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Myers, David

Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Gas House Baby

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Playwriting)

by

David Myers

Committee in charge:

Professor Naomi Iizuka, Chair
Professor Allan Havis
Professor Manuel Rotenberg
Professor Adele Shank

2012

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to many individuals who have supported me throughout my training and thesis process. I would like to thank Naomi Iizuka, Adele Shank, and Allan Havis for the generous assistance in the writing of this play, as well as Stephanie Timm, Ron McCants, Krista Knight, Lauren Yee, Sharif Abu-Hamdeh, and Jeff Augustin for their guidance and support.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Gas House Baby

By

David Myers

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Playwriting)

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Naomi Iizuka, Chair

Cotton just got divorced, lost his job, and is living in a Motel 8. Coming back home to Shreveport, Louisiana, his life is about to change in ways he could never have predicted. In a play about fracking, fatherhood, and family secrets, one man figures out what it means to be a good father and a good son, and what happens when it's impossible to be both.

GAS HOUSE BABY

By David Myers

May 2012

CHARACTERS

4f, 3m

Cotton – male, 30s, white

Irene – female, 60s, white

Hayden – female, 20s, white

Loretha – female, 50s-60s, black

Joseph – male, 30s, black

Marina – female, 20s, Vietnamese

Thomas – male, 60s, white

SETTING

A home in Shreveport, Louisiana.

TIME

Now

NOTE

The design of the set should be abstract. If possible, the walls of the house should slowly move apart over the course of the play, so that at the top, the parlor and kitchen look naturalistic and by the end they look like a living space that has been “fracked.” Please think of the family home as an seemingly impenetrable piece of shale rock that gets broken up and cracked over the course of the play.

1.

(In the parlor of a nice Southern home. There are couches and lamps. Things are middle class. Irene is pouring two bourbons.)

IRENE
You notice anything different about me?

COTTON
No.

IRENE
Take a good look.

(Irene displays herself. Cotton looks.)

COTTON
Did you get a haircut?

IRENE
No.

COTTON
New earrings?

IRENE
No.

COTTON
Is that a new blouse?

IRENE
No.
You really don't see it?

COTTON
I don't.

IRENE
Take a good look.

COTTON
What is it?

IRENE
My eyeballs got bigger, dummy!

COTTON
You what?

IRENE
My eyeballs got bigger. Look.

(She opens her eyes wide.)

See? Look.

(She opens her eyes wide.)

You see?

COTTON
I don't understand.

IRENE
I had a little touch up.

COTTON
A touch up?

IRENE
A little surgery, just a small procedure. I had them lift some of this flesh from around my eyes. It was getting so I could barely see with all that skin sagging off my face.

COTTON
You had plastic surgery?

IRENE
Just a touch.

COTTON
When?

IRENE
A month ago. I thought it'd be a surprise.

COTTON
You had face surgery to surprise me?

IRENE
I don't know why you make such a big deal over everything, Cotton. It's just a little lift around the eyes. All the girls are getting them. And with the holidays coming up. It's not easy being an older woman, you know.

COTTON
It seems kind of vain.

IRENE

Well, I suppose it doesn't compete with your news, now does it?

COTTON

-

IRENE

Here. Take this from me.

(Cotton takes his drink.)

What should we drink to?

COTTON

Can we not? I don't want to make today into anything more than what it is.

IRENE

Got to toast to something. Otherwise the spirits will come and get you.
How about, "to the road ahead?"

COTTON

Okay, Mama. To the road ahead.

IRENE

Welcome home, Cotton. Happy Thanksgiving.

(Irene takes a sip. Cotton downs his.)

COTTON

I'm going to grab another.

IRENE

I'll join you.

(Irene downs her drink. Cotton takes
both glasses to the bar to reload.)

Your sister called to say she's sorry she's not making it this year.

COTTON

Is she having fun?

IRENE

I don't know why anyone would go to Indonesia.

COTTON

For fun. Is she having fun?

IRENE

I forgot to ask.

COTTON
What did she say?

IRENE
Nonsense mostly.

COTTON
Next time she calls, ask her if she's having fun.
Here.

(Cotton hands Irene her Bourbon.)

IRENE
What should we drink to this time?

COTTON
How about, "to new eyeballs?"

IRENE
To seeing things in a whole new light.
Did you talk to her today? (They cheers and drink. A beat.)

COTTON
Hayden?

IRENE
No.

COTTON
Oh.

IRENE
I don't know if that's part of the protocol or not.

COTTON
I don't know either.
We haven't spoken.

IRENE
I don't want you to get too down in the doldrums about this, Cotton.

COTTON
Me neither.

IRENE

It's okay to feel sad, but you've got your whole life in front of you. You don't know what paths are still available to you. When a door opens, you've just got to walk through it.

COTTON

Okay.

IRENE

Is that what you're going to do?

COTTON

Yes.

IRENE

Look at me.

(He does.)

You will find someone else. You hear me? She's not the only one out there. You will find someone else to take her place. It's a big ocean.

COTTON

Can I be honest with you Mom?

IRENE

Enter at your own risk, darling.

(Cotton smiles)

COTTON

I love you, Mama.

IRENE

You can always be honest with me, Cotton. Not everyone has what we have.

COTTON

I kind of feel like a total failure. Like I'm too young for this. Most of my friends aren't even married yet. I feel like, like okay, I feel like, in my heart, I feel like I'm still twenty years old, but if you look at my actual life, in the real world, it's like I'm forty years old.

IRENE

You know what I think the problem was? You tried to marry someone different than you. You have to marry someone the same as you. You have to be able to understand each other.

(This angers Cotton.)

COTTON
Okay.

(Irene notices.)

IRENE
Did I say something wrong?

COTTON
I'm just sharing how I feel, Mama. I didn't mean to submit to your righteous judgment. I'm not in the mood. In like ten minutes I'll be divorced.

IRENE
I thought we were talking about it. Did you not want to talk about it?

COTTON
-

IRENE
I don't know why you're making such a big deal about midnight either. If you signed the paper, you're already divorced.

COTTON
I started today married. Tomorrow is the first day.

IRENE
I suppose I just don't see why you would marry someone like Claudia (*said with a full Latin accent... "Clow-Th-ia."*)

COTTON
Because I love her.

IRENE
I know, but Cotton, we could all see that thing falling apart from the moment it started.

COTTON
I couldn't.

IRENE
"Where are you going to make your bed?" That's what I kept thinking the whole time. A bird and a fish might love each other, might have great affection for each other even, but where are they going to make their bed? There's a natural order to things, Cotton.

COTTON
I have no idea what that's supposed to mean. Racism? Are you talking about racism? Because Claudia's (*again, full accent*) Latina?

IRENE

Oh please. (*sarcastic*) Latina.

COTTON

What is that? Right there. Why are you doing that?

IRENE

I'm just drinking my Bourbon, honey. You don't have to worry about me.

COTTON

Maybe I'll just go to bed.

IRENE

Don't go to bed. It's almost midnight. We should be together at midnight.

COTTON

I don't want to stay awake to be racist.

IRENE

I'm not racist. Don't be so damned p.c. about everything. I know plenty of "Latinas." It's not racist to say what things are.

COTTON

"Natural order" is racist.

IRENE

That's not what I meant by it and you know it.

COTTON

Well we're not getting a divorce because she's Latina, so we can stop talking about it.

IRENE

Does that mean that you're gonna tell me why you *are* getting a divorce?

COTTON

-

IRENE

Was it sex?

COTTON

No.

IRENE

Money?

COTTON

-

IRENE

It was, wasn't it?

COTTON

I don't know. We don't make each other happy. When are you supposed to just cut your losses? We just couldn't do it anymore.

IRENE

-

(Short pause. Cotton takes an engagement ring from his pocket. He looks at it. He hands it to Irene.)

COTTON

Here.

(Irene puts the ring on her finger.)

IRENE

Thank you, Cotton.

COTTON

Thank you for letting us use it.

IRENE

It was an honor. I still remember the day you asked me for it. Such a scared little boy, nervous about his future.

COTTON

I hope...

IRENE

What's that?

COTTON

I hope that you'll let me have it again someday. If the time ever comes.

IRENE

-

COTTON

-

IRENE
May we be so lucky.

(beat)

I wonder something, Cotton.

COTTON
What's that?

IRENE
I wonder if we should maybe have an honest conversation about your finances.

COTTON
(*joking*) It'd be a short conversation.

IRENE
All the more reason.

COTTON
I pretty much gave Claudia (*with accent*) everything she wanted. She moved to California for me. It only seemed fair. So, I've been living out of a Motel 8 near our apartment. There's a couple of boxes, but I basically have everything I own in my suitcase.

IRENE
Claudia's (*accent*) mother mentioned that you were quite generous.

COTTON
You talked to her?

IRENE
She's right here in town, Cotton. The union was ending. It only seemed appropriate that we acknowledge it in some way.

COTTON
You should have asked me first.

IRENE
I don't think I need your permission to go visiting one of my neighbors.

COTTON
She's not your neighbor.

IRENE
Let's return to the issue at hand. Are you employed?

COTTON

No. Real Estate is all dried up. In California, at least. I've got enough money to make it to February.

IRENE

I see.

COTTON

I've been looking.

IRENE

I'm sure you have.

COTTON

People hear that you're getting a divorce and they start thinking you're weak.

IRENE

Well, I'm your mother, Cotton. I've loved you since before I even met you. Things are going well here and I'd be willing to help you out.

COTTON

What do you mean?

IRENE

You remember Zayma Yokum?

COTTON

From your bridge group?

IRENE

Zayma's taken over our investment club and streamlined the endeavor. There's a lot of new money in Shreveport right now. There's a natural gas reserve – the Haynesville Shale, it's called. People are digging it up and making a fortune.

(beat)

COTTON

Is that how you were able to afford the face surgery?

IRENE

It's called a "touch up," Cotton, not "face surgery." But, yes, that is how I was able to afford the procedure. I sold an option on the property. Zayma helped me with it. A "lease bonus" is what it's called.

COTTON

I know what a lease bonus is. How much did you get?

IRENE
Eight thousand dollars.

COTTON
That's it? Why didn't you tell me about this til now? I could have helped you.

IRENE
I didn't want to bother you.

COTTON
I'm a broker Mom. I do real estate contracts all day.

IRENE
You're dealing with enough right now.
Besides. Broker's fees are so high.
Zayma was willing to do it for free.

COTTON
I would have done it for free.

IRENE
What I wanted to suggest, Cotton, is that you come down here for bit. Set up shop in Shreveport. Money goes a lot further down here than it does in California. And with all the gas money in town, the real estate market is booming.

COTTON
I don't know.

IRENE
You don't have to stay here if you don't want to. We'll find you a room somewhere. Zayma could find anything. I'll pay the rent to help you get back on your feet.

COTTON
That's very generous, Mama.

IRENE
I like having you close dear. I like being able to keep an eye on you.

COTTON
-

IRENE
Promise me you'll think about it?

(Beat)

COTTON
Okay.
I promise.

(Cotton looks at his watch.)

IRENE
It's almost midnight.

COTTON
Yep.

IRENE
You alright?

COTTON
I'm fine.

IRENE
You sure?

COTTON
Yes. I'm fine.

(beat)

IRENE
Don't be so hard on yourself, Cotton. Some things end.

COTTON
Okay.

IRENE
I'm proud of you.

COTTON
Why?

IRENE
The only path forward is truth. You and Claudia (*with accent*) were not a good match. Better things lie in front of you.

COTTON

I'm thirty years old and divorced. I'm basically living out of my car and I'm about to lean on my mother for money. I can't remember the last time I did something right.

IRENE

Well Cotton. You ain't dead yet. So there's still time.

COTTON

-

(Cotton looks at his watch, then back to his mother. The watch beeps. He takes off his wedding band and drops it into his scotch.)

