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The Process of Bringing an Original Playscript to Production-- Flamingo & Decatur

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The Process of Bringing an Original Playscript to Production
Flamingo & Decatur

The Process of Bringing and Original Playscript to Production
Flamingo & Decatur

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Drama

by

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to present my play, *Flamingo & Decatur*, to the thesis committee, to illuminate the process of writing it, and to place it within the context of the entire body of dramatic writing I've done here at the University of Arkansas.

The dissertation opens with a narrative essay that details the process of bringing *Flamingo & Decatur* to production. It describes the germination of the idea for the play and follows the process through the initial drafts—detailing the ways in which the script was reshaped through its various iterations. Special attention is given to the ways in which the script changed at specific stages in its development: multiple readings with actors, a summer workshop dedicated to improving it, and, of course, its actual production.

Next comes the most important element, a copy of the script itself. This is the text of *Flamingo & Decatur*, exactly as it was performed at Nadine Baum Studio Theatre. An accompanying program from the play documents this production.

And finally, the play is placed within the context of my course of studies here. To that end, I've included a list of all dramatic works completed here, a catalogue of productions I've received, and a playwriting resume which details, not just my writing output, but also my teaching responsibilities while at the university.

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I. **THESIS NARRATIVE**

As I sat back and watched the amazing cast of Flamingo & Decatur perform on opening night, the delineation of the story seemed fairly clear. We meet a man--in this case a Las Vegas gambler--who's been living almost exclusively for himself. We watch him suffer a bitter romantic setback but also see him learn something. In the play's final moment in which he reaches out to buck up someone else, we see him grow as a human being.

I didn't set out to tell that story. I'm not sure I set out to tell any specific story, which is part of why the script of Flamingo went through so many permutations. I guess in some ways I still think about dramatic stories in the same way I thought about journalistic stories when I was a sportswriter. My first question is always, what's the angle?

The undeniable audience satisfaction produced by Aristotelian plot structure means that stories found in plays can often seem to be different versions of some other (often familiar) story. So I ask myself, what is it that I'm bringing to the table that is going to give me an angle? What is going to make this feel fresh? What can I show these people that they haven't seen or thought about before?

In the case of Calculation, my previous play, the process was very different. In that instance, the story was already there, essentially written by history. The fresh perspective I felt I could bring to the table was the ability to see dramatic potential in those historical events. As the son of a mathematician and someone who appreciates the beauty of mathematics, I saw a roiling conflict between two titans of natural philosophy where others might see only a dusty academic dispute.

For my thesis project, I knew I wanted to write a play set in Las Vegas. Having spent six

years there as a professional poker player immediately prior to entering the program here, I was struck by the way people's ears would prick up when I would tell them that. Lots of people were clearly interested (or at least thought they were interested) in the exotic lifestyle of the Vegas gambler. Having that life experience felt like dramatic capital jangling around in my pocket. I just needed to figure out how to spend it.

My mother had given me another nugget of an idea when she emailed me an article about this guy who forged some documents and moved into a multi-million dollar home in North Raleigh—living there for several months before being detected. The idea of having my gambler protagonist squatting illegally in a gated community appealed to me. Las Vegas was the epicenter of the housing market implosion. I liked the idea of capturing the city in a specific moment in time, just after the crash.

And so as I started writing, I had my angle. I was going to show the audience a world I knew intimately, the world of Vegas gamblers: How they talked, how they operated, how they viewed others, how they viewed themselves, what it felt like to ride their emotional roller coaster. I had the angle, but I didn't really have the story. So I started to construct a narrative—a gambling narrative.

One of the interesting facets of a professional gambler's life is the way gambling often permeates every other activity. My gambler buddies and I would obviously gamble on any games of skill we happened to play--golf, basketball, horseshoes, and the like—as well as sports we'd watch on television. But we'd also gamble on every other aspect of life: Whether the temperature would top 110 in July, who would win the 1979 re-run of Family Feud we were watching, who could lose the most weight before Christmas.

I wasn't on the course, but several of my buddies were on that scorching August day in

2008 when pro poker player Erick “E-Dog” Lindgren famously played Rio Seco four times in one day—walking the course without a caddy and breaking 100 all four times. Lindgren pocketed over \$100,000 from a consortium of other players on the losing side of what's known as a “proposition bet.” I thought the prop bet had potential as a dramatic device—there are stakes, there's a build-up to a confrontation, and finally, there's a winner and a loser.

So now I had two forces I was hoping could propel the dramatic action: The brazen act of illegally squatting and its ramifications, and some sort of winner-take-all prop bet scenario.

I knew right away I wanted a protagonist-plus-roommate set-up. I had lots of experience living in gambling collectives in Las Vegas. It was extremely common for a handful of players to band together in order to rent a large house with a pool and hot tub—de rigueur amenities for anyone aspiring to the “baller” lifestyle. I knew the other gambler characters in the play would be poker players, so I decided to make Jackson, the protagonist, a sports bettor. Earning a living as a professional poker player is extremely difficult, but making it as a sports bettor is exponentially harder. There's a certain hubris—even a quixotic aspect—to the enterprise which appealed to me.

I also knew pretty quickly the roommate would be not just a poker player, but an online poker player. Online play can be more profitable because of the enormous increase in the rate of hands per hour you could play in a virtual environment. Unfortunately for online players, this means the gambling roller coaster goes even faster, and during a losing streak, the sense of desperation, and especially isolation, is also magnified.

There can be plenty of loneliness and desperation in playing live, but at least the live player has to dress himself, drive to the casino, notice the weather, interact with other humans at the table. The online player-- especially one like my long-time roommate Adam who was

pathologically unable to quit playing during a losing session—might go days at a time without ever leaving the house or changing out of his pajamas.

The situation of squatting illegally in a foreclosed property seemed antagonistic in itself—the financial desperation, the danger, the sense of living outside of the system. But this force could be brought into sharper relief by creating an actual antagonist--the pain-in-the-ass next-door neighbor—and so I introduced the character of Simon.

And finally, I added the character of Nicole because I've always found the female poker player to be a fascinating species. With any professional gambler it's interesting to ask, what makes this person do it? But it's even more interesting, I think, to ask that about a woman who chooses to go into such a male-dominated world. In any event, the uber-male world I was creating for the play seemed to be crying out for a female presence.

So now I had four characters, and that number was a conscious choice. I had decided early on that I wanted to write a four-hander, set in a single location. During the course of my studies here, I was exposed to the viewpoints of several different playwrights on how important practical considerations should be when writing your play.

On one end of the spectrum, you had the view that understanding the realities of theatrical production and then shaping your play to reflect those realities was a crucial ingredient of playwriting. Any other approach amounted to self-sabotage. After all, you wanted your play produced, wanted your voice heard. Didn't you?

On the other end of the spectrum were the free spirits. The advice there was seemingly to write exactly the story you wanted to tell. The story was paramount, and anything that felt like a limitation or restriction could compromise the story. Write the best one possible and then let the director and the TD figure out how to stage it.

It seemed to me that the free spirits might be on to something—I could envision a time when I would want to cast off the onerous yoke of practicality. But until I actually tried writing a production-friendly play, I wouldn't really know what I was supposed to be rebelling against. It would be a good learning experience, I thought, to try and write a four-hander set in a single location.

And so I started cranking on the project with the goal of completing a first draft in time to get it into the rotation for the playreading series on Tuesday nights. I had my world, my moment in time, my four characters, my physical location. I had the twin engines of illegal squatting and proposition betting to drive the plot. And with these elements in mind, I produced a 90-page draft and took it in for a read with the graduate actors.

After the read, there was a lot of general agreement in the room on certain points. People liked the world, they liked the characters, and they especially liked the language of the play. But there was also a lot of agreement that the stakes didn't feel high enough. It appeared that neither of the twin engines supposedly driving the plot had the necessary horsepower to really propel it. The problem seemed to be that with both the prop betting and the squatting situation, the stakes never seemed personal enough. The prop betting was about the protagonist winning \$50,000, and even though that's a sizable figure--and even though for Jackson it represented the end of an almost mythological quest to recover something he'd lost--in the end it's only money. Money comes and goes.

The illegal squatting did have an attractive element of danger, but again the stakes weren't high enough. Maintaining their precarious living situation was important to Jackson and Ben, but not something in which they had a huge emotional investment. And so it was hard for the audience to invest emotionally.

After the read, I was giving a lift to the chronically transportation-less head of playwriting, Bob Ford, and he offered a way of looking at the problem that resonated with me. If the world of the play was interesting and the characters were compelling, then the idea was to look at the set-up as a laboratory. I was now free to experiment within that laboratory and figure out what it was that my protagonist really wanted.

The most obvious answer was sitting on a platter right in front of me: I could put Jackson and Nicole together romantically. In fact, even in the first draft it's clear that Jackson is attracted to her. But I had resisted this impulse because there was something I liked about the dynamic of two people of the opposite sex awash in this world of gambling and connecting purely on those terms without any romantic context at all. Also, the move to put them together seemed, well, too obvious.

But once I gave in to it, the decision almost immediately felt like the right one. I realized that there was a real longing inside of Jackson—a void that couldn't be filled by any amount of property commandeering or proposition betting. To have a real chance at a relationship with someone like Nicole, and then, as my plot would have it, to lose that chance—the cost of that felt very real.

Once the keystone of the romantic interaction between Jackson and Nicole was cemented in, all of the other elements seemed to fall into place around it. The dual engines of prop betting and house squatting that had failed as primary drivers of the action seemed to work effectively as sub-plots. The house-squatting angle was sharpened by Jackson's interaction with Simon; the prop-betting was brought into focus through his relationship with an unseen adversary, the shadowy bookie T.K.

As the internal logic of the play crystalized, I found a way to give Ben his own character

arc. The guy who would go to any lengths to avoid obtaining real employment eventually finds job satisfaction with the None of the Above Preservation Society. I found it ironically pleasing that it's only in the absurd mission of NOTAPS (a real issue if not a real organization) that Ben finds his sense of purpose.

But it was the Jackson-Nicole storyline that was really carrying the ball. I wrote a daytime scene where they do some Beatrice-and-Benedick-type sparring, and the nighttime scene where their relationship deepens. We see them form a real connection as Nicole tells her bad-beat story and makes herself vulnerable before it all rips apart when Jackson confesses the truth about their living situation. I initially had Nicole saying a few more things to Jackson before exiting in that scene but then decided to get her out of there as quickly as possible—keeping my powder dry for a later confrontation between them.

The final scene between Jackson and Simon was fun to write: The gradual unthawing of hostilities between them. Two guys--each lonely in his own way, each suffering the effects of a loss--connecting over a beer and some talk about football and golf. I liked the symmetry of bookending the play with Jackson-Simon scenes.

And then I was allowed to sneak my substantially re-written play back into the Tuesday night series for another read just before the end of the spring semester. The response to the changes was generally positive, and Bob had two concrete suggestions.

One had to do with the dramatic arc or spine of the protagonist and making sure all the events contributing to that spine are in alignment. (A visit with Bob is often like a visit to a chiropractor.) The link between Jackson's breakup with Nicole and his decision to connect with Simon was there, but it was fuzzy. Bob suggested reworking the confrontation scene so that we clearly see Jackson learn something about himself in that moment--something that he then

applies in the final scene.

The other suggestion had to do with Nicole's backstory. The way her current occupation was affecting her emotional outlook was pretty clear, but her background was a bit of a cipher. Bob suggested having her tell Jackson something personal about her childhood--something that would not only deepen the connection between them, but also help us to better understand who she was.

After implementing both of those suggestions, I sent the improved draft to Nancy Rominger at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, where Flamingo was to receive an informal reading as part of my internship at the Southern Writers Project. The reading was a lot of fun—augmented with beer and pizza—and represented another opportunity to hear talented actors work with the text. In addition to the readers, there were a dozen or so spectators—actors, directors, and playwrights working on various SWP projects. Not surprisingly, some valuable observations came out of the reading.

The first was a general observation: The actors really liked the dialogue—the pacing, the lingo, the rhythm of it. That was very encouraging. But two very specific criticisms also emerged:

The first had to do with Ben's NOTAPS scene. After excitedly describing his new job, he was continuing on to give Jackson a mini-version of his stump speech. I was having some fun at the expense of the right-wing judge who struck the NOTA option off the Nevada ballot in hopes of improving Mitt Romney's chances there before getting smacked down himself by a higher appellate court. But the speech was slowing down the dramatic action.

The second criticism had to do with the arc of the Simon-Jackson relationship. As it moved from bitterly adversarial toward genuine friendship, there seemed to be a crucial “missing

step.”

A two-birds-with-one-stone approach to the fix immediately presented itself. I could simply remove the stump speech (getting Ben out of the picture earlier) and replace it with a short Simon-Jackson scene. The only hurdle was figuring out a reason for him to come back over.

I decided to go with the missing-cat angle because it would reveal some of Simon's essential loneliness and desperation. Because I knew exactly where I wanted things to end up, writing this scene was like dropping in a missing puzzle piece—I think I wrote the whole scene in 90 minutes and never really tinkered with it much.

I took this draft into the university's new play development workshop during the intersession between spring and summer. The same actors who would appear in the final production were present at the workshop, and a number of useful suggestions emerged. It was extremely helpful to hear Stephanie Bignault, the actor playing Nicole, talk about how she was interpreting that character's super-objective.

There was also a bit of crucial retooling that occurred in the final scene. Initially, I had Jackson suggesting a golf outing only after Simon decides not to collect the \$500. Bob eventually convinced me to switch the order, so that it's clear Jackson is responding directly to Simon's need for companionship rather than appearing as a quid pro quo exchange.

After implementing those changes, the play went almost immediately into production. I was thrilled, naturally, to get a sensitive, dynamic director in Amy Herzberg and a talented, seasoned cast of three MFA actors and one up-and-coming undergraduate. The only mild disappointment came when I was told that because the set needed to be versatile enough to function for both my thesis play and that of my fellow MFA Prince Duren, I could expect a

minimalist approach to scenic design.

I had hoped that setting the play in a single location might provide the opportunity for a more elaborate set design, but the decision was easily understandable. Hey, two out of three ain't bad, I told myself. Imagine my surprise when Amy showed me an artist's rendering for the set that looked exactly like the back of one of the Vegas houses in which I had lived. Designer Michael Riha had cunningly conceived a set that could be transformed in a single day from the apartment interior of Prince's play to the exterior location of Flamingo.

Because of some scheduling conflicts, Flamingo was rehearsed on a slightly compressed schedule, and it was immediately clear that the process wouldn't allow for the same sort of rewriting that had occurred during the rehearsal of Calculation. I had to be mindful of the actors' challenge in getting off-book with a pretty hefty script, especially that of Jason Shipman, who played Jackson and thus appeared in every scene of the play.

That's not to say there weren't improvements. Sharp-eyed as ever, Amy found moments where the timing of the text wasn't lining up with the natural staging or transitions that seemed a little jagged, and so she requested small alterations. These usually involved generating a very small amount of new text or simply moving things around a little and didn't cause the actors much hardship.

And I was allowed a few tweaks of my own. Listening to the actors work with the text, I would sometimes suggest a more natural phrasing if it seemed something was tripping them up. And then at a rate of, say, once for every two dozen times I silently wished an actor would say the line exactly as I'd written it, I would actually like the way they had altered it better than what I originally had, so I would write in the improved line.

