this kind of thing before.

3

I miss my lil bro cuz, even though his hands are always sticky and shit, so the controller's always sticky, he's still my boy. He's still my boy. (Beat) Yo, you wanna be my little brother?

1

Troy looks up

2

Meets George's eyes

1

And nods ever so slightly. George, sensing his victory, speaks:

3

Hellsmotherfuckinyeah you're my little brother!!! My little bro! Cool. Gimme some love. (Beat) Slap me five, little bro. Gimme some dap.

1

Troy slaps George five.

3

I'm George, by the way. They call me Curious George.

1

Troy says:

2

I'm Troy.

3

Troy?

3

Like the battle of?

2

Yeah.

3

Haha, okay! The battle or Troy. I like that. "This goes out to my brother, there will never be another, Trouble T Roy. I reminisce, I reminisce. Duh nun nunna nunna nun duhnt dunnant duhnt nant, duhnt nunna nunna duhnt nunnant nunnant. You ever heard that shit?"

1

Troy says:

2

Um, I don't think so.

3

Pete Rock and Something Something Smooth. You can hear it on the radio every now and then, when they play the old school shit? (Beat) My little bro . . . Yo, you sure you're not hungry? You want this fruit cup? Gotta eat somethin, otherwise you'll get all emanci . . . uh, emancipated? Thass a word, right?

1

And Troy, feeling a little more confident, says:

2

Yeah, emancipated is a word. But you're thinking of emaciated. Emancipated means to be set free. Emaciated is what happens when you don't eat enough. The body, like, wastes away? (Beat)

3

Yeah, yeah, you get all skinny and sickly lookin and shit. I knew that. I was just testin you and shit. (Beat) So what you in for, little bro?

1

And Troy says:

2

My lawyer says I'm not supposed to talk about it.

1

He's referring to his Public Defender, who is still in law school.

3

Shit, thass what they all say. They all say you not supposed to talk about it, cuz somebody might rat you out. But, like, I'm not a rat, so.

(Beat)

1

Troy says:

2

I don't really feel like I've got the words for it.

3

What!? Nah, smart motherfucker like you? Can't find the words? Nah. You could prolly write a book on that shit, like a whattayacallit? A novel? You could prolly write a novel and it be a best-seller and shit . . .

1

Suddenly, George's attention shifts from Marcus to an inmate - i.e. an audience member - who's watching too closely for George's comfort. George fixes his gaze on the audience member. His face twists into a mask of pain and anger. He speaks to the inmate/ audience member:

3

Yo, what the fuck you lookin at? What? You think this is funny? You think I'm your fuckin entertainment? You think this a game?

1

That's awkward.

3

Wait till I get outta here. I'm gonna find you, mothafucka! I'm gonna find you and . . . (Beat) Nah. Nah. Chill out, George. Got to keep my cool. Don't let these rude ass motherfuckas get to you, G. It ain't worth it.

1

Troy, who's a little afraid at this point, says:

2

Do they watch us like that all the time?

3

All the fuckin time. That shit fucks me up. They throw you in here, and motherfuckas watch you all the time. Like you're some kinda animal. Some kinda freak. (Beat) Go ahead, man, tell me. You'll feel better. (Beat) Would it help if I told you what I did?

(Beat)

2

I don't know.

3

What the fuck? Thass no kinda answer.

2

It's just that, I don't care if you know what I did, or didn't do. As long as I know, nothing else matters.

(Beat)

3

Oh.

(Beat)

2

What?

3

Oh, I see.

2

What? What do you see?

3

Yeah, I see it all now. You're one of those.

2

"Those"?

3

You're one of those "I didn't do it" motherfuckas, huh?

2

I didn't say that.

3

No, but you think it. You think: Why'm I in here? I didn't do it. It's so fucked up. I'm a victim and blah blah blah. Right?

1

Troy gets swept up in the moment, as he's prone to do.

2

You don't know me, and you definitely don't know what I think, so . . .

3

Nah, you're right. It's just that, everybody in here, you ask 'em if they did it? 110% percent of them will say that they didn't do it. (Beat) Why you lookin at me like that?

1

Troy is looking at George like he's stupid.

2

You can't have 110% of a group of people. You can't go beyond 100%.

1

George snaps back:

3

Man, shut the fuck up!

1

Troy falls silent. George realizes, in this moment, exactly what kinda person Troy is.

3

I'm sorry, little bro. I didn't mean to snap on ya like that.

2

It's okay.

3

I'm saying it for, uh, impot-

2

Emphasis.

2

Yes! Emphasis! (Beat) Damn. Damn. You're a smart motherfucka. I can't get over how smart my little bro is. So what you in for? What'd you do? Or, what didn't you do, but they say you did?

1

Just then, there's a commotion down the hall. Errol, kicking and screaming, is led - or dragged in - by Officer Gallo.

5

Get the fuck offa me!

4

Shut up.

5

Yo, I said get the fuck offa me motherfucker! Before I -

1

Gallo releases Errol, then steps back, a smile spreads across his face.

4

Before you what? (Beat) What are you gonna do? (Beat) I'm waiting. (Beat) Okay, now, it seems, we are back to neutral. This is good. We can move forward from neutral. Or we can move backwards. It's up to you. (Beat) Which way would you like to move?

1

This is how Gallo operates. He's calm and cool - or he acts that way - but really, deep down, he's a sadistic motherfucker. He's baiting Errol.

5

I'd like to move forward, sir.

4

Good. Are you finished?

5

Yessir.

4

Good. Are you prepared to move forward?

5

Yessir.

4

Good. Now pick up your shit - your bedding and your undies - off the floor, and get your ass in the fish tank.

5

Yessir.

1

Errol does as he's told, taking a spot in the corner of the fish tank, away from the others. Gallo pauses.

4

Howzit going, Georgie?

3

Beautiful, Sergeant Gallo. It's a beautiful night.

4

You're hanging in there?

3

Yessir.

4

One day at a time, right?

3

Thass right.

4

That's what I like to hear. Now you see here, Errol? Georgie is a damaged child who has chosen to move forward.

5

Yes, I can see that. He looks all rehabilitated and shit.

4

Sure, he's had it rough. He's had his trials and tribulations. But he refuses to be beaten. He refuses to stay down. He denies stagnation whenever it tries to take hold. Georgie is not

rehabilitated, because, as you can see, he's still in here. He's got a ways to go yet. But, Georgie is on his way towards rehabilitation, isn't that right, Georgie?

3

You got it, Gallo.

4

You're a real trooper, Georgie.

3

Thank you.

4

Just think: You'll be up at Sing Sing before you know it, doing your 8-10 year bid. And this'll all be behind you. You boys get comfortable. Lights out in ten.

1

Gallo begins to go, then notices Troy for the first time.

4

Georgie?

3

Sir?

4

Who's this?

3

This my little bro, Troy.

4

Georgie, I went to high-school with your mother. I used to know your father. Personally. We played handball on 14th Street. He had real talent. Could've been a contender, could've been something, but he threw it all away. Why did Gloria and George Sr. omit the fact that you had a little brother?

3

Howdafuck should I know? I don't keep tabs on those deadbeat, crackhead, junkie motherfuckas.

1

Gallo does not like speaking out of turn. He does not do well with direct speech. He steps toward George, prepared to strike a blow, but at the last possible second, he halts.