IRENE

Midnight.

(Cotton starts to cry.)

IRENE

Come here, baby.

(Irene's arms swallow him up.)

IRENE

Look at me.

Look at me.

(He does.)

This will change.

2.

(One year later. Loretha is setting the dinner table for five. She is using the fancy dishes. She wears an apron. In her moment alone onstage, we see the care that Loretha takes to put everything in it's proper place. After a moment, Hayden enters.)

HAYDEN
Loretha, are we ready in here?

LORETHA
Not yet.

HAYDEN
I think people are ready to come to the table.

LORETHA
In a minute, Hayden. Don't rush me. No point in having people come in here before everything is in its place.

HAYDEN
-

(Hayden sighs or taps her feet.)

LORETHA
You are welcome to help if you're feeling impatient.

(Hayden come over and helps Loretha with the place settings. Hayden does it quickly and with no attention to detail. Loretha notices and corrects Hayden's work.)

LORETHA
The lazy man works double, Hayden. Might as well do it right the first time.

HAYDEN
-

LORETHA
You disagree?

HAYDEN
No. I don't.

LORETHA

Good.

Now we're ready.

(shouting into the next room) The table is ready, Miss! Y'all come on in!

(Irene and Joseph, Cotton and Marina enter with drinks in their hands. Marina, who is pregnant, is drinking water. Loretha remains, arranging the set up.)

IRENE

(talking to Joseph) And then just like that, "Wham! Crash! Boom!" they're in love. He said it hit him like a ton of bricks. "Wham!" Love at first sight. Though they did more than just look, I'm sure you can see. *(to Cotton)* Wasn't that what you said, Cotton, that it "hit you like a ton of bricks?"

COTTON

I believe I said it was like a weight lifting actually. I feel lighter.

IRENE

So the bricks are going in the other direction?

COTTON

That's right. Floating up to the sky.

IRENE

(to Joseph) Love struck is the point, I guess. And now my boy is feeling all light and fancy free.

JOSEPH

It's nice to see people in love. *(to Cotton and Marina)* Where did you two meet?

IRENE

At a bar if you believe it. They met at a bar. I don't know anybody claims to have met the love of their lives at a bar, but that's what he's saying.

COTTON

It was in New Orleans. I went down there for a conference. Best trip I ever made.

JOSEPH

(Cotton) What line of work are you in?

COTTON

Real Estate. Same as you.

JOSEPH

Real Estate. Yes, I guess that is what I do, isn't it?

IRENE

They've decided they don't want to know what kind of baby they're going to have. The gender, I mean. It boggles the mind. I mean, you're going to find out at some point anyway, why not have a little advance notice?

HAYDEN

Some people like to live in the not knowing, Mama. The point is to be excited about the child, whatever it is.

IRENE

Well that doesn't make any sense. They're two different things. *(to Joseph)* Marina here wants a girl. I suspect because she thinks, well I don't entirely know what she thinks, because she's so quiet all the time, but I'm guessing you want a girl because you think she'll be your friend in your older years, is that right, Marina?

MARINA

Um... No.

IRENE

Or is it that you feel like you only know how to raise a girl, because that's what you are, and you worry that maybe you're not capable of figuring out how to raise a child that's a different gender?

MARINA

Uh...

HAYDEN

She wants a girl because girls want girls, Mama. It's a thing. She doesn't have to justify it. People like to have kids like themselves. *(to Marina)* Just ignore her.

IRENE

Did I say something wrong?

COTTON

Let's sit down and have a nice dinner.

(They sit.)

IRENE

(to Joseph) You see how touchy everyone can be around the holidays.

JOSEPH

I'm grateful just to be here. There's nothing like a family.

(Loretha puts Irene's napkin in her lap for her. This bothers Joseph.)

IRENE

Have you been watching much tv since you've been in town Joseph?

JOSEPH

Not that much. Why do you ask?

IRENE

I wonder if you've caught this program, there's this program they've been playing on PBS lately about elephants. Have you seen it? "The Incredible Elephant" or something like that?

HAYDEN

I've seen it.

IRENE

They play it once around 8pm and then again later in the night.

HAYDEN

I've seen it.

IRENE

"Elephants Galore" maybe?

HAYDEN

"Unforgettable Elephants."

IRENE

"Unforgettable Elephants." That's it. They follow this parade of elephants around for a couple of years and they tell you the whole elephant family's story.

COTTON

A "parade?"

IRENE

That's what you call a group of elephants.

COTTON

A parade?

HAYDEN
Isn't it a herd?

MARINA
Either term is accepted.

(Beat. Irene thinks Marina is weird.)

IRENE
As I was saying. They follow these elephants around, and the other night they told the story of Grace. Grace is one of the matriarchs in the parade and she is this big beautiful, one-tusked, majestic, gorgeous elephant.

MARINA
(*quietly to Cotton*) Are we going to eat?

COTTON
(*quietly to Marina*) Soon.

IRENE
So everyone has been waiting and waiting for Grace to give birth. When is this big heifer going to drop this baby? She finally does, and it's a mess, there's afterbirth everywhere, it's hot, and all the elephants are exhausted. And Grace's calf is injured. It's lethargic, just lying, wallowing away in the afterbirth. Grace lets him sit in the sun for a while, hoping that he'll dry out, you know. And she's poking at him – she jabs him with her tusk and gives him some gentle shoves with her trunk – but nothing seems to work. So she hunkers down and scoops up her little boy, she's holding him with just her one tusk and her trunk; it's a delicate balancing act, and she carries him over under a tree. She drops him, gently, right into the shade, thinking, "maybe he'll cool off." But that night her baby dies. Grace stands there by that tree for four days. Eventually, her daughter Gwen, who's almost an adult, pushes Grace out from under the tree – she has to push her – but she gets Grace to move on. And every year after that, Grace goes back to that same spot and mourns the loss of this little boy. Isn't that something?

(All motion around the table has stopped. People are just listening to Irene's story. Cotton's jaw is hanging to the floor. Marina is stone-faced.)

COTTON
Jesus.

IRENE
Isn't that incredible? Motherhood.

COTTON
What is your problem?

IRENE
What, honey?

COTTON
I'm sitting here with my pregnant girlfriend, Mom. We're going to have a child in like four weeks and you choose *this* story to tell me over Thanksgiving dinner?

IRENE
I think it's beautiful.

COTTON
Why?

IRENE
It's got wisdom in it, Cotton. You two are about to become parents. It takes strength. It won't go how you think it will. Parenthood never does.

HAYDEN
(*sarcastic*) Thanks Mom.

IRENE
Elephants are the great mystical Gods of the animal kingdom. And mothers are one-tusked heroes tending to their calves as best they know how. You two should prepare yourselves.

COTTON
Okay, Mom. No more advice, okay? Just leave it alone.

IRENE
You see this Joseph? It's a real pity: no one in my family wants the wisdom of my age. Took me my whole life to get this smart and my poor blind children don't want to hear a word of it.

(Loretha exits. Joseph notices.)

JOSEPH
She just comes and goes, huh? She doesn't have to ask your permission to leave the room?

IRENE
You mean Loretha?
Loretha's at work right now, Joseph. Please don't embarrass her.

HAYDEN
Where are you from?

JOSEPH
Pittsburgh.

HAYDEN
What's that like?

JOSEPH
Pittsburgh?

HAYDEN
Yeah.

JOSEPH
Good parts and bad parts, I guess.

HAYDEN
What are you doing in Shreveport?

JOSEPH
Oh, uh, I'm uh, I'm with the Phillips Energy Corporation.

(Beat)

HAYDEN
Am I the only one who doesn't know what that is?

COTTON
They're the gas people. They're buying up everyone's mineral rights.

HAYDEN
Oh.

JOSEPH
I'm the uh... I'm the head of the division.

HAYDEN
(playful) Oh my! We get our own division do we?

COTTON
There's a lot of money at stake, Hayden.

JOSEPH
It was a promotion for me. I was working on the Marcellus in Pennsylvania and they asked me to come down here and head up the division.

HAYDEN

I suppose I should be blushing, shouldn't I?

JOSEPH

It's not required, but it does happen from time to time.

(Beat. Joseph and Hayden smile at each other.)

What do you do?

HAYDEN

Oh, I live in New York.

JOSEPH

(*a joke*) Professionally?

HAYDEN

Ha. No. I'm a, right now, I'm an assistant at a law firm, but what I really want to do, what I really care about is... poetry.

JOSEPH

You're a poet?

HAYDEN

Yeah.

JOSEPH

I didn't realize you could do that professionally.

HAYDEN

You can't really. It's why I work at the law firm.

JOSEPH

Are you published?

HAYDEN

I had one poem in a magazine, but I'm optimistic there will be more.

JOSEPH

I like your attitude.

(Beat. Smile.)

I've never met a poet before.

HAYDEN

It's pretty great so far, isn't it?

JOSEPH
Indeed it is.
Let me ask you a question.

HAYDEN
Shoot.

JOSEPH
Do you rhyme?

HAYDEN
(a joke) From time to time.

(Hayden and Joseph are tickled.)

IRENE
Oh lord. That is the stupidest shit I have ever heard. You don't say that to men up in New York, do you darling? No wonder you're still single.

MARINA
I know a poem.

COTTON
You do?

MARINA
(reciting)
Tender as an eagle it swoops down
Washing all our faces with its rough tongue
Chained to a rock, and in that rock, naked
All of the faces.

(Beat)

It's called, "Love." I forget who wrote it.

COTTON
How do you know that?

MARINA
We learned it in school.
I like the idea of love being an eagle that viciously swoops down and preys on all our hearts. *(to Hayden)* Do you know it?

HAYDEN
I don't.

MARINA
It's a good poem.

HAYDEN
It's very nice. You don't remember who wrote it?

MARINA
No.

COTTON
(*to Marina*) I didn't know you studied poetry.

MARINA
In English class. In high school.

IRENE
(*to Joseph*) Marina is not from Shreveport.

JOSEPH
Where are you from?

MARINA
New Orleans.

IRENE
Well. (*to Marina*) You were born in Vietnam. (*to Joseph*) She was born in Vietnam.

MARINA
I'm from New Orleans.

IRENE
Have you been, Joseph?

JOSEPH
I have not. Not yet. But I hope to go soon.

IRENE
You should really go. You would love it. So much culture, you know? You'd be right at home.

COTTON
Why?
Because he's black?

(Beat)

IRENE

Because it is a world class city, Cotton. And Shreveport might be a little small for Joseph's tastes.

(Loretha enters with dinner on a serving cart.)

LORETHA

Dinner is ready.

MARINA

Finally.

HAYDEN

(takes a deep breath) Mmm. I can smell the sweet potatoes.

IRENE

It looks lovely Loretha. Thank you.

COTTON

Yes, thank you Loretha. It all smells really delicious. We're truly grateful for your work.

LORETHA

That's alright, Cotton. I like to see you well fed.

IRENE

(to Loretha) Would you join us for grace, dear?

LORETHA

Mm-Hm.

(They all stand and join hands.)

IRENE

(to Loretha) You do it. Yours are so good.

LORETHA

Thank you Lord for our friends and family. Thank you Lord for this bountiful meal. Thank you Lord for the new little person that will be joining the family. We pray that the road always rise to meet us, that the wind always be at our backs and that the darkness always be in the next room. In Jesus' name...

ALL

Amen.

IRENE
Thank you, Loretha.

LORETHA
You're welcome.

JOSEPH
Does she... Do you always say grace?

LORETHA
Just when I'm asked. Y'all enjoy your supper. *(to Marina)* And you make sure to eat up, Miss. You're eating for two now, so don't be so shy.

MARINA
Okay.

LORETHA
I just love babies. So innocent.

IRENE
We all love babies, Loretha. Of course.

