

Welcome to Fear City

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Characters:

E – male, 18

CHEKY – male, 18 or 19

NEESY – female, mid 20s

WANDA – female, 40

JACQUES – male, upper teens/early 20s

BOSS

VAGRANT

MAN

RAT/VOICE

BENJI

RANDOMITES

*The company will be African American, but the *roles* of BOSS and MAN are white. RAT is ethnically ambiguous; he's grey.

Possible doubling combinations:

Male track 1: JACQUES/VAGRANT/BENJI

Male track 2: RAT/VOICE/MAN/BOSS

Setting: Areas in and near a housing project in the South Bronx in July 1977. The set should be simple as scenes may shift quickly and most of the locations—the apartment, the grocery store, etc.—all have a uniform drab quality. Only the rec room, which is the party room should be vibrant and colorful. A fan may be used periodically because it is hot. *Also, around the periphery should be the sense of ruins—the burned-out Bronx that has become a normal part of life—and some of it should be adorned with less-than-beautiful grafitti.

Slashes (/) indicate an overlap in dialogue.

1. Welcome to . . .

A loud, booming VOICE speaks in the darkness. Think of the voice from the intro of Rob Base & D.J. EZ Rock's "It Takes Two." This is in that realm, but much cooler.

VOICE

Right now. You are about to see a show about a few people. Black people. Strugglin' Black people in the Bronx. Strugglin' Black people in the Bronx in July, 1977. You may ask yourself why am I here? How did this come to be? Where did I go wrong in my life? I am sorry. I can't help you wit any a that. But if you feel like noddin' your head and shakin' yo ass, the rest a your life don't matter. You are in the right place, muthafuckas!

(Lights up: a real onstage D.J. will bust a groove, hot as shit, as the company enters.)

VOICE

Ladies an fools, this is Wanda aka Mama.

(Spotlight on WANDA.)

Born in Harlem, USA in 1937. Hobbies include chompin' on gum an complainin' about the mayor. But don't let that wise smile fool ya. She can shake that booty like nobody's business.

WANDA

Shut yo mouth!

VOICE

This my boy Cheky!

(Spot on CHEKY.)

Bronx born and bred, homies! He may be single, but he's got a J.O.B., ladies!

(CHEKY flirts with the audience.)

An baby boy got hisself some maaaaaaaagic fingers.
Yeah party people! When they cut music from yo school, make yo'self a instrument outta whatever the fuck you got!

(CHEKY joins the D.J. at the turntable and gives the record some super fancy scratch action. Spotlight moves to NEESY, who's dancing like crazy. The kind of dancing that only happens when you're beyond tipsy.)

That, mi amigos, is Denise Renee aka Neesy. She is smart as shit, but when it's time to party—

NEESY

(Partylike:) Heeeeey!

VOICE

Her intellect don't have a prayer in Hell. I hear she like long, romantic walks to the liquor store, fellas.

NEESY

(Sharp:) Hey!

VOICE

Oh! She also almost sorta gotsa college degree an this chick be a avid reader . . . durin' daylight hours.

(NEESY dances out of the light and the light finds E.)

Last one up is E aka Earl Lee Thomas. Son of Wanda and baby bro to Neesy. E is a martial arts expert, has dreams of bein' a famous poet some day. So ladies . . .

(E waits expectantly.)

I'd say Cheky is a much better bet.

E
Fuck you, man.

CHEKY
Thank you, man!

VOICE

There's a couple more, but these the ones you need to remember. Think you can handle that?

(The music comes to a halt and everyone freezes, waiting for objections. A pause. Then all resumes.)

Thought so! 'Bout that time. Off you muthafuckas go!!!

(The cast quickly disperses and the music stops. The stage is empty all except E.)

E

'ey! Where'd everybody go? What just happened?!

(Light shift.)

2. Content

E and CHEKY are outside CHEKY's UPS truck on a break.

CHEKY

What had happened was Santi Claus come and I was good this year!

(CHEKY pulls out a new stereo system from under some boxes.)

E

Thank God for the blackout!

CHEKY

X-mas in July, muthafucka!

E

This here the real shit! 65 watts per channel! Tape deck *an* a 8-track! ?? State a the art!

CHEKY

We gon tear some shit up tonight.

E

Yeah brotha.

(They slap fives and do an intricate, secret jive handshake because it's 1977.)

You got a mic though, right?

CHEKY

Shiiiiit.

E

'ey! Ain't no state a the art you ain't got a godamn microphone!

CHEKY

Wouldn't tell you if it did. You 'on't need to be runnin' off the mouf on nobody's microphone.

E

Yeah I do.

CHEKY

No you don't.

E

Yeah I do.

CHEKY

No you don't.

E

Yeah I do.

CHEKY

No you don't!

E

YEAH! I do!

CHEKY

Nigga I'm 'bout to throttle you.

E

I got shit to say.

CHEKY

Open a window an shout.

E

Fuck you.

CHEKY

No fuck you witcha corny shit.

E

I write, bitch. I got a point a view. I got *content*.

CHEKY

Nobody wanna hear your content, nigga. Folks be wantin' a dance an you up 'ere stammerin' 'bout "my name is Earl Lee 'cuz my hurtin' got started Earl-y." I love you like family, but that shit is *terrible*, man! It ain't poetry. It don't e'en have no kinda musicality.

E

What about the Last Poets, man? How come it's OK for them—

CHEKY

No! No no no you did *not* just compare your raggedy shit to the Last Poets!!

E

Well? How'm sposeta get good like that when stingy niggas won't give nobody a mic to practice on?

CHEKY

Pick a new dream. Or? Keep writin' that shit down, type it up one day an send it to like a magazine or some shit. See if they publish it.

E

What? Like *Penthouse*?

(CHEKY thinks.)

CHEKY

Aim a lil' lower.

(E does some Judo movements to center himself.)

You kick me you die.

E

'S awirght. You don't got faith in me. *I* got faith in me

CHEKY

Whatchu need to be gettin' attention rhymin' for anyways? Ain't like nobody *ever* gon get rich an famous shoutin' rhymes into a mic.

E

I 'on't need to be rich an famous.

CHEKY

Whatchu need?

E

To be listened to. Thass all. Be seen. Cuz some days? I feel like I will for certainly disappear.

(A brief pause.)

CHEKY

You a freak, yo. Check dis out.

(CHEKY tries to do something, but it doesn't work. It's electrical. E tries to fix it for him.)

E

I'on't get a whole lotta respect, Chek. If I can do this? Like? Do it *good*—

CHEKY

Ohhhhhh! This 'bout gettin' pussy!

E

You ain't listenin'.

CHEKY

Just use the Kung Fu shit—

E

Judo!

CHEKY

Tellin' you as your friend, your rhymin' ain't gon work.

(E fixes the electrical problem. There is some shouting down the street, then the sound of glass breaking, and a scream. They pay no attention.)

E

Got stuff I'm tryna say, Cheky. Don't know how else to do it. Hurts holdin' it in. You know what thass like?

(CHEKY thinks about this.)

CHEKY

We'll see.
Gotta get back to work, man.

(E checks his watch.)

E

Me too. Fuck! Sposeta ask for a raise today.

CHEKY

Then go do it, baby! Fuck the fear!

E

Who says I'm scared?

(CHEKY is surprised for a second then smiles.)

CHEKY

Thass what I'm talkin' bout! Go get yo'self paid, boy!

(They do their intricate hand shake thing. CHEKY disappears into the truck and poor, scared E takes a big, deep breath.)

3. Special Skills

E is under a counter at a deli supermarket. He plays with some wires. No one is around and weird elevator music plays, something terrible like "Love is a Many Splendored Thing." He finishes, comes up, presses a button on the cash register and it comes to life. He does this to the next register and the next. At some point, his BOSS walks over.

E

How they lookin'?

BOSS

Good, Earl. Your work is flawless as usual.

E

(Proud:) Well I try.

(E nervously clears his throat.)

Mr. Franklin. You know. I been workin' here a long time now. Right? So I been thinkin' maybe—

(BOSS suddenly starts weeping. E doesn't know what to do.)

E

What's – uh – ?

BOSS

I gotta let you go, kid. I'm so sorry.

(BOSS pulls himself together.)

E

But? Didn't you just say my work was flawless?

BOSS

It is! Ain't about your work. That's what makes it so awful. I gotta cut more than half my staff just to stay afloat and I don't even know if that's gonna work!

E

Oh. God. Thing is, Mr. Franklin. My mother just lost her job an she been there fifteen years. I'm the only income we got comin' in.

(BOSS bursts into fresh tears.)

BOSS

I am sorry. I mean that. But after that damn blackout, my insurance is sky high. If this place is still here in another six months, it'll be a miracle. Neighborhood's changin'. Everything is. It's a terrible life, Earl!

(BOSS runs off. E picks up his backpack and is instantly on a subway platform where he waits for CHEKY. He takes out a beat-up notebook and a little pencil and writes.)

VAGRANT

Whatchu doin' that for? Writin' a speech? Gon be the next Malcolm X?

(VAGRANT laughs.)

Spare a lil' change? VAGRANT

I wish. E

Come on! Help somebody out for once in your life! VAGRANT

(E stares at him. He reads something from his notebook.)

The concrete spreads
Like the lice on your heads
Bedbugs on your beds
Roaches on meds— E

What the shit is comin' outcha mouf? VAGRANT

My poetry. You like it? E

No I do not. VAGRANT

Well that's my gift to you, sir. I 'on't have no money so that's what I can give ya. E

(VAGRANT grabs E's hands suddenly and inspects them. E's so startled, he lets him for a second before pulling away.)

Get off me!

Them some soft hands. You ain't done a honest man's work your whole life, have ya? VAGRANT

Bullshit! I work alla time! E

Then why them hands so damn soft? VAGRANT

(Mumbling:) Baby oil. E

(VAGRANT shows E a patch on his tattered jacket that it's far too warm to be wearing.)

VAGRANT

82nd Airborne. In '66 they shipped us out to Saigon. Where the fuck was you? Betchu ain't e'en serve!

E

I was seven.

(VAGRANT takes a good look at him.)

VAGRANT

You a hollow muthafucka, aintcha? *Boy!*

(There is a strange shift. E speaks/moves in a heightened manner.)

E

Nah suh. I works real hard and I's a good boy. Always have been. A boy tryin' hard to get all growed up an be a man. You show me the way, mista?

(Shift back to normal.)

VAGRANT

You a hollow muthafucka, aintcha? *Boy!*

(Silence. E reaches into his pocket and pulls out a few coins. He drops them in VAGRANT's hand.)

E

(Contempt:) Thank you for your service.

VAGRANT

Yeah. Yeah yeah, Langston Hughes. Enjoy your scribblin'. Soft goddamn hands.

(VAGRANT exits. Moments later, CHEKY comes up.)

CHEKY

Brothaman!

(CHEKY starts their handshake thing, but E leaves him hanging.)

You aight?

E

I . . . guess.
How was your day?

CHEKY
Nigga you saw me three fuckin' hours ago!

E
You didn't tell me nothin' 'bout your day!

CHEKY
We gettin' to be like a married couple an shit.

E
Fine. Fuck it.

(Train comes into the station.)

CHEKY
What happened to you?

(They get onto the train.)

E
Got let go today.

CHEKY
Nuh-uh! Don't e'en joke 'bout that!

E
No joke.

CHEKY
Goddamnit! That don't e'en make sense. You *perfect* at that damn job!

E
He say it don't matter. Insurance too high. Rent too high. Bullshit. He even started *cryin'*!

CHEKY
Shit. Fuck the Bronx, man!

E
Fuck New York. Fuck it all.

(Beat.)

CHEKY
Let's move.

E
Negro shut up.

CHEKY

For serious. We should just go. Ya know? Like white boys do. What? They call it "backpacking." Let's go backpacking across country an wherever we land be our new home.

E

Are you just sayin' stuff right now to say it or do you actually think thass a good idea?

(CHEKY thinks.)

CHEKY

I 'on't know. It sound good though, right?

E

Never work.

CHEKY

Might could.

E

If you want me to be your wife an you plan on supportin' us both as a UPS man.

CHEKY

Hell no.

E

'S all I'm sayin'.

CHEKY

You *wish* I'd marry you. Bitch you ain't e'en close to my type.