4

Though I don't appreciate your language, Georgie, I recognize the truth in what you say. Gloria and George Sr. have had their problems with dope. I wish to God that they'd let it go. But they make their own decisions. I've got enough trouble trying to live my own life, trying to walk a straight and narrow path. (Beat) Though i don't appreciate your choice of words, I must admit that your vision is much clearer than when you first arrived here.

1

Officer Gallo turns to Troy, then speaks:

4

I'm Officer Gallo. What's your name, young man?

2

Troy.

4

Troy? Troy . . . Trrrooooy . . . Hmm. (Beat) You're the one everybody's talking about, aren't you? The one who got caught with the stolen knapsack? Is that right?

1

Troy is mortified. How does Gallo know this?

2

My lawyer says I'm not supposed to -

4

- say anything about your case? Right. It's very wise of you to take your counsel's advice. I admire your conviction; I appreciate people who do what their told. (Beat) And yet I cannot resist, for I am infinitely interested in human behavior. Permit me to ask you one question: Is it true that you were apprehended trying to give it back to its rightful owner?

2

My lawyer, says that, says that -

1

George and Errol look at Troy, then to each other, and begin laughing like hyenas. Gallo turns on them, viciously -

4

You two shut the fuck up! (Silence, as 4 composes himself) Though I admit the circumstances surrounding this young man's arrest are somewhat ironic, I assure you it's no laughing matter. He's facing a stint upstate, like you two. But, unlike you, Georgie, who apparently doesn't know the meaning of word "No," and you, Errol, who, at such a tender age already displays the attributes of a career criminal, Troy here has a chance. He doesn't belong in Sing Sing, or Attica.

5

I don't belong in Sing Sing!

4

That may be, Errol, but Judge van Hoven feels differently. And, in this case, his opinion carries more weight.

5

Thass only cuz Judge van Hoven obese! That motherfucker prolly never gets up from behind that bench! He prolly got a big ol fuckin box of ding dongs back there, and he be eatin them when he thinks nobody lookin, but I seen him eating that nasty shit! I seen him with my own fuckin eyes! They prolly got a hole in the bottom of his seat, so he can go to the bathroom without having to get up! He prolly got a fucking pillow under the bench, so he can sleep at night, like this . . .

1

Errol plays the sleeping judge; George laughs but gets cut off by Gallo.

4

I'm sorry that you were committed today, Errol, I truly am, but you must accept the consequences of your actions and move forward. Clear away all the clutter - all the "buts" and the "what ifs" - that pollute your mind, and face the music of the what is. Only then may the healing begin. Epictetus said: "What is a 'good' event? What is a 'bad' event? There is no such thing! No such thing. What is a good person? The one who achieves tranquility by having formed good habit of asking on every occasion, 'What is the right thing to do now?'" Do you understand?

5

Yessir.

4

I'll leave it at that. Troy, it was nice to meet you. If you need anything, holler. You boys get cozy, now. I'm gonna sit right over here, and read for a bit. Errol? I'm watching you.

5

Whatever.

4

Don't do anything stupid. The sooner you move forward, the sooner you can put all this stuff behind you. (Beat) Lights out!

1

The lights shift, as the boys make their beds.

3

Yo, you were tryna give it back? What the fuck is that, little bro?

2

You don't have a little bro.

3

Officer Gallo doesn't know what the fuck he's talkinbout. He tries to act like he's a pillar of the community, like he's all in everybody's business, and he care and shit, but he don't know shit. He act like he all cool and calm and shit. He's always talkinbout philosophers, but yo, that motherfucka's violent as fuck. Ask Errol.

5

He'll fuck your whole shit up, quickfast.

3

He'll flip on you without warning, so be careful what you say to him. (Beat) Why you so scared to talk about your shit?

1

Troy tries to hide his feelings, but he's unsuccessful.

2

Scared? I'm not scared.

1

Yeah. He's terrified.

2

It's just that, it doesn't feel real.

3

What doesn't feel real?

2

The whole thing. Like, the night I got arrested. And then the officers who interrogated me. They put me in a holding cell, in the subway, all by myself. They acted nice to me. "Do you need anything to drink?" "Are you warm enough?" They even bought me pizza, and Coke. Then, when I was finished, and I started to relax, they took me to this other room. It had a steel table, and a steel chair bolted to the ground. With the lightbulb, you know? Swinging? They left me in there forever. Then, when they came in, they got real mean, and loud. They started asking questions they already seemed to know the answer to, and they started threatening me. (Beat) I said I didn't do it, but they didn't believe me. And now I'm in here.

3

I hear you. (Beat) Hey, little bro? You should make your bed closer to mines. Errol isn't to be trusted.

5

What the fuck you say?

3

You heard what the fuck I said, bitch. I said you're not to be trusted!.

5

Nah, see, Georgie, why you always talkinshit?

3

Mind your business, Errol. I'll mind mines.

5

Fuck you.

3

Fuck you!

5

Fuck you!

3

Fuck you, bitch! Why don't you go back to braiding your little sheet? You think I don't see what you doin over there? I see you. Do the world a favor: Hurry up and hang yourself already.

(Beat)

1

Now Troy is getting a taste of what it's really like on Rikers. The dark underbelly.

2

Is that forreal?

5

I'm not going to Sing Sing. Fuck that shit.

2

So you're gonna hang yourself?

5

You know what they do to dudes my age, in Sing Sing?

3

You ain't gonna do shit. He's been saying that for like, six months already.

5

Fuckin judge van Hoven hit me with three to six!

3

That ain't shit: I got eight to ten!

5

I don't give a fuck what you got. I'm worried about me! Damn. I knew I shoulda stayed on the run, but my girl was like, You need to turn yourself in, baby, maybe they'll go easy on you. I turn myself in, and bam, I'm sitting on Rikers. Then they say, take the plea, maybe they'll go easy on you. Three to six? All I did was take a pair of Yeezy's from some new jack didn't deserve to wear 'em! Three to fuckin six!? Shit, those motherfuckers don't go easy on nobody!

3

Errol, you stupid.

1

You're fuckin stupid!

3

Forreal though: Shut the fuck up so I can go to sleep.

5

I'll be quiet. But I'm still gonna be working over here, so.

1

An uneasy kind of silence follows as the cell-block exhales, preparing for a night's rest, but knowing that sleep is dangerous. Errol continues tearing and braiding his sheet. Troy rolls away, so his back is to the others - big mistake. George props himself up on one arm.

3

Hey, little bro? You asleep?

2

No.

3

It's cold as fuck in here, right?

2

Yeah.

1

Another big mistake.

3

On the outs, me and my little brother used to share the same bed? And we'd sleep, like, head to foot? But then, when it got cold, and my Gram couldn't afford to keep the heat on, we'd kinda get real close, so we could feel each other's body heat, you know?

2

You mean, like, spoon?

3

Yeah, I mean, no, cuz that sounds gay, and I am definitely not gay. We wouldn't "spoon", but just like, you know, how two brothers would do, like, to keep warm?

2

Yeah.

3

I miss that. I really miss that. And I just wonder if, since you're my little bro, would you scoot closer to me? So we can keep each other warm? (Beat) It's a known fact that little bodies generate more heat. So why dontcha come gimme some of your warm, little bro.

(Beat)

2

Um . . .

1

Troy is frozen. He knows that this is real, now

3

I've been cold, and I've been missing my little bro for too long, so . . . It's like this: You can either scoot your lil warm ass over here, and it can be beautiful, or I can drag you over here, kicking and screaming. Your choice.