LORETHA
They keep life interesting. So many changes in just one generation.

IRENE
Thank you Loretha.

LORETHA
Alright, I'm going. *Bon Appetit.*

(Loretha exits.)

COTTON
I'll serve.

(He serves Joseph first.)

JOSEPH
Thank you.

COTTON
My pleasure. Marina?

(Marina hands her plate.)

So Joseph. Do you oversee all the hiring for Phillips?

JOSEPH
More or less.

COTTON
Even through the landman?

JOSEPH
I wouldn't want to seem too proud on Thanksgiving, but yes, basically everybody all the way down the chain does what I say.

HAYDEN
(sarcastic) How do you stay humble with all that power Joseph?

IRENE
Hayden, please.

JOSEPH
(with a smile) I was brought up right. So I still remember my manners.

COTTON
The reason I bring it up is that I've spent the past year really familiarizing myself with the market here in Shreveport. Bossier too. You know I've been doing commercial real estate, and I was broker back in California before I moved back home. I like to think I've got a good mix of that homegrown knowledge of the area and bigger city cunning that I learned in California. I sort of feel like I'm ready to do something bigger you know? I've been wondering if it's time for a change.

JOSEPH
I'm certainly the right man to talk to about that kind of thing.

(Short pause. Cotton is stumped.)

COTTON
Good. That's good. Well so I was thinking...

JOSEPH
You should come down to the office some time. I can introduce you around and we can see what we can work out.

COTTON
Zayma Yokum suggested that I talk to you about it.

JOSEPH
Why didn't you just say that? If Zayma thinks you're alright, I'm sure everybody else will too. Zayma's good people.

IRENE

That is a lovely way of putting it. "Good people." What a nice phrase.

HAYDEN

I have a question.

(Beat)

(to Joseph) What are you doing here?

IRENE

Hayden. That's enough.

HAYDEN

I'm just asking, Mama. It's not rude to ask.

JOSEPH

Your mother invited me. I'm her date.

HAYDEN

Are you like doing secret tests on the property or something? Are you looking for gas?

JOSEPH

That's not how it works. We already know where the gas is. There's a big map back at the office of the whole parrish. Besides, I believe we already own an option on this property. Isn't that right?

COTTON

Yes. You do.

JOSEPH

I'm just a stranger with nowhere to go on Thanksgiving. Your mother was kind enough to give me shelter.

HAYDEN

How old are you?

JOSEPH

I'm 31.

HAYDEN

Just like Cotton.

JOSEPH

Just like a lot of people, I suppose.

HAYDEN

You're kind of slippery aren't you Joseph?

JOSEPH
I wouldn't say that.

HAYDEN
Everything just slides right off your back.

(Joseph smiles.)

JOSEPH
How about "carefree?" I try to come across as relaxed and carefree.
I find it puts people at ease.
What do you think?

HAYDEN
I think it's working.

IRENE
Marina dear. How is the bird?

MARINA
It's good.

IRENE
First turducken?

MARINA
It's my second. Cotton made it for me once.

COTTON
That was a good night.

IRENE
Well I'm sure mine is better than Cotton's isn't it? I've been making it my whole life.

MARINA
It's very good.

IRENE
Joseph, did you know that Marina here speaks Chinese?

MARINA
Vietnamese.

IRENE
Vietnamese. Right. (*sarcastic to Hayden*) They are different you know.

HAYDEN

Did you grow up speaking it?

MARINA

To my father.

IRENE

Why don't you teach us how to say something?

MARINA

It's a difficult language. People ask to learn, but it's really hard for white people to pronounce. *(to Joseph)* Black people too.

IRENE

Well give us a chance Marina. Don't be racist.

MARINA

Okay.

Ban nói quá nhiều. (In Vietnamese: "You talk too much.")

IRENE

What does that mean?

MARINA

It's an expression. It's hard to translate.

IRENE

Well teach us how to say something useful. Teach us how to say hello.

MARINA

Xin chào.

IRENE

Xin chào.

Was I close?

(Marina shakes her head no.)

IRENE

(to Joseph) Cotton has always had a taste for girls of different races. He dates the spectrum. I try to take it as an opportunity to see the world. I make them all teach me something in their native tongue.

HAYDEN

(to Marina and Joseph) I hope that you're both ignoring everything that's happening right now. You just have to let it wash over you. It isn't real.

IRENE

Claudia (*with accent*) taught me the most. I think my favorite was *Mi Casa es Su Casa*. It's so warm and inviting. *Mi Casa es Su Casa*. It just feels good to say. You can't translate something like that.

COTTON

How about, "Make yourself at home?"

IRENE

It's not as beautiful somehow. English is an ugly language.

(short pause)

IRENE

Xin chào.

MARINA

Who was Claudia (*with accent*)? Ex-girlfriend?

(pause)

COTTON

Oh, uh, no, baby, um, Claudia (*accent*) and I were married.

MARINA

–

COTTON

Just uh, just for five years.

MARINA

–

IRENE

Xin chào. Xin chào. Xin chào.

Am I getting closer?

MARINA

Excuse me for a moment.

(Very politely, Marina exits the room. There is a pause. Cotton might put his face in his hands and take a deep breath.)

IRENE

(*shouting to the next room*) Loretha, honey!

LORETHA
(from offstage) What?

IRENE
(shouting) Would you bring me a Bourbon, please?
(to the room) Anybody else want a Bourbon?
 (Nobody else does.)

LORETHA
(from offstage) Anybody else want one?

IRENE
(shouting) It's just me tonight. Bring me that expensive one from Kentucky, would you?

LORETHA
(from offstage) I'm getting it.

IRENE
(shouting) Help yourself to a glass if you want.
 (They listen. No response.)
(to the room) Loretha likes a little nip herself.

(Loretha enters with two Bourbons on a tray.)

IRENE
(to Loretha) What should we drink to?

LORETHA
 How about, "the unexpected." Cause that's all there is.

IRENE
 I don't know why the help is always the smartest person in the room, but damn it all to hell, it proves true once more. To the unexpected!

(Loretha and Irene toast and drink.)

IRENE
(to Loretha) Why don't you join us? A seat has become available. Joseph here wanted to ask you some questions about your work.

JOSEPH
(to Irene) I did?

COTTON
 Here. Take my seat Loretha.

LORETHA
You leaving?

COTTON
Yes. I am. I, uh... I need to go in the other room.

LORETHA
I'll just keep it warm for you.

COTTON
Okay. *(to the room)* Excuse me.

(Cotton exits. The room adjusts.)

LORETHA
(to Hayden) Didn't see you last year, Hayden.

HAYDEN
I was in Indonesia. On a writers' retreat.

LORETHA
You have fun?

HAYDEN
I did. Thank you for asking.

JOSEPH
Perhaps this is a good time for me to say good night. Loretha, thank you so much for the lovely dinner.

LORETHA
You don't want dessert?

JOSEPH
I shouldn't.

LORETHA
You should. I made the thing. It's just gonna sit there if no one eats it.

JOSEPH
The meal has been lovely. Thank you. It's so nice not to be on my own for Thanksgiving.

HAYDEN
I can walk you out, Joseph.

JOSEPH
That sounds good to me.

HAYDEN
Sometimes after a big meal, I like to take a walk around the block.

JOSEPH
I'd be delighted.

HAYDEN
Okay.

JOSEPH
(*to Irene*) Good night. It was a pleasure. Thank you again, Irene.

(He gives her a kiss.)

IRENE
You are always welcome, Joseph. Such a gentleman.

JOSEPH
Loretha.

LORETHA
Good night.

JOSEPH
(*to Hayden*) Shall we?

HAYDEN
This way.

(Hayden and Joseph exit.)
(Irene and Loretha sit together for a moment. The clink glasses.)

IRENE
The unexpected.

3.

(A model of a house illuminates onstage. Inside the model, a room lights up. We hear the following scene, but don't see anything but that light.)

MARINA
You didn't tell me you were married.

COTTON
I'm sorry.

MARINA
You didn't tell me.
Claudia. (*with accent*)

COTTON
I know. I'm sorry.

MARINA
Everyone else knows.

COTTON
Everyone else was there.

(beat)

They're family.

MARINA
I'm not family?

COTTON
Not yet.

MARINA
Not yet.

COTTON
But you will be.

MARINA
You have to be honest with me.

COTTON
Okay.

MARINA
A house cannot stand on lies.

COTTON
Okay.

(Short pause.)

I love you.

MARINA
I love you too.

(Beat)
(Lights out.)

4.

(In the kitchen. Loretha is cooking breakfast, something that sizzles. Irene is reading the paper at the breakfast table.)

(Cotton enters, dressed in a suit.)

IRENE
Hot damn.

COTTON
Good morning, Mama.

IRENE
You look great.
Loretha you see this?

LORETHA
I surely do.

IRENE
Doesn't he look good?

LORETHA
He surely does.

IRENE
Hot damn.
I swear you look just like your father.
What are you doing wearing a suit this early in the morning?

COTTON
I had a meeting. At the Phillips office.

IRENE
You did?

COTTON
I did.

IRENE
And?

COTTON
I got it.

IRENE
The job?

COTTON
Yep.

IRENE
My boy.

COTTON
Properties Outreach Coordinator.

IRENE
(with pride) Properties Outreach Coordinator.
I swear that is some corporate double speak if I ever heard it. It's just a string of nouns.

COTTON
It's a good title. You proud of me?

IRENE
I am.
Come sit down and eat some breakfast.
(He comes to the table.)
Loretha, will you make our fine young man some breakfast?

LORETHA
Eggs already cracked, Miss.

IRENE
So, what'd they say?

COTTON
They said I got it. I'll work for the Landman, so my job is in purchasing. I'm supposed to consume as much property as I can.

IRENE
"Consume?" They used the word "consume?"

COTTON
Yeah, these guys are real assholes. It's pretty awesome.
They said that I'm supposed to acquire as much land as possible and then coordinate with the engineers about where to build wells and pipeline.

IRENE
My head spins just thinking about it.
My boy the gas man.

COTTON
There's more.

IRENE
Oh?

COTTON
They put me in charge of your section.

IRENE
They what?

COTTON
I'm in charge of your section. The city is divided into sections. When you sold your option, it was part of a mass purchase that the company did of all the properties in your area.
I will oversee that area.

IRENE
Well good. That's good news, isn't it? You'll make sure your mama gets a good deal.

COTTON
That's right. It's very good news.
It's a uh, conditional offer though.

IRENE
Conditional on what?

COTTON
On the first deal I make.

IRENE
-

COTTON
With you.

IRENE
I already sold my option.

COTTON

Your property is in between the well for your section and the station where they filter the gas. They want to build a pipeline just under the surface, running across your property. An easement.

IRENE

-

COTTON

They'll pay you for it. Fifty thousand dollars.

IRENE

-

COTTON

Plus my job. Which comes with stock. For which there is basically no ceiling.

IRENE

Okay.

COTTON

The one snag, if you could call it that, is that with a pipeline closer to the surface, there are some additional risks.

IRENE

Like what?

COTTON

Nothing specific.

IRENE

What do you mean nothing specific?

COTTON

The company, as a policy, does not detail the risks. It would be a legal acknowledgment that there are risks, which is something that could be used against us.

IRENE

Is this a joke?

COTTON

No.

IRENE

Thankfully I have a man on the inside. My son. What are the risks?

COTTON

People say it can sometimes ruin the drinking water.

IRENE

Uh-huh.

COTTON

Of course people say all kinds of things. And Phillips has a very good safety policy.

IRENE

Maybe we should check in with Zayma about this.

COTTON

We don't need to talk to Zayma.

IRENE

Why not? Zayma's good people. You heard what Joseph said.

COTTON

Joseph is the one giving me a conditional job offer. And Zayma is an old lady. She's got a lot of connections in Shreveport, but she doesn't know her head from her tail. We don't need Zayma's advice. I am qualified to help you make this decision. And I think we should do it.