E

Fuck you I'm a catch.

CHEKY

Not with no job you ain't.

E

Shit.

Wish *I* could work for the UPS.

CHEKY

Grass is always greener. 'Specially 'fore the junkies pee on it.

E

Could you rec me to your boss?

No dice. Hirin' freeze. CHEKY

Fuck. E

Yep. CHEKY

(Beat.)

I ain't mean what I said.

When? E

CHEKY
"Fuck the Bronx." I ain't mean that. Love the Bronx. E'en when it makes me madder'n fuck.

(A moment.)

What? E

Got stopped again. CHEKY

Shit, man. E

CHEKY
Said I perfectly fit the description a the suspect. Guess the suspect be workin' at UPS, too!

They didn't take ya down— E

CHEKY
Nah. Boss took up for me for once. Gettin' real tired a fittin' descriptions, yo. Still. Good shit here, too. Right along wit the bad. I believe that.

(A pause. CHEKY has an idea.)

Let's see how tonight go. I'll make some dough. Prolly not too much, but we see.

? E

CHEKY

I'm sayin' we could partner up! You good wit electronics an shit. Maybe we work together. Just a idea.

E

How big a cut we talkin'?

CHEKY

Well. Depends don't it? You gotta apprentice for a while first. Make sure I like your work.

E

(Sucks his teeth:) Later for you.

CHEKY

'ey! I'm tryna help you!

E

By puttin' me on trial? That means *you* the boss. You wanna help me? Let me get on the goddamn mic.

(CHEKY sighs—a bit overwrought—in frustration.)

I ain't that bad, ya know? I gotta practice.

CHEKY

I know, man. But like . . .? Maybe you should focus on your *other* talents. You got special skills. You can do that electrical shit like nobody else I know.

(A MAN approaches.)

MAN

Excuse me? I don't mean to pry into your personal business, but I overheard that one of you is looking for work and electricians is your special skill?

(E and CHEKY look at each other in shock.)

CHEKY

Yeah! Him!

MAN

What kind of experience do you have?

E

Uh a lil' bit. I been workin' at a corner deli for a while maintainin' the registers, heater, refrigerators stuff like that.

CHEKY

He a genius! He just fixed my state-a-the-art sound system an the super in our buildin' been comin' to him for electrical advice since homeboy was 14!

(MAN smiles, nods.)

MAN

I may have a job for you.

E

Really?

CHEKY

This like some shit from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*!

MAN

I oversee some city works projects involving slum clearance and basic cleanup for safety purposes.

CHEKY

You mean like gettin' ridda alla busted up bricks an debris an shit 'round here?

MAN

Exactly.

E

Wow. So the city's doin' somethin' good for once? I on't mean no disrespect – uh – sir. But lil' kids be playin' in the wreckage a old burnt-out buildings. That shit ain't safe.

CHEKY

An none a this is pretty to look at.

MAN

You're both right. We are gonna clean up this neighborhood. Make it safe. Bring back the grandeur! When I was a tike, you could take the streetcar to Hunt's Point, see Tito Puente and his orchestra, go to Woolworth's get a nickel Coke and you might not head home til 1, 2AM and you think anybody'd bother ya? No! People were different then.

CHEKY

You was walkin' 'round Hunt's Point at 2AM when you was a kid?! Was you a baby pimp?

MAN

No! There wasn't a thing to be scared of in those days.

(E and CHEKY stare at him in awe.)

(To E:) You have a phone? MAN

Yeah. E
(MAN checks his watch.)

Can you call me at 4:30? I'll be back in my office by then. MAN

Definitely. E

Terrific. What is your name? MAN

E! Well uh Earl! Earl Lee— E

So glad to make your acquaintance, Earl Lee. My name is Robertson. MAN
(He hands E a card.)

You call me at 4:30 sharp, got it?

Will do! Thank you, Mr. Robertson. E

No "Mr." I'm just Robertson. MAN
(He exits.)

Damn, E! CHEKY

I know, right! This is crazy! E
(He thinks.)

Wait. *Is* this crazy?

Not that crazy. CHEKY

I mean what? Does he want me to fix somethin'? That was way vague. E

(E looks at the card.)

E

All this says is "Robertson. I clear." An a phone number. He could be mafia for all we know.

CHEKY

E? Call 'im up. If he sound like a freak, hang up the damn phone. Thass it. (Quietly:) You know? Most a the best payin' gigs is off the books for a reason.

E

I ain't gon do nothin' weird.

CHEKY

Less he wanna pay you to suck off a corpse, give 'im a chance. Whatchu gotta lose?

(E looks down again at the card. If they're not already seated on the train, CHEKY takes a seat and covers his eyes with his UPS cap. Oh yeah, he's wearing a UPS cap. He takes a train nap. While he's asleep, RAT appears. He's bigger than normal, but ideally he doesn't seem quite human-sized yet. E jumps.)

E

Jesus Shit!

RAT

That ain't my name.

E

You ain't sposta to be *in* the damn train!

RAT

Got a bitch waitin' for me in Longwood.
So. How's your testicle situation? Feelin' any new heft?

E

What?!

RAT

Weight? Magnitude? Massiveness?

(E looks at CHEKY to see if he's hearing/ seeing this, but CHEKY's still asleep.)

I get it. Don't wanna talk about it. Like your privacy an shit. 'S fine. Just know that you gonna need them balls to be sizable and powerful as all fuck you expect to make it through *this* night.

(E stares at RAT, considering.)

E

You like my nightmare Jiminy Cricket or some shit?

RAT

Haha! Thass stupid! But not wholly inaccurate.
I can be useful. I can also be useless. I can be helpful. But I can also be harmful.
Rattus norvegicus are like the Scorpios a the urban jungle. Shrouded in mystery.

E

Why you talkin' to *me*?

RAT

It's a funny thing about fear. Sometimes it gets so loud, humanity can't e'en hear it no more.

But *I* can.

4. Baby I'm Back

The apartment. WANDA chews gum. She stares at an ancient typewriter and punches two keys and immediately makes a mistake.

WANDA

Mother. Fucker.

(She coughs a little. Tries to use her equally ancient white out. Keys turn in the door. NEESY enters, but WANDA doesn't see her at first.)

E? Need you to go down the hall. See if Miss Geraldine has some paper we can borrow.

(No response.)

E?

(WANDA turns around and nearly jumps out of her skin when she sees NEESY.)

What the Hell?!

NEESY

Hey Mama.

WANDA

Well? Well hey!

(They hug. It is sort of warm and sort of not.)

WANDA
Why you didn't tell me you was comin'?

NEESY
Wanted it to be a surprise.

WANDA
Why?

NEESY
Why?! Cuz it's nice, ain't it? Get a surprise visit outta nowhere.

WANDA
But it ain't my birthday. You missed the 4th. Sure as Hell missed Christmas.

(WANDA notices the size of NEESY's suitcase. She tries to pick it up. She can't.)

Heavy.

NEESY
Well see? 'Member how sad you was when I moved out?

WANDA
(Honestly trying to remember:) No.

NEESY
It's just – Things didn't work out the way I thought they would in Cali. So? Thought maybe I could come back here for a little while.

(A moment.)

Surprise!

WANDA
I can't. Neesy—

NEESY
It won't be for long—

WANDA
Neesy I'm sorry but—

NEESY
Aintchu even the least bit glad to see me?

WANDA

(Stern:) Denise Renee, listen to me.

(This shuts NEESY up.)

I just got laid off earlier this week. Only income we have right now is from E's job and that might keep us from qualifyin' for welfare. I don't know. Money aside, you know damn well how section-8 is. I can't just be lettin' anybody stay up in here. They find out, I will lose this place.

NEESY

I know, Mama. I'm sorry.

WANDA

What the Hell happened?

(NEESY shakes her head.)

NEESY

Thought I could do it. Thought I could finally finish school, work, live on my own. But I couldn't.

WANDA

Yeah but what the Hell *happened*?

(NEESY seems to go somewhere far away in her mind.)

NEESY

I got confused. I got tired. I couldn't keep nothin' straight no more.

(WANDA stares at her. It is not clear whether anything NEESY's saying is causing WANDA to feel sympathy.)

WANDA

You usin' a whole lotta double negatives for somebody got all A's in English.

NEESY

I'm tired, Mama.

WANDA

Whatchu got to be tired for? How many kids *you* raise?

(NEESY says nothing.)

You were the one, Neesy. Valedictorian.

NEESY

I was not valedictorian, Mama. I was ranked third. Third ain't valedictorian.

WANDA

Well you shoulda been! Malcolm was a kiss ass and Felicia cheated on her midterms. You know it an I / know it.

NEESY

Let it go.

(WANDA shakes her head and stuffs another stick of gum in her mouth.)

Imma get back in school. Imma get myself together.

A week? Can I please stay just one week? I can look for a job and someplace else to stay. I won't be no trouble.

(WANDA has a sudden coughing fit.)

You feelin' OK?

WANDA

Five days, Denise. And that is puttin' me an your lil' brother at risk. Five days. That is it.

NEESY

Thank you, Mama.

WANDA

Don't waste your energy thankin' me. Start poundin' the pavement. Or maybe you can finish typin' up my resume? My fingers never did well on typewriters.

(NEESY sits down at the typewriter.)

NEESY

Still usin' this thing.

WANDA

It still work, don't it?

NEESY

Electric ones are so much easier to use.

WANDA

Waste a money. 'Sides, why does everything have to be "easy?" Young people are lazy.

NEESY

Aight, Grandma Moses.

(NEESY stares at the page in the typewriter and begins to type. She types pretty fast. E enters with CHEKY.)

E
What?! What the heck you doin' here?!

(E hugs NEESY.)

How comes you didn't tell nobody?

NEESY
Wanted it to be surprise.

E
Why?

NEESY
What's the matter witchall? Don't nobody like a surprise no more?
How you doin', Cheky?

CHEKY
All right all right. Welcome back to paradise!

E
How long you in for?

WANDA
Five days.

E
Cool. Party at the park tonight if it don't rain.

WANDA
She don't have time to party. She gotta look for a job.

(Silence.)

E
Whoa. So you back in town to stay?

NEESY
Looks that way.

WANDA
E go down the hall an ask Miss Geraldine if she can spare a few sheets a typin' paper.

E
So she can tell me how cheap we are?

WANDA

Baby, she just old. Just nod your head an smile and remember she'll be dead soon.

CHEKY

I'll take care of it, Miss Wanda. That lady loves me.

(E and CHEKY exit. NEESY continues typing. WANDA coughs again.)

NEESY

Summer colds is the worst ones.

WANDA

Who you tellin'?

NEESY

Whatchu takin' for it? Garlic soup? Vitamins?

WANDA

Yeah yeah. None a that works.

NEESY

How long you had that cough?

WANDA

Lemme see now.

(WANDA counts mentally.)

Maybe? Three, four months?

(NEESY stops typing and looks up at her mother.)

What?

NEESY

Mama, you gotta see a doctor.

(WANDA laughs.)

It ain't funny. Something could be wrong. Like . . . seriously.

WANDA

Nobody got no damn emergency room money. Just have to let it run its course.

NEESY

Who cares about the damn bills? You sick!

WANDA

Who cares about the damn bills?! Well I guess that'd be me, Miss California. Since nobody else gives a shit.

NEESY

Don't you tell me I don't care!

WANDA

Yep. Cared so much you followed that nigga to Los Angeles an what happened the second he got there? Malibu pussy must be the premium shit.

NEESY

Fine. Keep your cough. Keep on acceptin' shit you don't deserve. Let's see where that get ya.

(WANDA angrily shoves a piece of gum in her mouth. NEESY types, pissed.)

Why you keep chewin' all 'at gum?

WANDA

(Snaps:) I quit smokin' that's why. Helps wit the cravings.

NEESY

Whatchu quit for?

WANDA

I dunno. I's thinkin' I'd try to live longer. God knows why!

(E and CHEKY come back with a few sheets of paper.)

E

She made us stay an talk to her first!

CHEKY

She pinched my cheek.

E

She pinched his cheek!

CHEKY

I honestly didn't mind that part.

(E notices the tension in the room.)

E

What happened?

(WANDA takes the pages from E.)

WANDA

Thank you, baby.