1

Troy doesn't move. Tense silence. Then George reaches out to grab hold of Troy. And like that, they are on their feet, scuffling. Troy shouts:

2

Help! Help!

1

Gallo jumps to his feet, pulling an expandable baton from his belt. He enters the fish tank, tries to separate Goerge and Troy -

4

Break it up! I said break it up!

1

Gallo pushes George into the far corner of the fish tank, then tries to restrain Troy. George and Errol laugh wildly, enjoying the entertainment, as Gallo tries to restrain Troy, who doesn't realize that Gallo's trying to help. Gallo grabs hold of Troy, but Troy wriggles out of the hold, turns, swings on Gallo, and lands a blow to his face. Everybody freezes in place, then:

4

You know you messed up now, right?

2

What? No, I'm sorry. I was just trying to protect myself!

4

In trying to protect yourself, you strike out at your ally? Is that right?

1

George and Errol laugh, wildly.

2

I didn't mean to. I was -

1

Gallo brushes his fingers across his nose.

4

Oh, I'm bleeding.

2

I just wanna go home!

1

George and Errol laugh louder, wilder

4

And yet you are here. For good reason, apparently.

1

Gallo can taste his own blood, now.

4

Troy, you are far too violent. You are far too prone to inciting violence. Everywhere you go, it seems that violence follows. Something has got to be done about this. (Beat) Yes. Yes, something ought to be done immediately. (Beat) Come with me. We're going down to solitary confinement. See if they've got room for one more. (Beat) I'm going to make a special project out of you. (Beat) If you ever make me bleed again, I'll make life so miserable for you, you'll look forward to death like it was Christmas morning.

1

George and Errol laugh as Gallo drags Troy away.

46 DAYS: THE BING

6

We see him.

5

All alone.

6

He's all alone, yes.

5

In solitary confinement.

6

The box.

5

Right, the -

6

Or, The Bing, in some circles.

5

In some circles, yes, a bid in The Bing becomes a badge of honor

6

A sign of . . . Courage?

5

A sign of . . . Strength?

6

Because it's hard.

5

It's fucking hard.

6

Some people call it the Why Me pens.

5

Cuz you get in there -

6

And you sit there for so long

5

All alone

6

That you start saying:

5

Why me?

6

No visits.

5

No colors.

6

Everything's grey. The lights are green.

5

The United Nations classifies XX days in solitary confinement as torture.

6

Troy has been in solitary for 40 days -

5

42 days -

6

Right, 42 days, at this point.

(Beat)

5

2 months in the box will kill you.

6

90 days in the box will kill you.

5

Troy starts pacing, talking to himself:

2

Why me?

5

Troy does burpies -

6

Pushups into jumping jacks -

5

To pass the time -

6

To mark time -

2

. . . 78 . . . 79 . . . 80 . . .

5

Otherwise, he sits there, on the ground, counting cockroaches.

6

He counts cracks in the wall.

5

If you stare long enough, at some point, the cracks and the grooves in the wall begin to move.

(Beat)

6

What the fuck?

5

They start to move. Your own little private movie theater.

6

He begins dialogues with himself:

5

Yes, like:

2

That's rice?

That's not rice.

That's rice!

Rice doesn't move, so

That's rice, and it just moved!

Rice does not fuckin move, man!

It moved!

6

Troy's hallucinating, but there's no one there to tell him the difference between his hallucinations and reality.

5

It's hard.

6

Right. At least in general population, you can make friends with your inmates.

5

Well, friends is a strong word for -

6

Right, but still

5

Those kids in there tormented Troy

6

Yes, but

5

Made his life a living hell.

6

Right, but the opportunity for friendship, for fellowship at least -

5

Like when they'd say:

1

What the fuck are you looking at, Blood?

5

Or

1

Yo, is your girl's name Stephanie?

6

Yes! See, that's a start.

5

Right, and then they'd be like:

1

My homeboy said she misses you.

6

Yes, good!

1

Right after they fucked. She was crying and shit, and he asked her why. Then she started talking all that dumb shit, so he bounced on her.

(Beat)

6

Hhh.

5

They call it gladiator school for a reason.

6

Troy was no gladiator.

5

And he was far beyond anything you could call school on Rikers Island.

6

And a bid in the Bing was no badge of honor for him.

5

So when he was sent to The Bing, Troy saw it as a kind of relief.

6

Yes, a form of security.

5

He felt safe.

(Beat)

6

Officer Gallo's words on the subject helped a little, in the beginning.

4

Pascal said - you know Pascal? Stoic philosopher? Pascal said that all of man's problems stem from his inability to sit alone in a room.

6

Wow.

4

You're special, Troy. You've got a real opportunity to move the whole human race forward.

6

He's a piece of work, isn't he?

4

On the one hand, it feel like punishment. And, let's be honest: It is. But on the other hand, you've got an historic opportunity here. Don't waste it.

(Beat)

6

To Troy went in trying to solve all of man's problems.

5

And he succeeded. For a few days.

6

But it's hard.

5

It is fucking hard.

6

You're locked away from the people you love

5

You're locked away from the people who love you.

(Beat)

6

He felt a sense of security, when he first arrived. But that was just an illusion.

5

Even if the inmates can't get at you

6

You've still got to deal with the guards. And they -

5

They have intimate knowledge of the innerworkings of the system.

6

Right. So if they wanna get at you -

5

There's nothing to stop them.

6

And none of the liked Troy, cuz he was smarter than them. And he -

5

He acted like he didn't belong there.

6

He knew he didn't belong there.

5

While the rest of them were trapped.

6

So he's not totally safe.

5

Right.

6

Right.

5

Right.

(Beat)

6

Still, he's removed from the thick of it.

5

He's relatively safe.

6

He can rest.

5

Well, he's getting very little sleep, at this point.

6

But he's liberated from the perpetual state of fight or flight that the rest of the inmates in general population experience.

(Beat)

5

And the problem of solitude?

6

Right, solitude -

5

Ah, solitude!

6

Some solitude is necessary for good mental health, but too much of it can

5

Too much can become

6

It's its own kind of prison, yeah?

5

Too much of it can make you feel

6

Isolated?

5

Unstable?

6

Unloved?

(Beat)

5

You begin to feel you're losing your grip on

6

Reality?

5

The world?

6

Yourself?

(Beat)

5

In short, too much solitude

6

No matter the circumstances

5

Can be

6

Devastating

(Beat)

5

It's like looking at yourself in the mirror for

6

Hours?

5

Well, no, it would be

6

Days?

5

Until all of your faults

6

The ones you're aware of

5

And the ones you didn't know existed

6

Become painfully obvious, and

5

All-consuming?

6

It's all you can see.

5

Warped

6

Everything becomes distorted.

5

Too much solitude is like looking in the mirror for too long

6

Right, but it's the contents of your mind.

5

The thoughts that preoccupy your mind every day are present:

1

I'm hungry. I want something . . . Sweet. And salty.

2

Damn, she's pretty.

3

I need some sleep.

(Beat)

6

And then, the thoughts that you didn't know were there

5

Those that are normally buried more deeply, and for good reason

6

Rear their ugly heads:

1

Yo, you're fuckin fat, dude. Why don't you stop eating already?

2

That girl doesn't want you.

1

Look at you:

2

You're too ugly.

1

Your personality's bland.

2

You say stupid shit all the damn time.

3

And your dick's little.

1

How could she love you?

2

How could anybody

1

How could anybody

3

How could anybody love you?