IRENE

Yes I can see why you would.

COTTON

Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money in Shreveport. You could get more touch ups on your face if you want.

IRENE

-

COTTON

You could buy yourself a Cadillac.

IRENE

-

COTTON

And Marina and my baby on the way would have the security of knowing that they will be provided for, for a long time to come.

IRENE

Aha. Finally he says something honest.

LORETHA
Here you go.

(Loretha serves Cotton breakfast.)

COTTON
Thank you.

IRENE
It ain't me your worried about at all. It's Marina.

COTTON
The two are not mutually exclusive, Mama.

IRENE
She tell you to do this?

COTTON
No. She doesn't even know about it.

IRENE
-

COTTON
You could try being nicer to her.

IRENE
I'm nice to everybody, Cotton. It's my way to be friendly.
I can't see how it's my fault that she didn't know about your marital history.

COTTON
Fine.

IRENE
You're just feeling defensive because you got that baby on the way. Men are always like that. Start feeling their backs up against the wall and they look around for someone to lash out at.

COTTON
That's not what's happening.

IRENE
Your father got just like that too. Started walking around the house with a hammer and nails like he was gonna build something, talking to himself all the time. "We have to be ready." "We have to be ready." Just like that.

COTTON

-

IRENE

You remember that Loretha?

LORETHA

Mmm-Hmm.

IRENE

"We have to be ready." Like the apocalypse was coming and there was something he could do to stop it.

LORETHA

"We have to be ready."

IRENE

"We have to be ready."

LORETHA

"We have to be ready."

IRENE

"We have to be ready."

(Loretha and Irene laugh.)

IRENE

Lord, that man was scared out of his mind.

COTTON

Why do you do this?

IRENE

Do what?

COTTON

I have this job offer. I want to take the job. All you have to do is say yes. I'll even pay you fifty thousand dollars to say yes. But instead of giving me a straight answer, you start this weird insulting procedure. Yes, I want to be ready. Is that really something to make fun of me for?

IRENE

I think you're stretching the truth a little, Cotton.

COTTON

How?

IRENE

You haven't really been offered a job at all, have you? The only thing you have that they want is me. That's why your job is "conditional." They're *willing* to take you, if you get that pipeline built. I'm the one with the power here.

COTTON

Fine.

IRENE

Isn't that right?

COTTON

Yes. It is.

IRENE

Why don't you just say it?

COTTON

What?

IRENE

I'm the one with the power.

COTTON

You want me to say it?

IRENE

-

COTTON

You're the one with the power.

IRENE

It's nice to hear.

COTTON

You want me to say it again?

IRENE

-

COTTON

You're the one with the power.

IRENE

It's insulting to come in here and misrepresent things. And then to speak ill of Zayma. It's uncalled for.

COTTON

I'm sorry.

IRENE

I'll sign the paperwork.

COTTON

You will?

IRENE

Of course. Why would I stand in your way? I want nothing but the best for you Cotton. I just want you to remember who's taking care of who.

COTTON

Okay.

IRENE

Besides. Maybe I will buy myself a Cadillac.

COTTON

It would suit you.

IRENE

I love you Cotton.
Just don't insult me.

COTTON

I'm sorry.

IRENE

Now give me a hug and go get a pen from my purse. I'll sign whatever you want.

(Cotton hugs Irene.)

IRENE

"Thank you, Mama."

COTTON

Thank you, Mama.

IRENE

You're welcome.

(Cotton exits.)

5.

(In the main room, Marina is on the floor with her ass up in the air, doing some stretches to relieve pregnancy pain. Marina exhales loudly, perhaps she moans.)

(Hayden enters, just passing through. She stops.)

HAYDEN
Are you okay?

MARINA
Yes. I'm sorry I'm doing this in here. It's the only room with enough space.

HAYDEN
Are you like, in pain?

MARINA
Yes.

HAYDEN
Do you want me to call someone?

MARINA
Who would you call?

HAYDEN
I don't know. A doctor?

MARINA
I'm pregnant.

HAYDEN
Right.

MARINA
Pain is okay.

HAYDEN
Okay.

MARINA
Don't call anyone.

HAYDEN
Okay.

(Short pause.)

HAYDEN
What's it feel like?

MARINA
What?

HAYDEN
Being pregnant.

MARINA
It's like holding up a twenty pound weight with your bladder.

(Hayden grabs her crotch as though
she's been hit.)

HAYDEN
Ah. That sounds unpleasant.

MARINA
It's the miracle of life. Some things are worth pain.

HAYDEN
Okay... Well... I was just going to...

MARINA
Stay.

HAYDEN
What?

MARINA
Stay here. Talk to me. It's nice to have someone to talk to.

HAYDEN
Okay.

MARINA
You live in New York?

HAYDEN
Yes I do.

MARINA

I went there once. You like it?

HAYDEN

Yeah. Well. No, actually. I don't know. It's New York, you know? There's like a hundred thousand people there exactly like me. It's hard to remember who you are. But, you have to love it.

MARINA

You don't have to.

HAYDEN

Yeah, but it's like "New York."

MARINA

Right.

HAYDEN

"New York"

MARINA

I heard you.

HAYDEN

There's just a lot of people. It can get exhausting.

MARINA

Maybe you'll move back to Louisiana.

HAYDEN

(laughs) Uh... I have a place in the East Village. In a building with an elevator. I'm not moving back to Louisiana.

MARINA

Okay.

HAYDEN

Are you going to move to Shreveport? I mean, to like, be with Cotton?

MARINA

He's renting a room with that woman Zayma.

HAYDEN

I know.

MARINA

She's nice, but one room is too small. That's why we stay here when I'm in town. I have a house with my dad in New Orleans. I would like to move here, but I need enough room for my dad, Cotton, me and the baby. It takes money.

HAYDEN

You live with your dad?

MARINA

Yes.

HAYDEN

Is that like, impossibly hard?

MARINA

No.

HAYDEN

I only come home once a year. I don't think I could stand it here more than that. The idea of waking up every morning to see my mother... it makes me shudder.

MARINA

Your mother is a mean old bitch. She talks too much. And she's trying to scare me.

HAYDEN

Oh.

That was honest.

MARINA

I'm honest. It's why Cotton likes me. I tell him the truth. No point in lying.

HAYDEN

I see.

MARINA

That, and we both only have one parent. We bonded over that too.

HAYDEN

You should try and be generous with my mother... if you can.

MARINA

Why?

HAYDEN

She's been through a lot. She had a lot of hard years.

MARINA

-

HAYDEN

My father was harsh with her. He was violent sometimes. Mama doesn't always know how to act. She puts on this show of strength, but she's a woman of limited experience in a lot of ways.

MARINA

She's never been to New York.

HAYDEN

No. She's never been to New York. I don't think she's ever been out of Louisiana. I know she's racist, or, at least the way she talks about those things is different than how you're supposed to, but... she's curious, you know? She's doing it wrong, but she's trying to learn.

MARINA

He beat her a lot?

(Beat)

HAYDEN

Enough to make a difference.

(Beat)

MARINA

You're a good daughter.

HAYDEN

Thank you.

MARINA

If I have a daughter, I hope she's nice like you.

HAYDEN

That's nice to hear.

MARINA

Your house is very strange though. Even besides Irene.

HAYDEN

Why

MARINA

You have a slave. For starters.

HAYDEN

Loretha? She's not a slave. She's like an aunt.

MARINA

A slave aunt that does all the work.

HAYDEN

Loretha gets paid.

MARINA

-

HAYDEN

And that's not really fair. I mean, things are a certain way. That's how they are. Everybody participates in it. Loretha enjoys her work.

MARINA

(Beat) Are you stupid?

HAYDEN

No, I am not.

You're very harsh Marina.

MARINA

I'm honest. It's why people like me.

HAYDEN

Jesus. You're like a robot with that.

MARINA

What?

HAYDEN

Nevermind.

(short pause)

MARINA

You have a boyfriend in New York?

HAYDEN

Why?

MARINA
If Cotton and I get married. To know how many people to invite.

HAYDEN
I don't.

MARINA
Good.

HAYDEN
Is that? I mean, are you two talking about getting married?

MARINA
I'm pregnant.

HAYDEN
Right.

MARINA
So I assume he will ask.

HAYDEN
Oh.

(Long awkward silence.)

That was funny at dinner the other night about Claudia (*accent*), huh?

MARINA
-

HAYDEN
She was nice. Very human.

(Beat)

MARINA
I'm human.

HAYDEN
I know. I didn't mean to imply...

MARINA
I'm kind of two humans even.

HAYDEN
Right. Cause of your baby.

MARINA

If she's a girl, we're going to name her after my mother. *Da`o Bi'ch*.

HAYDEN

I'm sorry?

MARINA

Da`o Bi'ch. That was my mother's name.

HAYDEN

Oh.

MARINA

Don't worry. We'll give her a white people name too. Maybe Katherine. Or Hayden.

HAYDEN

That would be something.

MARINA

You'll be my friend I hope.

HAYDEN

What?

MARINA

Women have to stick together. Your mother isn't nice to me. I need a woman in the family I can trust.

HAYDEN

Okay.

MARINA

Yeah?

HAYDEN

Yeah. Okay.

MARINA

Good. It's settled then.

(Beat)

HAYDEN

May I say something?

MARINA
Sure.

HAYDEN
I love Cotton.

MARINA
Me too.

HAYDEN
He hasn't always been the steadiest vessel. Just so you know.

MARINA
-

HAYDEN
It sounds like you're making a lot of plans.
I just wouldn't want you to be too surprised.

MARINA
Okay.
Thank you.

HAYDEN
Don't mention it.

6. (Big family dinner. Place settings for five. Around the table sit Irene, Cotton, Marina and Loretha, who, for the first time in the play, is not wearing an apron. One chair is empty. They all sit in silence for a moment. Perhaps Irene sighs.)

HAYDEN

(from offstage) Okay! Like two more seconds!

(short pause)

(from offstage) Everything smells really good!

MARINA

(to Loretha) I like your hair like that.

LORETHA

Thank you.

MARINA

How come you don't do it like that all the time?

LORETHA

I do. Been wearing it like this for years.

Just not when I'm working.

HAYDEN

(from offstage) I'm putting everything on the serving plates!

IRENE

Marina, it occurs to me that you haven't told me what your father makes of this whole... situation.

MARINA

Situation?

IRENE

The man is about to become a grandfather, no? He must have some feelings about it. I assume he knows?

MARINA

Oh. It's very nice, actually. I think he's excited. He wants to build the baby a crib. He's bought the wood and the nails. He walks around the house with a hammer, talking about different designs.

IRENE

Is that right?

MARINA

He's excited about his grandpa name too. He wants something that sounds like New Orleans. He wants the baby to call him "Po'Boy."

COTTON

That's sweet.

LORETHA

Po'boy? Like the sandwich?

MARINA

Like, "Po'Boy, what are you doing? Would you tuck me in? Night night Po'Boy. I love you." I'm trying to convince him that Poppa would be better. Cotton could be Daddy and my dad could be Poppa.

COTTON

I kinda like Po'Boy.

MARINA

My father is a very nice man.
He would never hurt anyone.

HAYDEN

(from offstage) Okay! Here I come!

(Hayden rolls onstage with food on the dinner cart.)

Ta da. Dinner.

COTTON

Smells good.

IRENE

What is it?

HAYDEN

I made a beet and Brussels sprout salad to start. It has endive, fennel, and a little Asiago cheese in it. And, then for dinner, I made a rosemary chicken.

COTTON

Yum.

IRENE

"A" chicken? You made one chicken?

HAYDEN

Yeah.

IRENE

There's five of us, darling. A chicken only serves 4. And Marina's eating for two.