(She shoves them at NEESY, who ignores them.)

E

Uh? What the Hell went wrong?

WANDA

Nothin', boy! What the Hell's wrong witchu?

(WANDA pokes him in the head.)

CHEKY

(Quietly:) E, we can go over my place if you want.

E

No. Uh-uh! This right here! This be the problem with this family. We get mad at each other, spit out some insults, then go silent an nothin' gets fixed. It ain't healthy. I been readin' 'bout talk therapy. White people do this—they *pay* to do it! But you can do it for free. All you gotta do is talk through your problems with your loved ones and listen to what they say, even if it hurts. Then you try to make a different choice next time. The idea is to be honest, but not petty. To help; not to hurt. Mama? Why 'on't you start?

(WANDA, NEESY, and CHEKY stare at E for a few seconds. Then they all bust out laughing.)

WANDA

Thass whatchu do in your spare time? Read 'bout "talk therapy?"

NEESY

That's so sweet! What else you be readin' 'bout, princess?!

(They laugh more.)

E

Unbelievable!

NEESY

Awww! Did the wittle sensitive flowa get 'is feelwings huwt?

WANDA

(Still laughing:) Stop! He's liable to cry!

(That makes them laugh harder. E angrily exits into his bedroom and CHEKY follows.)

5. Cha-Ching

E and CHEKY in E's bedroom.

E

See what I'm dealin' with?

CHEKY

Man, I hear ya. But fo real? Why you gotta be so goofy?

(CHEKY laughs again; he can't help it.)

E

Nobody listens to me. They 'on't care.

CHEKY

(Stops laughing:) I do. But I get you. Most people ain't gon get you.

E

Your cousin comin' tonight? Jacques?

CHEKY

Awready asked me that.

E

No I didn't.

CHEKY

Whatchu need a brain scan? You asked me last night if a bunch a folks was comin' an he was top a the list.

(E sucks his teeth.)

What you so worried 'bout him for?

E

Ain't worryin' on him.

(E sucks his teeth again more exaggeratedly this time.)

He irks, me. Thinkin' he's hot shit.

CHEKY

Easy solve: stay the hell away from 'im!

(NEESY knocks and then enters without waiting for an answer.)

NEESY

Whatchall doin'?

E

Come in to laugh some more?

NEESY

You still thinkin' 'bout that? I already moved on.

CHEKY

You comin' to the party?

NEESY

Might stop by.

(NEESY plops down between them.)

(To CHEKY:) So it's gon be you an not a real D.J. tonight?

CHEKY

See! Thass cuz you ignorant. I *am* a real, D.J. I been doin' house parties for over six months so don't e'en start with me.

NEESY

Where Herc at?

CHEKY

There are other people on dis earf 'sides Herc!

NEESY

Shit you 'on't gotta get all indignant.

(NEESY stretches exaggeratedly, her boobs flying suggestively towards CHEKY.)

E

Nees?! Damn!

NEESY

What? Was a long trip.

CHEKY

Whatchu doin' back here anyway?

(NEESY looks around.)

NEESY

(To E:) Why your diploma ain't on the wall?

(E sucks his teeth.)

E
(Mumbling:) I 'on't have one.

NEESY
What?! You didn't graduate?

E
I'm takin' a summer class. If I pass I will graduate. Damn! Stay out my business.

NEESY
What is this summer class?

E
English.

NEESY
You failed *English*? Muthafucka you speak English.

E
Not that kinda English.

CHEKY
It's true. That's shit's biased.

E
For real! Now I gotta read a fuckin' late Victorian novel? How that's gon help me find a job?!

NEESY
Whatchu readin'?

E
Why you gon do my paper for me?

NEESY
I might be able to help ya if ya stop givin' me lip.

(E sucks his teeth. He shows her his books.)

E
I gotta read one a these. *Heart a Darkness, Kidnapped, or Jude the Obscure.*

NEESY
Ah.

(NEESY picks up *Heart of Darkness*, walks over to the window and throws it out.)

E

What the fuck you doin'? That was the shortest one!

(VOICE from outside: "Hey! What the fuck is wrong witchu?!")

CHEKY

You can't just be throwin' late Victorian novels on people an shit! You raised in a zoo?

NEESY

Jude the Obscure. Whenever you hate your life, that book will put shit in perspective *real* quick.

Hey. Y'all know if Benji gon come tonight?

E

He got a woman now an they got a whole mess a kids. He's grown. Don't. Start.

NEESY

Thass too bad. Maybe I should call 'im up, though. Make sure he knows I'm back in town . . .

CHEKY

Scandalous.

E

Why you gotta be causin' trouble?

CHEKY

Uh E?

NEESY

Gotta be good at somethin'.

CHEKY

It's 4:26. Just so . . . ya know.

(Slight pause then E remembers.)

E

Get out.

NEESY

Why?

E

You a distraction.

NEESY

Like you in here splittin' atoms an shit.

E

OUT!

NEESY

What you 'bout to look at some dirty magazines or somethin'?

E

Thass right. We 'bout to whip 'em out so you better run!

NEESY

You coulda asked nicely, fuckstick.

(NEESY exits.)

CHEKY

Seriously though. Why the fuck is she here? You think she in trouble?

E

Shit! Phone!

(E runs outside the room for a second. Maybe there are muffled arguing sounds while he's out there. He returns with a rotary phone that barely makes it into the room, the cord is crazy stretched. He carefully closes the door.)

Time?

CHEKY

4:29.

(E takes out the card. Then takes a few deep breaths. He starts to pick up the phone. Then:)

E

Shit! Paper! Pencil!

(CHEKY hands him both. Then E takes a deep breath again and picks up the phone and dials. This takes a minute: this is a rotary phone.)

Damn! Why they so many *zeros*?!

CHEKY

Just hurry up!

(E finishes dialing and waits.)

E
Hi, Mr. – um – Hello Robertson? This is E. Uh Earl. Yeah that’s me. So . . . Yeah I got somethin’ to write with. Go ahe—

(E listens and writes and writes and at some point, he stops writing and just stares straight ahead. His face changes.)

CHEKY
(Whispers:) Whass wrong witchu?

(E looks at CHEKY with the phone still stuck to his head.)

E
Yeah. Yeah I’m here.
Look? Robertson? I think we may have had a bit of a . . . misunderstanding? I thought you was lookin’ for an electrician. Not—

(Pause as E listens more. His face changes yet again. He can’t believe what he just heard. In fact, it may lower his voice an octave for a second; it’s that shocking!)

Can you repeat that please?

(Robertson repeats what he said. Beat.)

OK. What’s the address, sir? Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

(He writes.)

Will do. And you’ll find me? How you— Oh. Wow. OK. Yeah.
No. I don’t think I got any more questions. Thank you.

(E hangs up.)

CHEKY
What the fuckety fuck, man?

E
He wants to gimme seven thousand dollars.

CHEKY
Say that again.

E
Seven. Thousand. Fuckin’. Dollars. For one night a work.

(CHEKY appears to be in shock, then he winces for a brief second)

CHEKY
I think I just came.

E
Half up front. Half after it's done.

CHEKY
What the Hell kinda job is this?

E
Know that old, condemned community center the old people want reopened?

CHEKY
For sure! Thass the first place I ever played doctor.
(Wistful:) Shanté Washington.

E
He wants to pay me to burn it down.

(Silence.)

CHEKY
But? Thass like the one building near the corner still standin'.

E
Not for long.

(Slight pause.)

CHEKY
(Disappointed:) Shit man! You got me all excited for nothin'!

E
Why for nothin'?

CHEKY
Nigga please! You know you ain't gon be burnin'—

E
SHHH!

CHEKY
(Whispers:) Burnin' nobody's old community center down. Hell, if it was a home for child murderers an puppy rapists *you* wouldn't burn it down!

E
The fuck does that mean?

CHEKY

E? Come on now. This is for like serious teeth punched out, teardrop tattoo-havin', unpredictable felon muthafuckas. This ain't you.

E

It's seven thousand dollars.

CHEKY

This a job for a nigga wit balls a steel. No fuck that. Balls a *titanium*.

E

(Proud:) Wrong. Steel is stronger'n titanium!

CHEKY

You provin' my point, E.

E

I ain't a pussy. I'm a man now.

(Beat.)

It's only one building. It's condemned already. Old as Hell.

So? So it's like I'd be doin' the city a favor. Ya know?

An an? Shit! So many goddamn buildings is already burnt, why should I e'en be worried about one more? Nobody else cares. Why *I* gotta care? Nah, man. This is – this is bigger'n just right an wrong. An right an wrong ain't so easy to define no more. It's just too fuckin' complicated. Ya know?

CHEKY

Yeah. Maybe there are better ways to get money, though.

E

This kinda money?

(CHEKY says nothing.)

You think I'm a coward?

CHEKY

No, E.

I just think you're rare.

6. Happy Family Dinner Time

NEESY sets the small table. They are having something rather depressing like beefaroni, but let's be honest: it's also pretty damn good. WANDA sits and E joins her.

WANDA
Who was you talkin' to on the phone?

E
Nobody. Girl.

WANDA
What girl?

E
You 'on't know 'er. From summer school.

WANDA
Don't get nobody pregnant.

E
I won't.

WANDA
I mean it. I will beat you into idiocy.

E
Mama? I will NOT get nobody pregnant. Damn!

(Beat.)

WANDA
How was work?

E
What? Today?

WANDA
No tomorrow.

E
Um. Good. Fine.

(NEESY puts the bowl on the table and sits. They start passing the food around and eating.)

WANDA
You ask for a raise?

(Beat.)

E
Didn't feel like the right time.

WANDA

Right time, my ass. You deserve to be paid better an you need to find your manhood an demand it.

NEESY

Imma haveta argue witchu on that one, Mama. Havin' courage don't make you a man. If I was tryna ask for a raise, would you tell *me* to find my manhood?

WANDA

Mouthy people don't have these problems, Neesy. Don't worry: you'd be fine.

(NEESY shakes her head/rolls her eyes. WANDA coughs. E gets up and gets her a glass of water.)

I'm awright. Quit tryna distract me.

E? Ask me for a raise.

E

Huh?

WANDA

Pretend I'm Mr. Whatshisface an ask me for a raise.

E

Thass dumb.

WANDA

Yeah it is. But had you done what you promised to do days ago, we wouldn't be havin' this conversation. Now. Do it.

(A moment. E thinks.)

E

Mr. Frankin? I been here – almost . . . almost . . .

WANDA

(As Mr. Franklin:) Earl? You don't know how long you've worked here?

E

I do. I just –

WANDA

Start over.

(E clears his throat.)

E

Mr. Franklin? Do you think it might be possible? Like do you think that since I been doin' a good job for ya that – um – you could maybe—

WANDA

Teach you to finish a sentence?

(NEESY laughs.)

Cut it out.

NEESY

Sorry. It was just a good one.

WANDA

He's gotta learn somehow. He's too soft!
Again. This time ask wit some damn authority.

(A pause. E tries to find some authority within himself.)

E

Mr. Franklin please may I have a raise? I think I deserve one. Please?

WANDA

(As Mr. Franklin:) I'm sorry, Earl. Unfortunately, I can only afford to give out raises to my confident employees right now. Better luck next time, weakling.

NEESY

That was cold.

WANDA

No that was reality. 'Til you can prove yourself worthy, you won't be gettin' jack shit.

E

I just don't—

WANDA

Know how to stand up for yourself? Yeah I got that.

E

You're stronger than me!

(A moment.)

WANDA

You think I came out like this? Life did this to me. You are lucky cuz apparently life ain't havin' the same effect on you. That must be very pleasant. But then you gotta find another way. The world will trample you if ya ain't ready for it. Be a

trampler yourself or at least a goddamn spike. Don't allow yourself to be easy prey.

(WANDA coughs again. This is a violent attack and it goes it on for a while.)

E / NEESY

You gotta go to a doctor!

(Her coughing subsides.)

WANDA

Tell ya what? I'll go when you get your raise. Sound fair?

E

Mama, your health ain't nothin' to play around with.

WANDA

I sound like I'm playin'? You stop bein' a baby an ask for a raise, which you will get, an then I will see a doctor. I am very serious.

NEESY

You mean it?

WANDA

What I said?

NEESY

Would you be willin' to sign an official document?