(Beat)

5

Apart from the yearning to be with your loved ones again, these thoughts -

6

These nasty thoughts that you struggle to escape daily -

5

Crowd out the others, and

6

Yes, and they're totally negative.

5

A kind of self-inflicted violence.

6

Yes, good!

5

And you know the saying:

6

All of man's problems stem from the -

5

No.

6

???

5

You are what you think.

6

Oh.

(Beat)

5

And what Troy started to think

6

In the absence of others

5

That darkness

6

That solitude

5

Under the crushing weight of those violent thoughts

6

What he started to think was:

1

I wish

3

I wish

2

I wish I was dead.

5

Right.

6

That's when he started asking for extra sheets.

365 DAYS: THE JUDGE BRUNCHES WITH THE FAM

2

There he is, at the table

6

The head of the table

2

Fine restaurant

6

Not too fine, but fine enough to charge "Market Price" for most items.

2

Right . . . Meaning?

6

Meaning they sell bison steaks for upwards of \$40.00 usd.

2

Ah!

6

Fine enough to have a rotating menu, most days.

2

Yes, so he's sitting at the table

6

At the head of the table

2

His wife -

6

Whom he met while at Law School -

2

Summa cum laude, Wayne State 1982

6

1984 -

2

1984, right.

6

His wife is tastefully dressed, but comfortable.

2

Slinky Egyptian combed cotton dress -

6

Modest cut but still revealing

2

Red

6

Right, red

2

Revealing enough to captivate any pair of eyes that glance her way

6

She's sipping ice tea, waiting for the restaurant's "famous" bloody mary

2

What time is it?

6

Lunch time.

(Beat)

2

Meaning?

6

Meaning lunch time?

2

Lunch time is not the same for everybody, so, please, be more specific.

(Beat)

6

Noon.

(Beat)

2

You're not just saying that cuz -

6

No, it's noon. The Judge is very precise with his schedule. He takes lunch at noon no matter where he is, or what he's doing. Legend has it that, once when he was in surgery - angioplasty - he woke in the middle of the operation - at noon - to ask if he could -

2

Have lunch!?

6

To ask if he could have lunch, yes. Why do you do that?

2

What?

6

Steal my thunder like that. I was building toward the punch line, and you just - woosh, went right in there and stole it from me.

2

Sorry.

(Beat)

6

He's extremely rigid in his habits.

2

Yes.

6

Each day is carefully planned, and unfolds accordingly, without a hitch.

2

It's a real skill.

6

It's a real asset.

2

It's a real pain in the ass. For those who love him.

6

His wife, for instance.

2

Yes, his.

6

Hence the bloody mary at noon.

2

And look at that, it's just arrived!

6

She sips and winks at the waiter -

2

Handsome young man. This isn't his real career.

6

No, of course not.

2

He's an actor.

6

Yes. So being a waiter is his real career.

2

For now.

6

He looks down her dress as she sips her bloody mary.

2

And the Judge, well aware of what's happening, glances over at his son.

6

His son sits to the Judge's right.

2

He's a beautiful boy, 20 years of age.

6

Apple of his father's eye.

2

The light of his mother's life.

6

He's eating a cheeseburger with fries. The fries are smothered in mayonnaise.

2

Ever since the family visited Holland, he smothers his potatoes, in whatever form, in mayonnaise.

6

At 20, he's just a little older than Troy.

2

Right, Troy who, at this point, is now 16.

6

His birthday has come and gone while he's been locked up on Rikers Island.

2

Aha!

(Beat)

6

What? You see where I'm going with this?

2

Yes, I think so.

6

Would the Judge -

2

Who sent Troy to juvenile for a petty crime -

6

For which there is no real evidence -

2

The bag?

6

The knapsack?

2

Yes, the knapsack -

6

He had the knapsack, but is that really indisputable evidence?

2

I think so.

6

Either way, he's been in juvenile for over a year now, waiting for trial -

2

He refuses to plead guilty; refuses to accept a plea bargain -

6

He maintains his innocence.

2

Yes.

6

So the Judge -

2

Who takes his family to lunch each Saturday -

6

Would he send his own son to juvenile, for an indeterminate amount of time, with little-to-no evidence, if his own son stood accused? Would he? Would he?

2

No.

6

No! Of course not.

2

What kind of a man -

6

Right, what kind of a man would send a boy to such a horrible place?

2

Yes.

6

Let alone his own son. Do you see?

2

Yes.

6

And that's exactly the case when the Judge's son, two years later, while at university -

2

An ivy, no doubt

6

Naturally.

2

Yale?

6

Harvard?

2

Columbia?

6

Princeton?

2

Penn State?

6

When the Judge's son attends an unnamed ivy league school -

2

To protect the identities of those -

6

The Judge's son discovers that he's more successful with women -

2

And men -

6

When he slips a little pill into their drinks.

(Beat)

2

Right. And eventually -

6

Eventually he is caught.

2

One person steps forward.

6

And then another

1

And another

3

And another

2

And another

4

And another

5

And another

2

Game over.

(Beat)

6

Of course, his father being a judge

2

Who makes an annual contribution to this unnamed ivy league institution -

6

To protect the innocent -

2

When he learns of his son's trouble, the Judge makes a few calls.

6

Greases the wheels of justice, as only a judge knows how

2

And, let's be real, it's not all smooth.

6

No, he has to raise his voice with a few people

2

He makes a few threats

6

And he pleads with one or two, which really makes him feel unclean.

2

Still, before you know it

6

His son is off the hook.

2

Well, I wouldn't say off the -

6

No, you're right. Not completely.

2

Right, he was asked to leave the university -

6

To protect the innocent.

2

To avoid any awkward situations that may arise.

6

Sitting in the same class.

2

Passing each other in the halls.

6

Eating in the same dining halls.

2

Right.

6

Right. Hhh.

(Beat)

2

The son doesn't really want to leave, because, for all that unspeakable horror, he actually has a relationship -

6

A solid relationship -

2

With a young woman.

6

Of whom he's totally enamoured.

2

Sad.

6

Indeed.

2

But, obeying his father's advice

6

He leaves the university.

2

Right, he goes.

6

He goes to another school.

2

Not an ivy, but definitely not a shit school, either.

6

No, but much more low key.

2

Out of sight.

6

Right. So no one really notices when he goes back to slipping little pills into drinks.

(Beat)

2

Meanwhile, Troy

6

Who has been convicted of no crime

2

Who has been convicted of nothing

6

Troy, who has been convicted of no crime, who only stands accused, sits in solitary confinement, wondering:

2

Where did I go wrong?

6

Why is life so hard?

2

Why are things so fucked up?

(Beat)

6

His only peace comes from imagining his mother, and what she's doing.

2

She's out shoe shopping.

6

What?

2

She expects him to be home any day, and she wants him to look good. She wants him to get a job, and be successful straight away when he comes home.

6

She's also trying to stave off the loneliness, and the nagging thoughts:

5

Where did I go wrong?

6

To do something other than sit inside all day, weeping.

5

How did he get like this?

6

Alone.

2

Alone.

6

Alone in her little apartment, weeping, waiting for her world to collapse.

(Beat)

6

Troy had a pretrial on the 21st day of his time on Rikers Island. When asked

1

How do you plead?

6

He said

2

Not guilty.

6

He had another pretrial hearing on day 56. When asked

1

How do you plead?

6

Troy said:

2

Not guilty.

6

And on day 94

1

How do you plead?

2

Not guilty.