HAYDEN

We'll cut it some other way.

IRENE

What other way do you want to cut it? There's two breasts and two legs. Are you going to serve someone grizzle?

LORETHA

I don't need a piece. I can eat the Brussel thing.

HAYDEN

No. Loretha, you're the guest of honor. I'll just cut off a piece of Cotton's and share with him. If Mama doesn't like that, she can keep her complaints to herself. *(taking Loretha's plate)* Here. I made rolls too. Fresh rolls with butter.

(Hayden starts to serve.)

LORETHA

It's nice being a guest.

HAYDEN

I want to say something.

Loretha, I have always considered you to be the rock of this family. You're my second mother, a person I've always respected and a woman of unique philosophy. Especially since it's still Thanksgiving, we take this moment to give you thanks.

COTTON

Amen.

LORETHA

That's very kind.

HAYDEN

And I think we should start doing this every year. Start a new tradition.
(Irene clears her throat.)

Mama?

IRENE

Yes, Hayden of course. If anyone deserves anything, it is Loretha. *(to Loretha)* Dear, you are a blessing from above.

COTTON
Cheers.

(They toast)

IRENE
So Hayden, do you plan on seeing Joseph again before you head back to New York?

HAYDEN
I hadn't planned on it.

IRENE
There seemed to be a little spark between the two of you on Thanksgiving if I'm not mistaken.

HAYDEN
We were just talking.

LORETHA
Y'all took that walk together, remember?

HAYDEN
I do remember.

IRENE
Did y'all catch a little kiss in the night air?

HAYDEN
I'm not telling you that.

IRENE
What? You think your Mama doesn't know about smooching in the moonlight? You can't keep all your secrets from me dear. C'mon, give me some little bit of gossip.

HAYDEN
Don't be weird, Mama.

MARINA
He's nice looking.

COTTON
Joseph?

MARINA
Yeah.

IRENE

And you know he's got all that gas money.
Could do a lot worse, Hayden.

COTTON

(to Marina) He's my boss.

MARINA

I know.

HAYDEN

I'm like the family prostitute. Anybody else you guys want to set me up with?

COTTON

There's a cute new check-out boy at the grocery store. I'm sure he'd be happy to sack your groceries.

HAYDEN

Gross, Cotton.
What does that even mean?

COTTON

I don't know. You tell me.

IRENE

"Sack" her groceries? Is that something that people are saying now?

HAYDEN

No. Nobody says that.

LORETHA

I bet Cotton's going to meet a lot of single men at his new job. You should get him to take you to the office with him.

COTTON

Yeah, maybe I'll start a little side business. I could be your "manager."

HAYDEN

That's not funny.

MARINA

You would have to smack her around though. Put a hoe in her place.
(Marina mimes smacking a hoe and does the sound effects.)

(hitting sounds) Chsk! Chsk!

(in the voice of a bruised hoe) Ah....No...

HAYDEN

You know, it's conversations like this that really remind a girl of the bittersweet nature of coming home.

COTTON

We're just trying to help you out Hayden. In case your poetry career doesn't take off.

HAYDEN

What's that supposed to mean?

COTTON

Nothing.

IRENE

(playful, to Cotton) You messed up.

HAYDEN

What did you mean by that?

COTTON

I didn't mean anything, Hayden. Calm down. I just meant that a lot of people want to write poetry... that it's competitive... and then, eventually... they're forced to like, take a look in the mirror and find a real job.

HAYDEN

People get poems published.

COTTON

Okay.

HAYDEN

I've had a poem published.

COTTON

One.

HAYDEN

Not everybody can be a corporate stooge for the evil empire of earth polluters.

COTTON

Earth polluters?

HAYDEN

The way they remove the gas is by pumping gallons and gallons of toxic poison down there to break up the rock. Don't tell me you don't know this.

COTTON
I know how they do it.

HAYDEN
And poetry is like, one of the fucking oldest art forms that exists. It's an inspiration.

COTTON
Okay.

(pause)

LORETHA
We should say grace.

IRENE
Good idea.

(All join hands.)

LORETHA
Marina, would you like to say a few words?

MARINA
Oh. What do I say?

LORETHA
Tell the Lord what you're grateful for.

MARINA
Okay.
Thank you, um, Lord, for... this salad.
And for the chicken.

(Irene clears her throat.)

MARINA
Thank you for this family. And this baby inside of me. And this man that I love. And for Loretha. And for the rolls. Which I plan to eat with butter, thank you for butter...

LORETHA
In Jesus' name...

ALL
Amen.

IRENE
Let's eat.

LORETHA
(*to Marina*) Good job.

MARINA
Thank you. It actually feels kind of good to do.

HAYDEN
Can I have the floor for a moment?

IRENE
The floor? Some of us are starting to get hungry, darling.

HAYDEN
I'd like to recite a poem.

COTTON
It's okay, Hayden. I get the point.

HAYDEN
No. I just want to share. It's something that helps me be positive.

IRENE
Maybe after dinner.

HAYDEN
It's short. It's called, "The Wind."

IRENE
(*quietly*) Oh lord.
(*to Hayden*) Go ahead.

HAYDEN
It goes:
(*reciting*)
as if
out of nowhere
you could begin

It's by a guy I met in Indonesia. Wes. It's going to be published in the Spring. He got four hundred dollars for that. It's only eight words.

LORETHA
As if
Out of Nowhere
You could begin.

HAYDEN
(*with sound effect and gesture*) "The Wind."

LORETHA
That's nice.

COTTON
Why does that help you be positive?

HAYDEN
Because it implies that even the wind has to start somewhere. We should be generous with each other. You can only start from where you are. And everything has a beginning.

LORETHA
Except family. You can't start a family.

COTTON
I'm starting a family.

LORETHA
No.

COTTON
Um. Yes.

LORETHA
You are *continuing* a family. And you're just a dot.
You two will fall apart real quick if you think you come from nothing.

COTTON
I don't think that's what I said.

LORETHA
Can't start a family. Not possible. It's not like the wind.

(Irene holds up a piece of endive on
the end of her fork.)

IRENE
What the hell is this?

HAYDEN
That's endive, Mama.

IRENE
It's bitter.

HAYDEN
It's supposed to be like that.

IRENE
Why would you serve something like this?

HAYDEN
Some people like it. It's a type of lettuce.

IRENE
Lettuce is green.

HAYDEN
Endive is green.

IRENE
This is yellow.
And disgusting.

HAYDEN
You don't have to eat it.

IRENE
Look, Hayden, I know you're trying to do something real nice here, trying to make some kind of point with Loretha and the poetry and all, but this just isn't us. This is gross, honey, this, this endive. I don't want to eat this. Who's gonna bring me a Bourbon?

MARINA
Hey.

(Beat)

IRENE
Are you talking to me?

MARINA
Excuse me.
Maybe we could just eat the dinner.

(Beat)

IRENE

I don't want to eat the dinner, Marina. I think it's disgusting. Do you have a problem with that?

MARINA

No.

IRENE

Good.

(Beat)

MARINA

I think maybe the problem isn't the food anyway.

IRENE

Oh really?

MARINA

-

COTTON

Whoa, baby... whoa whoa whoa...

IRENE

(to Marina) What exactly are you implying my dear?

COTTON

I think maybe we've all just had a long day, and Hayden's getting ready to head back to New York...

MARINA

I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude.

IRENE

How do you mean to be?

MARINA

I just want to eat the dinner. And be happy.

IRENE

Well I think I've got the right to be anyway I want to be. We are in my house, after all.

MARINA

Yes. I know. *(sarcastic)* And what a gracious host you are.

LORETHA
Ooo..

IRENE
Maybe you just don't understand how we do things here, Marina. In America, it's considered very very rude to insult someone at their own dinner table.

MARINA
I know about America. I'm from New Orleans.

IRENE
See here I was thinking that you came from a culture that has a deep and profound respect for the concept of saving face. You wouldn't want to lose your face at my dinner table, would you?

MARINA
You're thinking of Japan. I'm Vietnamese. They are not the same thing. They're not even close to each other. All of China, and Korea, are in between.

COTTON
Okay. Baby, why don't we go to the back room, get some air... lose some steam...C'mon...

IRENE
(to Cotton) Is she making fun of me?
(to Marina) Is that what you're doing? You think I'm stupid?

MARINA
I think you're ignorant and that you don't listen. I've told many times that I'm Vietnamese. Not Chinese. Not Japanese. Vietnamese. And you still don't remember.

IRENE
What do I care where you're from?

MARINA
I think that you talk when you should listen.

IRENE
(to the room) The nerve of this woman.

MARINA
I think that you defend yourself by insulting others.

COTTON
Marina.

MARINA
I think that you insult me because you think I'm trying to take your son away from you.

IRENE
I have never been so insulted, in all my life...

MARINA
And the truth is, I understand why your husband beat you.
It's the only way to shut you up.

HAYDEN
Oh my god.

COTTON
Marina! God damn it! Go to the back room!

(Marina looks to Cotton, angry and perhaps close to tears.)

COTTON
Go!

(She goes to the back.)

HAYDEN
Oh my god.
Mama.

(Pause)

IRENE
I want her gone.

COTTON
Mama.

IRENE
Out. I want that chink bitch out of my house.

COTTON
She's not Chinese, Mama.

IRENE
Do you hear me?
Out.

COTTON
I hear you.

IRENE
Out, Cotton.

COTTON
Okay.

IRENE
Gone.

COTTON
I'll do it.

(Irene exits.)
(Beat)

HAYDEN
I'm going to go be with Mama.

(Hayden exits.)

COTTON
Fuck.

(Loretha starts to pack up the dishes to bring them to the back. Just like always. Cotton helps her. After a moment...)

LORETHA
They say a boy always picks a woman just like his mother.
That's why they fight. Same strengths, same weaknesses.

COTTON
-

LORETHA
It's your mother who taught you how to love. That's why you pick someone like her.

COTTON

That's not what I did. If Marina was like Mama, what would that make me?

LORETHA

-

COTTON

That's not what I am. And Marina's not like my mother.
(beat)

She's more like you.

LORETHA

How's that?

COTTON

Marina is honest. She doesn't misrepresent things. She doesn't put so many conditions on everything. A mother is supposed to love her son unconditionally, but my mother only loves me when I'm on my knees saying thank you.

LORETHA

-

COTTON

I need help, Loretha.

LORETHA

With what?

COTTON

I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

LORETHA

It's not my place to help with that.

(beat)

COTTON

Do you not know?

LORETHA

Know what?

COTTON

I love you. We all love you. Mama's not the one who taught me how to feel.

LORETHA

-

COTTON

Please. Tell me who I'm supposed to be. Tell me what I'm supposed to do.

(Beat.)

LORETHA

Come here, baby.

(Loretha swallows Cotton in her arms.)

LORETHA

You're just scared. That's all it is. That baby's gonna come out real soon and Mama's full of hormones. You take care of your family.

COTTON

-

LORETHA

Look at me.

(Cotton looks.)

It's a man's job to take care of his family. You hear me?
Can't be weak.

COTTON

Okay.

LORETHA

I'll help you.

(Loretha maybe looks at Cotton for a second. Then she just walks off.
Cotton is alone.)

7.

(The house model from scene 3 is onstage. The same light as before lights up. As before, we only hear voices as we look at the house.)

MARINA
(*in a whisper*) Cotton. Cotton, wake up.

COTTON
What is it?

MARINA
It's happening.

COTTON
What?

MARINA
It's happening.

COTTON
Oh shit.

MARINA
Yeah.

COTTON
Oh shit oh shit oh shit.

MARINA
Stay calm.

COTTON
Okay.
Are you okay? Can I do anything?

MARINA
Hold my hand.

COTTON
Okay.

MARINA
Rub my back.

COTTON
Okay.

MARINA
Tell me you love me.