WANDA

You shittin' me.

NEESY

Not at all.

(NEESY runs over to the typewriter and slides a fresh sheet of paper in it.)

WANDA

Get back over here an finish your plate!

NEESY

Only take a minute.

E

Neesy—

WANDA

An don't be wastin' that paper! Thass for me to find a job!

NEESY

(As she types:) I, Wanda Evelyn Thomas, being of sound mind and body
(She looks up and says to WANDA:) *So far*

WANDA

Don't test me

NEESY

—do solemnly swear that—

E

Neesy!

NEESY

Hold on, E! Swear that I will take myself to see a physician on the same day—

WANDA

If I can get an appointment!

E

NEESY!

NEESY

That my son Earl Lee Thomas receives a pay raise from his employer, Mr.
Franklin at Franklin Family Food Mart.

E

Why won't you listen?

NEESY

(Adding to the document:) But in the event that my condition takes a sudden,
drastic turn for the worse—

WANDA

Wait a minute

NEESY

I will see a doctor immediately.

WANDA

I didn't agree to that!

NEESY

Mama, it's only fair. If ya start hackin' up blood an shit we are takin' you to the—

WANDA

You so damn sneaky! You's just tryin' to trick me / all along!

NEESY

I don't want you to die!

E

Jesus Christ I LOST MY JOB TODAY!

(Silence.)

Happy now?

I did not ask for a raise because I was let go.

(E eats angrily. NEESY takes the paper from the typewriter and crumples it. WANDA stares at E.)

NEESY

Null and void.

(She tosses the balled up page across the room.)

WANDA

Let. Go? Why the fuck did that happen?

E

Said it had nothin' to do with my work. He had to cut a bunch a staff just to stay afloat. He said.

WANDA

Now what?

NEESY

I'll be able to find work, Mama. I'm scrappy. E'en after I'm gone I'll be able to help out.

WANDA

Scrappy. Then why you come back here?

(NEESY eats quietly.)

NEESY

I'll find somethin'.

WANDA

What you gon—

NEESY

(Sharp:) Trust me.

E

Neither of ya need to worry. Imma take care of it.

NEESY

No. *Imma* take care of it.

E

No. *I* am.

(E and NEESY stare at each other suspiciously. WANDA laughs.)

WANDA

Tell ya one thing: July ain't the worst month to be homeless!

E

We ain't gon be homeless, Mama.

WANDA

No it'll be nice. We can sunbathe out on Orchard Beach with all our shit. Indefinitely.

NEESY

We are three smart, capable individuals. There ain't no reason to just give up!

(WANDA shoves a wad of gum in her mouth.)

WANDA

Never imagined things would turn out like this. I thought by the time you two were grown wouldn't be constantly strugglin' no more. Just can't get ahead.

(WANDA starts to clear the table.)

(To NEESY:) Bet you don't remember this. When you was two, you could say your ABCs, which was impressive. I said, "my baby's smarter than your baby" to more than one mother. But then you blew my mind because one day you said 'em backwards! For a second I didn't know what the hell you was sayin' an I thought maybe you's broken. But then I figured it out. Damn! I thought "this kid might win the Nobel Prize one day."

(NEESY takes a dish from her mother then takes deep breath and then *rapidimente!* recites the alphabet backwards. She buttons the end with a "ta-dah" gesture.)

E

Holy shit.

(WANDA smiles.)

WANDA

Couldn't do that if I worked at it.

NEESY

Maybe I *will* win the Nobel one day. Could happen.

WANDA

Maybe.

Things never quite turn out like you think they will.

(WANDA exits into her room. There is a beat. Then NEESY continues cleaning and E helps her.)

NEESY

'S gon be fine, E.

E

Yeah. I know. I found a opportunity. Make some fast money. Serious money.

(NEESY looks at him quizzically.)

NEESY

Don't do nothin' stupid.

(Beat.)

E

You think Mama'll ever be proud a us?

NEESY

I doubt it.

E

Damn, Neesy!

NEESY

Whatchu want me to do, lie? I mean, shit E. We ain't exactly runnin' the ghetto Mensa chapter right now.

E

I 'on't know what that means—

(NEESY opens her mouth, but)

And I REALLY don't want you to explain it to me!

NEESY

Unless you can magically surpass her expectations, she won't be throwin' you no parades anytime soon.

(Beat.)

E

So you was a baby genius?

(NEESY shrugs.)

NEESY

That was a long time ago.

E

I like talkin' 'bout a long time ago. Seem like things was better a long time ago.

NEESY

Go find Cheky an set up your party. I'll join y'all later.

E

Why you pushin' me out?

NEESY

Cuz. It's Friday night. You had a bad day. I had a long day. Ain't nothin' to be done to fix our whole life tonight, so you may as well have a good time while you can. Tomorrow, all our goddamn problems will still be right where we left 'em. They ain't got nowhere else to go neither.

E

You comin' though, right?

NEESY

When you known me to skip a party? Get outta here.

(E grabs some things, smiles at NEESY as a silent "thanks" and exits. NEESY wipes down the table, finishes whatever needs doing. She peeks to make sure her mother's door is completely closed then she makes a phone call.)

Hi. I'm wonderin' if Tony's around? Yeah can you tell him it's Denise Thomas? Thanks.

(She waits. We might hear super cheesy hold music. She picks up WANDA's pack of gum and considers taking one.)

Hi Tony? It's Neesy!

(She laughs.)

Yeah yeah I'm back. So I'm wonderin' if you got any spaces available—? Oh. Oh yeah? Just waitressing?

(NEESY sighs.)

NEESY

OK. An this is topless? Yeah. Just makin' sure.
Yeah of course I can do that. No no new scars or nothin', I swear.
Tomorrow at 4? Yeah. I'll be there.
Thanks, Tony.

(NEESY hangs up the phone and sits down. She puts the pack of gum down and instead takes a flask from her purse. She takes a big, endless gulp. As she does, there is the low rumbling of thunder and the sound of rain hitting the windows.)

7. Pre-heat

In the rec room setting up for the party. E is under a table messing with some wires. CHEKY and JACQUES are goofing around with records. The sound of a hard rain outside may be heard.

CHEKY

"Payback," yo. "Payback."

JACQUES

Thass a easy one.

CHEKY

Cuz it's the best.

JACQUES

Nah, my man. JB is the *easiest*. I ain't knockin' 'im. Love me some "Payback," "Sex Machine," "I'm Black and I'm Proud." No joke. But the real trick is mixin' somethin' people ain't e'en sposta be dancin' to.

CHEKY

You mean like opera or some bullshit?

JACQUES

Yeah! Throw on some *La bohème*? That will seriously blow suckas' minds!

E

'ey Cheky, man? I on't think you brought alla cords.

CHEKY

Nigga don't gimme that jive.

E

Ain't no jive. Ain't no sound, nigga. Check.

(CHEKY looks under the table. He digs around in a crate or box. E studies JACQUES for a moment.)

(To JACQUES:) Where you get them tight boots at?

Why?
JACQUES

Just tell me where you get 'em at.
E

You a nosy muthafucka.
JACQUES

(Sucking his teeth:) What ya Mama make 'em for ya?
E

You can't afford these boots no how an' e'en if you could, I don't want your shabby ass bitin' my shit.
JACQUES

Fuck, E. I forgot 'em.
CHEKY

Goddamnit.
E

Don't be takin' the Lord's name in vain!
JACQUES

Are you for real?
E

Wanna try me, heathen?
JACQUES

(Eyes locked on JACQUES:) Cheky? Imma go see what I can find. You better hope I got some extensions lyin' around.
E

(E leaves.)

Why you gotta fuck wit him, man?
CHEKY

Uh-uh! I 'on't like nobody takin' the Lord's name in vain an Imma say somethin' when I see it happ'nin.
JACQUES

CHEKY

You bess take that Joe Bible shit someplace else.

JACQUES

I ain't ashamed. Jesus is my co-pilot.

(A giant rat runs by. JACQUES jumps.)

What the—? You see how big that thing was? Look like it was two feet long!

(CHEKY shrugs, still looking through records.)

CHEKY

Exterminator went on strike again.

JACQUES

But you saw that shit, right? Looked like a dog!

CHEKY

They big up here.

(E re-enters with some cords and other things.)

JACQUES

That ain't normal.

CHEKY

Maybe not for you, Hoboken.

JACQUES

'ey! We got vermin in Hoboken, but they like miniature.

(E fixes the electrical issues and James Brown's "Payback" blasts from the speakers. CHEKY has to dance; this is his song! E walks downstage center and in an instant, the stage is engulfed in a ring of fire, the song still plays. RAT appears and he now seems gigantic and he wears a Mets T-shirt. *Important: during the whole next section, CHEKY is still dancing in the background doing the robot and shit. The fire ring may appear fast and disappear just as fast. Whatever works.)

RAT

Nice party! I woulda gladly RSVP'd, but I guess my invitation got lost in the mail. I do move around, though.

E

Y'all gettin' too fuckin' big now!

RAT

Ya know you could fix it so the flames move slow. No one would get hurt. No one would notice.

E

I haven't the foggiest idea what you talkin' 'bout.

RAT

You do. You do you do you do. You scared. Scared to get caught. Oh no. That ain't it, is it? It's them pretty lil' morals you got. Thass it, right? Morals. Bitch please!

E

I ain't worryin' on nobody's morals. I can do it. Just a job like any other. I got no doubts.

RAT

You are one big pimple filled with doubt pus, bitch. I can see it.
(He sniffs.)

RAT

I can smell it.

(Pause.)

Can I bite your face?

E

(E sucks his teeth:) You ain't e'en sposeta be talkin'. Ain't natural.

RAT

We're a new breed.

You is shakin' in yo britches an you was already shakin' 'fore this offer come down. Yeah? Tonight's the night. Share your poetic voice. Get the attention a that special someone—

(E takes a cracker from his pocket and throws it across the room. In a perfect world, it hits CHEKY, momentarily fucking up his groove.)

CHEKY

Come on, man!

(RAT excitedly scurries after it and eats it greedily. He licks his paws as he comes back.)

RAT

That was clever! You smart, aintcha?

No I ain't *on* nothin'.
E

You look freakish.
NEESY

'S just how I am.
E

Oh yeah I forgot.
NEESY

You ever scared a makin' – like – a huge mistake?
E

(NEESY laughs.)

Not much no more since I already made so many.
NEESY

(Beat.)

Why you left Cali? Somethin' bad?
E

No I came home to the 'jects cuz I got crowned Miss America. Didn't I show you my sash?
NEESY

What happened?
E

(NEESY shakes her head. From her pocket, she pulls out her flask and drinks.)

I fell into one a them tar pits. Cops, EMTs had to pull me out.
NEESY

(E stares at her blankly. NEESY cracks up.)

You asshole.
E

Whatchu wanna read my diary? Give each other cornrows an have some girly talk? A lot happened. None of it good. I couldn't hack it. Couldn't do it. Couldn't compete.
NEESY

E

Whatchu gon do now?

(NEESY drinks from her flask. She hands E the flask. He takes a drink and winces.)

The fuck's in there? Lighter fluid?

NEESY

Don't worry. God hath blessed me with a pair a 36 double d's for a reason.

E

(Laughs:) What? You talkin' 'bout a titty bar?!

(NEESY drinks more.)

You ain't serious though, right?

NEESY

It's the one job inflation ain't touched.

E

Neesy? That shit is dangerous. I 'on't wantchu doin' 'at.

NEESY

It ain't that bad.

E

You done it before?

NEESY

Don't judge me, ya lil' bitch. You do what you gotta do. Right now, I gotta change my tampon.

E

Nees! Ew!

NEESY

Fuck you ew.

(NEESY exits. CHEKY reenters.)

CHEKY

Whatchu think 'bout the lightin' scheme in here? Pop in a few red bulbs? Black ones? Whatcha got?

E

Cheky? My sister talkin' 'bout showin' her tits for money.