But the rehearsal process for me was mainly about observation—watching Amy and the

cast do the hard work of creating an actual performance. Amy would indulge my occasional notion about the staging—sometimes implementing it, sometimes not. Because she had to be out of town during technical rehearsal, Bob seamlessly took the reins during that part of the process. I strengthened my understanding of how the sausage actually gets made in technical rehearsal—how lighting and sound cues get designed and built into the show, how costume quick changes get rehearsed, etc. I was assigned the fun task of creating a list of thematic and upbeat songs about Vegas and gambling, which Amy used as music during the transitions.

One interesting facet of the transitions, which was implemented at the 11th hour during the dress rehearsal, was the concept of having Jackson stay on stage during the scene changes. As part of Valerie Lane's spot-on costume design, he was simply putting on different Hawaiian shirts over the same Corona tee. Having Jason effect these changes onstage gave us a glimpse of “the lion in his lair,” as Bob put it, and it worked pretty well, I thought.

I guess it's a reminder that with things like staging transitions—just as with writing—it's the small touches that make all the difference. I was further reminded of this concept when Michael popped out of tech rehearsal for a late-night shopping run. The set already looked like the back of a house, but after he added a few textural details—some rocks, some ground-level Malibu lights, a spigot, a garden hose—it *really* looked like the back of a house.

The two performances themselves, well, what can I say? It's hard to describe how pleasurable it is to watch such a talented group of performers bring something you've written to life. The collaborative feeling of watching an actor take a character you created and show you something about him or her that you'd never realized before—it's a pretty special thing.

The audiences, while not large, were very theatre-savvy and eager to contribute to the talkback session after the shows. One thing I'd been watching throughout the writing process was

how people were responding to the amount of gambling jargon in the play. The response of these audiences was pretty consistent with what I'd heard in the readings—even though they oftentimes didn't understand chunks of dialogue, it wasn't interfering with their enjoyment or their ability to follow the plot.

A more surprising revelation was the way in which a significant swath of the audience viewed Nicole. They were quite suspicious of her motives, especially when she is mixing the drinks in the nighttime scene. Stephanie tends to naturally project a sort of sweetness, even innocence, which makes the audience's suspicions of her character even more noteworthy. I suppose one should never underestimate the public perception of professional poker players as untrustworthy.

Much of the most interesting feedback centered around the confrontation scene between Jackson and Nicole. This was the one scene where I felt the compressed rehearsal schedule may have taken a little bit of a toll. The scene has a lot of subtext and lines that can be taken in different directions. It seemed that in the final rehearsals the actors were still exploring the interaction in that scene, and I'm not sure they ever got it completely dialed in.

I also suspect the writing in that scene is not completely dialed in. The university's head of directing, Michael Landman, felt the emotional stakes seemed higher than could be justified by the previous interaction between Nicole and Jackson. But a female audience member contested this, saying that the depth of Nicole's wound seemed satisfactorily explained by the nature of her personality and her profession as a card-player—the way in which she always has to keep her guard up and what it meant for her to make herself vulnerable by letting it down.

This latter view largely reflects my own opinion, but I know there are probably ways I can strengthen that connection in the script. Bob has suggested that maybe there's something in

Nicole's background—in her relationship with her Navy father perhaps—that I could add to further underscore this concept, and that's something I want to explore.

Another idea that emerged from my post-show breakdown conversation with Bob was that maybe the key to the showdown scene was in Nicole's line: “You want me sure, but I'm not sure you could ever need me.” His thought was that the sentiment in that line might possibly be teased out and clarified.

I'm actually somewhat inclined to go in the opposite direction and cut that line. It's one of the few that sounded to me like it had been put in the character's mouth by a playwright. I think it's because it's one of the rare instances in which either character talks explicitly about the nature of their relationship. Mostly--even during the heart of the confrontation--they are talking about something else, and the way they actually feel about each other is riding underneath as subtext. I think cutting that line might help alleviate Michael's contention that the emotional pitch of the scene didn't feel completely earned. There are probably a few other lines in that scene that are candidates for addition by subtraction, and tightening the scene is something else Bob suggested.

In any event, the entire process of writing, workshopping, rewriting, rehearsing, and performing Flamingo & Decatur reminded me, once again, how lucky I've been to be a part of this program—a program small enough so that each playwright gets to see a fair bit of his work up on its feet, and large enough to surround and support that playwright with incredibly talented actors, directors, and designers.

The thesis process has really been the culmination of what, for me at least, has been a long journey toward truly understanding the collaborative nature of theatre. That aspect is no doubt second nature to people who have a lot of hands-on experience with it. But when I came

into the program, the only thing I knew about plays was what I had absorbed from watching (or in most cases reading) them. I had this vague idea that readings and workshops were supposed to be invaluable resources for improving your work, but I wasn't sure exactly why that was.

Going through the various stages of the thesis process, and especially the actual production of the play, really reminded me once again of what I've come to appreciate most about theatre collaboration. The esprit de corps that Jackson talks about in Flamingo is a real thing in theatre. I'm not sure how many people get a chance to really feel that in their professional lives, but it's certainly infectious.

I think that's the biggest reason it's such a safe bet that I'll follow through by making the above-mentioned alterations to Flamingo and then shipping it around to various contests and workshops. With a little bit of luck, maybe I'll get to feel the excitement of having a play in production again in the not-too-distant future.

II. **PRODUCTION**

Flamingo and Decatur

By

Todd Taylor

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

JACKSON	Around 30.
NICOLE	Same.
BEN	Same.
SIMON	Same. Possibly somewhat older.

TIME

2009.

PLACE

Las Vegas, NV

SCENE ONE.

The backyard/patio area of a four-bedroom Las Vegas house--the type built by the thousands in gated sub-divisions during the boom years of the early to mid-2000s. A sliding glass door in the stucco wall. The ubiquitous Vegas hot tub sunken in the gravel-covered yard, which is bounded by cinderblock walls. Not so ubiquitous, a backyard putting green. It's vibrant color stands in stark contrast to the general drabness.

The patio is partially covered by a terra cotta roof. Some patio furniture, a couple of fake wrought-iron chaise lounges, a table and chairs. On the table, an outdated, non-flat-screen TV. JACKSON watches the TV intently while working out on a treadmill/step machine.

JACKSON

Don't run it. Please don't run it. Just throw it. One time.

(Beat.)

They're stacking the box. Oh, my God. Are you blind? They're selling out. Check out of that. Audible, audible. Just throw it. Come on, throw it, throw it, throw it....God...DAMMIT. Are you fucking kidding me?

He stops the machine and steps down off of it, switching off the TV with a remote and wiping his face with a towel. He steps over to the putting green and picks up a three-wood and limbers up his shoulders--grabbing the club at each end, raising it over his head and then bringing it down behind his back in a familiar stretch.

He is breathing heavily, mostly because of the stair machine, but also for a different reason.

With each deep breath out he attempts to exhale his frustration and tension, and reach a zen/yoga state of relaxation. It's not easy or completely successful, but after a few stretches he discards the 3-wood for a putter and lines up a putt. More deep breaths. As he hits the putt...

SIMON

Howdy, neighbor.

JACKSON misses the putt badly. He takes another unsuccessful de-stressing breath, then looks to find SIMON at the gate in the wall.

SIMON (cont'd)

Man, I'm really glad to see you're using that putting green. Doug--you know, the previous owner--he had it built special. Got the contours and everything.

JACKSON

(Coming over to the gate.)

Yeah, it's great. Dave, right?

SIMON

Simon--you don't remember?

JACKSON

Of course.

SIMON

I mean, you made kind of a production about introducing yourself the day you moved in. Or was that just for show?

JACKSON

Simon. No, I knew that. Momentary...sorry.

SIMON

You're Jackson.

JACKSON

Yep.

SIMON

That's an easy one, kind of unusual. Like Jackson Pollack.

JACKSON
That's it.

SIMON
Or Jackson Browne.

JACKSON
What can I do for you, Simon?

SIMON
I'd like to talk about something if you have just a minute.
(Re: the gate.)
You mind if I...

JACKSON
No, come in.

SIMON works the latch and lets himself in.

SIMON
I feel a little awkward.

JACKSON
Why's that?

SIMON
Well, it's my first time over here and I'm coming with a little bit of a complaint.

JACKSON
Uh oh.

SIMON
Yeah, no, it's not a huge thing but I...I notice you haven't been watering your grass.

JACKSON
Hmmm.

SIMON
I mean we got those big thunderstorms in July which kind of allowed your yard to hang in there, but...

(Beat.)
I don't know if you've lived in Vegas in early fall, but it's still pretty hot. The conditions here, they kill grass pretty quick. If you don't water it.

JACKSON
Right, right.

SIMON

So could you start watering it?

JACKSON

Well, the thing is, if I water the grass, it'll grow. And then I'll have to mow it.

SIMON

OK. And that's a big deal because?

JACKSON

We don't have a mower.

SIMON

I take care of my own yard, but that's kind of unusual, to be honest. Most people out here just get a lawn service.

JACKSON

(Lining up a putt.)

Mmmm.

SIMON

Which would be good because you've got some small trees out front which are also dying.

JACKSON putts the ball and watches it intently as it tracks toward the hole. He continues to hit putts at various points throughout the scene.

JACKSON

A lawn service would be great. But with the economy and everything, I'll be honest, we're stretched pretty thin over here.

SIMON

What line of work are you in?

JACKSON

I'm a sports investor.

SIMON

You mean you bet on sports?

JACKSON

Yeah.

SIMON

So you're basically a gambler?

JACKSON

Well. Yeah.

SIMON

So what's that got to do with the economy?

JACKSON

Gamblers are not immune from the effects of this economy, let me tell you. The whole thing, you know, with the falling tide and the boats.

SIMON

I thought you guys were renting the house.

JACKSON

That's right.

SIMON

Every rental agreement I've ever seen for a nice neighborhood like this, the landlord contracts a lawn service. It's not usually left to the renters.

JACKSON

Our guy's a little sketchy I think.

SIMON

What's his name?

JACKSON

Victor, Hector, something like that.

SIMON

(Re: Airplane)

What's your vector, Victor?

JACKSON

Exactly.

SIMON

Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of the guy, whoever he is. One less empty house on this street.

(Beat.)

Say, you don't know how much Victor paid for this place do you?

JACKSON

Not really.

SIMON

I guess I can look it up. I think they put that stuff online now.

JACKSON

Oh, you know what, I actually do know how much he paid, now that I think about it. Because he was kind of bragging about picking it up for a song. I guess it was like a...distressed property.

SIMON

How much did he pay?

JACKSON

Two hundred thousand.

SIMON

Around two hundred or exactly two hundred?

JACKSON

Exactly two hundred. I remember because I thought it was weird to be a round number like that. But yeah, exactly two hundred.

SIMON

That's not good.

(Casting a look back in the direction of his own house.)

Doug paid 385. That was four years ago.

JACKSON

Brutal. They foreclosed on him?

SIMON

He walked away.

JACKSON

Hmmm.

SIMON

Lost about 40K in equity, he said.

JACKSON

Ugh.

SIMON

Lot cheaper than continuing to pay 385 for something that's worth...200.

JACKSON

When you put it like that, hard to blame him.

SIMON

It's not something I would do. I think if you sign a contract, you should, you know....

(Beat.)

I'm not mad at the guy. You invest in real estate because you think it's safe. Then the bottom falls out.

JACKSON

Yeah, that's rough.

SIMON

But sometimes I think if everyone had just lived up to their word, the whole crisis could have been averted.

JACKSON

Kind of a moral grey area.

SIMON

Well, unless you start watering it, your front lawn's gonna be a grey area.

Beat.

JACKSON

Look, I know you're in a tough spot. But I doubt the fact that your house lost half its value has much to do with the color of my yard.

SIMON

You're right. There are market forces I can't control.

JACKSON

The invisible hand.

SIMON

The invisible hand. Yeah. No one can control it.

JACKSON

No.

SIMON

So I focus on what I can control.

JACKSON

Like the grass.

Beat.

SIMON

Look, the bylaws are pretty clear: Grass is OK, gravel is OK, crushed brick is OK. But a giant patch of dirt is not OK. I came over here to talk man-to-man because I didn't want to get the homeowners association involved, but now it seems as though--

JACKSON

Whoa, Simon, call off the cavalry there, guy. We can work this out. I mean, sure, you could sic the association on Hector, who I think is in South America right now anyway, and, sure, maybe after six months of red tape, you could finally force him to do something with the lawn...Or....

SIMON

Or?

JACKSON

I could start throwing some water on it tomorrow, and green it right up. Yard would look like fucking Ireland.

SIMON

Sounds great.

JACKSON

All I'm asking is a little cooperation on your part.

SIMON

Cooperation?

JACKSON

I've seen that bad-ass riding mower you've got--what is that, a 20-horsepower Toro?

SIMON

Twenty-two, yeah.

JACKSON

Cuts a swath that's like four feet wide?

SIMON

Not quite.

JACKSON

But pretty close.

SIMON

Forty-six inches.

JACKSON

I think we can agree that's pretty close to four feet.

SIMON

Pretty close, yeah.

JACKSON

Right, so you finish cutting your grass and then you just sort of swizzle across the driveway there, make a few passes in my yard with that big ol' four-foot swath, and bing...there you go.

SIMON

Why would I cut your grass?

JACKSON

I'm trying to meet you halfway here. Personally, I could give a shit about the lawn. But I'm willing to foot the extra water bill if you're willing to pitch in a little. Take you all of ten minutes.

SIMON

Maybe I could just loan you the mower.

JACKSON

Then I'd have to bother you to borrow it, bother you to return it.

SIMON

Wouldn't bother me.

JACKSON

Plus, my buddy had a Toro just like that one. Blade threw up a rock and cracked the oil pan.

SIMON

I don't really see how that could happen.

JACKSON

Oh, it happened. He's mowing away without a care in the world and suddenly there's no oil in the engine. You ever seen a 22-horsepower Toro engine after it's seized up?

SIMON

No.

JACKSON

Well, it's not pretty. No, I wouldn't want to take on the responsibility of operating another man's power equipment.

Beat.

SIMON

OK. You water it, and I'll mow it. But you gotta do one thing.

JACKSON

Shoot.

SIMON

I notice on your car, you got some kind of wire stuck in the stub where your antenna used to be.

JACKSON

Coat hanger.

SIMON

Does that really improve reception?

JACKSON

Oh, it's night and day.

SIMON

Well, it just looks kinda crappy sitting in the driveway there. You can buy a cheap antenna for ten or fifteen bucks.

JACKSON

(Steering him back to the gate.)

You know what? You got it.

They shake on it. JACKSON opens the gate for him.

JACKSON (cont'd)

They say good fences make good neighbors. You know what I think makes good neighbors?

SIMON

What?

JACKSON

Communication. Working together to resolve a situation.

SIMON

Could be.

JACKSON

A lot of people will tell you that nobody knows their neighbors anymore. Especially in this town. Simon, I'm just glad that's not the case with us.

SIMON

See you later.

JACKSON

So long, neighbor.

SIMON exits. JACKSON gets back on the treadmill and paces for a short while. BEN enters carrying an open laptop.