6

Do you see where this is going? Day 127

1

How do you -

2

Not guilty.

6

Day 163

2

Not guilty.

6

Day 190

2

Not guilty.

6

211

2

Not guilty.

6

248

2

Not -

6

272

2

Not

6

303

2

Not guilty.

(Beat)

6

But the Judge refused to relent. Never offered bail; never made a push to get this trial underway.

1

And the prosecution, though they had no real evidence

6

They were prepared to drag it out for as long as possible, in an attempt to pummel Troy into submission.

1

But they didn't count on Troy being so tenacious -

6

So steadfast -

1

So unwilling to compromise his integrity -

6

That he was willing to undergo whatever torture -

1

Whatever torment -

6

Whatever kinda shit this system could throw at him.

1

So he sat in his cell, slowly losing his mind.

6

Unknowingly losing his will to live.

1

And nurturing an all-consuming fear and hatred that would permanently affect his relationship to others.

6

Troy has become really, really good at braiding shred of bedsheets together

1

They're as strong as rope

6

Well made ropes.

(Beat)

2

While the Judge

6

At dinner with his family.

2

His son, who smiles as he chews a mouthful of french fries smothered in mayonnaise -

1

Thinking of the last woman he was with

2

How good it felt to have complete control over her, his mouth watering while remembering the rush.

6

And his wife, who sips her third bloody mary -

1

Because she knows all too well of the Judge's own crimes -

6

Crimes against her, her son, and others he chooses not to speak of -

1

She toasts the waiter

6

Who looks down her shirt once more, as he drops off a fourth bloody Mary

1

The Judge

6

The Judge

2

The Judge, who denied Marcus's request for a trial yet again, digs into his steak -

6

The Judge saws at the meat, side to side, until the juices spill out onto the plate, and the fibers tear apart -

2

The Judge lifts the juicy morsel to his mouth

1

He bites into his steak and thinks:

2

Perfect, just perfect.

1

And, more importantly, he thinks:

6

Everything's gonna be all right.

2

Everything's gonna be all right.

579 DAYS: TROY DREAMS OF ESCAPE BUT HIDDEN HANDS HAVE CLIPPED HIS WINGS

1

5 a.m.

3

In the cell.

1

Troy's dreaming.

3

If you watch closely, he's not unlike the dog you used to have, the one that would lay on his side, and move his legs, like this

1

Yes! And he'd make muffled little grunts, and almost inaudible yips and yowls and

3

When he was dreaming.

1

And you'd all watch and go:

1 AND 3

Awwwwwww!!!

3

Shhh!

1

Oh!

3

He's dreaming!

(Beat)

1

But this is Rikers Island. Motherfuckers are not polite like that -

4

Chow fuckos! Everybody on the line!

1

Troy's dream -

3

Which he has every night at this point -

1

Is shattered.

3

Troy opens his eyes but his mind is not yet awake.

1

Not yet aware that he is indeed in his cell. So the officer nudges Troy along.

4

You hear me dickhead? I said on the line for head-count!

1

Seeing Gallo standing directly outside Troy's cell door is unsettling, but he's used to it at this point.

3

Troy leaps to his feet.

1

Does ten pushups on his way to the door.

4

What the fuck? You think it's pilates? Get the fuck up, let's go!

3

Troy's needling at the guard.

1

Making him wait just a little longer,

3

To assert that he has some autonomy.

1

He does his pushups -

3

6, 7, 8

1

9, 10

3

And like that

1

He's on the line.

3

But Gallo still feel slighted. He makes note of this

4

Note to self: fuck that kid up. Later.

(Beat)

1

Troy struggles through another day.

3

The solitude.

1

The rice.

3

Their maggots, actually.

1

The voices:

3

Stupid, little dick, no love-getting motherfucker!

1

And then, when he finally gets back to sleep -

3

He dreams

1

He dreams the same dream he dreams every night:

3

There's a metal plate behind the toilet, in his cell

1

Which conceals the plumbing, among other things

3

Rats

1

Roaches

3

Dope

(Beat)

1

Concrete

3

Steel beams

1

Dope

(Beat)

3

And that's where Troy

1

In his dream

3

Disappears each night.

1

He twists and wends his way through the spaces behind and between the walls.

3

Did you say "wends"?

1

Yes, I

3

Okay, just

1

What's wrong with it?

3

Just making sure. Go on.

1

He passes through spaces that were not really meant for human bodies to pass.

3

Through vents and grates. He sees guards and fellow inmates engaged in activities that only happen when one thinks one's alone.

1

Sucking

3

Fucking

1

Cuddling

(Beat)

3

Eating

1

Doping

3

Dancing

(Beat)

1

But Troy is on a mission.

3

But he's determined.

1

He can't stop for too long.

3

He's got digging to do.

1

If he can go three feet.

3

3. Feet..

1

He'll see daylight. He'll be free.

(Beat)

3

So he digs

1

With a spoon

3

He's removing chunks of soil

1

Rock

3

Little creatures

1

He's digging

3

With fury?

1

Fury?

3

Right?

1

Fervor?

3

???

1

Passion?

3

He's digging with fury

1

The smell

3

Damp soil

1

Shit

3

Feet

1

He works in the dark, but you can still see his face

3

As though he's generating his own light there, in the darkness.

1

His eyes are wide and bright

3

Focused

1

Burning with the desire to be free!

3

Free!

1

Free!

(Beat)

3

And yet, he hesitates.

1
He hesitates?
3
The sun's rising, there in the east.
1
The birds are singing.
3
People are putting coffee on in kitchens all over New York.

1
Troy sees sunlight
3
Shafts of golden morning sunlight, poking through cracks in the soil

1
He digs faster

3
Harder

1
Faster

3
We're still talking about digging, right?

1
He's determined!

3
Yes, right

1
He digs and digs and digs

3
Till he's exhausted

1
Even then

3
He digs

1
Cuz he's still not all the way through

3
He doesn't stop until

1
The little wall of soil falls away

3
Troy's arm bursts through, on the other side

1
He can see an open field -

3
What?

1
The open field, you know?

3
This is Rikers Island. There aren't any open fields.

1
I know, but -

3

It's completely surrounded by water

1

Yes, but -

3

Filthy, polluted, toxic fuckin

1

He's dreaming!

3

Oh, right

1

Remember?

3

Yes.

(Beat)

1

In his dream, he sees a field.

3

He's broken through to the other side

1

Right, he's on the other side of those walls.

3

He's looking at the field, in his dream, and it's covered -

1

It's bathed

3

Yes, I like that, good

1

It's bathed in golden morning sunshine.

3

And Troy is thinking:

1

All I have to do now is run.

3

Run! Run!

1

Just run!

3

Right.

1

And -

3

He's free!

1

Yes. But.

(Beat)

3

But?

1

He stops.

3

What???