Tonight?!
CHEKY

Not here! That ain't what I mean.
I think she done it before.
E

(Shrugs:) Worse things.
CHEKY

Like?
E

Prostitution?
CHEKY

What da *fuck*, Cheky! What she sayin' hardly a notch above prostitution. It's a slippery slope, nigga. Slippery slope.
E

Wontchu give 'er a break? Findin' a job is damn near impossible. Shiiit. If I's outta work an a bitch? I'd be shakin' 'em around, too.
CHEKY

Ya are a bitch.
E

Just *your* bitch, bitch.
CHEKY

Nobody comin' you know that, right? House party ain't nothin' like a block party.
JACQUES

Thass just negative.
E

For real! You 'on't like it, take your fancy butt to Studio 54.
CHEKY

Might do it, cuz. Ain't hardly no honeys around here.
JACQUES

(JACQUES and E lock eyes for a brief moment. Glaring at each other? Taunting each other? JACQUES abruptly exits.)

I hate that guy. No offense.
E

CHEKY

I *am* offended! He a asshole, but he still my family.

E

Why he here?

CHEKY

Fightin' with his moms again. They'll make up. Day or two. He'll go back to Jersey. 'Til they fight again.

E

What they fight about?

CHEKY

Nosy!

E

You brought it up!

(Beat.)

CHEKY

Aight. You can't say noth—

E

I won't! I swear!

CHEKY

I mean it, E.

E

I won't!

(CHEKY lowers his voice.)

CHEKY

He got – like – a boyfriend.

E

Boyfriend?

CHEKY

Shut the—

(CHEKY makes sure no one can hear them.)

Yeah. His moms was all “not in my house” an she made ‘im go an repent cuz they all religious an shit an the preacher knocked ‘im in his forehead an was like “release this child, Satan.” It was fucked up.

(Pause.)

CHEKY

Why you bein' quiet? E? I swear to god if you say one word—

E

Ain't gon say nothin'. I's just thinkin'.

CHEKY

What was you just thinkin'?

E

He seem kinda tough for a gay. That's all I's thinkin', I swear.

CHEKY

He *is* tough. That ain't connected. People say Emile Griffith is that way and he was the Welterweight champion. Killed that Cuban dude in the ring.

(Another pause.)

E

Was you like – ? You think it's nasty?

(CHEKY studies E for a moment.)

CHEKY

Nah, E. It ain't for me. But people gotta be happy. Ya know?

E

Uh-huh.

(NEESY reenters.)

NEESY

Still ain't nobody here?

CHEKY

Ain't e'en ten, whatchu expect?

E

Denise? You are my sister and I love you an I do not want you to take off your clothes for money. I will take care of our financial problems.

NEESY

Jesus, E! You talkin' 'bout this with Cheky???

CHEKY

Don't worry, Neesy: I didn't picture nothin'.

Fuck me. NEESY

Maybe after E goes to bed? CHEKY

(E pops CHEKY in the head.)

(To E:) Can't tell you nothin'. Still a lil' fuckin' punk, aintcha? NEESY

(NEESY exits.)

She kinda got a point. CHEKY

(E turns to CHEKY, incredulous.)

All I'm sayin' is – ya know – you ain't gotta tell me *everything*—

(E angrily walks away from CHEKY and starts fucking with the light bulbs. CHEKY returns to the record player. He puts on a song and people slowly start trickling in. JACQUES tries to help E with the lights.)

You lost? E

Nigga, you want help or not? JACQUES

Aight. Here. E

(He hands him something.)

You know? I wasn't plannin' to bite your shit.

Excuse me? JACQUES

Your boots! I wadn't gonna go get a identical pair! I got more class than 'at. Just wanted to know where you got 'em from, cuz it seem like a place with a style I dig. E

Well. You never know wit people. JACQUES

(They finish and the room is a sexy red or purple or something.)

E

Thanks, man.

JACQUES

You welcome.

(Awkward pause.)

E

So? You think it'll stop rainin' 'fore midnight?

JACQUES

I look like a meteorologist?

E

You don't have to be so snippy alla time.

JACQUES

I'm not! Wait. Am I?

E

Lil' bit.

JACQUES

Don't mean to be.

E

S'OK. Just work on it. You do any martial arts?

JACQUES

(As in no:) Huh-uh.

E

You could come by my dojo sometime. If ya want. Helluva stress reliever.

JACQUES

Why you stressed?

E

Money shit. Life shit.

JACQUES

That shit ain't goin' nowhere long as you breathin'. Whatchu stressed about now? This second?

(A moment.)

E

I gotta make a choice. Could be. A dangerous choice.

JACQUES

I got good reflexes. Let's do a bet. You get me down, you go for the danger. I get *you* down, play it safe.

E

I got training. I will hurt you.

JACQUES

Ain't scared.

(E shows JACQUES a few Judo moves and he goes in for an attack, but JACQUES blocks him in a way that leaves them in a somewhat compromising/erotic position that they must quickly break. Is it a draw? Can we tell who won? Do we care?)

Gotta go. My girl's here.

E

Your? Oh. OK.

JACQUES

What?

E

Nothin'. Go on.

(JACQUES exits. E does more of his movements. Sound of more thunder. E breathes with the movements. CHEKY approaches.)

CHEKY

Go make sure folks know we inside.

(E collects himself. He breathes. He stares seriously at CHEKY for a second.)

E

I gotta do this thing. Don't I? Gotta go for the danger.

(Slight pause.)

CHEKY

I on't know, man.

(Whispers:) I guess . . . if you like know for sure sure the buildin'll be empty? I mean, *I* might. But I ainchu.

E

Cuz you the brave one.

CHEKY

Nah, homes. Ain't about brave. Everybody does what they can do.
Gotta get back to the turntable.

(E grabs him suddenly, desperately.)

E

You let me try? My words? What if—after tonight—I don't get another shot?

(CHEKY sighs, but sees his friend's seriousness.)

CHEKY

Gimme time to get it hot first. But do not think you gon get up 'ere an
monologue all night. Two, three minutes. Thass it.

E

Thanks, man.
You like a brother to me, you know that?

CHEKY

Don't be tryin' to move my emotions, nigga! Three minutes. That is IT!

(CHEKY exits. E finishes his movements. JACQUES watches him
from afar.)

8. Too Much Want

NEESY stands outside the door of the building as the rain pours. She smokes a
cigarette. After a moment, WANDA joins her.

WANDA

Whatchu doin' out here?

NEESY

Watchin' the rain.

(She inhales. They both watch the rain.)

WANDA

Tell me you ain't pregnant. Thass all I ask.

(NEESY shakes her head no.)

NEESY

Think I'm worse than pregnant.

WANDA

Ain't nothin' worse than pregnant.

NEESY

I'm all emptied out. Feels like there ain't nothin' left inside.

WANDA

Talk like a normal person, Neesy.

NEESY

I 'on't know what a normal person is, Mama.

(WANDA takes out a cigarette and puts it in her mouth.)

Thought you quit.

WANDA

I did. Ain't gon light it.

(WANDA inhales and exhales imaginary smoke from her unlit cigarette. She treats it as though it is absolutely alight.)

NEESY

If I work hard enough – when I find a job I mean – we should move.

WANDA

To where? 'Nother project? You think it be any better?

NEESY

Don't have to be a damn project. There are other ways to live.

WANDA

Yeah there are. There are goddamn windowless tenements an I ain't never goin' back to that. You don't know how much better we got it here.

(RAT scurries in front of them, carrying an umbrella.)

I ain't sayin' we couldn't use some improvements. But things could be whole lot worse.

(There is the sound of shouting nearby, then glass breaking, a loud alarm goes off. Some kids run. Some kids laugh.)

NEESY

What about Co-op City?

(WANDA busts out laughing.)

WANDA

Are you crazy?! You know how hard it is to get into Co-op City? Why 'on't we just get on the wait list for Gracie Mansion?!

(WANDA laughs so hard she coughs again.)

NEESY

So thass it? We just never gon try anything cuz it's hard?

(WANDA's coughing subsides.)

WANDA

You come back here an gimme another mouth to feed an argue with everything I do. Why? What do you want, Neesy? What the hell do you *want*?

NEESY

I want you to see a doctor.

I want you an E to be safe.

I want to get a real degree.

I want money. Lotsa fuckin' money.

I wanna work in a office in a nice, clean high-rise building and sit at a desk with a phone that lights up when it rings and an electric typewriter an down the hall is a water cooler where I'll see Rosa and ask what happened on *Charlie's Angels* last night an she'll know cuz Rosa's a TV addict.

I wanna eat out in restaurants whenever I feel like it.

I wanna take a vacation an go skiing in Aspen.

I wanna smile when I'm all alone for no reason.

(A moment. NEESY continues smoking.)

Don't worry. You won't have to put up with me for five whole days. I'll be able to go sooner'n 'at.

WANDA

You got too much want in you, baby. It'll burn ya up.

NEESY

I 'on't know what else to do but want.

(WANDA gently starts to put her hand on NEESY.)

Don't.

(WANDA pulls her hand away.)

NEESY

How comes? How comes we ain't allowed to want nothin'?

(A strange shift happens. During this shift, WANDA and NEESY will speak in a strange, heightened manner.)

WANDA

Want dis want dat. You take what de good massa gi' you an ya jes be a happy nigger.

NEESY

But Mammy! I wants to wear Mistress's purdy dresses an hold one dem parysols an walk out in de sun an say "Lawda mercy" all de day long.

(WANDA slaps NEESY in a strange, exaggerated way.)

WANDA

Dummy! You jes smile an say "yessuh" an don't be no trouble, pickaninny!

NEESY

But Mammy!

WANDA

NO PICKANINNY! I will tan yo hide good I hear one 'nother word 'bout bein' like the mistress. You is different! You take what you git an be happy. An donchu never let on that you be knowin' all you do. A head fulla knowin gitcha kilt sure as day turn to night.

(The rains stops. Something shifts. WANDA and NEESY return to normal.)

WANDA

You allowed to want all you want, baby. Don't mean you'll get nothin'. Come on. Let's go to E's party for a lil' while.

NEESY

There's gotta be somethin' better.

WANDA

What if there ain't? What if this is all there is? Would it be the worst thing in the world?

(The RAT appears with *Heart of Darkness* in his mouth, the one NEESY threw out the window earlier. He sees that the rain has stopped so he can close his umbrella. NEESY watches him. He sits somewhere, puts on his glasses and starts to read. Occasionally, he will eat a page.)

WANDA

Whatchu lookin' at?

NEESY

Nothin'.

(The RAT locks eyes with NEESY and pointedly eats another page.)

WANDA

Come on now.

(NEESY slowly follows WANDA back inside as a gunshot is heard in the near distance and the sounds of police sirens. RAT rolls his eyes and puts on a large set of headphones to block out the sound. Content, he continues reading.)

9. The Breaks

Back at the party in full swing. Dancing and stuff. E is sort of dancing, sort of pacing. He's nervous.

JACQUES

Still tryna make up your mind?

(E jumps, startled.)

E

Yeah. Mullin' over a lotta shit, ya know?

JACQUES

Maybe you just need a drink.

(JACQUES starts toward the drink table, dancing the whole way. E follows him dancing, too.)

E

Nah that's aight.

JACQUES

What? You don't drink? You 18, right?

E

Yeah!

JACQUES

And?

E

I – um – I need to get on the mic—

JACQUES

Why you got a announcement?

(Awkward pause as they both realize they've been dancing pretty close together. WANDA and NEESY enter.)

Go on an make your announcement. I'll listen.

E

Yeah?

JACQUES

Yeah, man.

(A tiny moment of connection between them. E heads for WANDA and NEESY.)

E

Mama whatchu doin' down here?

WANDA

What am I too old to dance a lil' bit? Damn!

NEESY

(About the party:) This ain't lookin' too bad. Cheky knows what's he's doin'!

E

Yeah he – uh – Imma be right back.

(E steps up to CHEKY at the turntable and whispers something to him. CHEKY rolls his eyes and then puts up three fingers. E nods. CHEKY hands E the mic then turns on an easy beat for him.)

Hey yo. Ev'rybody!

RANDOM PERSON

What?

E

So

(He glances at his notebook paper.)

So my name is Earl
But they call me E
I look around this part – y
An know I'm blessed
I am so luck - y
So I got to say

On this special day

ANOTHER RANDOM PERSON

This sound like somethin' from *Sesame Street*!

(Laughter. E pauses, looks out at JACQUES and crumples the paper in his hand.)

E

Your boots are fine
But not as fine as you
Am I outta line?
I'll stop if ya tell me to.