BEN

Oh, my God! This is...how can this keep happening? How is it possible for any one human to run so bad?

JACKSON studiously avoids eye contact by fiddling with the treadmill display.

BEN (cont'd)

Listen to this one--

JACKSON

Nope.

BEN

Just this one. You have to hear this.

JACKSON

No.

BEN

You're not gonna believe it.

JACKSON

I already believe it.

BEN

You won't though. Listen--

JACKSON

Dude, there is a special level of hell reserved for people who tell bad beat stories.

BEN

Yeah, well I'm going to hell anyway. Just let me tell this one.

JACKSON

No, man, no. I'm serious.

JACKSON gets off the treadmill and goes to the putting green. BEN follows him over. Throughout the story, JACKSON attempts his relaxation breathing, then more putting.

BEN

So under-the-gun raises, I three-bet with, of course, aces--

JACKSON

You're the worst. The absolute worst.

BEN

I know, I am, I know. So I three-bet with aces. Guy to my left caps it with kings. Monster idiot on the button calls FOUR bets cold.

JACKSON

I'm pretty sure I've heard this one.

BEN

Just listen. Flop comes ace, king, four rainbow.

JACKSON

Oh, I've definitely heard this one.

BEN

I bet out, kings raise, idiot calls, we cap it.

JACKSON

Turn card is a queen.

Beat.

BEN

How'd you know that?

JACKSON

I told you I've heard this one.

BEN

This happened two minutes ago.

JACKSON

I've heard it. I've heard'em all.

BEN

This just fucking happened!

JACKSON

In bad beat stories, the turn card is always a queen.

BEN

So, turn card is a queen. Me and the guy with kings, we cap it again with the idiot in the middle calling the whole way. River...jack.

JACKSON

Obviously.

BEN

Donkey takes all that heat with two tens as like a 500-1 dog and magically gets rewarded with a straight. Fourteen-hundred-dollar pot.

JACKSON

The fish have to win sometimes or there'd be no game.

BEN

But why does it have to keep happening to me?

JACKSON

It's not just happening to you.

BEN

I don't want to be lucky. I've never asked for that. I just don't want to be unlucky.

JACKSON

You're lucky you don't have a roommate who tells bad beat stories.

BEN

Funny.

JACKSON

I'm serious. Fourth-and-goal from the two, and Mississippi State's genius coach decides take a back with no vision and no burst and plow him up the middle behind a line that hadn't moved a soul all game. Do I complain to you?

BEN

Well, in a way you just sort of--

JACKSON

No, I don't. Because it doesn't change anything. It doesn't make me feel any better.

BEN

That's not why I tell you.

JACKSON

Why do you tell me?

BEN

I don't know. I want there to be a record.

JACKSON

A record.

BEN

I want the record to reflect how bad I run. Not just in poker, but in life.

Beat.

JACKSON

Look, I never thought I'd say this to anyone, but you need an actual job.

BEN

That's not an option.

JACKSON

If you keep playing online poker, you're gonna drop dead of a heart attack by the time you're forty. Either that or go crazy as a fucking jackalope.

BEN

What are you, my life coach now?

JACKSON gets back on the step machine.

JACKSON

At the very least, you should hop on this thing once in a while. Release some of that stress.

BEN

I can't believe you got one with a built-in heart monitor for fifty bucks.

JACKSON

Guy probably never even used it once.

BEN

Vegas has the best pawn shops. So many degenerates.

JACKSON

How much cash have you got?

BEN

I dunno. Couple hundred maybe.

JACKSON

You have like fifteen thousand.

BEN

It's all online.

JACKSON

Well, take some of it off. We gotta start paying to water the grass.

BEN

We gotta do what?

JACKSON

(Gesturing toward the gate.)

You know our weird neighbor?

BEN

That fucking guy...

JACKSON

He's threatening to put the homeowner's association on our ass about the lawn. Which would obviously blow our situation sky high.

BEN

I thought you had like seven thousand.

JACKSON

It's all tied up in the last-longer bet with Houston Ray.

BEN

That was for five thousand. Where's the other two?

JACKSON

Mississippi State.

BEN

God, you're a total D-gen.

JACKSON

But Ray's an even bigger D-gen. That's the whole point.

BEN

How long's it been? A week?

JACKSON

Eight days, yeah.

BEN

I gotta say you look good, down a few L.B.s, little color in your cheeks.

JACKSON

It's been brutal.

BEN

Totally vegan, right? Not even dairy?

JACKSON

No animal products of any kind.

BEN

And no alcohol?

JACKSON

Not a drop.

BEN

I can't believe you agreed to that last one.

JACKSON

Ray said he'd lay 2-to-1 if we put that in. He thinks it's gonna be his ace.

BEN

For sure it is.

JACKSON

But it's not. The no-alcohol clause is really...my ace.

BEN

Your ace? You probably haven't gone eight days without a beer since you were 14.

JACKSON

If I could drink, then one night I would have some beers. Judgment would be impaired. Inhibitions lowered. Next thing you know, I'm at the Taco Bell drive-thru.

BEN

Would Taco Bell even count as animal product?

JACKSON

The point is, if I can fade drinking alcohol, it makes me more likely to stay with the diet, not less likely. It's a correlated parlay.

BEN

You sure Ray will pay off if he loses?

JACKSON

Ray's a D-gen, but he wouldn't welch on a bet. He'll pay off.

BEN

If he's got the money.

JACKSON

He just hit the main event in Tunica for a quarter mil.

BEN

Ray could blow through that in two weeks.

(Beat.)

Maybe I can sell a few thousand to Florida Dave. He always needs chips online.

BEN sends a two-word text. SFX: Doorbell.

BEN (cont'd)

I got it.

JACKSON

You expecting somebody?

BEN

(Exiting through the sliding door.)

Yeah, it's cool.

JACKSON gets off the treadmill and moves back to the putting green for some more relaxation breathing. BEN returns with a pizza and opens the box on the table.

JACKSON

Really, dude? Really?

BEN

What? It's beautiful out here.

JACKSON

Are you serious?

BEN

I wanna eat it al fresco.

JACKSON

You want me to lose. Is that it?

BEN

(Digging into a slice.)

Look, man, I'm sorry. But it's your bet.

JACKSON

But right in front of my face?

BEN

I gotta live my life, bro.

JACKSON comes over and investigates.

JACKSON

A meat-lover's? Man, you are something else.

BEN

Don't look at it.

JACKSON

You're a real gem. I just wanna...

JACKSON sticks his face in the pizza and inhales deeply.

BEN

(Attempting to shield the pizza.)

No, hey, no, what're you doing? Stop it, dude.

JACKSON

I'm just getting a whiff.

BEN

No, man. Hold on, you're fucking drooling on it.

JACKSON

Oh, my God, is that Italian sausage?

BEN finally gets himself between JACKSON and the pizza and is able to close the box.

BEN

All right, fine, fine. I'll eat it inside.

(Heading for the sliding door with the box.)

But I wanna know, where can I get some side action on Houston Ray? Is that betting window still open? 'Cause you got no shot.

BEN exits. JACKSON attempts his most unsuccessful relaxation breathing ever. SIMON appears at the gate.

SIMON

You wanna open the gate?

JACKSON

Oh, hey, Simon. I'd love to chat some more, but I was just on my way to, uh--

SIMON

I think you better open it.

JACKSON

(Letting him in.)

Sure, sure. What's on your mind, neighbor?

SIMON

(Going to putting green and picking up the putter.)

For some reason I felt like doing a little putting. Just a wild hair, I guess. You don't mind, do you?

JACKSON

Well, no, not ordinarily. It's just I have a few things going--

SIMON

(Lining up the putt.)

Stop talking a second.

He hits the putt. It lips out.

SIMON (cont'd)

Man, that little ridge is so tough to see. Looks like it has to move left.

JACKSON

Now, look, Simon. This is not a good time, OK?

SIMON

Oh, well, I don't wanna disturb you. A man's home is his castle, isn't that what they say?

JACKSON

That's what they say.

SIMON

It's like this guy I've been reading about, Bonnie Prince Charlie. He wanted to be king of England. Wanted to live in that big castle. But his claim, you know, it was illegitimate.

JACKSON

Bonnie Prince Charlie.

SIMON

You know what they called him?

(Beat.)

You're gonna like this. They called him, the Pretender.

JACKSON

Huh.

SIMON

Yeah, you kinda remind me of him.

JACKSON

No kidding.

SIMON

I mean you're just a little bit bonnie yourself, aren't you? Just a wee bit. Bonnie.

Beat.

JACKSON

Have I done something to--

SIMON

Did you really think you could get away with it?

JACKSON

I think there must be some kind of misunderstanding.

SIMON

*(Jabbing the putter very gently into
JACKSON's chest.)*

I checked online. I know what's going on around here.

JACKSON

You are totally losing me, guy. Is this about the lawn because--

SIMON

You guys are squatters.

JACKSON

Squatters? What does that even mean?

SIMON

It means you're not paying rent. The bank still owns this house. You guys just moved into it for free.

JACKSON

Oh, is that what this is about? Because it takes a few months for the paperwork to, you know, go all the way through.

SIMON

Is that right?

JACKSON

Sure, Victor probably forgot to dot an I somewhere is all. I mean, squatters? Who even--

SIMON

(Pulling out a cell phone.)

Good, that's good. I'm glad it's a mistake.

JACKSON

That's all it is.

SIMON

You don't mind if I call the cops? Just to have them check it out?

JACKSON

There's no need for that.

SIMON

(Dialing.)

I hate to be un-neighborly, but--

JACKSON

(Putting his hand on the phone. Beat.)

Look. Look. This is a victimless crime. We're not hurting anybody.

SIMON

Is that right?

JACKSON

We're just sticking it to the man. You don't have any love for those stiff's down at the bank, do ya? The guys squeezing you for that mortgage payment every month?

SIMON

I do love sticking it to the man.

JACKSON

Sure you do.

SIMON

Maybe I shouldn't tell anybody.

JACKSON

What would be the point?

SIMON

Maybe--even though I'm busting my hump every month to make my mortgage--maybe I should just wave at you when you pull that jalopy of yours into the driveway.

JACKSON

It's not that old.

SIMON

Just wave and smile as you walk into your home, your home that's practically identical to mine.

JACKSON

All the houses out here are identical.

SIMON

Same square footage, same hot tub. But you know what, I don't think that's enough, the waving and smiling. I think I should cut your grass.

JACKSON

Maybe we could rethink the whole--

SIMON

Even though I work 50 hours a week at a hospital trying to help people, and you're a degenerate gambler squatter.

JACKSON

Look--

SIMON

No, you look. Because we're gonna play a little game.

JACKSON

Game?

SIMON

A little game called Simon Says.

JACKSON

Simon, listen, you've got a--

SIMON

Simon says you are going to pay me \$500 a month.

JACKSON

Pay you?

SIMON

This place would rent for two grand easy, but you can stay here for 500. That way we both get to feel like we're sticking it to the man.

Beat.

JACKSON

How 'bout 300?

SIMON

Five hundred. Cash. Non-negotiable.

JACKSON

All right. Fine. Five hundred a month. You got it.

JACKSON holds out his hand to shake on the deal. SIMON doesn't take it.

SIMON

Simon says you will cut your own damned grass every two weeks.

JACKSON

Sure, sure.

SIMON

Simon says you will also cut my grass every two weeks.

JACKSON

Now, wait a minute---

SIMON

(Gesturing with the cell phone.)

You will cut my grass every two weeks.

JACKSON

All right, but I'm using the Toro.

SIMON

You will also edge the driveway.

JACKSON

I'm not doing that.

SIMON

Simon says you will edge the--

JACKSON

You can call the cops right now, I'm not doing any fucking edging.

Beat.

SIMON

I'm gonna come over at noon on the first Saturday of every month. If you're not home, if you don't have the money, if you don't have all the money, I'm picking up the phone. Do we understand each other?

JACKSON

First Saturday of the month.

SIMON

You know, you were right. Communication. That's the key.

JACKSON

Uh huh.

SIMON

And get that damned antenna fixed. Neighbor.

HE exits. BEN enters from the sliding door where he's been eavesdropping.

BEN

Man, you must really hate edging.

JACKSON

You gotta set some limits with a guy like that or he'll squeeze you to death. You heard the whole thing?

BEN

I heard enough. We really gonna pay this character 500 a month?

JACKSON

I think it's our best play.

BEN

We could just find another empty house. No shortage of 'em.

JACKSON

It's not just another house, we'd have to find another perfect set-up.

BEN

I don't like that guy lording it over us.

JACKSON

I don't like it either. But 500's still a fraction of the legit cost. I say we ride it out til we can make a graceful exit.

BEN

So...250 a man then. You gonna come up with your end?

JACKSON

I was hoping you could front me.

(Beat.)

You know I'm good for it.

BEN

Did you just say, I know you're good for it? Is that what you said?

JACKSON

I've got Houston Ray on the ropes.

BEN

You talked to Ray?

JACKSON

No, but if he wants a beer and a slice of pizza half as bad as I do right now, he can't hold out much longer.

BEN

Is that supposed to be funny?

JACKSON

Since Ray made that score, he's been playing high as the sky in cash games. Tight Rick saw him sitting in Bobby's Room with yellow-birds stacked up to his chin.

BEN

Doesn't mean he wants to ship you ten of 'em.

JACKSON

That's it, right there. It's just ten chips for him now. When you make a score, you just naturally lose perspective. And you know Ray, he doesn't have the discipline.

BEN

You're gonna preach to me about discipline? If you'd only wagered Ray a couple G's, you'd have some rent money for the parasite next door.

JACKSON

I've got the best of it, I'm telling you.

BEN

So what if you do? Why do you always have to put your whole roll on the line?

JACKSON

Because I'm a puma, Ben.

BEN

A puma.

JACKSON

Vegas is a jungle.

BEN

Oh, here we go.

JACKSON

Some inhabitants of this jungle are tree frogs. A window of opportunity opens right in front of them, and they just sit there. They bet small. They don't bet. They're paralyzed. Opportunity knocking. Ribbet. Golden opportunity. Ribbet. Twenty-four carat--

BEN

I get it, I get it.

JACKSON

Then you have your pumas. They see an opportunity, they don't wait, they don't hesitate, they don't shilly-shally around the fucking bush. They pounce. That's what I do. I've got the best of this bet with Houston Ray, I pounce.

BEN

I know, man, but--

JACKSON

If Houston Ray wants to get on this ride, he's gonna have to pay full fare. No discounts.

BEN

I'm not asking you to give Ray a break. I want you to give me a break. Give yourself a break.

JACKSON

You want me to tree frog it.

BEN

I just want you to lock up a couple dimes for Christ's sake. Put it in the vault.

JACKSON

Do you think you could take a puma from the wild, and tame him, and make him so that he didn't want to pounce?

BEN

Sure. Maybe. I don't know.

JACKSON

No. You couldn't. Pouncing is what they were born to do. And it's what I was born to do. Pounce. Like the puma.

Beat. BEN's cell phone text alerts. He glances at it.

BEN

Florida Dave is busto. I'm not sure who I can sell chips to online.

JACKSON

You could just cash them out through the site and get a check like a regular person.

BEN

And leave a paper trail for the IRS? Talk about a tree frog move.