1
He stops, and looks back into the dark tunnel, through which he passed.
3
Why the fuck would he - ?
1
He doesn't move.
3
Why?
1
He's thinking.
3
Thinking?
1
To flee would be an admission of guilt.
(Beat)
3
Right. Right. And so
1
So he turns around. He twists and wends his way back through
3
Back through that dark
1
Stinky
3
Musty fuckin tunnel
1
Back toward his cell
3
Back toward the nightmare from which he had the opportunity to escape -
1
He's determined to earn his freedom the right way.
3
So he twists
1
And wends and contorts his way through that darkness
3
Back to his cell.
1
And just as he's crawling out of the hole in the wall
3
With the metal plate
1
Just as he's dusting himself off, and getting ready to crawl into bed
3
Exhausted
1
He hears Gallo's voice:
4
Chow! Everybody on the fuckin line!
(Beat)
1

Troy's eyes are awake before his mind can

3

He does his ten pushups, on his way to the cell door

1

Gallo makes a mental note:

4

Fuck that kid up, next chance you get

1

You'd think he's dreaming of freedom by any means necessary

3

But, no

1

No, he's dreaming

3

He's dreaming of earning his freedom

1

He's dreaming of clearing his name

3

And making sure that these people, this system

1

Which, if we're being honest, is broken

3

He's dreaming of getting out, and doing whatever he can to make sure that nobody else has to suffer what he's suffered.

1

If he were to flee

3

That would be an admission of guilt. That would compromise the whole

1

Right. Troy's dream is much bigger than freedom. Troy wants significant, lasting change. And he's determined to get it. No matter the cost.

732 DAYS: ANOTHER FEATHER IN THE CAP

1

Something's wrong.

2

Yeah

1

It's not right

2

Lots of shit's wrong with the world

1

I know that. We all know -

2

Right?

1

No. Something's not right with Troy.

2

Ah.

1

Talking to himself.

2

I talk to myself.

1

Yes, but -

2

We all do, don't we? Talk to ourselves all the time. We're a generation of solipsists.

1

What does that even mean? Solipss . . . suwhat?

2

Solipsist. It's someone who talks to himself. With no real need for the voices of others.

1

Okay. Yeah.

2

We were in adjacent cells, outside.

1

Yeah?

2

Yes.

1

Yeah? Yeah?

2

It's just . . . He wasn't really doing anything.

(Beat)

1

He was probably tired.

2

Nah.

1

It's hard to sleep in there. You know how it is in the box. Can everything in the whole fuckin jail. Mikey from a few doors down hitting his cell door with a battery. Jose from around the Way rapping to his dead brother all night. De'Marco flushing his toilet all night -

2

All night -

1

- so he can talk to his neighbor in 3 second bursts. Officer Gallo talking on his cell-phone, whispering sweet nothings to wifey.

3

Baby, I cannot wait to get home. I'm gonna -

2

Nah, that's his girlfriend.

1

Oh.

2

Yeah.

1

Oh.

(Beat)

2

Yeah, so. Nobody really sleeps in here. At night. We all try to sleep during the day. But that shit's tricky cuz you might miss your hour of fresh air. And you don't wanna let that go, no matter how tired you are.

1

Yeah.

2

So you know he wanted to be out there.

1

And yet

2

And yet he was quiet

1

Detached

2

Removed

1

Didn't wanna do nothin.

2

Just sat there -

1

No, he didn't even sit: he stood!

2

He stood?

1

Fuckin stood, like this, for the whole hour.

(Beat)

2

Damn.

(Beat)

1

Something changed.

2

Yeah

1

But what? What had changed?

(Beat)

2

Didn't he. Didn't he have like a pet?

(Beat)

1

Motherfucker you don't get to keep pets on Rikers Island!

2

No, I know that. I mean, didn't he have some kinda pet that was like, a wild animal, but that was like, his friend or some shit?

1

I mean, there was the time he found maggots in his cell.

2

Yeah, I remember that -

1

He was in a funk, and he was spending a lot of time staring at the floor.

2

Right, staring at the -

1

And he saw this little white thing, like a grain of rice.

2

And he kept asking himself: is that a grain of rice? Did I drop that from off of my plate?

1

Right. It even occurred to him that he might eat it.

2

Keeping yourself fed in there is no joke, Jack.

1

Should I eat it, he thought.

2

It's not much, but -

1

Should I pluck it up from the cell floor, and -

2

Yes, but then it moved.

1

And we all know that fuckin rice doesn't just move.

2

Right!

1

It moved, man!

2

Yes, that will fuck your whole shit up -

1

Yeah. I'd be pretty, I don't know, broken up?

2

Shattered.

1

Devastated.

2

Shattered is good. He's looking at a grain of rice, thinking it's one thing, but then the shit suddenly moves -

1

His rice moved.

2

Right. Naturally, he was. He was shattered.

(Beat)

1

It was a crow.

2

What?

1

The animal you called his pet. It was a crow.

2

Yes!

1

It would come to Troy, visit him, when he was out on the yard.

2

Yes, right!

6

Caw! Caw! Caw!

1

It would come to him, and give him stuff.

2

What the fuck?

1

Yeah, man.

2

Like give him gifts and shit?

1

Yes. They're like that, crows. Really smart, really curious. I heard that it was caught in the barbed wire, near the top of the fence that keeps prisoners from trying to escape. Troy saw this, and immediately climbed the fence. The guards were flipping out. The other prisoners were telling him to get down, cuz they knew they'd all be on lock-down if Troy tried to escape.

2

And that's what they thought, right? That he was trying to escape?

1

Right. But he kept on climbing, till he got to the top of the fence. The guard in the tower had Troy in his sight. He was ready to take Troy out. When Troy reached the top of the fence, where the crow was, he stopped. The crow was going crazy, cuz you know, he probably thought Troy was going to hurt him, but then Troy put his hand on the crow's wing, real gently, like he knew what he was doing -

2

Like he had done it a thousand times before -

1

And he just figured out how the crow was caught on the barbed wire, and he removed the crow's wing, gently, skillfully, and the crow, now free, fell back, spread its wings, and caught the air. It flew away, and Troy climbed back down to the ground.

2

Damn.

1

And ever since then, the crow would bring Troy gifts.

(Beat)

2

Like what? Like what?

1

Stupid shit, mostly. Nuts and bolts. Receipts. Twigs and animal hair. Stuff that the crow would use, you know, to make a nest.

2

It was trying to help Troy build a nest?

1

???

2

Or, like, a home for himself?

1

I never thought of it that way but, yeah, I guess. Other times, it would bring Troy half-eaten donuts, and stale bread. One time it brought Troy \$20.00.

2

Get the fuck out!?

1

Forreal. It brought Troy \$20.00. But then Officer Gallo ran up on him, like:

3

Is that what I think it is?

1

And Troy was like:

2

Nah.

1

But Gallo was like:

3

Boy, you must be able to see that I'm able to see that that's a \$20.00 in your hand.

1

And Troy couldn't lie, so he was like:

2

I found it on the yard.

1

And Gallo, having watched the whole thing, with the crow, and the delivery, and the sweet, tender moment the boy and the bird shared, Gallo, that ornery motherfucker, was like:

3

You know that's contraband, right?

1

And Troy was like:

2

Yessir.

1

And Gallo was like:

3

And you know that Contraband is mandatory 6 months in the bing, right?

1

And Troy was like:

2

Right. But I was gonna give it to you.

1

And Gallo was like:

3

You're gonna give it to me?

1

And Troy was like:

2

Yessir.

(Beat)

1

And Gallo, the twisted, sadistic motherfucker that he is, seeing that Troy was wrong either way, Gallo was like:

3

So not only are you in possession of contraband, but you also intend to bribe a corrections officer - which is another crime altogether, and you can safely add in conspiracy to boot, which will add roughly another three years to your sentence. Is that correct, boy?

1

And Troy couldn't say anything after that. He had a court date the next day, where he was hoping he'd be released. What could he do?

2

I'da cracked Gallo's fuckin head wide open, and let him bleed out right there on the yard for everybody to see.

1

. . .

2

But that's just me.