COTTON
I love you.

MARINA
Mm. That's nice.

COTTON
Good.

MARINA
I'm scared.

COTTON
Me too.

MARINA
What if I'm not enough?

COTTON
I don't know.

MARINA
Hold my hand.

COTTON
Okay.
Ready?
We push on three.

MARINA
Wait.

COTTON
What is it?

MARINA
Wait.

COTTON
On three. We can do this.

MARINA
Something's wrong.

COTTON
We can do this, baby.

MARINA
No. There's a problem.

COTTON
On three.

MARINA
It hurts.

COTTON
One

MARINA
No. No no no

COTTON
Two

MARINA
Hold my hand.

COTTON
Three.

MARINA & COTTON
Push.

COTTON
One.
Two.
Three.

MARINA & COTTON
Push.

COTTON
One.
Two.
Three.

(It is silent for a moment.)

COTTON
Are you okay?
Marina?

END OF ACT ONE.

ACT TWO**1.**

(Irene in the kitchen. She pours herself a Bourbon and sips.)

IRENE

My mother was a crazy old bitch.
She could never find a polite way of saying anything.

I remember when I was fixing to get married. I was 20 years old. Most of my friends were already settling down and I thought Thomas would never commit to a date. He wanted to wait until he finished school. Then he wanted to wait until he had a job. Then he wanted to wait until we had a little money saved up. My mother said, "Maybe y'all should just wait and get married in the afterlife." I thought it was so rude.

Eventually, I did get married. On my wedding day, my mother whispered something to me. She said, "Irene. People always say how it's going to be. They got a lot of grand talk about their intentions and what life's gonna be like, but guess what? There is always a leak. Every boat ever built is gonna sink someday. The water always finds a way in."

What kind of evil shit is that to say to someone on their wedding day? She nearly ruined it for me.

(Beat)

It's scary when you see yourself becoming something you always thought you weren't. But I think I see her point. It's not that happiness is impossible. It's that it can't depend on staying afloat.

When my son was born, I held him in my arms while he shit all over me. I don't know that I've ever felt so good. It was a round, warm feeling. But my mother was right, the water finds a way in. A baby comes into the world and changes who everyone is. Everybody gets a new name, everybody gets a new title.

(Irene turns on the faucet and lets the water flow.)

I've let Marina and Cotton move into my home with their boy. They named him *Công* James. It's clever. I plan to call him Jimmy.

I let them in because they needed my help and they didn't have anywhere to go. And I did it for myself. It is a super human feeling to be able to provide
IRENE (con'td)

IRENE (con'td)

for someone you love. To feed and clothe them. To nourish them. It's incredible.

(Irene takes out a nice lighter and lights it. She holds the lighter, with flame for a moment.)

There's a poison in it though.

There's a poison that I've pretended isn't there.

It's coming for me.

I see it.

(Irene holds the lighter up to the running water. The water catches on fire. A brief cloud of flame burns onstage.)

We'll see who wins.

2.

(Loretha and Cotton in the kitchen.
Loretha is washing dishes with water
from store-bought gallon water jugs.)

COTTON

He does this thing where like he'll crawl over to Marina and look back at me. And then he'll crawl over to me, and look back at her, then he'll crawl back over to Marina, and just look at the two of us, like, turning his head back and forth, waiting for something to happen. Like we're gonna do something.

LORETHA

He probably wants y'all to kiss.

COTTON

You think?

LORETHA

Sure. Babies like it when their parents show affection for one another. It assures them down to their little baby souls. Lets them know that they come from something strong.

COTTON

I guess I always thought of that stuff as like, societal instead of innate.

LORETHA

You're going to be a good father, Cotton.

COTTON

Yeah?

LORETHA

Absolutely. Don't be too scared about it. That ain't gonna help nobody, least of all you.

COTTON

Thanks.

LORETHA

Marina's okay?

COTTON

She's fine.

LORETHA

I heard you all had some trouble.

COTTON

-

LORETHA

It's a lot of excitement, a new baby. You like being there when he came out?

COTTON

He was choking. So we had to rush to the hospital. He couldn't breathe, so they cut him out.

LORETHA

Thank the Lord for surgeons, am I right?

COTTON

I guess.

LORETHA

You watch them do it?

COTTON

I did.

LORETHA

You see inside?

COTTON

I did.

It made me angry.

LORETHA

Angry? At the doctor? That man saved their lives. You shouldn't be angry at him.

COTTON

It's not fun watching someone you care about get cut open. They act like it's nothing, but it's a hard image to get out of your head.

LORETHA

It got to you, huh?

COTTON

I thought I might lose them both.

LORETHA

You remember what I taught you growing up?

COTTON
Say a prayer?

LORETHA
When life gives you problems, say a prayer or make a joke. It makes things easier.

COTTON
I remember.

LORETHA
You said a prayer yet?

COTTON
I was praying the whole time.

LORETHA
Sometimes the joke part just has to be a little whisper of something naughty. It gives you something to put your bitterness into.

(pause)

Listen.

(Loretha waits for the energy in the room to get quiet. It is a pause of a decent length.)

Fuck.
Balls.
Kootchie.

(Loretha smiles.)

See that? It's fun, isn't it? Just a little tickle.

COTTON
What? What are you doing?

LORETHA
I'm cheering you up fool. Listen.

(quiet)

Fuck. Balls. Kootchie.

(She laughs.)

You try.

COTTON
I don't think I understand what's happening.

LORETHA
It'll make you feel good. Wait for the room to get quiet, real still and silent, then say something a little raunchy.

(Beat. Cotton thinks.)

LORETHA

But don't take mine. You gotta come up with your own thing.
And don't say something stupid like "damn" or "fart," Cotton. It's got to be something good.

COTTON

(skeptical) Okay.

LORETHA

Let's hear it.

COTTON

Something dirty?

LORETHA

Don't be a stick in the mud. Give me something good.

(Cotton thinks for a second.)

COTTON

Okay. I got it.

LORETHA

Go ahead.

(Pause. The room gets quiet.)

COTTON

Queef.

LORETHA

What?

COTTON

Queef.

LORETHA

What's that?

COTTON

What do you mean?

LORETHA

What *is* that? What you said.

COTTON

A queef?

LORETHA
Right.

COTTON
It's a uh... It's a queef.

LORETHA
It's slang I guess.

COTTON
It's like... sometimes when a man and a woman are like...
(Cotton starts to make hand gestures to demonstrate. He gets embarrassed and stops.)

LORETHA
What?

COTTON
I can't.

LORETHA
Just tell me.

COTTON
It's a like..
(Cotton gesticulates, attempting to explain what a queef is. His gestures are not helpful. Perhaps he makes sounds.)

It's a little like..
(gesture)

LORETHA
I have know idea what the hell you're doing.

COTTON
Nevermind. Pretend I said "boobie" okay?

LORETHA
I'm gonna say it. Make you feel better.

COTTON
Please don't.

LORETHA

I'm sure my generation's got a word for it too. Mankind don't go changing all that much.

COTTON

I'm embarrassed.

LORETHA

Queef. There, I said it. Queef. Queef. Queef.
(Cotton chuckles.)

LORETHA

See how much fun it is?

COTTON

It is pretty fun.

LORETHA

I'm going to start saying it all the time. Whenever I do the dishes, I'm going to start up with a "Queef" to the dishes over here. "Queef" to the dishes over there.

COTTON

Queef to the dishes everywhere! *(like Tiny Tim from A Christmas Carol)*
Each and every one!

(They both smile. Maybe some laughing. Beat.)

LORETHA

You're father taught me that trick.

COTTON

He did?

LORETHA

He sure did. He was always making dirty jokes.

COTTON

Did you like him?

LORETHA

Thomas?

He was alright. He wasn't all bad.
(beat) You still think about him, huh?

COTTON

I have these images of him in my mind. I remember the sound of his feet on the floor. I remember the shape of his hands.

LORETHA

He was a force of nature. He was something to be reckoned with.

COTTON

I remember him hitting me. His hand would cover my whole cheek and sting the sides of my eyes.

LORETHA

-

COTTON

I remember when he died. He was out of town on a business trip and Mama took Hayden and I into the living room. She lit a candle and told us he was dead. We all cried. Mama hugged me so hard I thought she broke one of my ribs. She made me look her in the eye and tell her I'd never leave her.

(beat)

And I remember you made pie. For weeks, it seemed like there was always fresh pie in the house.

LORETHA

You remember what I whispered in your ear?

COTTON

"Somewhere, there's a father out there for you."

LORETHA

"Somewhere, your father is out there for you," I think it was.

COTTON

I can't believe we're still dealing with that man's bullshit.

LORETHA

What do you mean?

COTTON

I might lose my job.

LORETHA

Why?

COTTON

The deed to the house is still in his name. The title company made a stink about it before the deal went through, but Joseph didn't want to sort it out. Joseph wanted to get the pipeline built. So now it's built, but we don't have the right documentation on the house. I'm the broker for this section. The whole thing looks like a fuckup on my part even though Joseph is the one who rushed it.

LORETHA

What are you going to do?

COTTON

I'm trying to find his certificate of death, so we could transfer ownership, but there's no copy at the courthouse and no one is helping me.

(pause)

LORETHA

You trust me Cotton?

COTTON

Why?

LORETHA

If I told you something, whatever it was, would you believe me?

COTTON

Depends on what you told me, I suppose.

LORETHA

You made that whole speech at Thanksgiving last year about how you love me. You and your sister both. Your sister said I was a woman of "unique philosophy." You remember that?

COTTON

I do.

LORETHA

"Unique Philosophy." You know what I thought to myself when she said that?

COTTON

What?

LORETHA

"What the hell do y'all know about my philosophy?"

You and your sister, Cotton. You both think you know me, but you don't. How could you?

COTTON

Because you raised us.

LORETHA

I come to this house every day, but I'm not myself here. How could I be? I come into this house and I disappear. That's what you pay me for.

COTTON

I see you.

LORETHA

You don't pay me to be honest. And I don't do the job for love. I do it for money, Cotton. Y'all have money. I need money. You don't want to know me for real. You don't want me in your life, meddling, trying to help. I just clean the toilet and do the dishes.

COTTON

What aren't you telling me?

LORETHA

-

COTTON

What is it?

LORETHA

The back room, Cotton. Your mother's desk, in the drawer on the bottom left. You look through every piece of paper in there. If you really want to know some truth, that's where it'll be.

COTTON

Okay. Thank you.

LORETHA

But you didn't hear it from me.

COTTON

Okay.

LORETHA

You love me?

COTTON
I honestly do.

(Loretha stares at him a bit longer.)

LORETHA
Take a look in that drawer.

3.

(Irene is drinking Bourbon in the parlor. Cotton sits with her.)

IRENE

(*re: Bourbon*) You don't want one?

COTTON

I'm good.

IRENE

When they told me our water supply was ruined, I felt sad at first, but then I realized that it doesn't matter all that much. I'm rich now and I much prefer drinking Bourbon anyway.

COTTON

It's poison you know.

IRENE

It's Bourbon, honey. It ain't gonna kill you.

COTTON

-

IRENE

This'll be you someday, Cotton, you know that? You'll be sitting somewhere with Jimmy, just doing what feels natural to you, enjoying life and sharing your wisdom with him. He'll look you right in the face and, just like a little shit, he'll tell you that your favorite drink is poison.

COTTON

Okay. Fuck it. You win this one. I will join you.

(Cotton pours himself a drink. Irene smiles.)

IRENE

I'd hoped you would.

COTTON

What do you want to toast to?

IRENE

How about Little James? May he grow into something strong.

COTTON

How about "the truth?" Why don't we drink to "the truth?"

IRENE

To seeing things as they really are.

(They cheers. Cotton downs his drink.)

What's on your mind, Cotton?

COTTON

I found something.

IRENE

What did you find?