JACKSON

You're right. Bad suggestion.

BEN

Paying full fare on your taxes? You can't get more tree frog than that.

JACKSON

That was bad, OK, you're right. Dammit, I can still smell that meat-lovers.

BEN

If you're hungry why don't you eat something?

JACKSON

I guess.

BEN

You've got ten pounds of tofu in the fridge.

JACKSON

It's the only thing these crazy-ass vegans eat that has any protein in it.

BEN

I thought spinach had protein.

JACKSON

Trace amounts at best. You need like a geiger counter to even....Wait, wait, all this talk about pouncing has given me an idea.

BEN

If it's about the last of that peanut butter, I already pounced last night.

JACKSON

A tree frog sees an empty house and thinks, hmmm, an empty house. A puma sees the same house and thinks, oh, wait, that ten thousand in rental value just lying on the fucking ground. I'll pick that up and put it in my pocket since no one else seems to want it.

BEN

We already did that.

JACKSON

That's what a regular puma would do, but what about an alpha puma?

BEN

Obviously. The alpha puma.

JACKSON

The alpha puma thinks, as long as I'm gonna appropriate this property, I might as well get max value.

BEN

And how does he do that?

JACKSON

By renting out one of the bedrooms.

BEN

Are you nuts?

JACKSON

Listen to me, this is beautiful. We charge 500--bargain price for a baller house with granite countertops, tile floors--

BEN

Don't forget the hot tub.

JACKSON

Bing, we have the nickel to pay off Simon Legree next door and still live here F.O.C.

Beat.

BEN

You know what, I actually kinda like it.

JACKSON

Yeah. Fellow puma.

BEN

But it'd be a little unfair to the renter.

JACKSON

Why? He'd be getting value.

BEN

If we don't clue him in and the cops show up...

JACKSON

No, no, no. If the cops show up we'll just tell the truth.

BEN

The truth?

JACKSON

Sure. The renter knew nothing, it was totally our scam. They're not gonna hassle someone who's completely innocent.

BEN

Unless the renter was kinda shady himself. Had a record or something.

JACKSON

What we need is a straight arrow. A stand-up guy.

BEN

No operators, in other words.

JACKSON

No operators, no D-gens.

BEN

No hustlers.

JACKSON

No angle shooters.

BEN

The upright citizen type.

JACKSON

Exactly.

(Pause.)

You know anybody like that?

BEN

Oooh...yikes. Maybe I could scare up a couple candidates.

JACKSON

Go out into the jungle and find us an innocent little tree frog. Swizzle your way into his good graces, and then...

BEN AND JACKSON

(Unison.)

Pounce.

Blackout.

SCENE TWO

A couple days later. Lights up on BEN and NICOLE examining the hot tub.

NICOLE
Does this thing get hot?

BEN
It's a hot tub.

NICOLE
Yeah, but some of them only get up to 103, which is pathetic.

BEN
You like it really hot.

NICOLE
At least 104, maybe 105. If it's not painful when you first get in, it's not hot enough.

BEN
You wanna feel the burn.

NICOLE
It's more therapeutic.

BEN
Huh. I'm more of a recreational user.

NICOLE
After about eight hours at the table, I get this knot, right here.

BEN
Oh yeah, right between the shoulder blades, I get that too. Totally.

NICOLE
A good hot tub really melts it away. For me anyway.

BEN
Right.

NICOLE
But only if it's hot.

JACKSON enters carrying his clubs.

BEN

Hey, man. Where ya been?

JACKSON

(Setting his clubs down.)

Driving range.

BEN

This is Nicole. Nicole, this is my useless roommate, Jackson.

JACKSON

Oh, hey. Nice to meet you.

BEN

Don't let her innocent look fool you.

JACKSON

She doesn't look innocent to me.

NICOLE

I'm not.

BEN

She's a shark at the poker table.

JACKSON

Shark, huh? I could see that. You an online player like Ben?

NICOLE

I play the big online tournaments Sundays, but I mostly play live. At Bellagio.

JACKSON

Oh yeah?

NICOLE

I think I've seen you in the sportsbook a few times.

BEN

Nicole's a vampire.

JACKSON

That right?

NICOLE

Sort of.

BEN

She comes into the poker room at 2:30 a.m. on the dot. The winners have gone home. The losers are there. Drunk, frustrated, playing every hand, hemorrhaging cash--

NICOLE

Cut it out.

BEN

You know that big fountain in front of Bellagio? These guys are spraying money around just like that fountain. And she shows up every night, the Angel of Death. Swoops in like a vulture--

NICOLE

Would you stop?

BEN

Like this hot vulture. And now these guys are even more off-balance because she's hot. And she just picks...them...clean.

JACKSON

And do you sleep during the day?

NICOLE

Got my own coffin.

JACKSON

Where do you live?

BEN

See, that's the thing. Nicole's interested in maybe renting one of the bedrooms.

JACKSON

Oh...Oh, no kidding?

NICOLE

Possibly. Ben mentioned you had some extra space. Which seems like an understatement.

JACKSON

You mean the furnishings.

BEN

Such as they are. Right?

NICOLE

Well, it does seem kind of...spartan.

JACKSON

That's the style we've been going with. Very spare, very, you know, masculine, I guess.

BEN

But I was just telling Jackson we could use more of the homey touch around here, right? A bit of decoration...

JACKSON

Oh, absolutely. If you were to take the room, you could put your own stamp on the place.

BEN

We'd both welcome that.

JACKSON

It's like a blank canvas.

NICOLE

Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

BEN

Sorry, listen to us. Giving you the hard sell.

JACKSON

But it really is a great house. You can see this backyard is pretty sweet.

BEN

These, uh, whadda ya call em, Malibu lights.

JACKSON

The landscaping is...well, there's like 15 grand in the palm trees alone. Got the hot tub obviously.

BEN

She's worried it won't be hot enough.

JACKSON

Are you kidding? Thing's hotter than a nuclear reactor.

NICOLE

Good jets?

JACKSON

Like 747s.

BEN

Super powerful.

JACKSON

Has he showed you the kitchen? Island the size of Madagascar in there. And the countertops...

NICOLE

You mind if I look around by myself? Sort of get a feel for the space?

JACKSON

Go right ahead. Yours would be the bedroom to the left at the top of the stairs.

NICOLE

I'll check it out.

She exits.

JACKSON

(Calling through the sliding door.)

The bathroom next to it would be all yours. Totally...dedicated...

BEN

Dude, what are you doing?

JACKSON

Me?

BEN

You're weirding her out.

JACKSON

What? No, I'm not.

BEN

You're staring at her.

JACKSON

No way.

BEN

You're tongue's practically hanging out.

JACKSON

Come on.

BEN

It's the same way you were looking at my pizza, the meat-lover's.

JACKSON

Gimme a break, dude.

BEN

I'm just saying, this is our prospective roommate, not some cocktail waitress at Bellagio.

JACKSON

Would you give me a fucking break?

NICOLE

(Entering.)

Oh...my...god.

(Pause.)

Which of you is the vegan?

BEN

(Clapping JACKSON's shoulder.)

This guy right here.

NICOLE

I knew it. Nobody has that much tofu in their fridge unless they're vegan.

JACKSON

I'm guessing you're also...

NICOLE

Two years, yeah. Not that I judge anyone else's choices, but I think it tells you something interesting about a person. I gotta admit I'm surprised.

JACKSON

Why's that?

NICOLE

You don't really seem the type.

BEN

Oh, he's religious about it. Super faithful.

JACKSON

I try to stay on the straight and narrow.

NICOLE

So for you, is it more about the health benefits or the whole karma thing with the animals?

JACKSON

Well, I guess for me it's kind of a blend, I think. Sort of a hybrid approach.

NICOLE

But if you had to say, what's the primary reason?

JACKSON

Oh, wow, that, would be a tough call, you know.

(Pause.)

But I guess if I had to say, I mean if you absolutely pressed me for an answer, I would probably go with...the animals.

NICOLE

Really?

JACKSON

Yeah, the animals.

NICOLE

That's interesting.

JACKSON

When you really think about it, who are the animals? Nothing less, I think, than our noble brethren.

NICOLE

Huh.

BEN

He loves animals. Especially pumas.

NICOLE

Pumas?

JACKSON

All the big cats really. They're just so....noble.

NICOLE

For me it's all about the health benefits.

JACKSON

Right.

NICOLE

Vegans live longer. It's a statistical fact. I could give two shits about the animals.

JACKSON

For me it's a blend.

NICOLE

No, hey, I think it's very, you know, high-minded that you care about them.

JACKSON

Thanks.

BEN

It's always the ones you least suspect, right?

NICOLE

I gotta admit I'm starting to get a good vibe about this place.

JACKSON

You gotta trust those first vibrations.

NICOLE

Maybe so. Although anything would be better than where I'm staying now.

JACKSON

Where's that?

NICOLE

Budget Suites.

JACKSON

Ohhhh, yikes. The one on Trop?

NICOLE

Yup.

JACKSON

How'd you end up there?

NICOLE

I was living with my boyfriend. We broke up.

BEN

You know him. Nate. Floor man at Venetian.

JACKSON

That guy's a douche.

Awkward silence.

BEN

Hey, I don't know anybody in this town who hasn't lived at Budget Suites.

NICOLE

It's not that bad, just kind of depressing. Plus it's a thousand a month.

JACKSON

We're asking half of that. For all this. No lease, no deposit, month-to-month with a 30-day notice.

NICOLE

What's the catch?

BEN

Well, we only have the place for six months, so it's more of a short-term solution.

NICOLE

Six months would be perfect for me. Gimme a chance to find something permanent.

JACKSON

So, we got a deal?

NICOLE

Let me check out the upstairs.

JACKSON

Yeah, go check it out.

She exits. BEN checks a text alert.

JACKSON (cont'd)

(Calling after her.)

There's a bonus room that we could turn into an upstairs den if we wanted.

(To BEN.)

I think this one's in the bag.

BEN
This is not good.

JACKSON
What?

BEN goes to the table and starts frantically checking his laptop.

BEN
They did it. I can't believe they actually did it.

JACKSON
Who?

BEN
The DOJ.

JACKSON
DOJ?

BEN
Justice Department. They've shut down all the online poker sites.

JACKSON
They can do that?

BEN
Jesus Christ. Come on, log in one time. Just this once.

JACKSON
What about your bankroll?

BEN
I don't know. It's frozen. I can't log in.

JACKSON
But somebody has it. Right? The feds have it.

BEN
I don't know. I don't know anything. Nobody knows anything.

JACKSON
They can't just keep all the money in those accounts. It's gotta be hundreds of millions.

BEN

This is how I run. I told you that.

JACKSON

We're gonna make it, man. We're gonna ride it out.

BEN

Why do I have to run so bad? What have I done?

JACKSON

We've still got Houston Ray.

BEN

Who have I offended? It makes no sense.

JACKSON

And Nicole. We've got Nicole.

NICOLE

(Entering.)

You think you've got me, huh?

JACKSON

Well, I, no, I mean, I thought--

NICOLE

It's OK, I'm gonna take it. There's just a good vibe over here.

BEN

(Violently shaking his laptop.)

Come on, you piece of shit! Log in, log in!

He slams the laptop on the on the table, breaking it to smithereens and then emits a low moan. NICOLE and JACKSON look at each other. Blackout.

SCENE THREE

A couple days later. JACKSON putting on the green. He hits one putt gingerly, then lines up another. NICOLE enters in a bikini. JACKSON sees her mid-putt and misses the ball completely/whacks it way too hard, etc.

NICOLE
Are we at 104 yet?

JACKSON
What?

NICOLE
I thought you were heating up the tub for me.

JACKSON
Probably not there yet. I'll check the gauge.

He walks around to the side of the house. NICOLE moves to the tub and dips a toe.

NICOLE
It's getting there.

JACKSON
(From the side of the house.)
Says 95. Few more minutes.

NICOLE
(Bending over and looking in the tub.)
Is that glass?

JACKSON
Glass?

JACKSON comes back into view. He fights mightily to keep from staring. It's killing him. He stares. She instantly catches him staring.

NICOLE
Yeah, there's little glittery things all over the--Oh, my god, were you staring at my ass?

JACKSON

No. I was going to look. At the glass.

NICOLE

Uh huh.

JACKSON

You were in my...field.

NICOLE

Field?

JACKSON

You know, my field of vision. The visual field.

(Peering in the tub.)

I think those are just little shimmery metallic things.

NICOLE

Not glass?

JACKSON

They're supposed to look like shells or something... Plus there's no glass allowed in the wet area. That's a pretty strict rule.

NICOLE

Oh, sure. I can tell you guys run a pretty tight ship.

JACKSON

(Returning to putting.)

You should probably put on some sun screen.

NICOLE

Is that another rule?

JACKSON

It's just this desert sun...

NICOLE

I'm from SoCal. I know all about sun.

JACKSON

This ain't Cali sun, OK? We're not talking bright, happy, eat-a-fish-taco-on-the-Santa-Monica-pier sun.

(Looking up warily.)

This is merciless Vegas sun.

NICOLE

I'm from San Diego, not LA.

JACKSON

Best weather in the world, San Diego.

NICOLE

That's what they say.

JACKSON

Is it not true?

NICOLE

No, it is. I guess I just didn't appreciate it.

JACKSON

That's always the way, right?

Beat.

NICOLE

What's with all the putting?

JACKSON

It's relaxing, like a focus thing. Very zen.

NICOLE

No, you're up to something.

JACKSON

What do you mean?

NICOLE

You go back and forth all day. Putting green to treadmill, treadmill to putting green.

JACKSON

You think I'm up to something.

NICOLE

Just tell me. All right?

Beat.

JACKSON

I'm in training.

NICOLE
For what?

JACKSON
A proposition bet.

NICOLE
Oooh, I love those. What's the bet?

JACKSON
It's complicated.

She waits.

I have to break 100 at Diablo Canyon. Twice in the same day.

NICOLE
Doesn't sound that tough.

JACKSON
Think you could do it?

NICOLE
I'm not a golfer. But Nate used to shoot in the 70s at Diablo all the time.

JACKSON
I'll bet he did.

NICOLE
He did.

JACKSON
So Nate's a pretty smooth swinger.

NICOLE
Whatever.

JACKSON
I'm guessing ol' Nate's got really good tempo. Good timing.

NICOLE
I'm just saying if your big prop bet is breaking 100, you must suck at golf.

JACKSON
Shoot mid-80s most days.

NICOLE

So you've got the best of it.

JACKSON

I'm a huge dog.

NICOLE

You're an 80s shooter who's an underdog to break 100. That makes sense.

JACKSON

Diablo Canyon is a desert course. No rough. You miss the fairway, you're in the desert. OB.

NICOLE

OB?

JACKSON

Out of bounds. Nate must be close to scratch if he's shooting 70s out there.

NICOLE

He is.

JACKSON

So it's incredibly tough to score, but that's only part of it. I gotta walk the course.

NICOLE

What's so hard about that? I like walking.

JACKSON

I knew this was gonna be impossible to explain.

NICOLE

Oh, my god.

JACKSON

Diablo has a ton of elevation change, OK?

NICOLE

OK.

JACKSON

Big hills, elevated tee boxes. I gotta carry my own clubs and hoof it all the way around that track.