1

He's trying to get out of jail, not spend the rest of his life in.

2

Right.

1

How would cracking a corrections officer's head open get Troy out?

(Beat)

2

(Shrugs)

1

Right. So you see the predicament he was in.

2

Yeah, I. Right. Right.

(Beat)

1

So then Gallo was like:

4

I'm going to have to confiscate that \$20.00 as evidence.

1

Troy handed it over. Gallo put it in his pocket, and never spoke of it again.

(Beat)

2

Did it ever find its way to evidence?

1

Who knows?

4

Not bloody likely.

2

Right. Nah, it never found its way to evidence.

1

Gallo probably used it to buy some Chinese takeout, and a cheap bottle of wine for his girlfriend that same night.

2

Or flowers for wifey.

1

Right, or flowers for . . .

4

Nah. Sesame chicken, brown rice - \$11.76 after tax - and a bottle of Pinot Grigio - \$7.59. An unforgettable night with my undercover lover? Priceless.

(Beat)

2

I'm gonna train me a fuckin crow.

1

Right!?

2

I'm tryna come up.

1

We're all trying to come up, one way or another.

2

Hell yeah.

1

Hell yeah.

4

Hell yeah.

3 (O.S.)

Hell yeah!

(Beat)

1

But then, a few days before Troy went quiet, the crow stopped coming to visit Troy. He's in there for 732 days at this point, and the crow's been there all along. That crow's visited more than Marcus's mom, friends, and lawyer - all of them combined.

2

They were close?

1

They were tight.

2

They were people?

1

They were tight.

2

Right.

1

But the crow stopped visiting Troy all of a sudden.

2

Right, that must have really fucked him up.

1

Yes. Yes, that, Mmm!

(Beat)

2

You know what I heard?

1

What? What did you hear?

2

I heard that, around that same time, Gallo, who wore that fuckin awful fedora -

1

That his grandfather had given him before he died, yes?

2

Yes. Gallo came to work wearing that awful brown felt fedora. He had a crow's feather tucked up into the silky, sweat-stained red band. On the right side.

(Beat)

1

Oh shit.

2

Yeah.

1

Troy didn't need this, but he had one saving grace.

2

What?

1

He was scheduled to see the judge the very next day.

799 DAYS: THE FEAR OF FREEDOM

4

Leave an animal in a cage long enough and, when you go to let it out, it doesn't wanna come out. I mean, it wants to come out real real bad. But it's too scared. It tip-toes around, looking at everything like it's going to be attacked at any moment. And then it goes right back in. It's a pitiful thing to see.

3

Troy returned from court with the saddest, most troubled look on his face. You'd think that he was convicted and committed to hard time. He looked a lot like that other kid, Errol, the one who hanged himself a while ago. But when asked what was wrong, Troy had nothing to say. To begin with.

4

It's a pitiful thing to see, but if you grew up on a farm, or in the woods, like I did, you learn to do what needs to be done. No fuss no muss. When it's time to go, you kick 'em out and keep it moving.

3

We all assumed Troy had been convicted. But, when he finally spoke, we learned that he had been released. The prosecution had to drop the charges, because their only witness, the man who claimed that Troy had stolen the bag, had disappeared.

4

Solitary will do that kinda thing to you. It'll reduce a man to an animal. You start to feel as though you're constantly in danger. Like there's always somebody - or some thing - out to get you. No matter where you are, or who you're with, you never feel safe. You don't wanna be around people. Doesn't matter if it's your own mother, you're terrified in their presence.

3

Can you believe that? Two and a half years? And like that, nothing. You're free.

4

It was a shock, to put it lightly. Troy took it real hard.

3

You're not allowed to cross lines in there. This becomes a problem when you get out into the world. You don't wanna cross any lines.

4

He told me, that night, that it didn't feel real. Like it was a play or something. I don't go to the theater, so I didn't fully understand.

3

You wanna move forward, but you can't.

4

He said:

2

This is a play.

4

And I said, What do you mean? And he said:

2

This is my play, and you're in it.

(Beat)

4

Ha! Have you lost your mind? I am not in your play.

2

I've pushed his button.

4

And I'll never forget this. The way he looked at me. His eyes wild and empty. He looked at me with those eyes, and he said:

2

Damn. You're good.

4

"Damn. You're good."

(Beat)

4

I knew he was in trouble. So I kept an eye on him.

3

We see him, in his cell. Laying on his side, facing the wall.

4

He was shivering.

3

He was shivering, like he was cold. Or like he was a ball of nerves.

4

Leave an animal in a cage long enough

3

and it doesn't wanna come out.

(Beat)

4

He was shivering, so I thought he was cold. I didn't think anything of it when he asked me for an extra sheet. I checked on him at 1 am, 3 am, and, for the last time, at 5 am. At 5 am, I stood at his cell door: Chow! Everybody on the line.

3

As with other mornings, Troy didn't move.

4

You hear me? I said Chow! On the fuckin line!

3

But Troy did not leap to his feet.

4

In fact, when I looked closer, he wasn't actually in his bed. I opened the door as quickly as I could, and rushed in the cell.

3

And there he was

4

Slumped?

3

Yeah, slumped, but, like

4

Hanging?

3

Hanging, in a slumped position.

4

When he asked for that extra sheet, I didn't think nothing of it. And there he was

3

I mean, the boy wants to come out, but

4

Hanging in a slumped position.

3

The boy wants to come out but he's terrified.

4

...

3

...

800 DAYS: AN EPILOGUE IN WHICH THE MOTHER SPEAKS WITH GOD

1

There she is

2

The mother

3

Troy's mother

1

Standing in her back yard

2

In Brooklyn

3

Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

1

She raised Troy in this very backyard.

2

It's a garden apartment.

3

Not too nice, but she's

1

She's worked wonders with it. She has a certain touch

2

She's good with plants

3

She knows how to put seeds in the earth

1

And nurture them

2

Till they bear fruit or flowers

3

On this particular day

1

It's June

2

The garden is in bloom

3

She has tomatoes

1

Cucumbers

2

Basil

3

Squash

1

Potatoes

2

Garlic

3

And strawberries.

(Beat)

1

There's a sweet smell in the air

2

Lilacs

3

Marigolds

1

And roses

(Beat)

1

And yet, from the way she stands

2

With her head down

3

Shoulders stooped

1

Delicate fingers dangling

2

You can tell

3

Something has gone horribly wrong.

(Beat)

1

A state employee, from the department of corrections has just left.

2

She offered him tea, made with mint from her garden, but he declined

3

He's a professional. He knows that, no matter how much he wants that tea, he must do his job and keep moving. These things

1

These things

2

These things are better when delivered quickly, matter of fact, and on to the next.

3

Troy's mother, standing in her garden

1

In Crown Heights, Brooklyn

2

The sun shining directly down upon her

3

It being noon, or nearly. She's weeping, silently.

(Beat)

1

Not that she cares if anyone hears. No, there's not a soul on earth who wouldn't weep upon hearing the news she just received

2

The news that

3

Her son, Troy

1

Her heart and soul

2

Her baby

3

Her joy

1

Is dead.

(Silence)

1

She's carrying on a conversation with God, in her head

2

What's she saying?

3

Can you know that?

1

Can anyone know that?

2

Yes, I think so.

(Beat)

3

She's asking, Why?

1

Right, Why my son?

2

Yes. Why is it my son who -

3

Who suffered this injustice -

1

This torture -

2

This horror.