I know we might play
Might fight
Like Sugar Ray

But I want you to know

I ain't afraid
I ain't afraid
I ain't afraid
To . . . love you. So
Tell me.
You feel the same way? Yo?

(E looks meaningfully out at JACQUES who is shaking, horrified.)

No?

(People laugh. CHEKY follows E's gaze. JACQUES runs out of the room, slamming the door. A frightful pause. Then CHEKY graciously takes the mic back. CHEKY changes the track.)

CHEKY

Give it up for Lil' E.

(Does anyone clap for this?)

Making his . . . debut.

(A moment. CHEKY needs to get the party back under control.)

Gather round gather round
An lend me your ear
My name is Cheky an I'm leky
Cuz I ain't got no peer!

I scratch a lil' music
My hum dee dum dum
I make ya laugh I make ya shake it
Girls I make ya ummm...

(Somewhere in here, WANDA and the rest will start to get down,
really digging CHEKY's rhyme. E is actually impressed, though
still humiliated.)

No no I know
I know you are a lady
I'll wait til it's late
So it don't feel so shady.

I don't mean to give you no streeesssss
But babies I must confeeeessss
Never thought I would be caught up on the mic like this
And now I think I'll never leave except to take a piss

(NEESY grabs the mic. When NEESY begins to rap this is too much
for E. Unseen by the rest, he makes a mad dash for the exit.)

What?!

NEESY

A piss is all it take
A piss is what you make
Move over potty boy
Denise ain't no fake!
Gotta tell ya I can smell ya
An I ain't that impressed
You talk yo rap

CHEKY

You heard 'em clap!

NEESY

But darlin' I'm on a quest!
I'm droppin' knowledge
Like in college
Tryna teach ya some shit
An you better listen up
I won't repeat this bit.

Free muthafucka muthafucka think free!

(NEESY hold the mic out to the crowd.)

ALL
Free muthafucka muthafucka think free!

NEESY
Free muthafucka muthafucka live free!

ALL
Free muthafucka muthafucka live free!

NEESY
Free muthafucka muthafucka BE FREE!

ALL
Free muthafucka muthafucka be free!

(CHEKY takes the mic. The “teacher” is NEESY.)

CHEKY
If you learnin’ from the teacher say hell yeah!

ALL
Hell yeah!

CHEKY
What?

ALL
Hell yeah!

CHEKY
(To NEESY:) You think they understandin’ what you feelin’ inside?
You think they got enough you feelin’ satisfied?

NEESY
Satisfied Sanctified Justified Electrified!
Y’all get the gist.

CHEKY
Class dismissed.

(Mic drop.)

VOICE
Intermission time, my niggas! Go getcha drink on!

End of Act 1

10. The New Plague

E is inside a nearby basement trying to start a fire.

E

(Stumbling over something:) Shit!

(He then stands very still, trying not to make a sound. Then he gets to work. He starts messing with some wiring when the giant RAT appears.)

RAT

So your balls *did* see a growth spurt?

E

Do not distract me.

RAT

Ain't rocket science. Just cut some fuckin' wires and leave.

E

Gotta do it right.

(He examines some wires.)

Wiring's old, but I need to activate it in a way that looks like I want things to work so the fire seems accidental. Then it has to start slow enough not to get outta control, but be strong enough to bring the place down. It's a delicate process.

RAT

La dee muthafuckin' dah.

(RAT starts to smoke a joint.)

You want?

E

Don't do that here.

RAT

Ain't like it's gon make much of a diff in a few minutes.

E

It is a distraction. A hindrance to the pursuit at hand.

RAT

A "hindrance?" Mr. College.

E

I look like I got college monies to you?

(E drops something because his hands are shaking. He breathes and tries to center himself. A moment.)

RAT

Homeboy didn't much like your poetry, huh?

(E says nothing.)

It was tacky. You don't just throw some shit like that in somebody's face. *In public!*

E

Get away from me.

RAT

I'm just tellin' ya the troof [*as in "truth"*]. Here's some more troof for ya: that be the real reason you in here. Boy crush leaves ya hangin' in the air, suspended wit nothin' to grab onto 'cept your lousy nursery rhyme so you gotta prove your manhood somehow, dontcha? Gotta save face.

E

(Sadly:) Thass convoluted logic.

RAT

(Laughs:) Ha! Listen to ya! Fuckin' college nigga!

(A moment. E becomes frustrated with what he's doing and suddenly seems incredibly sad. RAT offers the joint to E. E takes it an inhales.)

E

'S like? Music an words. I just wanna put them two things together an do it right. Feels like a club I ain't a member of. Cheky is. He touches a mic, a turntable, it's like he's home. Ev'rybody strugglin' just to fuckin' get by an it's this one thing: music an words an dancing—it keeps people sane. Makes 'em feel like they belong. Like they not on the brink a extinction. Not me, though. I ain't in the club.

(RAT takes his joint back.)

RAT

You wanna be in a *lotta* clubs.

(E returns to his work.)

The Mineshaft.
The Anvil.
The Flamingo . . . on cowboy night.

E

Why 'on't you go an try to get another plague started. I'm sure you got some diseases inside 'at disgusting body a yours.

RAT

Awready on it. TB.
Ya know, they say these old-ass diseases be spreadin' all over again cuz a the fires. So? Thanks, lil' buddy!

(RAT gives him some noogies. Then he stops: listens to the air.)

You hear that?

(E freezes. He listens.)

E

No.

RAT

Shh shh. Sound like . . . Hummin'? Breathin'? Close by? Next door??

E

Stop tryna gaslight me!

RAT

Are you positively sure that this building is completely empty?

E

Yes, ya filthy hood rat! He swore to me that this place was completely free a inhabitants and I pass by here alla time. Don't even see no junkies in here. Just you and your relatives.

RAT

Oh all right. Since the man you randomly met on the 6 Train assured you that it was people free, it must be, right? I mean he seemed so trustworthy. Only a honest Abe would ask a stranger to commit a class-A felony for him.

E

Fuck off!

RAT

What do you care? Collateral damage! You, my nigga, are college-bound. You gon get yo'self edumicated.

E

I ain't heard a sound.

(E returns to his work. RAT is quiet for a few moments. Then:)

RAT

Hmm. I's just thinkin'. How close are we to YOUR building?

E

Please! You think I'd take the job if I thought my home was in jeopardy? You a damn fool?

(RAT puffs on his joint.)

RAT

I 'on't know, man. I's just foolishly thinkin' 'bout . . . geography. And wind speed versus the speed of the FDNY. But what does it matter? If somebody gets hurt or whatever let's be real: these assholes chose to live here knowin' what this place has become. They fuckin' askin' for what they get! You ever seen them pamphlets with the creepy skull? NYPD made 'em up to scare tourists. "Welcome to Fear City" in bold letters on the cover. Some corn-fed meatball from Iowa is in Fear City limits just by goin' to Broadway to see fuckin' *Annie*. (Or Annie Sprinkle if he goes a few blocks south.) So. What that make *us*? Beyond Fear City? Terror Town? Or are we just. Plain. Hell? Anybody that stick around here, deserves what they get.

(Beat.)

E

What if they got nowhere else to go?

RAT

That your problem?

E

You talk about humanity not hearin' fear no more but you can. For what? You a instigator. You just wanna make things worse.

RAT

Ain't like I promised you a rose garden, bitch.

(There is a sound from nearby like footsteps. E panics and hides for a second.)

(Calling up:) You better set some traps! You got niggas in the basement!

(RAT laughs. The steps go away. Silent. E reemerges.)

E

Was outside. *Outside*. Wadn't here.

(E quickly removes a socket from the wall.)

RAT

D'you know pesticides can't e'en kill us no more? Just makes us high and horny as fuck. I tell ya: It is a magical time to live in this city, princess!

(A spark, smoke, and the tiniest flame.)

E

Who's a princess now, dick nose?!

(E flies up the stairs and exits. RAT sniffs at the fire. He gets an idea. From somewhere, he finds a large stick with a hotdog on it. He is delighted! He roasts it over the fire.)

11. Ahhhh Freak Out!

Back at the party. It's gettin' LIVE. People are dancing and drinking and having a damn good time. CHEKY spins something crazy and everyone laughs and the break kids go nuts. FUN!

NEESY

Benji?

(A good-looking dude turns around.)

BENJI

Lil' Neesy! How you been, girl?

NEESY

I'm aight. Whatchu been up to?

BENJI

Workin' for the city. Got kids now.

NEESY

Yeah I heard.

BENJI

Don't get me wrong: I love 'em more'n I love myself, but them niggas is work! You don't got none yet, do ya?

NEESY

Nah nah. Child rearin' ain't really my thing, ya know?

(BENJI laughs.)

BENJI
Well you lookin' mighty good, girl.

NEESY
I am?

(NEESY edges a bit closer.)

BENJI
Yeah. Look like you put on some pounds. In alla right spots.

NEESY
You wanna dance or you just gon compliment me all night?

(They dance a funny dance like the hustle or the funky chicken, but they're deadly serious about it.)

BENJI
Whatchu be doin' out there in California?

NEESY
You know you know. Keepin' busy.

BENJI
Busy doin' what?

NEESY
Took a couple classes.

BENJI
Still readin' alla time? I 'member you useta read a book faster'n most folks could read *The Daily News*!

NEESY
Yeah. I's in this lit class, but the professor was a donkey dick. Coulda been a card-carryin' member a the Klan judgin' by the shit he'd say.

BENJI
Oh yeah?

NEESY
Yeah! It was terrible! I wrote this paper on *Heart a Darkness* an I did – like – this deconstruction a the text an shit, which was real smart, but he did not get it at all and I got into this argument—

(BENJI starts looking around, clearly getting bored.)

BENJI
What? What else? Somethin' 'bout construction?

NEESY
Nevermind. Thass no fun!

BENJI
Whatchu drinkin'?

NEESY
Anything wet.

BENJI
I hear that.

(BENJI goes to get her a drink and NEESY keeps dancing. CHEKY dances over to her.)

CHEKY
What the Hell you doin'?

NEESY
Whatchu doin'? Ain't you sposta be at the record player?

CHEKY
I got time. Put on "Love to Love You Baby" so I could take a break. So uh?
Whatchu doin' wit Benji?

NEESY
Is you my daddy now?

CHEKY
I am a impartial watcher who cares about your family. Y'all don't need no more drama. 'S all I'm sayin'.

NEESY
You sound kinda partial to me.

CHEKY
Nah I ain't. I'm Switzerland.

NEESY
Why you ain't sayin' nothin' to Benji? Last time I counted, it take two to tango.

CHEKY
Exactly! So whatchu need *him* for?

NEESY
What?

CHEKY
Nothin'! Switzerland!

(BENJI returns, handing NEESY a drink.)

BENJI
'Sup, Checker man! You got the magic fingers, brotha.

(They do some kind of handshake or slap fives.)

CHEKY
Thanks, man. Imma get back in it. Later.

(CHEKY exits.)

BENJI
I like that lil' dude. Useta get on my last nerve when we was kids, but he's all grown up now.

NEESY
Ain't the only one.

(NEESY wraps her arms around BENJI.)

BENJI
Uh –

(He gently pulls away.)

NEESY
What's wrong? We can't dance no more?

(BENJI pulls out his wallet and shows her a photo.)

BENJI
Hard to concentrate thinkin' 'bout these lil' buggers. That there's Kendall, Jermaine and Jerusalem are the twins and the baby in *my* baby's arms is Benjamin the third.

(He puts his wallet away.)

They always wit me. No matter what.

NEESY
An they don't like you dancin' wit old friends?

BENJI

Neesy? I gotta watch myself. You are quite a temptation. But I'm a serious person now.

NEESY

Wait hold up. You sayin' I *ain't* a serious person?

BENJI

Well? Nah. Not really. But you cool, foxy, and fun and what's wrong wit that? Not everybody's meant to settle down wit a family. Some people just get to dance they life away. Don't sound half bad to me.

(Beat. NEESY drinks.)

I hope you ain't mad. I'm different than I usedta be. We can talk and hang. But that's it.

NEESY

You named your child Jerusalem?

BENJI

Yeah why?

NEESY

That ain't a name. It's a city.

(BENJI stares at NEESY a moment, hurt. But then he laughs.)