NICOLE

Twice.

JACKSON

In the merciless Vegas sun. And I gotta break 100 both times.

NICOLE

So maybe it's tougher than I thought.

JACKSON

It'll be plenty tough.

NICOLE

What kind of price are you getting?

JACKSON

Five to one.

NICOLE

Wow, long shot. Who's the bet with?

JACKSON

Bookie named TK.

NICOLE

The Alabama Hustler?

JACKSON

You know him?

NICOLE

He plays in the Omaha hi-lo game sometimes.

(Beat.)

You probably shouldn't gamble with TK.

JACKSON

You don't think so.

NICOLE

He used to beat Nate out of thousands in golf, even though Nate was way better.

JACKSON

Gambling on golf is all about the spot.

NICOLE

Spot?

JACKSON

The terms. I'll give you three strokes a side. You let me move up one tee box. That kind of thing.

NICOLE

No, exactly, the spot. Nate said before every match TK would put on a master class in negotiation.

JACKSON

Just because he took advantage of your dumbass boyfriend...

NICOLE

TK grew up hustling nine-ball in Birmingham pool rooms. Guy like that's always gonna have an angle. He's always gonna have an edge.

JACKSON

You think I'm outta my league.

(Beat.)

I'm not some helpless little tree frog.

Beat.

NICOLE

Tell you what, I'll take a little action on TK's side.

JACKSON

You want TK's side?

NICOLE

If he's laying five to one, the true odds have to be more like ten to one.

JACKSON

I can't believe you wanna bet against your own roommate.

NICOLE

What's that got to do with anything?

JACKSON

We're kind of a team over here.

NICOLE

If TK's betting it, there has to be value.

JACKSON

Where's the esprit de corps?

NICOLE

It's all about the value.

JACKSON

Yeah, no, I see how it is.

NICOLE

You're not one of those guys who talks a big game and then can't pull the trigger, are you?
I want some of this action.

JACKSON

I got plenty of action already.

NICOLE

How much do you have with TK?

JACKSON

He says he'll book any amount.

NICOLE

But right now you have no action.

JACKSON

I'm gonna bet 10K. Ten thousand to win fifty.

NICOLE

Will bet, gonna bet...what're you waiting for?

JACKSON

I gotta collect on another prop first.

NICOLE

What's the hold-up?

JACKSON

I haven't won yet.

NICOLE

You're like the prop bet king. What's this one?

JACKSON
It's a last-longer bet.

NICOLE
OK.

JACKSON
With a guy named Houston Ray.

NICOLE
So it's who can last longer...at what?

Beat.

JACKSON
We have to avoid eating certain things.

NICOLE
Like animal products?

JACKSON
And alcohol.

NICOLE
Oh, my God. You said you were Vegan.

JACKSON
I am a Vegan.

NICOLE
No, you're not.

JACKSON
I can't even eat my Frosted Mini Wheats because the fucking frosting is held on by some sort of gelatin. So don't tell me I'm not a Vegan.

NICOLE
You said you loved the animals.

JACKSON
I do. I'm all about the animals.

NICOLE
It makes me wonder if there are other things.

JACKSON

Things?

NICOLE

Things where you're not being straight with me.

SIMON has materialized at the gate.

SIMON

Howdy, neighbor.

(Working latch and letting himself in.)

Looks like you're having a regular hot tub party over here. I shoulda brought my suit.

NICOLE

You always invite yourself into other people's yards?

SIMON

Not always, no. But Jackson and I, we have sort of a special relationship.

JACKSON

Simon's our next door neighbor.

SIMON

Neighbors, yeah, but it goes beyond that. Way beyond.

JACKSON

Wasn't expecting you over here til Saturday.

SIMON

Just wanted you to know I've got the Toro all gassed up, changed the oil. It's sitting in the shade behind the house. You can leave it there when you're done.

JACKSON

Yeah, whatever, that's fine.

NICOLE

You're gonna cut this guy's grass?

JACKSON

It's a little deal we worked out.

SIMON

Your guest doesn't seem to understand what's really going on around here.

NICOLE

I'm not a guest. I live here.

SIMON

You don't say? Now, see, I find that interesting.

NICOLE

What's so interesting about it?

SIMON

She really has no clue, does she?

NICOLE

Excuse me?

SIMON

You're always hustling, Jackson. I'll give you that much.

NICOLE

I'm gonna get something cold to drink in the hot tub, and don't worry, it won't be in a glass container. When I come back, I expect this guy to be gone.

She exits through the sliding door.

SIMON

(As she goes.)

It was nice meeting you, too, sweetheart.

JACKSON

Our deal doesn't include you coming over here and hassling us.

SIMON

Hassling? I just wanted to let you know the mower was ready. Mowing *is* part of our deal.

JACKSON

And I said fine.

SIMON

But now that you've taken on another roommate, our deal might have to change.

JACKSON

We're doing what we have to do to make ends meet. It doesn't change anything.

SIMON

Maybe not. But if I were you, I'd try to cultivate a more cordial attitude around here.

JACKSON

Is that right?

SIMON

There's a part of me that would enjoy seeing you hauled off in cuffs.

JACKSON

I'll bet.

SIMON

Just pack you up in the paddy wagon, along with the other goofball gambler and Little Miss Muffet in there.

JACKSON

Leave her out of it.

SIMON

She's smack-dab in the middle of it. Right where you put her.

JACKSON

She doesn't know anything.

SIMON

No. I'll bet she doesn't. So innocent. So trusting.

(Beat.)

Key's in the ignition. Park it in behind the house when you're done. I'll be back Saturday for the money.

SIMON exits via gate. JACKSON kneels down and dips his hand in the hot tub. He swirls it around pensively. Blackout.

SCENE FOUR

It is night. The low light source of the Malibu fixtures produces a strange effect. Some wind chimes, a new addition, tinkle in the breeze.

JACKSON sits at the table examining a rice cake. He takes a crunchy bite. Tries to extract some pleasure out of chewing it. Gives up and flips it back on the plate with a disdainful plunk.

He gets up and brushes the chimes with his fingernails, causing them to jangle more prominently. NICOLE enters and observes him for a short time.

NICOLE
You like the chimes?

JACKSON
They're nice.

NICOLE
You said to add a few homey touches.

JACKSON
Homey. Yeah. What're you doing here?

NICOLE
I live here, remember?

JACKSON
You know what I mean, it's not even 3:30. Did you hit and run on those suckers?

NICOLE
No.

JACKSON
Tough session then?

She doesn't answer.

Well, it's a nice night to be outside. I don't think I've ever seen you outside at night.

NICOLE

What's nice about it?

JACKSON

Oh, come on. This is the best part about living in the desert, once that old sun goes down. The dry air, a little breeze. Kind of quiet away from the strip.

NICOLE

Except for the chimes.

JACKSON

I like the chimes.

(Beat.)

So, did you go off for a big number? You don't have to say if you don't wanna. It's just I thought you always put in your eight hours, win or lose.

Beat.

NICOLE

I broke dead even.

JACKSON

Huh. Dead even, that can be kind of a funny spot.

NICOLE

Yeah.

JACKSON

There's the dead even where you get up big, right off the go. You're riding high, everything's breaking your way. And then it turns. And you start the death spiral. Down, down, down until you hit break even. And then you have to get up because going into the red just seems, I don't know...

NICOLE

I don't get up. I keep playing.

JACKSON

Then there's the dead even where you're stuck, you're buried. Deep, deep in the trap. And you scrap and you claw your way back. And when you get to even, it's like how those miners must feel when they get rescued. This beam of light pierces the darkness, and you're free. Anybody who doesn't call it a day right then is a fool.

NICOLE

You sound like one of the tourists.

JACKSON

Me?

NICOLE

Your result on any given day is just an arbitrary sample. It's all one big session.

JACKSON

It's all one big session, sure. You know what they call that? A truism. 'Cause it's obviously true. I mean, yeah, of course it's one big session. But is it really? Is it really just one big session? Maybe if you're a fucking robot.

NICOLE

I am not a robot.

JACKSON

No. Hey, I know that. I know you're not.

NICOLE

I'm not trying to tempt you or mess with your sacred prop bet, but I feel like a drink.

JACKSON

You've only been up a couple hours.

NICOLE

So?

JACKSON

Isn't this like your 10 a.m.?

NICOLE

It doesn't feel like 10 a.m. It feels like night.

Beat.

JACKSON

OK, sure, I've got just the thing. Fix us both right up. Be right back.

He goes inside. She moves to the chimes and brushes them as he had done. He returns with three or four cans of club soda dangling on a six-pack ring, a bottle of vodka, bucket of ice, a knife, cutting board and a lime, all of which he unloads on the table. He cracks open one of the cans.

JACKSON (cont'd)

Gotta get the club soda in cans, that's the key. Those two-liters go flat in a day.

He mixes one club soda and vodka and then pours one club soda only. Then starts cutting the lime.

NICOLE

I get it. You're having just the club soda.

JACKSON

I've been drinking these ever since the last-longer bet. Kind of fizzy. Kind of fancy, you know, with the lime.

NICOLE

Almost like a real drink.

JACKSON

Almost.

(Handing her a glass and then toasting.)

To breaking even. The good kind.

They clink glasses and drink.

NICOLE

You know a lot about the other kind.

JACKSON

The bad kind? Yeah, sure.

NICOLE

Ben said you made some kind of big score a while back.

Beat.

JACKSON

You remember when the Celtics picked up Ray Allen and Kevin Garnett?

NICOLE

I'm not really a sports fan.

JACKSON

Boston went out and grabbed two franchise players back-to-back to go with another superstar in Paul Pierce. They became the Celtics' Big Three.

NICOLE

Seems like I've heard the names..

JACKSON

The deal went down in the summer, and a lot of the books at these little casinos off the strip were asleep at the switch. So I pounced. I went out in the middle of the night to the Gold Coast, the Sun Coast, the Barbary Coast.

NICOLE

But not the Ivory Coast?

JACKSON

The Orleans, the Fiesta, the Plaza. Maxing out their podunk limits, betting five hundred and a thousand at a time.

NICOLE

How much action did you end up with?

JACKSON

Five dimes at 10-to-1. The next day when the smoke had cleared and everyone realized what it all meant, the odds dropped to 3-to-1.

NICOLE

Nice value.

JACKSON

That whole season I felt like a farmer must feel, you know. I just watched this crop I had planted, I watched it come in.

NICOLE

And then you harvested it.

JACKSON

I drove around to the different casinos with a shoebox and collected it all in little bricks of five thousand. And then I went home and looked at it. This shoebox full of paper sitting on my coffee table.

NICOLE

Fifty thousand dollars.

JACKSON

Some people work a year, two years for that kinda money.

NICOLE

Some people do.

JACKSON

And right in that moment, I could've done anything. Go to Costa Rica and live on a beach. Tour the Rockies on a motorcycle. Learn to hang glide. You know? Play St. Andrews. Learn to hang glide at St. Andrews. Anything.

(Beat.)

And you know what I did?

NICOLE

Gambled it all away.

JACKSON

If I could get that 50K back, get it back from TK, somehow I think this time I would...

NICOLE

What? What would you do?

No answer.

You can never go back and fix things.

JACKSON

You telling me there's nothing out there that you're chasing?

NICOLE

Not anymore.

JACKSON

Has to be some kind of reason you play poker instead of doing something else.

NICOLE

I like the game.

JACKSON

That's it?

NICOLE

Isn't that enough?

JACKSON

Gamblers, you know, people who do it for a living, we're outside the system.

NICOLE

What's wrong with that?

JACKSON

Nothing. It's just you're a looker, you're smart. The whole system is rigged in your favor.

NICOLE

Gimme a break.

JACKSON

I don't get why somebody like you would wanna work it from the outside.

NICOLE

Somebody like me....you don't know anything about who I am.

JACKSON

I know you're from San Diego.

NICOLE

Like a couple million other people.

JACKSON

I know you're a vegan, but not because you love animals.

NICOLE

Our noble brethren?

JACKSON

I know you sleep in a coffin during the day and then at night you go out and suck people dry.

NICOLE

Yeah, yeah...

JACKSON

But you don't just take their money.

NICOLE

What else?

JACKSON

You take their souls. You take their souls home with you and lock them away in a small ivory box.

NICOLE

You been going in my room?

JACKSON

I know what's going on around here.

Beat. The chimes jangle.

NICOLE

My dad was a navy officer, very, you know, regimented. Authoritarian I guess, like a lot of military guys.

JACKSON

You grow up resenting him?

NICOLE

He was gone a lot. I used to watch the big ships move in and out of the bay and think about what he was doing out at sea.

JACKSON

You were how old?

NICOLE

I don't know, twelve, thirteen. It seemed to me that being in the navy was a big adventure, always moving, different ports all over the world. But it was also about order, about discipline. That's the only way you could live on a crowded ship like that.

JACKSON

Makes sense.

NICOLE

I think playing poker is like that. It's an adventure because you don't know where you're going or what's gonna happen. But the way you win, or at least the way I win, is being more disciplined than the other player. Staying patient, keeping an even keel. Never getting too high or too low.

JACKSON

You call that adventure? The high and the lows, isn't that the whole point of gambling?

NICOLE

The adventure ends real quick if you can't stay afloat.

JACKSON

How's the admiral feel about his little girl playing cards for a living?

NICOLE

He hates it. But that's not why I do it.

JACKSON

You sure?

Beat.

Want another drink?

She touches her back.

NICOLE

What I'd really like is a Percocet. I only played for an hour and still it came back.

JACKSON

What's that?

NICOLE

The knot between my shoulder blades.

JACKSON

I got something better than Percocet.

NICOLE

Yeah?

JACKSON

(Moving behind her.)

Yeah.

*He puts his hands on her shoulders,
massaging the spot with his thumbs.*

That the spot?

NICOLE

Little lower. Mmmmm, that's it.

(Beat.)

That feels good.

JACKSON

Good.

*He continues. She closes her eyes and
exhales.*

You wanna tell me what happened at the casino?

NICOLE

I want to. But I can't.

JACKSON

Why not?

NICOLE

Because Ben told me to never ever tell you a bad beat story.

JACKSON

Nah, go ahead. Tell me.

NICOLE

He said you hate them with a passion that burns white hot.

JACKSON

It's OK. I wanna hear it.

NICOLE

You sure?

JACKSON

Tell me or I'm gonna stop with the back rub.

NICOLE

I'm sitting in a feeder game for the 5-10 no-limit. We were shorthanded, and I'd already jousting with this other pro in a couple of small pots. We were both sitting pretty deep.

JACKSON

How deep?

NICOLE

I had about four thousand and he had me covered. Anyway, I've got ace-ten of hearts; he's got queen-jack of hearts. The flop comes three small hearts.

JACKSON

Flush over flush.

NICOLE

We get the whole eight thousand in the middle and flip our hands over. And if there's one thing I'm good at, it's keeping my guard up.

(MORE)

NICOLE (cont'd)

Even if there's only one card in the deck that can beat me, I know that card is going to come some of the time. So I prepare myself, just in case.

JACKSON

But there aren't any cards that can help this guy.

NICOLE

No, he's drawing completely dead. And so I relax. I let my deflector shield down. I mean, the guy is drawing fucking dead.

JACKSON

I'm with ya.