(Beat)

3

She's asking what she might have done to

1

To prevent this

2

This

3

This tragedy.

1

She advised him, in a letter, to plead guilty. To get it over with.

2

But she doesn't know if Troy even received that letter. Letters have a way of getting lost in the system.

3

Never to be seen again.

1

Yes. So she has no way of knowing what he was thinking, what he was feeling.

2

This only adds to the misery she feels. Not only has she lost her only son, but

3

But, for the past 800 days, there's nothing

1

No moments shared

2

No conversation

3

No new memories.

(Beat)

1

One day, he was arrested. The next -

2

The next he was locked up. And then -

3

And then he was placed in the bing, and never heard from again.

(Beat)

1

She speaks to God.

2

She asks him questions that we can never know

3

And yet, they are questions that, if we were in her shoes, we'd all ask.

(Beat)

1

And then, she speaks

2

She speaks

3

She speaks aloud

1, 2, AND 3

For all to hear:

5

Please, God, just let me hear his voice one last time.

(Silence)

1

And there, in that silence, a crow is heard:

6 (O.S.)

Caw! Caw! Caw!

2

Is that???

3

Yes, I think it is.

1

The crow calls out again, closer this time.

6 (O.S.)

CAW! CAW! CAW!

2

The crow enters

3

The crow enters and sits on the table, just a few feet away from where Troy's mother stands, her face pointed up towards the sun, up towards God.

6

Caw! Caw! Caw!

1

Her first thought is that the crow, long thought to be a harbinger of bad luck, has come to mock her.

2

But in fact, this crow is peculiar.

3

Yes, it's carrying a letter -

1

A bundle of letters

2

Right, in its

3

It's carrying a bundle of letters in its beak.

1

The crow drops the bundle on the table, and says:

6

What's up?

(Beat)

1

Troy's mother looks at the crow, with wonder. Wonder?

2

Astonishment?

3

She looks at the crow like, What the fuck?

1

Yes, What the

2

And the crow speaks.

6

So, you don't know me, but I was friends with your son? He saved me one day, when my wing was caught in some barbed wire? I thought I could perch on this thing, it looked solid, but then, ah, then it just kinda hooked into my wing and when I tried to fly away, it was like my wing was gonna rip right off. Not knowing what else to do, I waited. I waited. I waited. My buds were calling out to me:

1

Caw! Caw! Caw!

6

Saying that they were going back to Manhattan, you know, where all the good food and stuff is. They were gonna leave me. So I tried to fly away again, but, ah, I just, I just couldn't. I thought they were gonna leave me, but then your son, he came climbing up the fence in leaps and

bounds. And he took my wing in his hand. I thought he was gonna tear it off, but he moved it like this, then like this. Next thing I know, I'm free!

2

The crow is talking, and we can understand the crow, but all Troy's mother hears is

6

Caw! Caw! Caw!

1

Right, and

2

And still, the crow continues:

6

I feel like I owe my life to your son. So I took him things, gifts and stuff. Cool marbles. Awesome twigs. Kickass tangles of string and leaves and stuff. Stuff he could build a home with, you know? (Beat) And he would give me these, like, letters? He said that I should find you. And give them to you. (Beat) For a long time, I couldn't find you. I thought of giving up. But, like, your son saved my life, so, I didn't give up. Cuz I'm strong like that. And loyal.

3

At this point, it must be said that

1

Troy's mom, she's kinda freaking out

2

As anyone would, right?

3

Yes, like, if this fucking crow just swooped down outta the sky and sat on your garden table and just started

6

Caw! Caw! Caw!

1

But the bundle of letters has captivated her. It's got her full attention, because she recognizes the handwriting on the top envelope -

2

It's Troy's handwriting, no doubt

3

Right. And so she reaches out to pick the letters up, but the crow -

1

The crow speaks louder, more forceful -

6

I think something bad's happened. I can feel it. I'm an animal, so, like, you know that I know when something bad's about to happen. Or, in this case, when something bad's already happened. So I think. I think you should have these.

1

The crow stops talking, and nudges the bundle towards Troy's mother.

5

For me?

1

The crow says:

6

Yes, those are for you.

1

But all Troy's mother hears is:

6

Caw! Caw! Caw!

2

But she gets the point. Those letters are for her.

3

She recognizes the handwriting, on the envelopes.

1

Right, the envelopes. She's untied the string, she's sorting through the letters.

2

About 20, 25 of them.

3

Right, 25 letters from the hand of a dead man.

1

His final words.

2

His parting words.

3

Detailing the last days of his life, and the injustices he's forced to endure.

1

His thoughts

2

His feelings

3

His worries.

(Beat)

1

The crow, recognizing that his job is done

2

The crow spreads his wings.

3

The crow starts to take off, but stops.

6

Your son saved my life, and I'll never forget it. Thank you for the way you raised him. cuz a lot of boys, they, they woulda just started pegging me with stones or something. They woulda let me die on that fence. And your son, he didn't. So, thank you.

1

And Troy's mom just stares at the crow, like

2

What the fuck?

3

No, she stares at the crow, and she feels the weight of this moment. She feels as though God is speaking to her through this crow. Though she can't understand exactly what the crow is saying, she feels that the sounds are words directly from God's mouth.

(Beat)

1

The crow, knowing his job is done

2

Spreads its wings, and begins beating the air.

3

The crow flies away, up, up, up towards the sun, and then off to the west.

(Beat)

1

Troy's mother opens the letter at the bottom of the stack

2

Believing it to be the first one he wrote

3

Or, the beginning, at any rate.

1

She opens the letter, and weeps

2

She weeps upon seeing her son's handwriting.

3

Her mind returns to the time when she was teaching him to write, and he was practicing his R

1

She wanted so badly for him to make the R with one stroke

2

But Troy, not knowing how to move the pencil like that

3

Kept making three separate strokes.

(Beat)

1

Troy's mother grew frustrated, and raised her voice

2

Troy cried.

3

And his mother felt guilty.

1

So guilty, in fact, that after all these years, she still remembers this moment.

2

It brings her joy and pain.

3

How fast life passes us by.

(Beat)

1

She weeps as she begins reading the first letter:

2

Dear Mama . . .

1

She reads another:

3

Dear Mama . . .

1

And another:

4

Dear Mama . . .

1

And another:

6

Dear Mama . . .

1

With each letter she reads, she hears Troy's voice. She sees him, in her mind's eye, as if he were right there with her, sitting at the table, surrounded by the vegetables and the flowers in

her garden. Though she still wonders where she went wrong, and what she could have done to make things different, she also knows that there's another fight ahead.

2

In Troy's letters, he wrote about how nobody should suffer the way he had, away from his family, away from his friends

3

All alone, in solitary confinement.

1

He knew that if people could hear his story, maybe

2

Just maybe

3

They'd quit doing this kind of thing to kids.

(Beat)

1

So, as Troy's mother reads, she weeps. She mourns the loss of her son. But she's also preparing for the fight to come. She knows that, if God does indeed exist, He -

2

Or It -

3

Right, whatever entity God may be, chooses some of us to fight battles we didn't choose.

(Beat)

1

She sits in her garden, reading

2

Reading

3

Reading

1

Until the sun goes down.

2

She read until the sun goes down.

3

And darkness falls over the city.

1

And she thinks: tomorrow

2

Tomorrow:

3

Tomorrow:

5

I'm going to water my garden. Then I'm going down to the courthouse to file a complaint.

EL FIN ~ 8/8/17

VITA

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