BENJI

Same ol' Neesy. Don't get whatchu want an them claws come-a scratchin'.

NEESY

Your girl needs braces. *Bad*. Section-8 gon pay for 'em?

(BENJI suddenly seems very sad.)

BENJI

You have a nice night.

(BENJI exits. NEESY remains drinking alone. After a minute, there is a bit of a scuffle.)

CHEKY

(On the mic:) Hey! Hell no! They ain't gon be no blood spilt up in this piece. I will tear your monkey asses up first!

(It's getting hot. NEESY takes off her shirt and a tank is on underneath. She fans herself.)

NEESY

(To anyone who will listen:) Do you smell it? You feel it?

(They ignore her. Scuffling starts again. This becomes an out-and-out fight with cheering and punching and shit.)

CHEKY

HEY! COOL OUT! DON'T NEED THIS BULLSHIT IN HERE!

Puttin' on the brakes
Cuz I got what it takes
I'm flawless no mistakes
An I'm givin you the shakes!

Come on! Step to me.
See what I do.
I may be cute
But I'll embarrass you!

I generate, cultivate, articulate, pontificate
The shit you wanna hear
The world thachu hold dear
You still wan' fight an jeer?
Then get up outta here!

Come on! Just

CHEKY

Get up outta here!

Say it wit me!

ALL

Get up outta here!

CHEKY

Hey hey just

ALL

Get up outta here!

(CHEKY has succeeded in stopping the fight, but somehow in the kerfuffle, NEESY gets knocked over / trampled / somehow badly hurt.)

PERSON

Shit! Somebody help!

(NEESY convulses and laughs. CHEKY and WANDA rush over to NEESY. The music violently stops, followed by boos. This shit is

chaotic!)

Baby? WANDA

Nees? You OK? What happened? CHEKY

(NEESY seems far away and incredibly sad.)

They never like me. NEESY

Who? CHEKY

I *am* a serious person. NEESY

(She bursts into tears. She sobs uncontrollably for a minute then she regains her composure completely.)

What happened to my drink? NEESY

Turn the music back on! RANDOM PERSON

Do not make me come over there! CHEKY

Time to go home, baby. WANDA

I *saaaaaaaid* where is my drink? NEESY

I think you already done drunk e'rybody here under the table. CHEKY

You hurt? WANDA

I'm fine, Mama. I'm fine fine fine fine fine. I checked myself out cuz I am an adult an I was *fine*! NEESY

What? WANDA

(The lights suddenly go out. People flip out. Everyone can feel/hear/smell the fire now.)

CHEKY

(Shouting because his mic is out:) Proceed to the exits! Walk, don't run. We gotta evacuate right now. Let's move!

12. The Kink

E is panting, staring at his watch closely. He's timing something and is seriously panicked.

E

5, 4, 3, 2 . . .

(E pulls the handle on the fire alarm box on the street with great ceremony. But nothing happens. He pulls it again. Nothing happens. He bangs on the thing, pulling on it, but nothing works.)

RANDOM PERSON

That thing's broke!

E

Broke? But? Ain't there another fire hap'nin—

RANDOM PERSON

Yes fool. Imma try to find a phone. Don't e'en know who they'd send.

E

Why you say 'at?

RANDOM PERSON

(Impatient:) Boy don't you read the damn newspaper? They closed down Engine 94 last week. Ain't no firemen around here!

(RP rushes off. E takes in what he's just heard. There are sounds of screaming and E pulls the handle over and over and then beats the shit out of the alarm box. RAT appears.)

RAT

My boy! That inferno you got started: *NOYCE!* Gon' be a four-alarm at least!

(RAT does a little happy dance.)

E

Nobody's comin'. It's just gon keep on burnin'!

RAT

Eh? Somethin'll stop it.

E

Don't make sense! I thought it through—

RAT

Big MAC thanks you.

E

What?!

RAT

Oh did your friend Robertson not tell ya? He's a lackey for big MAC—that's the Municipal Assistance Corporation for you laymen. Yeah, kid. There's big money in ghetto destruction. Truth be told: you coulda easily asked for more.

(E vomits. RAT laughs.)

Please, nigga! You act like you Judas with the silver coins. Get over yourself.

E

But? But – this is still my home! I fuckin' grew up—

RAT

(Fierce:) **HEY!** You got paid to do a job, didncha? I mean, what da fuck did you think "slum clearance" meant? College Boy?

(E shakes, doesn't know what to do. He finally runs off in the direction of his building. RAT laughs then stops suddenly, sniffing something. He finds some popcorn on the ground and eats it. VAGRANT enters. VAGRANT and RAT look at each other for a long time: a standoff.)

VAGRANT

Fuck you.

RAT

No fuck you!

VAGRANT

Fuck. You.

RAT

No no no fuck *you!*

VAGRANT

(Vitriolic rage:) **FUCK! YOU!**

RAT

Wait what are we talkin' about?

(VAGRANT struggles against his own disgust to point at RAT's Mets T-shirt. Or perhaps he does something more overwrought, like violently tearing at the shirt.)

Oh this? I'm just wearin' it to be funny.

VAGRANT

Get your filthy stinkin' traitor ass on the 7 Train and don't you never come back!

RAT

No no it's cool, man! I'm a Yankees fan. Bronx Bombers, Jackson, Munson – I swear to god, I love those guys!

VAGRANT

Get out.

RAT

Make me.

(VAGRANT starts to take his dick out.)

RAT

Big whoop. I drink pee for breakfast!

(VAGRANT stops then lets loose a ferocious, primal howl. RAT tries to hold his ground, but does not like this at all. He finally screams and scurries away. The VAGRANT's howl fades into the sound of sirens.)

13. Air

E sees the blaze (reflected on his face) and cannot believe the size of it. People pass, some irritated some scared. E sees NEESY.

E

What – what's goin' on?

(WANDA is having the worst coughing fit of her life. So much fucking worse than all the others that came before it.)

NEESY

Mama? Mama, can you breathe?

(WANDA tries to say something, but the coughing is too much.)

E

(Yells out:) Someone help us!

NEESY

(Speaking slowly and clearly, like she's talking to an idiot:) Mama? Nod? Can you nod for me?

(Unfortunately NEESY's tone makes WANDA laugh, which only worsens things for her. An exhausted EMT appears.)

EMT

Ma'am? Can you speak?

(WANDA breathes momentarily, but it is short lived before the coughing starts up again. Someone wheels in a gurney and helps WANDA onto it and they roll her off.)

E

What happened?

NEESY

Smoke! There was another goddamn fire an she breathed in too much smoke!

E

How?!

NEESY

Where the fuck were you?!

(Calling after the EMT:) Wait! We're her kids! We're comin' too!

(NEESY drags a stricken E offstage.)

14. Wanda's Hopes

In the waiting room at the ER. WANDA is wearing a breathing mask. NEESY seems nervous and uncomfortable.

NEESY

You think they OK?

WANDA

Hope so, baby.

(WANDA inhales from her mask.)

WANDA

Whole city's goin' to Hell. Dumbass, lyin' ass mayor wit 'is coke bottle glasses.
Closed down so damn many fire stations to save money an' city's still penniless.
An burnin' to the ground.

(Breathes into her mask.)

Imma write that asshole another letter soon's I get outta here.

NEESY

Think it'll make any difference?

(WANDA doesn't respond. E enters.)

What they say?

E

Only two ahead a ya.

WANDA

Hmph. We'll see how long 'at takes.

NEESY

Two ain't bad. Could be much worse.

WANDA

Everything could always be much worse.

E

Mama? You ever tried – like – positive thinking?

(A pause.)

Like instead a always assumin' eveything's gon turn out for the worst, try to picture like *good* outcomes? Thass what I'm tryna do. Just now, for example, instead a assumin' that the two people in front a ya gon take forever, why not assume that they won't? Might be good for ya. Mentally *and* physically.

(Beat. Then NEESY and WANDA bust out laughing.)

WANDA

Thank you, baby! I needed that!

E

Heck with y'all.

WANDA

I'm sorry! It's just – your face!

NEESY

I know! He look like a missionary he so serious!

(WANDA and NEESY slap fives. WANDA quickly replaces her mask.)

E

Why you ain't never open to nothin' new? Ever?

(A moment. The laughter subsides.)

WANDA

You know what? You right. I should be open to new things. But I'm not.

E

Why?

WANDA

I useta be a hopeful person. Waitin', longin' for somethin' better, but—

(She shakes her head, waves it away.)

That just hurt ya in the end. You work hard an do the best you can. 'S all I know. All the mysteries a the world? They none a my business. They'll unfold or they won't. Won't make no difference to me.

(Slight pause.)

Why do painful things happen? Why aren't good decisions rewarded? What is it keeps us from gettin' the dreams we useta hope for? All mysteries to me. An' I ain't nobody's Sherlock.

E

Whatchu useta hope for, Mama?

(WANDA thinks for a minute, then she gets a big, secret smile on her face. She looks about a decade younger. For a moment.)

RECEPTIONIST

Wanda Thomas?

(The smile fades and WANDA stands. NEESY stands, too.)

WANDA

No stay here.

NEESY

Donchu want some support?

WANDA

I think I can handle some pencil dick doctor.

(WANDA exits. NEESY sits back down.)

E

How'd she get so close? I mean, for her to get sick from the—

NEESY

Smoke was everywhere. An you know Mama. She had to make sure the youngest kids was out the buildin' first.

E

Don't make sense.

NEESY

It's this fuckin' neighborhood. Some stupid kid playin' wit matches or showin' off an this shit happens.

(Beat.)

You see 'em?

E

Who?

NEESY

Mother an her baby girl screamin' her tiny lungs out. They was high up an the ladder on the one truck they sent couldn't reach 'em. So they had to jump.

E

Jump? They OK?

NEESY

I hope.
You didn't see 'em?

(E shakes his head.)

E

I'm a shitty person.

NEESY

I'm a shitty daughter. I 'on't come back for Christmas like I promised. Two years in a row I don't come back. An I'm only here now cuz I got nowhere else to go.

E

Good thing you back. If it wadn't for you . . . ? Mama might not be here if it wadn't for you.

(Beat.)

E
Did anybody else get hurt? Did ya see? Most everybody was OK, right? Thinkin' positive. Everybody else was OK. Right?!

(NEESY slowly turns and looks out at E.)

NEESY
Where was you at? Earlier?

E
When?

NEESY
You just disappeared.

E
Went for a walk.

NEESY
Where?

E
Why?

(NEESY stares at E.)

NEESY
What did you do?

E
Don't worry about it.

NEESY
What did you do?

E
I made some cash, Nees.

(NEESY stares at him, but E won't return her gaze.)

NEESY
I been home less'n twelve hours an I feel like I been scared during most a that time. I can't take it. Tell me whatchu did.

E
No.

(Silence.)

NEESY

Last time I's in a hospital, I was all alone. No one came to see me. Because no one knew I was there. Thass a weird thing. Wantin' to be left alone an wantin' company at the exact same time.

E

Why you was in the hospital?

NEESY

I wrote a paper in my lit class called "British Colonialism and the Dawn of Minstrelsy." Got me kicked outta school cuz the professor was a racist. Well? The fact that I punched him out for sayin' racist shit got me kicked outta school. Which is quite a feat considering I wasn't e'en officially enrolled. He spoiled readin' for me, ya know? Useta like readin' more than anything else. Feel sick when I look at a book now.

(Beat.)

I started smellin' death everywhere, like Kurtz. *Everywhere* – on men, their hands, on the bus, in my cereal. Couldn't get it outta my nostrils, ya know?

E

Jesus.

NEESY

I did fall in a tar pit once. I wadn't makin' that up.

(E doesn't know how to respond.)

One day I was walkin' along, smellin' death, an the sun started comin' up over the hill an I looked up an there were these niggas in the trees. Niggas with paint on their faces, feathers in their hair, an their dicks flappin' free in the wind. An I thought "Well that's it. I have lost my mind an turned into a colonialist Brit." Or Pole whatever the fuck Conrad was. But they looked at me an I looked back at them. An they smiled. They said "Shhh." I wasn't the one they were waitin' for. I was safe.

(Long silence.)

E

Thass what happened to you?

NEESY

Yeah. L.A. wasn't for me.

E

It's in my nostrils, too.