NICOLE

And the dealer runs out the board, which is just, you know, a formality. Turn card is the deuce of clubs. River...deuce of clubs.

JACKSON

The same card twice?

NICOLE

Fouled deck. All the money in the hand has to be refunded, which for this dealer is like solving a Rubik's cube. Eventually they have to call the floor to sort it out.

JACKSON

That's just...I can't even...

NICOLE

I'm sitting there like I've been hit in the windpipe with a shovel. I can feel the knot getting tighter and tighter. And I just, I just had to get out of there.

Beat.

JACKSON

The knot, I think I've just about got it out.

NICOLE

You don't have to keep going. I know your hands are getting tired.

JACKSON

Yeah, I was just about to ask if I could take a break.

NICOLE

Really?

JACKSON

No. Not really. I guess in theory there would come a time when I would get tired of doing this but I'm having trouble, you know, conceptualizing it.

She turns to face him.

NICOLE

Thanks for listening to my bad beat story.

JACKSON

No. Hey. That was no run-of-the-mill bad beat.

NICOLE

It doesn't change anything. But I wanted to tell somebody.

JACKSON

Sure.

NICOLE

I wanted to tell somebody who could understand. Who knows what it's like.

He touches her hair.

Why is that?

JACKSON

Yeah, it's...I don't know. That's a tough one.

Beat.

NICOLE

How 'bout I make us another couple drinks while you heat up the hot tub. We could take a little dip.

JACKSON

You wanna take a dip.

NICOLE

Enjoy the night air. That sound good?

JACKSON

Yeah.

(Tracing her arm with a finger.)

Yeah, that does sound good.

Beat.

NICOLE

So go turn the damned tub on.

JACKSON goes toward the side of the house, but doesn't quite turn the corner. NICOLE fixes two more drinks, the same way. JACKSON watches her make the drinks although she doesn't notice him watching. He comes back to the table.

NICOLE (cont'd)

You didn't turn it on.

(Beat.)

What is it?

Beat.

JACKSON

We're not really renting this house.

NICOLE

You're not?

JACKSON

No.

NICOLE

Whose house is it then?

JACKSON

Belongs to the bank.

NICOLE

The bank?

JACKSON

It's a foreclosed property. Ben and me, we got a tip that is was just gonna sit here for a while. So we moved in.

NICOLE

You're telling me we're trespassing right now.

JACKSON

Technically.

NICOLE

What do you mean, technically?

JACKSON

We're trespassing.

Beat.

NICOLE

I want my five hundred dollars.

JACKSON

(Fishing it out of his pocket.)

Yeah. Sure. Take it.

NICOLE

I'll be back for my stuff.

JACKSON

Can I just say that--

NICOLE

If it's not all here when I come for it, I'm calling the cops.

SHE starts to leave.

JACKSON

You might as well wait till morning--it's the middle of the night.

NICOLE

You think I would spend another minute here?

JACKSON

I just--

NICOLE

I'd rather sleep under a bridge.

JACKSON

Look, can we please--

NICOLE

Don't touch me. Don't...

She crosses to the door, then turns back.

Every time I let my guard down. Every single time. What are the odds of that?

She exits. JACKSON alone on stage for just a moment. BLACKOUT. End Act I.

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

Early morning light. Sounds of a mourning dove. JACKSON lies asleep on one of the chaise lounge chairs, fully clothed. He's surrounded by beer cans and Taco Bell wrappers. A large styrofoam cooler sits nearby.

BEN enters, dressed in a coat and tie. He sees the carnage.

BEN

No. No, no, no, no. What is this? What have you done?

He kicks one of the cans. It clatters against the side of the house but JACKSON doesn't stir.

Are you kidding me? Is this a joke?

A few more kicks send a few more cans clattering.

Wake up. Jackson. Wake up, you idiot.

JACKSON doesn't open his eyes, but emits a low moan groggily waves BEN away with his hand. BEN grabs a glass of water off the table and throws the water in JACKSON's face. He coughs and splutters, finally awake.

JACKSON

Rowwwrrrrrr. What the...what are you doing?

BEN

What am I doing? What am I doing? What are you doing?

JACKSON

What time is it?

BEN

I don't get it, man. The Houston Ray bet was all we had.

JACKSON

Mmmmph.

BEN

Now we've got nothing. Absolutely nothing.

JACKSON

What are you...

BEN

Houston Ray was our one shot. You knew that.

JACKSON

Ugh, I feel rougher than a goat's ass.

BEN

Maybe we won't tell him. Maybe we shouldn't.

JACKSON

(Suddenly alert.)

You wanna hold out on Houston Ray. Welch on the bet?

Beat.

BEN

Nah. You gotta pay him off.

JACKSON

You sure?

BEN

I just don't get it. You were doing great. What happened to the discipline?

JACKSON

Well, if you'd just give--

BEN

We needed that money, Jackson.

JACKSON

You know, it's funny you mention Houston Ray. Because he called me 'bout four a.m.

BEN
He did?

JACKSON
He did.

BEN
And?

JACKSON
And...he was a little bit drunk.

BEN
Oh, ho ho ho. Ha. He was a little drunk.

JACKSON
A wee bit tipsy.

BEN
He was tipsy. He was tipsy. Oh, my God. He was tipsy.

JACKSON
What happened to your belief in me?

BEN
Tell me what he said.

JACKSON
Where's the faith?

BEN
What'd he say?

JACKSON
First of all, he won a bracelet last night.

BEN
No way. Which event?

JACKSON
Limit hold'em shootout. Not a big field.

BEN
Nobody plays limit anymore.

JACKSON

Paid like 120K.

BEN

Not much for a Series event.

JACKSON

No, but--

BEN

Still a nice score.

JACKSON

So he takes some friends out to Nobu. Gonna celebrate with a little sushi.

BEN

He gave up on the bet as soon as he won the bracelet?

JACKSON

No, listen. It's a celebration. His buddies are ordering every type of exotic roll, all kinds of sashimi.

BEN

Sea urchin?

JACKSON

The works. And Ray's eating like edamame and seaweed salad.

BEN

Right, right.

JACKSON

They're ordering bottles of Grey Goose, bottles of Dom. They're doing sake shots out of the bellybuttons of these Korean girls. And Ray's sitting there, drinking his bottle of San Pellegrino sparkling water. Just watching.

BEN

And he crumbles?

JACKSON

No. He makes it through the whole meal.

BEN

He makes it through?

JACKSON

Bill shows up on a silver tray. Seven dimes. Ray doesn't even blink. Just pays it off and walks to the valet.

BEN

Man.

JACKSON

He's headed home, driving west on Flamingo away from the strip. And he just snaps.

BEN

Just like that.

JACKSON

Pulls into that 7-11 on Flamingo and Decatur.

BEN

Flamingo and Decatur? The one with winos and streetwalkers always spilling out of it?

JACKSON

He goes in, buys a microwave burrito and a couple of Miller Lite tallboys. Polishes it all off in his car.

BEN

Right there in the parking lot.

JACKSON

The fucking parking lot.

BEN

Wow.

JACKSON

Yeah.

BEN

Wow.

JACKSON

I know.

BEN

And then he called you.

JACKSON

Said he's got the money ready, but I gotta buy him a sushi dinner.

BEN

That's good. You gonna do it?

JACKSON

I'm not gonna buy him champagne or anything, but I'll get us both some nice sushi. Maybe a little sea urchin.

BEN

Sorry I doubted you.

JACKSON

Yeah, well...

(Beat.)

Why're you so dressed up?

BEN

I was going to a job interview. If you can believe it.

JACKSON

That's great. Good luck, brother.

BEN

I'm not going now.

JACKSON

No?

BEN

No. I mean, I was desperate. My whole bankroll's tied up online. I couldn't play live. I couldn't do anything.

(Beat.)

But now there's no need.

JACKSON

You should probably still go.

BEN

I figured you could front me a couple dimes. I could play live on the strip. Rebuild the roll.

JACKSON

I would. You know I would.

BEN

Look, you know I'm good for it.

JACKSON

That's not it.

BEN

I'm a winning player. I gotta history, OK? I gotta track record.

JACKSON

I know you do.

BEN

There are thirteen thousand, eight hundred and forty dollars of mine sitting around in cyberspace somewhere. Now, the sharps, the people who know, they say I'm a huge favorite to get paid out.

JACKSON

That's good news.

BEN

But it's gonna take a while to unsnarl this whole thing. Like maybe a year.

JACKSON

You should go to the interview. A straight job might be good for you.

BEN

Gimme a break.

JACKSON

You might like it.

BEN

Why don't you get one then, if it's such a... You're not gonna loan me a couple dimes?

(Pause.)

I thought we were a team, man. That's what we always said.

JACKSON

The money's already invested, OK. I don't have it to give to you.

BEN

Whadda ya mean, it's invested?

(Beat.)

You're gonna bet the whole wad against TK?

(MORE)

BEN (cont'd)
(*Beat.*)

Don't you ever learn?

JACKSON

That's the way it is.

BEN

Can't you make one score without blowing it immediately?

JACKSON

I gotta follow my game plan.

BEN

You got the same damn plan as every other D-gen: Bet it all.

JACKSON

You're gonna be late to your interview.

BEN

Look, look. You wanna parlay the Houston Ray bet into something bigger, I get that.

JACKSON

Do you?

Sure I do. But be reasonable. Bet TK six thousand. Six to win win thirty, right? That's a score in anybody's book. Then you can loan me two G's to play on and keep a couple for living expenses.

JACKSON

You don't get it.

BEN

No, you don't get it. They are holding my money. My money. I don't have anything to pay the light bill, the water bill, the grocery bill, any of that shit I've been paying.

JACKSON

I have been focused like the puma--

BEN

Would you stop with the goddam puma?

JACKSON

I have been focused like the puma. While you were snarfing down meat-lover's, I was eating black bean patties. While you were knocking back Sierra Nevadas, I was drinking Vegas tap water.

BEN

You did great, man, but we---

JACKSON

Everything is going according to the plan, just the way I envisioned it, all right? I'm not gonna tree frog it against TK.

Beat.

BEN

Nicole's not gonna like it when the lights get shut off. This whole house of cards is gonna collapse unless you free up some of that cash.

Beat.

JACKSON

Nicole's gone.

BEN

Gone where?

JACKSON

I told her. I told her the truth.

BEN

The truth?

JACKSON

Yeah.

BEN

Why in the world would you tell Nicole the truth?

(Beat.)

Oh my God. You started falling for her. That's what happened, isn't it?

JACKSON

I just felt like telling her, that's all.

BEN

Oh my God.

JACKSON

She, well, she kinda flipped out.

BEN

Of course she flipped out. Straight arrow like that. What'd you expect?

JACKSON

I don't know.

BEN

This was your scheme. The whole thing. The whole fucking...Think she'll go to the cops?

JACKSON

I refunded her rent money.

BEN

She could still turn us in.

JACKSON

She could. But I don't think so.

BEN

No? What kind of price can I get on that?

JACKSON

Eight to one.

BEN

Eight-to-one, that's...

JACKSON

Reassuring?

BEN

How reassured am I supposed to be? We got the guy next door leaning on us like he's Bugsy Siegel. We got a pissed-off Nicole roaming up and down the strip. Our situation is falling apart, dude. It's fucking crumbling.

JACKSON

Look, I'm gonna play Diablo sometime in September, right?

BEN

We'll never make it to September.

JACKSON

It's already September.

It is?
BEN

JACKSON
(Checking his phone.)
It's September 4th.

Huh.
BEN

JACKSON
We just gotta bluff our way through one more month, and then it's gonna be settled, one way or the other. If I get the fifty grand, I'll loan you five. I'll loan you ten. If it doesn't happen, we're both gonna need straight jobs.

Beat.

BEN
Guess I can still make that interview.

JACKSON
Good luck.

BEN
I told ya, I don't wanna be lucky. Just not unlucky.

JACKSON
Not being unlucky. That's the best kind of good luck.

Blackout.

SCENE TWO

Most of the beer cans and wrappers have been cleared away. JACKSON sweeps the last of the debris into a small pile.

SIMON appears at the gate and lets himself in.

SIMON

Hey. Hey, I need to ask you something.

JACKSON

You need to know the day of the week? Cause today's Thursday.

SIMON

No, listen, I--

JACKSON

You'll get the money Saturday. That's our deal.

SIMON

I know what our deal is. This is about something else.

JACKSON

Why, sure thing, neighbor, whatever you need. You here to borrow a cup of sugar? Maybe your car needs a jump?

SIMON

It's my cat.

JACKSON

Your cat?

SIMON

He's missing.

JACKSON

And you think we took him?

SIMON

No. No, I just thought you might have seen him.

(Beat.)

He's a tabby.

JACKSON

A tabby.

SIMON

Kind of an orangy color with stripes.

JACKSON

I know what a tabby is.

SIMON

So have you seen him or not?

JACKSON

I'm really not sure I should say.

SIMON

What do you mean?

JACKSON

Maybe he's got a good reason for running away. Maybe he's not happy.

SIMON

Have you seen him?

JACKSON

Maybe he just couldn't take it anymore.

SIMON

You think this is some kind of joke?

JACKSON

You think I give a flying fuck about your cat?

Beat.

SIMON

He's been de-clawed. It's not safe for him outside.

JACKSON

Hmmmm.

SIMON

If he gets in a fight with another cat, he'll get torn to shreds.

JACKSON

Mmmmm.

SIMON

I guess I shouldn't expect compassion from someone like you.

JACKSON

You're looking for compassion? Over here?

SIMON

Not for me, for my cat. He's a defenseless animal in a hostile environment.

JACKSON

Well, I've always had a soft spot for animals. But you can see how it's a little tough for me to want to help out when you've got your hand in my pocket.

SIMON

That's just business.

JACKSON

Oh. Oh, I see. Just business. You're kind of like General Motors.

SIMON

You gonna stand there and tell me you wouldn't do the same damn thing if you were in my spot?

JACKSON

Shake down my next-door neighbor?

SIMON

Don't make me laugh. If you had the chance to pocket five hundred a month just by tightening the screws on someone, someone you didn't even know...

JACKSON

I think we know each other.

SIMON

I know that you degenerate gamblers are all exactly the same. You'd sell out your own mother for ten cents on the dollar if you thought it would keep you in action for one more day.

JACKSON

Sure, sure. If that's what you gotta tell yourself.

SIMON

I've always been the victim. The guy who was too nice to take advantage of other people.

JACKSON

Right, right.

SIMON

But I'm all done with that.

JACKSON

Yeah, no, I can see you are.

(Beat.)

I haven't seen your cat. All right?

SFX: A loud meow. SIMON rushes to the gate.

SIMON

Hey, Desmond. You rogue, you rascal you. I thought you'd left me, Dez. This time I really thought...Oh, you want your supper? Sure you do.

(To JACKSON.)

I'll be back on--

JACKSON

On Saturday. For the money. I know. Now would you get the hell out of my yard?

SIMON

Your yard?

SIMON lets himself out through the gate.

JACKSON picks up the broom and sweeps the small pile of debris into a dustpan and deposits it in the large black trash bag. He steps back and admires his handiwork, then carries the bag, broom, and dustpan into the house.

Immediately, he reappears with the cooler, which has clearly been restocked and iced down.