COTTON

In the back room. In your desk. I found something back there.

IRENE

What were you doing snooping around my desk?

(Cotton pulls out a stack of letters from his back pocket.)

COTTON

I found these letters. Love letters, between you and Dad. They're beautiful.

IRENE

You shouldn't have been back there.

COTTON

It's a whole side of you that's hard to imagine. So scared and excited. So vulnerable.

IRENE

Give them here, Cotton.

(Cotton holds the letters.)

Those letters are private.

COTTON

Yes, they're very intimate. I read them several times.

IRENE

Did Loretha tell you where they were?

COTTON

I kept reading and rereading them. I felt like I was meeting two new people: My father, the lovestruck poet, and my mother, the coquettish bride to be.

IRENE
Give them to me.

COTTON
I read them so many times, Mama, and then I noticed something. There's a phone number on the back of one of them. Just a little scrawl of blue ink. It looks like it was added later.

IRENE
-

COTTON
It's an Oklahoma area code.

IRENE
-

COTTON
I called it.

IRENE
-

COTTON
I heard his voice. I couldn't say anything, I was just breathing into the phone, but I stayed on the line til he hung up. I recognized his voice. You believe that? I heard it and I knew it was him.

IRENE
-

COTTON
You lying bitch. He's alive.

IRENE
Give me those goddamn letters right now.

(Cotton throws the letters at her.
They spread out all over the room.)

You've got no right to these.

COTTON
You don't even own the house!

IRENE
Sit down.

COTTON

You've been lying to me my whole life, you crazy fucking bitch. I can't even wrap my brain around it. How could I ever trust you again?

IRENE

Cotton. Sit down and shut up.

(Cotton remains standing.)

You're done with this.

COTTON

The hell I am.

IRENE

Do you hear me? We're not talking about this again.

COTTON

-

IRENE

You called him. That's fine. I'm glad you had that experience. I'm glad that you are growing up and learning that things are more complicated than you once thought.

(beat)

Let me tell you something that I know. I know why you didn't say anything to him on the phone. You don't want that man in your life any bit more than I do. Your father is dead. We've mourned it and we've accepted it. There's no reason to bring him back into our lives. And that's why you're going to leave it alone.

COTTON

You can't control me.

IRENE

I'll tell you something else I know. You contact him again? You touch these letters or go through my things, and I'll fire Loretha in a heartbeat.

(beat)

I heard your sister and you last year, calling Loretha your mother. How dare you? How dare you go behind my back, Cotton, and share your life with her? Do you have any idea what I've done for you? Are you such an ungrateful, sniveling little shit that you can't even see that I've given you everything?

COTTON

-

IRENE

(calling into the other room) Loretha! Loretha!

LORETHA
(*offstage*) Yes?

IRENE
Get in here.

COTTON
Don't.

IRENE
Try me, Cotton. I dare you.

(Loretha enters.)

LORETHA
Yes?

IRENE
Why don't you pick up these letters for me?

(Loretha looks to Cotton. Then she starts to pick up the letters. Irene stares Cotton down.)

4.

(Lights up on the house model. We hear the sounds of a small pop, a gas leak and then a much louder boom. Perhaps the house starts to shake.)

(Men in Tyvek suits and gas masks take the stage. They rearrange the set, packing up any exposed breakables, flipping chairs onto the tops of tables, etc. When they are done, the house should look like no one is currently living in it, and it is being worked on by a crew of workers.)

5.

(The stage is dark. Flashlights poke around. Hayden and Joseph make their way onstage, wearing gas masks. Joseph may turn on a work light.)

HAYDEN

(quietly) Are you sure it's safe?

JOSEPH

Yes. And you don't have to be so quiet.

HAYDEN

I don't?

JOSEPH

No. There's no one here. *(yelling)* There's no one around for miles! You can do whatever you want!

HAYDEN

AH!

JOSEPH

AH!

HAYDEN

What do you think: do I look sexy like this?

JOSEPH

Yes. Always.

HAYDEN

(re: the mask, joking) I feel like I might have something on my face. Do I have something on my face?

JOSEPH

You look great. Even with an ugly mask on.

HAYDEN

You guys have these just like lying around the office?

JOSEPH

I know where to get them.

HAYDEN

Smooth Man Joseph runs the show, huh?

JOSEPH
Smooth Man Joseph gets what he wants.

HAYDEN
Is that right?

JOSEPH
And Smooth Man Joseph wants a kiss.

HAYDEN
You're sure it's safe in here?

JOSEPH
As long as you don't breathe it in.

HAYDEN
I think it's weird to think that we're walking around in something that would kill us and we can't see it or smell it or taste it or anything. Makes you wonder what else we don't have the right senses to detect.

JOSEPH
That's deep. You're deep. You should be a poet.

HAYDEN
It's like (*doing a voice and gesture*) "Does the fish know it's swimming around in water? Does the fish know?"

(Hayden swims around like a fish.)

JOSEPH
Kiss me.

HAYDEN
(*in a voice*) But, Mr. Smooth Man, it's so dangerous.

JOSEPH
Just do it like how I told you outside, okay?

HAYDEN
Alright.

JOSEPH
You remember?

HAYDEN
Yes.

JOSEPH
Okay. Ready?

HAYDEN
Ready.

JOSEPH
One, Two, Three, Go.

(They both take a deep breath, slide their masks back on their heads and kiss. When the kiss is done, they separate and put the masks back on, out of breath.)

JOSEPH
That hit the spot.

HAYDEN
Yeah.

(beat)

It's weird being in the house without Mom here, isn't it?

JOSEPH
I like being here with you.

HAYDEN
It's so quiet.

JOSEPH
I'm sure your mother is doing fine at the hotel.

(beat)

I'm glad you're back in town. I don't like going so long without seeing you.

HAYDEN
It's only been a month.

JOSEPH
That's a long time when you got the kind of feeling for someone that I got for you.

HAYDEN
That's sweet.

JOSEPH
Coming up on our one year.

HAYDEN
You could from the first kiss?

JOSEPH
What do you count from?

HAYDEN
-

JOSEPH
Kissing in the moonlight don't mean nothing to you?

HAYDEN
A relationship doesn't formally begin, formally speaking, until you do it.
That's the rule.

JOSEPH
Well the one year for that isn't too far off either.

HAYDEN
Nope.

JOSEPH
We should kiss again.

HAYDEN
Yes please.

JOSEPH
One, Two, Three, Go.

(Deep inhale, and they slide the masks off, but before their lips meet...)

I love you.

(Beat. They exhale, and slide the masks back on.)

HAYDEN
You do?

JOSEPH
I do.

HAYDEN
-

JOSEPH
You knew that, right?

HAYDEN
Yeah... I guess I did.

JOSEPH
It just feels like I should say it. If I'm standing here knowing it, I should say it.

HAYDEN
I love you too.

JOSEPH
No joke?

HAYDEN
No joke. I love you Joseph.

(beat)

JOSEPH
(*gently*) One, Two, Three

(Deep inhale, then slide back the masks, kiss, break and slide the masks back on.)

I think we should move in together.

HAYDEN
What?

JOSEPH
I think we should move in together. This year has been great, but I don't like only seeing you once a month. And, then, when you're in town, it's like we have to sneak around, looking for spots to be together where no one will find us. I'm a grown man, Hayden. I can't be sneaking around like a 14 year old boy. We should move in together.

HAYDEN
Like, in New York?

JOSEPH
In Shreveport.

HAYDEN
I live in New York, Joseph.

JOSEPH

I know. But you should move down here.

HAYDEN

Should I?

JOSEPH

Yes. I'm telling you. You should move down here with me. You don't even like it up there.

HAYDEN

It's where I live.

JOSEPH

I know that. But come to Shreveport. Give it a year. You don't like it, I'll try and get a transfer back to the Marcellus.

HAYDEN

-

JOSEPH

You could treat it like a residency. Think of it as "Shreveport, Indonesia." I'll pay for everything. You could write, go on long walks, stay up late and sleep in all day, whatever you want. And you and I could eat dinner together every night.

HAYDEN

I do want all that.

JOSEPH

This leak in the pipeline is going to be fixed by the end of the week. We're not going to be able to come here. Once the leak is fixed, we're going to move your mother back in. We'll have no where to go.

HAYDEN

My life isn't like, disposable, Joseph.

JOSEPH

I know that.

HAYDEN

Do you? I'm not going to just move across the country because some man told me to.

JOSEPH

I'm not just some man.

HAYDEN

Is it so obvious that I should be the one to move? Maybe you should give up your life and come up to New York.

JOSEPH

I make money in Shreveport. Enough to pay for you to have whatever you want. I mean this with no offense, but I don't think you can offer the same.

HAYDEN

-

JOSEPH

Right?

HAYDEN

Yes, that's right.

JOSEPH

So, are you thinking about it?

HAYDEN

You don't get to just have whatever you want.

JOSEPH

Why not?

HAYDEN

You don't get to just have whatever you want while I make sacrifices. It's not fair.

(beat)

JOSEPH

You can say no. But that's not what I want.

HAYDEN

It's not what I want either.

JOSEPH

So don't say no.

HAYDEN

It's just... it's scary.

JOSEPH

Love is scary.

HAYDEN
It really really is.

JOSEPH
But you have to go all in.

HAYDEN
–

JOSEPH
Just try it. If you don't like it, you can always move back.

HAYDEN
That never happens. Look at Cotton. He'll never leave Shreveport now.

JOSEPH
Shreveport isn't the end of the world, Hayden. The gas is flowing and the money's coming in. There are worse ways to live.

HAYDEN
I've spent my whole life trying not to be a housewife in Shreveport, Louisiana. And now you're asking me to be just that.

JOSEPH
Did I just propose without knowing it?

HAYDEN
–

(Long beat)

JOSEPH
I understand what it would mean to you. And I promise to always think of you as a poet.

HAYDEN
What if I just say yes?

JOSEPH
Then we get a chance at something special.

HAYDEN
I'd quit my job.

JOSEPH
You hate your job.

HAYDEN
Fuck that job.

JOSEPH
Fuck that job.

(They look at each other as Hayden considers.)

HAYDEN
Okay. Yes.

JOSEPH
AH!

HAYDEN
AH!

JOSEPH
AH!

HAYDEN
AH!

JOSEPH
This is right. This is so right. You're gonna see. This is the right thing, baby. This is going to be great.

HAYDEN
Here's to the future.

(They both take deep breaths, take off their masks and kiss.)

(In the scene transition, we hear the sounds of breathing, as if over the telephone. Perhaps it starts that way and then fades into the sounds of the house breathing.)

6.

(Cotton is alone in the house, wearing a gas mask. He is nervous. We hear the sound of footsteps coming. Thomas enters, also in a gas mask.)

(The two stare at each other for a good while. Then, Thomas slides his mask off his face, onto his head.)

COTTON
Put the mask back on.

THOMAS
You look old.

COTTON
I got older.

THOMAS
I figured you'd do that.

COTTON
Put the mask back on.

(Thomas takes the mask off his head.)

THOMAS
You have a family?

COTTON
I do.

THOMAS
How many kids?

COTTON
Just one. He's 10 months.

(Thomas smiles.)

THOMAS
We were excited when I built this place. Moved in right after you were born. Got my fingerprints on every piece of wood in here.

COTTON
It's a beautiful house.

THOMAS

I offered to put it in your mother's name when I left. She said she didn't want it.

COTTON

Dad?

THOMAS

What?

COTTON

The house is full of gas. Put the mask back on.

(Thomas drops his mask to the floor.)

THOMAS

She know I'm here?

COTTON

No.

(Thomas looks around the house.)

THOMAS

She remarry?

COTTON

No.

Did you?

THOMAS

I remarried. A couple of times.

COTTON

Do you have other families?

THOMAS

Why?