(Beat.)

E
Nees? I gotta go.

NEESY
Why? Where?

E
I gotta go.

(E races off.)

NEESY
Wait E! You can't leave me here alone. EARL!

15. Devolution

Much much later that night. E is back in what's left of the building he set on fire. The space should appear mildly familiar, but it's seriously burned out now, smoking, simmering. There is an eerie quiet: the fire is out. E is not doing well. NEESY enters.

NEESY
Idiot.

(E says nothing.)

You wanna die from smoke inhalation?!

(E says nothing.)

Mama's gon be OK we think. If you care! They gon keep 'er few days. Turns out she got goddamned TB. Like it's the 1930s or some shit!

E
A plague.

NEESY
Say she gon make it, though.

E
I fucked up.
I thought maybe I could figure out what I did wrong. Or maybe I could figure out some way to slow it down. Nothin'. I didn't learn nothin'. 'Cept I fucked up.

(E cries.)

I had a reason. A good reason. It wadn't sposeta be like this.
Was sposeta be quick.
Nobody was sposeta get hurt!

(He tries to recover.)

Nevermind. Nevermind nevermind nevermind. I 'on't know what you talkin'
'bout. Didn't do nothin'. I ain't never done a thing. I's a good boy.

(Sound of sirens in the distance. CHEKY races in, ducking the
police sirens. He's startled for a second to see E and NEESY.)

CHEKY

Why in the holy fuck are y'all in here?

E

(Sincerely to CHEKY:) Ain't I a good boy?

CHEKY

E?

(E passes out. CHEKY tries to catch him, but he still winds up on
the floor.)

NEESY

No! E come on! Do not pass out in here!

CHEKY

Is he on somethin'?!

NEESY

I don't know! He's losin' it, Cheky! Goin' off the deep end an I 'on't know why!

(NEESY cries. CHEKY strokes her back while lightly tapping E on
the face, though CHEKY is scared, too.)

CHEKY

(Referring to the burnt-out building:) It was E, Nees.

NEESY

It was—

(NEESY slowly understands what CHEKY is saying.)

Why?! Earl! What the FUCK?!

(NEESY slaps E hard and he comes to. Except...)

E

The po-lice.

(Laughs.)

Five-O.

(Laughs.)

Jive ass men in blue.

NEESY

This is what I been sayin'! You know better than this! You actin' stupid an crazy 'cuz this ain't a life!

E

So you sayin' we awready dead? Oh good. Thass less stressful.

(E shifts between laughing hysterically and wailing hysterically.)

NEESY

E don't. *Please!*

CHEKY

You gotta hold on, brothaman.

E

I have balls of steel! I don't wan 'em! Somebody come take 'em from me!

NEESY

STOP IT!

E

I'm a man now. Burnin' people up. Gettin' paid! Puttin' my own mother in the goddamn hospital! I am a **MAN!**

(He laughs hysterically and trashes the already burnt-out room. Not safe behavior.)

NEESY

Calm down breathe calm down shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh do your exercises do whatever you need to just please calm down.

E

I did it. My hands can fuck up the world.

(Sirens. CHEKY visibly stiffens, terrified.)

NEESY

When I get real scared I try to sit still an see myself workin' in a nice, clean office in a high-rise building way downtown. I got myself a secretary and an electric typewriter an – an – manuscripts! Thass what I do! I **READ** for a goddamn livin'. Cuz – cuz I'm a publisher! Thass what I do! I sit there an I read alla time an nobody bothers me cuz I'm the boss. I'm the boss. I'M THE BOSS!

E

You the boss.

NEESY

I'm the BOSS!

(Part of the building/set moves as though the place is starting to fall apart.)

E

Can you get me a job?

NEESY

Yes. Yes I can. You a junior editor.

E

Good. That's what I wanted.

(A part of the building falls off.)

But is it manly job?

NEESY

Oh hell yeah! You gon have to fight the crazies that wan me to publish they shitty books. You gon type up rejection letters an crush a whole bunch a folkses dreams.

E

Good. I can do that.

(More building crumbles.)

CHEKY

Is it safe there?

NEESY

Always!

E

Do it got rats?

NEESY

Good god no! Exterminator come in twice a month!

E

An he know how to *kill* 'em?

NEESY

Of course! He got this super strength poison that ain't e'en legal in North America!

CHEKY

An nobody be accusin' you a shit you didn't do?

NEESY

Only the good shit. Only the good shit.

CHEKY

I'm likin' this place, Neesy.

NEESY

An an an an an I'll be married to a decent man with thick hair an just a lil' bit of a paunch, but he has a friendly smile an he has no ambitions an he'll love me an think I'm intelligent an not crazy an he'll make sure the niggas in the trees always stay on our side cuz they ain't goin' nowhere. They always gon be in the trees.

CHEKY

Always been in the trees.

E

Thass me! Nigga in the tree nigga in the tree! Stroooooonnnng nigga in the tree howlin' down the innocents. They don't know what I see. They don't know what I see.

NEESY

We gon be so happy. An rich an safe an free

E

Free

NEESY

An we'll reach for the sea

(They stretch their arms out wide.)

An we'll dance dangerously

(They dance dangerously.)

NEESY

We'll be doin' whatever we want cuz

NEESY / E / CHEKY

Thass what you fuckin' do when you're happy!

(NEESY, E, and CHEKY begin a fast rhythmic clap and dance and then they sing. I encourage the singing to be free flowing, wild, joyous, and extreme. The singing takes them into a super heightened place physically and vocally.)

NEESY / E / CHEKY

Do Lord oh do Lord
Do remember me
Do Lord oh do Lord
Do remember me
Do Lord oh do Lord
Do remember me
Lord remember me

(More building crumbles and the sound of sirens from not too far off can be heard.)

NEESY / E / CHEKY

When I'm in trouble, Lord
Do remember me
When I'm in trouble, Lord
Do remember me
When I'm in trouble, Lord
Do remember me
Lord, remember me

(Serious building crumbling, sirens coming, lights start flashing.)

When this world's on fire, Lord
Do remember me
When this world's on fire, Lord
Do remember me
When this world's on fire, Lord

Do remember me
Lord, remember me!

E

Now I thought I done seen e'rythang til I seened that elephant could fly!

(They all look at each other and crack up.)

NEESY

I done toldju I 'on't know nuffin' bout birthin' no babies! I 'on't know nuffin' 'bout nuffin' 'bout nuffin' 'bout *nuffin*!

CHEKY

I zigs an I zags an I tos an I fros. Thass wutcha ask me, thass wutcha knows!

NEESY

Ha ha HA! We's gon be rich an free an we's gon walk out in de sun all de day long.

E

Right on through de promise land yessuh yessuh!

(A police car approaches. Red and blue flashing lights.)

CHEKY

Ohhhh we done did it now!

NEESY

You ain't done nothin' wrong! You's a *good boy*! A strong buck!

E

Jes like me!

NEESY

(Pointing to E:) Jes like he!

CHEKY

You right! I *AM* a good boy!

E

You one strong nigger.

CHEKY

An *you's* a good boy!

NEESY

Both you chillen is jes fine!

CHEKY

(To NEESY:) You's good, too! Massa never sell you wit dem hips!

NEESY

We three be sooperior stock an ev'rybody know it!

(More building crumbles.)

Yes indeedy. You got value. Nigger. CHEKY

Coon. NEESY

Jungle bunny. E

(They laugh.)

Jigaboo CHEKY

Butter head NEESY

Spook E

(They laugh.)

Tar baby CHEKY

Porch monkey NEESY

Jim Crow. E

(They get serious. Then it drops. Then they laugh. Then that drops.)

POLICE OFFICER
(From offstage, through a megaphone:) Vacate the premises.

Crow. O-o-o-o-o . . . O. NEESY

Monk. Heeheeheeheehee CHEKY

Arrrrrabaaaabyooooeeheehee E

(They all bust up laughing. More crumbling.)

POLICE OFFICER
(From offstage, through a megaphone:) I repeat: vacate the premises. Now.

(They all bust up laughing. More crumbling.)

NEESY

Aiieein aiiee uhhnesssann.

CHEKY

Ehhhhh. Eeee oooo.

E

Ehhhhh! Eeee reee.

(Crumbling.)

NEESY

Ioeeeein uh eereh uh urrrraiiieeahl

E

Ehhhh. Eeeee iurrrii owwww

CHEKY

Onuuuuu eeee?

(NEESY, E, and CHEKY explode in violent laughter, which leads to the final collapse of whatever is left of the building/set. The laughter will naturally fade out. As the set crumbles, the POLICE OFFICER tries once more, but his voice melts away into distortion. The world has become a distortion. What is real? What it isn't? The stage is now a bare, burnt-out ruin. There is a long silence. In the silence, the other actors join E, NEESY, and CHEKY on stage. The actors will then speak on behalf of their characters. *The names listed below are of the actors that read this play at the 2015 Bay Area Playwrights Festival.)

THOM

E leaves the Bronx. He is haunted. He dreams of screaming babies and burning flesh when he sleeps. He awakens coughing from phantom smoke each morning. Two years later he learns that no one was killed in his fire. He didn't murder anyone; he just destroyed their homes and all they had.

AKILAH

Neesy makes some decent money working for Tony, but after a few months, she lucks out and finds work as a receptionist in a clean office in a high-rise building way downtown. This is a respectable job. When no one's watching, she reads; it's become her favorite thing to do again. In a few years she'll be in the same office reading Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and it is going to blow her fucking mind!

ELIZABETH

Wanda recovers, but because she lived with the infection for so long, her lungs suffer permanent damage. This means even simple tasks like folding laundry will sometimes leave Wanda gasping for air. Before E leaves, he gives her a large sum of money with no explanation. She is conflicted, but keeps it. Though she stashes about half of it away in a safety deposit box. In five years, the decade famous for fire will be a memory. So when Wanda's bank with her safety deposit box burns down, it's a surprise. The box is fire safe, but sometimes things just...disappear. No matter how many letters to the mayor and your congressman you may write. No matter. She's a survivor. And there's no point in crying over the future.

MICHAEL WAYNE

Cheky, aka Mic Chek, aka Mixmaster C, aka Charles Randolph Freeman never leaves the Bronx, because why would he? It's home. He gets better and better at rocking a party, but when record executives start to come around, he's not feeling it. One of his boys started calling what they did with music and words and dance even graffiti—hip-hop. But hip-hop is ephemeral, not meant to be recorded. So Cheky never made a record. But he still, miraculously, works for the UPS and his son is smart and rare and reminds him of his old best friend so much it's scary.

THOM

E couldn't forget that his hand could wreak havoc in the world. He used them delicately after the summer of '77. Never pushing his way into anything. Staying safely on the outside so he wouldn't hurt anyone. Outside of the music he longed to make, outside of the loves he longed to have. Hoping one day he'd be man enough.

(NEESY, E, and CHEKY explode in laughter, which leads to the final collapse of whatever is left of the building/set. The stage is now a bare, burnt-out ruin. The laughter will naturally fade out. There is a long silence. In the silence, the other actors join E, NEESY, and CHEKY on stage, all their faces in darkness. They stare at the audience. Projections [text and images] and sounds from the next thirty years in hip-hop, Bronx/U.S. history and struggle will quickly flash by on all their faces, sound speeding up as though a cassette is being fast-forwarded. Then that ends. A silence. CHEKY finally steps forward. He digs through the wreckage with some difficulty. After awhile, he finds a turntable, possibly the new one he had at the beginning. He dusts it off lovingly. Miraculously he also finds a record. He slips it on the turntable and turns it on. He hesitantly plays with the record, making sounds, scratching it. E steps forward and digs through the wreckage, too. Cheky finally finds something danceable and gradually the other actors, except E, all begin to dance. They dance like there's no tomorrow. They dance like it's the only way back to life. They dance they dance they dance. E finds a dusty microphone. He stares at it for a moment, as if afraid it might bite him, but then he smiles. He joins the dance.

The RAT appears, now wearing a Yankees jersey. He seems uncharacteristically serious. He lights a joint and when he does this the music and dancing stop instantly. The RAT looks at the audience.)

RAT

If hope is louder than fear . . .
Raise your fist.

(The company raises their fists.)

ALL

Class dismissed.

(Blackout.)

End of Play