He plunks down in a chair, pulls out a can of beer, and opens it with a satisfying crack. The satisfaction quickly dissipates. He stares morosely into space.

BEN enters. He observes JACKSON for a moment.

Ahh, that's sad. Just...sad.

What's sad?

Oh, nothing. It always depresses me a bit to see the unemployed.

You must get depressed a lot.

Squandering their misspent lives.

You see how clean this place looks?

Drinking in the middle of the day.

Did you really pull it off?

Say hello to the assistant regional coordinator for NOTAPS.

The assistant what?

Regional coordinator. For NOTAPS.

What's NOTAPS?

BEN

Yeah, real shocker you don't know, someone who shirks his civic responsibilities. I couldn't be less surprised.

JACKSON

Enlighten me.

BEN

N.O.T.A.P.S. The None of the Above Preservation Society.

JACKSON

Doesn't ring any bells.

BEN

As you would no doubt be aware if you exercised your right to vote, Nevada has boasted, since 1978, a peculiar feature in its ballot procedure for all state and national candidates.

JACKSON

Peculiar?

BEN

After the name of each candidate, you will find listed that option most highly cherished by the discriminating Nevadan: the opportunity to vote for None of the Above.

JACKSON

None of the Above.

BEN

Doesn't it give you a thrill just saying it?

JACKSON

None of the Above. Maybe a very small thrill.

BEN

Sadly, and all, all too predictably, this hallowed option, unique to Nevada among the fifty states, is being threatened, being threatened by the...

(Refreshing himself with an index card.)

Nefarious henchmen of conformity.

JACKSON

You got that off a card.

BEN

It's part of my presentation. I'm trying to get it down.

JACKSON

What kind of job did you con these people into giving you?

BEN

I'll have you know I was completely truthful at my interview.

JACKSON

Really?

BEN

I told them I was a poker player who couldn't play online anymore.

JACKSON

You told them you were a poker player?

BEN

They didn't care. They loved my enthusiasm and my engaging speaking style. Great eye contact, they said.

JACKSON

So you conned them with fake enthusiasm.

BEN

No, it was real.

JACKSON

We both know you never heard of this ballot thing before today.

BEN

Once they explained it to me, I was convinced. I believe in the message.

JACKSON

None of the Above.

BEN

Absolutely.

JACKSON

And you're giving speeches.

BEN

Tuesday and Thursday afternoons I come in for a little light office work. Answer a few e-mails. Maybe write a press release.

JACKSON

You write press releases.

BEN

And then about three times a week they've set me up for speaking engagements. Rotary Club, Civitans, book clubs.

JACKSON

So you've got like, health insurance?

BEN

Well, no. Ten seventy-five an hour, 25 hours a week. Forty-three cents a mile on travel to speaking engagements. Plus there's sometimes a free meal at those things.

JACKSON

Hmmm.

BEN

It's not the lottery, but maybe it'll keep us afloat til your showdown with TK.

(Beat.)

You think it's stupid, which is fine. But I'm excited.

JACKSON

No, no, you should be. Seeing you fired up about something, I'm really happy for you.

BEN

You don't look all that happy.

JACKSON

Sorry, man, I guess I'm just...

(Beat.)

I could've scored with Nicole last night.

BEN

What's that supposed to mean?

JACKSON

I could've had sex with her. In the hot tub.

BEN

But you...chose not to? Is that what you're telling me?

JACKSON

I sort of gambled on the sure thing in the short-term and tried to parlay it into something long-term. That's why I told her the truth.

BEN

And she wiggled out. So you got neither the short-term or the long-term.

JACKSON

No, I got nothing. And, I don't know, ever since she left I've been telling myself it was the right play. But now I'm feeling...I guess I feel kind of...

He notices BEN isn't really paying much attention. Maybe he's studying his index card.

BEN

What?

JACKSON

It doesn't matter.

BEN

(Moving toward the door.)

Well, look, dude, I really just came home to grab a quick bite. I gotta be back in the NOTAPS office by one for some orientation thing.

JACKSON

Yeah, OK. Sure.

BEN

(Standing in the doorway, raising his beer.)

To None of the Above.

*JACKSON raises his beer half-heartedly.
BEN drains his can and exits.*

JACKSON

None of the Above.

He swirls the remainder in the can, then drains it. Blackout.

SCENE THREE

Lights up on JACKSON putting. The setting sun is casting its last rays directly on the back of the house. The chimes tinkle as he watches it set. The sound of police sirens. The noise gets louder, gets very close, then moves off into the distance.

He lines up another putt. NICOLE appears in the doorway.

Beat.

NICOLE

Still practicing for that stupid prop bet?

JACKSON

Me and Ben, we boxed up all your stuff.

NICOLE

He helped me load it. It's in my car.

JACKSON

I would've helped. I didn't even...

(Beat.)

You got everything?

NICOLE

Just about.

JACKSON

You come out here for a little of that evening breeze? I know it wasn't to tell me good-bye.

NICOLE

I'm taking the chimes.

JACKSON

Yeah. Sure. They're all yours.

NICOLE

I know they're mine.

She brushes the chimes with her fingernails.

JACKSON

You gonna hang those up at the Budget Suites?

Beat.

NICOLE

I'm not staying there anymore.

JACKSON

No?

NICOLE

I'm staying with TK.

JACKSON

You're staying with TK.

NICOLE

He had some extra space.

JACKSON

Man, it's like he's running a hotel over there. Couple of his Alabama flunkies. That cute little Laotian blackjack dealer. You like the set-up?

NICOLE

Things are a little different over there. He actually owns the deed to the house. And he's not charging me a dime.

JACKSON

I'll bet he's not.

NICOLE

Fuck you.

JACKSON

Who was it telling me TK always has an angle? I'm can't remember who that was.

NICOLE

I know why you don't like him, why you're so jealous of him.

JACKSON

Of TK?

NICOLE

You can't stand him because he's a winner.

JACKSON

No.

NICOLE

You both like to gamble on sports. Fair enough. But he puts in a little legwork, makes a few phone calls. Now he's collecting that ten percent vig on every bet.

JACKSON

Running a book? You think that's impressive?

NICOLE

And what do you do? You keep laying that juice and trying to beat the sharpest handicappers in the world at their own game. You're a loser.

JACKSON

I'm not a loser.

NICOLE

But, hey, you get outta bed when you want, play golf when you want, you got no boss. It's the Peter Pan complex. The player all alone against the house. So fucking noble.

JACKSON

You're a player, right? Aren't you a player?

NICOLE

I play against other players, not against the house. And I don't get up when I want.

JACKSON

Sure you do.

NICOLE

You think I like this backwards vampire schedule?

JACKSON

Some part of you likes it.

NICOLE

Making it in Vegas means bankroll management and putting in the hours. It's exploiting tiny edges in specific situations over and over. You don't have any clue what you're doing.

JACKSON

I been out here a while.

NICOLE

You fluke your way into a score and then give it all back in dribs and drabs. Death by a thousand cuts. Now you're trying to get there with one score all over again. It's a disorder.

JACKSON

Just a different strategy.

NICOLE

It's the absence of strategy. You got no strategy.

JACKSON

TK's gonna find out my strategy when I pounce like the puma at Diablo Canyon.

NICOLE

He's not taking your action.

JACKSON

He said I could have that bet anytime I wanted.

NICOLE

That window is closed. I told TK that I'd seen you practicing all day long, working out on the treadmill. I told him not to take it.

JACKSON

You told him?

(Beat.)

TK offered action. He'll stand by that.

NICOLE

You wanna bet?

(Beat.)

How much you wanna bet he gives you action?

Beat. The last rays of the sun are eclipsed by the mountains that ring the Vegas valley. The malibu lights begin to switch on automatically.

JACKSON

Man, you must really hate me.

(Beat.)

(MORE)

JACKSON (cont'd)

I know I made a mistake, a big mistake. One of those ideas that sounds good in, you know, the abstract.

NICOLE

It wasn't abstract. Not from my side. All that doubletalk. "Homey touches. Blank canvas. Month-to-month with a 30-day notice." That was me you were talking to. It wasn't abstract.

JACKSON

But you didn't come out so bad. At the end of the day, you got your money back, got a couple weeks rent-free over here. Nobody got arrested. Now you're in a nicer place, probably got a hotter hot tub.

NICOLE

It does.

JACKSON

Yeah, I mean, you can go downstairs and watch sports with TK. I hear he's got 15 flatscreens in his game room.

NICOLE

He's also got some art on the walls, some spices in the spice rack, light bulbs in all the sockets.

JACKSON

So I don't see how you got hurt so bad.

NICOLE

You really don't see it?

(Beat.)

You hustled me, Jackson. You played me for a sucker. And I hate that, I hate it worse than anything. I get it every minute I'm in that casino, and that's OK. I signed up for that. But you made me feel like I had a safe place to come home to, a place where I could...

JACKSON

I know.

NICOLE

And then I find out you were running a game on me. The whole time, just a game. You're worse than any of those operators down on the strip.

JACKSON

Aren't you one of those operators on the strip?

NICOLE

I'm not an operator.

JACKSON

No? You ever think about the boozed-up tourists you're fleecing down at Bellagio? Some of 'em have an addiction, they're gambling their mortgages away. Some of 'em have families.

NICOLE

That's so pathetic you would throw that in my face. There is nothing false about a poker game. I'm there to take the other guy's money. He's there to take mine. Everybody knows the score. So don't you even try and compare it, not to what you did to me.

Beat.

JACKSON

Don't I get any credit? Any credit at all for...

NICOLE

For coming clean?

JACKSON

Yeah.

NICOLE

For not screwing me in the hot tub when you had the chance?

JACKSON

Yeah. For that.

NICOLE

You should've gone ahead and done it.

JACKSON

Is that right?

NICOLE

If you're going to fuck someone over, you might as well go all the way with it.

Beat.

JACKSON

OK. All right. I guess there's some things you can't fix.

NICOLE

No. You can't.

Beat.

JACKSON

You wanna know why I decided to tell you? To tell you the truth?

(Beat.)

I had this crazy idea that maybe by coming clean, there could be some sort of chance for, I don't know, something more for us. Something long-term.

NICOLE

So you did it because you thought it would help your chances with me.

JACKSON

There something wrong with that?

NICOLE

Not because it was hard for you to keep up the charade, not because you felt bad about the way you were using me. It was just a strategy to get something you wanted.

JACKSON

How do you know what I felt?

NICOLE

I'm not sure you're capable of feeling anything. You want me, sure. But I don't think you could ever need me.

JACKSON

Sounds like you got me all figured out. That's what you do for a living right, you read people? Hold on, is my pulse rate elevated? Is my eyebrow twitching?

NICOLE

That's why you like pumas so much, Jackson. Pumas don't need anybody. They go through life alone, taking what they want. Size up every situation for maximum gain, everyone else just...potential prey.

JACKSON

I gotta hear this from a poker player?

NICOLE

I do it eight hours a day, but I can't live like that. It's OK for a cat, I guess, but not much of a life for a human being.

JACKSON

You don't think I feel things?

NICOLE

Maybe that's why you put everything you own on the line over a prop bet or a football game. So you can feel something.

Beat.

JACKSON

You can say what you want, but I know what I felt. When you were making those drinks for us. I wasn't thinking about me.

Beat.

NICOLE

You know, it's stupid, so stupid. But I guess there's a part of me that really wants to believe that.

JACKSON

Why don't you then?

NICOLE

Because you're right, I do read people. And it's not based on any twitching fucking eyebrow.

JACKSON

No?

NICOLE

I observe what they do. I notice patterns in their behavior. Because people do the same things over and over.

JACKSON

And what is it that you observed me doing?

NICOLE

What did you ever show me but a lot of smooth talk? A bunch of scheming and hustling?

JACKSON

I showed you other things.

NICOLE

When was the last time you actually did something for somebody else? Not because there was anything in it for you, not because it could profit you in some way. But purely for someone else's benefit?

Long pause. He doesn't answer.

I gotta go.

JACKSON

Yeah. Yeah, sure.

She crosses to the exit.

NICOLE

You should really get out of this place before the cops land on you.

JACKSON

They got bigger fish to fry.

NICOLE

You never know.

JACKSON

We're working on it. Oh, and tell TK I was sorry to hear about his medical condition.

NICOLE

Condition?

JACKSON

Where his nuts shriveled up so bad he wasn't able to take any of my golf action.

NICOLE

(A tiny opening.)

Yeah. Yeah, I'll tell him.

She exits without the chimes. Blackout.

SCENE FOUR

*The next day. Late Saturday morning.
JACKSON drinking a beer, watching a
football game on the TV. SIMON enters
through the gate.*

SIMON
Hello there, neighbor.

JACKSON
Money's on the table.

SIMON
All of it?

JACKSON
Count it if you want.

SIMON
Good. That's good.

(*Beat.*)
I gotta admit you've got the yard in pretty decent shape. Both of 'em.

JACKSON
Glad you approve.

SIMON
That the Michigan-Ohio State game?

JACKSON
Yep.

SIMON
Who you pulling for?

JACKSON
Look, dude, you don't get to shake us down and then hang out over here like we're buddies, OK. It doesn't work that way.

SIMON
No, I get that.

JACKSON

Just take the money and get outta here.

SIMON

That's fine. I just wondered who you were pulling for, that's all.

Beat.

JACKSON

Ohio State.

SIMON

Oh, yeah? Big Buckeye fan?

JACKSON

I was gonna pound Michigan minus three and a half, but I overslept. Didn't get the bet down.

SIMON

Yeah, that's the weird thing about living out west. Football comes on at nine in the morning. Still doesn't seem natural.

(Beat.)

Seems like you should be pulling for Michigan. If they win that would at least prove you had the right side.

JACKSON

I don't care about being right. I wanna be lucky.

SIMON

I don't get it.

JACKSON

If Ohio State wins, the fact that I didn't get the bet down, it'll be a lucky break. But if Michigan covers, I'll be kicking myself for oversleeping.

SIMON

What's the score?

JACKSON

Twenty-four three. Michigan.

SIMON

Go, Blue!

JACKSON

Would you get the fuck outta here?

SIMON

Sorry. Sorry. It's just I'm from Michigan. Grand Rapids. My ex-wife, Jenny, she was from Toledo, so, you know, big Buckeye fan. Huge.

(Beat.)

Ever since we moved out here six years ago, we used to, well, we used to get up early on Saturday to watch Ohio State-Michigan. Game day, you know. We'd dress up in our team gear...It was...I don't know...

(Beat.)

She left last year when everything started to go south, with the house and all. I mean, it was more than just the house, but....She's remarried already if you can believe that. Living in San Diego.

(Beat.)

I don't watch much college football anymore. I get up Sundays and watch NFL. Pull for whoever the Chargers are playin'.

(Beat.)

You know. Cause the Chargers play in San Diego.

JACKSON

I bet sports for a fucking living. I know where the Chargers play.

JACKSON, who's been partly focused on the game for most of this, reaches into the cooler and cracks open another beer.

SIMON

Oh, hey, wow, the ol' Saturday morning brew. I haven't had a beer in the A.M. since, yeah, no, I guess it was last year's Michigan-Ohio State game. Jenny could really knock'em back on game day.

JACKSON stares at him in disbelief. Then motions to the cooler.