COTTON

-

THOMAS

I got three kids in Oklahoma. Oldest one is about to graduate high school.

COTTON
Do you hit them?

THOMAS
Is that all you care about?

COTTON
Do you?

THOMAS
When they deserve it, yes, I hit them.

COTTON
-

THOMAS
You're still scared of me, huh?

COTTON
You can't hurt me like you used to.

THOMAS
Yes I can. Look at you. You gonna take off that faggot mask and look me in the eye or are you gonna keep hiding?
(Cotton takes a deep breath and slides the mask off.)

Come give your father a hug.
(Cotton hugs Thomas. Thomas holds him close.)

You and your mother are weak. You need other people. You're scared to stand on your own two feet. You're weak for loving me, with everything I've done to you. As much as I tried to get you to stop, and here you are... looking to me for love.

(Cotton breaks free. Thomas raises his hand to hit Cotton in the face. Cotton flinches. Beat. Thomas lowers his hand. He raises it again. Cotton doesn't flinch.)

Better.

COTTON
I want the deed.

THOMAS
I'm sure you do.

COTTON
Give it to me.

THOMAS
Why would I give you anything?

COTTON
Cause you're my father. And you're going to die. And you might as well have done one decent thing with the waste of time that is your life.

(Thomas takes out the deed. He hands it to Cotton.)

THOMAS
I already signed it. It's in your name. It's all yours now.

COTTON
-

THOMAS
You'll see what it's like. As that little boy grows up, you'll see. I'll get my revenge.

COTTON
I'm not gonna be like you.

(Thomas smiles an insulting smile.)

THOMAS
Good luck.

7.

(In the house, no gas. Marina stands in the kitchen, cleaning out the fridge. She has a fresh bag of groceries to put in as well. Cotton sets up the highchair at the head of the dinner table.)

MARINA

Does Loretha ever buy anything healthy?

COTTON

Yeah. Sometimes.

MARINA

I don't think there's a single vegetable in here.

COTTON

There's beans. Beans are vegetables.

MARINA

I'm just going to throw everything away. James can't eat any of this. If I clean it out now, nobody will miss it when they get back. It's probably all contaminated anyway, right?

(Cotton finishes setting up the highchair and stands back.)

COTTON

Check it out. *Công* James! The *Công* of the house! I set him up at the head of the table.

MARINA

Looks good.

I'm going to try putting things in a different place. You think your mother will mind?

COTTON

She might. She's kind of particular.

MARINA

Most of the food your mother serves is garbage and she keeps all of my stuff in the back.

COTTON

Let Loretha do it. She's got a whole system.

MARINA

Why don't we just try it my way and see how it goes?

COTTON

I don't want to fight with anyone about it.

MARINA

Great. So we'll do it my way and you can just sit this one out. You don't have to worry about it.

(Marina throws away some more stuff.)

COTTON

Okay.

I'm going to take some of this stuff to the back.

MARINA

Cotton?

COTTON

What?

MARINA

You could help me if you want.

COTTON

Okay.

MARINA

It wouldn't kill you to take an interest.

COTTON

I'm interested.

MARINA

What he eats matters. It affects his health, how he sleeps, sort of everything he does...

COTTON

Okay. What do you want me to do?

MARINA

Here.

(Cotton goes over to the fridge with Marina. He helps her throw stuff away for a moment.)

MARINA
Cotton?

COTTON
Yeah?

MARINA
Why haven't you asked me to marry you?

COTTON
-

MARINA
Do you hate me?

COTTON
No. I love you. I just...

MARINA
I know I'm not Claudia (*with accent*). I'm harsher, maybe. Nobody likes me here.

COTTON
No. Marina-

MARINA
Did I do something wrong?

COTTON
No.

MARINA
-

COTTON
-

MARINA
My parents got married when they were 18. My dad says one of the hardest things about raising me on his own was that he didn't get to be married to my mother longer.

COTTON
That's very sweet.

MARINA
Tell me why.

COTTON
I don't know, Marina.

MARINA
-

COTTON
I'm scared.

MARINA
I picked up my whole life for you, Cotton. I moved in with your mother.
I don't like it here.

COTTON
I know.

MARINA
I don't want to spend my whole life in Louisiana.

COTTON
Okay.

MARINA
"Okay." That's all you ever say. "Okay" or "Yeah." Ever since James was
born, every time I talk to you, you only say one word back.

COTTON
-

MARINA
See? Now you don't have anything to say.
(beat)

You have to stop being scared.

COTTON
Where do you want to go?

MARINA
Some place clean.

COTTON

What does that mean?

MARINA

I want to go some place with sunshine. Somewhere where James can run around when he gets older.

COTTON

Okay.

(beat)

MARINA

Some place near the ocean. I've never lived near the ocean.

COTTON

Okay. We can do that.

8.

(A room lights up on the house model onstage. During this scene we hear the voices of Hayden, Joseph and Irene.)

HAYDEN
Mama.

IRENE
Yes.

HAYDEN
I have some news Mama.

IRENE
What is it?

(Cotton, in the flesh, enters the stage and inspects the house model.)

HAYDEN
It's about Joseph.

IRENE
Joseph?

HAYDEN
He and I are dating, have been dating for the past year... We're in love.

IRENE
My Joseph?

HAYDEN
No, *my* Joseph, Mama.
He's asked me to move in with him.

(Cotton runs his finger over the roof.)

IRENE
In Shreveport?

HAYDEN
Yes.

IRENE
And you're going to do it?

HAYDEN
Yes. I'm going all in.

(Cotton pops the roof off the house model. He removes it.)

JOSEPH
We're very excited.

IRENE
I see that.

HAYDEN
We have some news, Mama.

IRENE
I've been waiting for it.

(short pause)

Well?

JOSEPH
We'd like to ask you for your wedding ring.

IRENE
-

JOSEPH
We thought it'd be a nice way to carry on the tradition.

HAYDEN
We're getting married!

(Cotton pops a wall off the house.)

And having a baby!

(Cotton pops a wall off the house.)

Twins!

(Cotton pops a wall off the house.)

And buying a house.

(Cotton looks at the inside of the model house.)

IRENE
I guess pretty soon you won't need me at all.

HAYDEN
We'll always need you, Mama.

(beat)

IRENE
You won't.

(beat)

HAYDEN
That's the way you want it, isn't it?

(Cotton turns out the light.)

9.

(A year later than scene 7. Irene, Cotton and Marina are at the dinner table eating quietly. There is a baby monitor on the dinner table.)

MARINA

Thank you for dinner, Irene.

IRENE

You're welcome.

MARINA

The bird came out very nice.

IRENE

I let it marinate for a long time.

MARINA

It's delicious.

IRENE

—

(A rustling sound comes from the monitor. The child seems to be flopping around in his bed. Everyone freezes, not wanting to be the one to wake him up.)

MONITOR

Mommy? Mommy?

COTTON

(to Marina) Wait. Don't go yet.

MONITOR

Mommy?

COTTON

He's going to go back to sleep. Watch.

(More rustling sounds. The child starts to cry.)

MONITOR

Mommy. Mommy. Mommy!

(Marina stands to leave.)

COTTON
(to Marina) Sorry. I thought he'd make it.

MARINA
Excuse me.

(Marina exits politely. There is a short pause, filled with baby cries, then we hear Marina enter the room that the baby is in.)

MARINA in MONITOR
Hi Honey. Are you okay?

MONITOR
Mommy!

MARINA in MONITOR
It's okay. Mommy's here. Mommy's right here baby. Sssh. Sssh.

(The baby starts to calm down.
Cotton turns off the monitor.)

IRENE
I remember when you were born, Cotton.

COTTON
Oh yeah?

IRENE
I couldn't believe how much shit came out of you. It seemed endless.
Where'd it all come from?

COTTON
I don't know.

IRENE
Has that been your experience?

COTTON
Uh. No? I was expecting a lot of shit, I guess.

IRENE

When you first came out, you couldn't breathe. Had something stuck in your windpipe. You were crying and all funny colored, just had your mouth hanging open like this. (*she demonstrates*) The doctor and nurses stood there like idiots. But I grabbed you, I put my lips over your mouth and nose and I sucked. Got a mouth full of snot out of it too. It was nasty, but you started breathing. It was our first kiss.

COTTON

I never heard that story.

IRENE

"Welcome to Motherhood." That's what I thought to myself. "Don't fuck it up."

COTTON

I think Marina feels it too.
It's been hard on her.
It's been hard on us.

IRENE

It doesn't get easier, but it does change. Same as anything.

COTTON

I have some news, Mama.

IRENE

What is it?

COTTON

Marina and I have decided to move to California. We think we'll be happier there.

IRENE

When did you decide that?

COTTON

We've been talking about it since last year.

IRENE

You're going to leave me in this big house all by myself?

COTTON

You'll still have Loretha.

IRENE

Is that a joke?

COTTON

I want to make a deal with you, Mama.

IRENE

Oh?

COTTON

I'm willing to let you stay in the house. But I want all the money. Every cent you've received from Philips goes to me.

IRENE

-

COTTON

And I want to hear you say that the house is mine.

IRENE

-

COTTON

If you do that, I'll let you stay. If you don't, I'm selling the surface rights to Phillips. They'll turn the property into a parking lot for their big rigs.

IRENE

You little shit.

COTTON

I'd watch your tone, if I were you.
I'm the one with all the power.

(long beat)

IRENE

You two are in touch now, is that it? You talk to him? He gives you advice on how to live your life? How to make decisions, how to be married, how to be a father, how to love somebody, how to hate somebody, how to hurt people, how to treat somebody that's hurt you, how to show kindness, how to show love. You get all that from him now?

COTTON

My father died a long time ago, Mama. I barely ever even think about him.

IRENE

-

COTTON
Now let's hear it.

IRENE
You're not selling this house.

(Cotton takes out a contract and puts
it on the table.)

COTTON
This is the offer from Phillips.

(Cotton takes out a pen.)

I haven't signed it yet.

IRENE
You remember last time you went out to California, Cotton?

COTTON
Yes I do.

IRENE
You remember what happened?

COTTON
Yes I do.

IRENE
Came back with a wad of snot caught in your throat. Who saved you? Who
nursed you back to health, Cotton?

COTTON
You did.

IRENE
You know what Claudia's (*with accent*) mother told me when I talked to her
years ago?

COTTON
-

IRENE
She said Claudia (*with accent*) loved you with all her heart. She'd never
seen her daughter so taken with a man. But you were so crippled with fear.
So scared to jump without a safety net, poor Claudia couldn't figure how to
build a life with you.

(beat)

IRENE (cont'd)

You're not selling this house, Cotton, because if you sell it, you've got nowhere to go when your life falls apart. No more running home to Mommy. That's not something you can give up.

(Cotton takes the pen and signs the contract.)

COTTON

Now it's over.

IRENE

-

(Long beat.)

COTTON

Do you think it's weakness that bonds us together?

IRENE

Up until this moment, I had always thought it was strength.

MARINA

(from offstage) Cotton? Cotton? Could you come help me please? Cotton?
Cotton?

(Cotton gets up and leaves. Perhaps he kisses his mother on the top of her head as he goes.)

10.

(Just over 30 years ago. Thomas enters holding a baby. He talk to Irene, showing her what he built.)

THOMAS

This is where we'll put the table. This is where we'll put the bar. I was thinking I could make a little stand to go right here for a bassinet so we have a place to put Cotton while we're eating.

IRENE

-

THOMAS

(looking up) The roof was the hardest part to build. Climbing up there all the time, hauling up these big pieces of wood.

(Irene puts her hands out for Baby Cotton, indicating that she wants to hold him.)

THOMAS

Here we go. Whole family together. All in.

(Talking to Cotton as Thomas hands him over to Irene.)

You ready? Here we go.

(to Irene) You like it?

END PLAY.