JACKSON

Go ahead.

SIMON

Oh, no, hey, you don't have to, you know...

JACKSON

Would you just drink the beer and get outta here? Jesus Christ.

SIMON

(Cracking one open.)

Thanks, man. That's neighborly of you.

They both watch the game in silence for a short while, then both wince audibly at the same time.

JACKSON

What a hit.

SIMON

That was just...whoa.

(Beat.)

I can't enjoy watching football, not as much as I used to. Because of my job. At the hospital.

JACKSON

(Grudgingly.)

What's your job?

SIMON

I'm a nurse.

JACKSON

Huh. You got that whole bedside manner?

SIMON

It's just that I see a lotta head trauma at work. And now that we know what all those collisions do to the players' brains, you know, medically speaking. It takes some of the fun out of it for me.

(Beat,)

You ever feel that way?

JACKSON

I think about it. I think about it a lot actually.

(Beat.)

I still love watching it though.

SIMON

You play football?

JACKSON

Yeah, in high school. You?

SIMON

In high school, yeah.

JACKSON

You ever hit anybody pure like that?

SIMON

Pure?

JACKSON

(Picking up a 6-iron and demonstrating.)

You know that feeling in golf, when you take this nice relaxed swing, and the contact with the ball is so solid, so pure, that you don't feel any impact with the club face. It's like the ball just vaporizes.

SIMON

Oh, that's the best, when you stripe it off the tee. You've hit a person like that?

JACKSON

Once. I was coming from a left defensive end spot, and I beat my man clean to the outside. But the quarterback had rolled the other way, so I had this long run to get to him.

SIMON

Right.

JACKSON

And he's left-handed so his back is to me. He can't see me coming. Perfectly teed up.

SIMON

Like a golf ball.

JACKSON

I'm at top speed just as he lets the ball go, and I lower my shoulder and essentially run right through the guy.

SIMON

What'd that feel like?

JACKSON

It was amazing. There was this incredible crack from the pads smacking together, but I didn't feel the impact at all. I felt nothing.

SIMON

Like you had vaporized him.

JACKSON

You ever hit anybody like that?

Beat.

SIMON

Well, I was a punter.

JACKSON

Right.

SIMON

I mean, I did make one tackle. But it was more like me getting the guy down as he was running over me.

JACKSON

But you got the guy to the ground.

SIMON

I got him down, yeah.

JACKSON

Well. That's the important thing.

Beat.

SIMON

You ever take a shot like the one you put on that quarterback?

JACKSON

Sophomore year, they moved me up to the varsity in the middle of the season, put me on the kickoff team. First game with the big boys, you know.

SIMON

Sure.

JACKSON

I'm running full out and some guy on the return team peels back and just picks me off. Never saw him coming--lit me up like a Christmas tree.

SIMON

What'd that feel like?

Beat.

JACKSON

You ever blow your chance at something you really wanted? Where you know right away, that was it. That was your shot.

SIMON

I know that feeling.

JACKSON

That's what getting lit up on a football field feels like. It feels like that.

SIMON

I felt that way when Jenny left. I guess I'm still kind of feeling that way, a little bit.

JACKSON

Still?

SIMON

I'm just not sure I can make it happen again. The way it was with her.

JACKSON

Yeah, but I mean you gotta get back on that horse, right? What else you gonna do?

SIMON

I don't know. Not get back on the horse?

JACKSON

You can't not get back on the horse. Can you?

SIMON

No, yeah, I guess you gotta.

(Beat.)

Oh, hey, Michigan scored again.

JACKSON

Great. That's great.

SIMON

You were right. Michigan minus three and a half. That was the play.

(Beat. Now singing the Michigan fight song.)

Hail! to the victors valiant
Hail! to the conqu'ring heroes
Hail! Hail! to Michigan
The leaders and best!

JACKSON

All right, all right. Enough.

SIMON

Hail! to the victors valiant
Hail! to the conqu'ring heroes
Hail! Hail! to Michigan,
The champions of the West!

JACKSON

(Laughing in spite of himself.)

You're a piece of work, man.

SIMON

(Draining his beer.)

All right. Well, thanks for the beer.

He turns and takes a few steps toward the gate.

JACKSON

Hey. You said you played golf.

SIMON

I love it.

JACKSON

I've been thinking 'bout playing Diablo Canyon one of these days.

SIMON

Oh, man, I've been dying to play that course.

JACKSON

I'm pretty much a bogey golfer, shoot low 90s mostly. How 'bout you?

SIMON

Been really rolling it well lately. Shooting low 80s pretty consistently.

JACKSON

I'm getting this weird vibe. Like you're being completely honest about your scores.

SIMON

Yeah, weren't you?

JACKSON

Dude, you gotta shade things just a bit. Tell me you shoot upper 80s.

SIMON

Why?

JACKSON

We're fishing around for a number here, trying to work out the spot.

SIMON

What if we were both just completely honest?

JACKSON

That's not how it works. It's like a dance, like a ritual.

SIMON

But we could do it if we wanted.

JACKSON

There's no need to re-invent the wheel here. I'm thinking you give me two shots a side.

SIMON

OK.

JACKSON

But there's a catch. We're gonna walk the course.

SIMON

That's fine.

JACKSON

It's a tough course to walk. What kinda shape you in?

SIMON

Best of my life. I've been training for the Las Vegas Triathlon.

JACKSON

No, no, no, no. Don't tell me that. Tell me you used to run track in high school, but now you've got foot problems that keep you from running.

SIMON

If I'm gonna make stuff up, why don't I just tell you I've never broken 100?

JACKSON

Yeah, no, that's a great idea. And then how's it gonna look when you go out and post a 79? It'll be pretty obvious that you straight-up hustled my ass.

SIMON

It just seems simpler to tell the truth.

JACKSON

Look, dude, right now you're like...well, it's like the situation with your cat.

SIMON

Desmond?

JACKSON

Yeah, you're like Desmond. You're out there in the wild. And you got no claws, no defenses.

SIMON

You think the golf course is that dangerous?

JACKSON

One of these days you might end up on a tee box with a bookie named TK. If that happens, I can tell you that before you even get off the front nine, he'll have the deed to your house, the pink slip to your car, and full possession of your 22-horsepower lawnmower with the 46-inch swath.

SIMON

Man...not the Toro.

JACKSON

I'm trying to help you here.

SIMON

OK. All right.

JACKSON

We should really bump up the spot since you're like an Olympic athlete. But we'll keep it at two a side. Match play, twenty bucks a hole.

SIMON

Little rich for my blood. How 'bout we play five bucks a hole.

JACKSON

Five bucks a hole? This is Las Vegas. Let's try and preserve a modicum of fucking dignity here.

SIMON

How 'bout ten a hole?

JACKSON

OK, now we're negotiating. Tell you what, you got it. I get two a side, ten bucks a hole. With carryovers.

SIMON

All right. You got a bet. Just, you know, let me know when you wanna play. Maybe once it cools down a little bit.

JACKSON

Right.

SIMON

Thanks for fixing the antenna.

JACKSON

It was only fifteen bucks. Like you said.

*SIMON nods sagely, then heads for the gate.
JACKSON picks the money off the table.*

JACKSON (cont'd)

Hey.

SIMON turns back around.

You forgot your money.

Beat.

SIMON

Just keep it.

JACKSON

Yeah?

SIMON

Yeah. Just keep it.

(Beat.)

But you still gotta cut the lawn. Both of 'em.

JACKSON

OK.

SIMON

That's a square deal. My mower, your labor.

JACKSON

It's fine. I kinda enjoy riding the thing around anyway. Feel like a farmer.

SIMON

All right, well, I gotta get back inside. This sun is brutal.

JACKSON

Yeah. It's merciless.

SIMON exits. JACKSON walks back to the cooler and cracks open another beer. A rare mid-day breeze stirs the chimes as he drinks. He climbs up on the treadmill, carefully placing his can of beer in the cupholder, and begins treading. Blackout. End of play.

University Theatre Presents

Flamingo and Decatur

By Todd Taylor

June 22 & 23, 2013
Nadine Baum Studio

Directed by Amy Herzberg

Scenic Design by Michael J. Riha

Lighting Design by Justin R. Spaethe

Costume Design by Valerie Lane

Stage Management by Katie---Beth Thomas

Cast for this Production

JacksonJason Shipman
Simon.....Nathaniel Stahlke
Nicole..... Stephanie Bignault
BenCurtis Longfellow

There will be one 10---minute intermission during the performance
and a short talkback immediately following the show.

Special Thanks

B---Unlimited, Golf USA of Fayetteville,
TheatreSquared, Walton Arts Center

Please turn off all cell phones and other electronic devices while in the theatre.
As a courtesy to others, please do not TEXT during the performance.

Production Staff for *Flamingo and Decatur*

Associate Scenic Designer Madeline Brown
Sound Engineer..... Patrick Stone
Properties Coordinator Madeline Brown
Wardrobe Crew Rachel Washington
Properties Crew Erin Alaniz
Sound Operator Kenny Fitch
Technical Director Patrick Stone
Assistant Technical Director Justin Ashley
Master Electrician..... Justin R. Spaethe
Scenery/Lighting CrewStephanie Bignault, Melissa Haar,
Maegan Hickerson, Curtis Longfellow,
Jason Shipman, Nathaniel Stahlke
Front of House Ashley Cohea, Brittany Taylor, Rachel Washington

**Don't miss the amazing finale to our Month of
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**One Person Shows
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For more information, visit theatre.uark.edu.

Tickets on sale now for the University Theatre 2013---2014 Season!

The Clean House
By Sarah Ruhl
Oct. 4---13

She Stoops to Conquer
By Oliver Goldsmith
Nov. 15---24

Spring Awakening
By Steven Sater
Music by Duncan Sheik
Feb. 21---March 2

As You Like It
By William
Shakespeare
April 18---27

III. VITAE

Works Completed

Love's Logic (2010) 10-minute play

A riff on the sphinx's riddle, a charming young drifter must solve a puzzle in logic to win the hand of a widowed queen, but a wrong answer means certain death.

Camp of the Enemy (2010) 10-minute play

A confederate soldier stumbles into the union camp. He must convince the Yankee colonel that he's deserting the confederacy or be executed as a spy.

Right of Passage (2010) 10-minute play

A college student wakes up one morning vowing to never again move aside for someone walking on the left (wrong) side of the sidewalk. Confrontation ensues when he encounters a "leftist."

Missed Connections (2010) 10-minute play

A play with no dialogue. Set in a lobby bar inside Grand Central Station, we watch two young people form a dalliance, but all we hear are the sounds of the jukebox and P.A. system.

No Thumbs Up (2011) 10-minute one-performer play

A confrontation between two men in a bar is interrupted when both notice a player in the televised football game they were watching has been paralyzed.

The Paradoxican Monster (2011) 10-minute one-performer play

A soapbox speaker with the flair of an old-time revival preacher attempts to convince the audience to reject the idea that corporations are people.

Loaded Question (2011) 10-minute one-performer play

Based on interviews with Fayetteville residents. A student, a housewife, an activist, and a gun-shop owner wrestle with the issue of high-capacity magazines.

That Gambling Jones (2011) 30-minute one-performer play

A veteran of Las Vegas casinos tries to prevent naïve Arkansans from getting fleeced in Oklahoma casinos by teaching them the ropes.

May Blizzard (2011) one-act comedy

On their first trip together, a young couple prepares to explore the wonders of Yellowstone. But tensions rise when a freak spring snowstorm strands them in their Billings motel room.

The Gravedigger's Art (2011) full-length comedy

A directionless former English major tries to make ends meet by performing pet funerals complete with elaborate eulogies. But at night, he has ambitious dreams.

Calculation (2011) full-length historical play

Two titans of the Enlightenment, Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz become embroiled in a bitter fight about which one of them actually invented calculus.

Syracuse (2012) full-length screenplay

Archimedes, the greatest mathematician and inventor of the ancient world, employs ingenious war machines to defend his city from the siege of ruthless Roman general Marcus Marcellus.

Flamingo & Decatur (2012) full-length comedy

Two Las Vegas gamblers cut expenses by squatting in a foreclosed residential property. But everything changes when they take on a new roommate, an attractive female poker pro.

Social Madea (2013) 10-minute play

A cordial meeting between two old friends at a supermarket turns bitter when one of them learns through Facebook that she wasn't invited to the other's big summer shindig.

Double-Drowning at the Blind School (2013) 10-minute play

A group of relatives gathered for a funeral reminisce about a dramatic day in the life of the departed.

Selmer Paris Mark VI (2013) 10-minute one-performer play

The protagonist is a high-end alto saxophone manufactured in the 1950s. The occasion, the first time the leather-bound case has been opened in many years.

The O'Neill Horse (2013) 10-minute play

Based on letters from German P.O.W.'s who were housed in Arkansas during WWII. A German war vet looking for work returns to the farm where he once was held prisoner.

D.O.A. (2013) full-length adapted screenplay

Adapted from the 1950 film noir of the same name. An accountant discovers he's been fatally poisoned and has just 24 hours to locate his murderer.

Works Produced

May Blizzard (2011) Kimpel 402

University Studio Series/ Kiara Pippino, dir.

The Gravedigger's Art (2011) Nadine Baum Studio Theatre (staged reading)

Boarshead Players/ Bob Ford, dir.

Calculation (2012) Kimpel 404

University Studio Series/ Esteban Earavalo Ibanez, dir.

Calculation (2012) Nadine Baum Studio Theatre (staged reading)

New Works Festival/ Amy Herzberg, dir.

Flamingo & Decatur (2013) Nadine Baum Studio Theatre

New Works Festival/ Amy Herzberg, dir.

TODD TAYLOR

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EDUCATION

University of Arkansas
Master of Fine Arts in Drama 2013
Playwriting

University of North Carolina Greensboro
Master of Arts in English 1996
Concentration in Theatre

Duke University
Bachelor of Arts in English 1990
Concentration in Drama

AWARDS

Doctoral Fellowship, University of Arkansas 2010 – 2013

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Arkansas
Instructor—Undergraduate Playwriting 2012
Developed syllabus and overall course structure, and administered all grades.

Instructor—Theatre Appreciation 2012-13
Taught survey course culminating in hands-on theatre project.

Central Carolina Community College
English Instructor—Expository Writing, Literature, Film, Public Speaking 1999-2004
Developed syllabus and overall course structure, administered all grades.

RELATED EXPERIENCE

University of Arkansas, June 2013
Assistant Producer
New Works Festival

Alabama Shakespeare Festival, May 2013
Assistant Dramaturg
Southern Writers Project

UofA One Act Play Festival, March 2012

Director

Boom by Peter Nachtrieb

TheatreSquared, May 2011

Assistant Director

Fall of the House by Robert Ford

PLAYS AND PERFORMANCES

Flamingo & Decatur

University of Arkansas New Works Festival, June 2013/ Amy Herzberg, dir.

Full-length comedy

Calculation

University of Arkansas Studio Series, April 2012/ Esteban Earavalo Ibanez, dir.

University of Arkansas Boar's Head Players (staged reading), June 2012/ Amy Herzberg, dir.

Full-length historical play

Playing with a Doll's House

TheatreSquared 24-Hour Playoff, June 2012/ Kenn Woodard, dir.

10-minute comedy

The Gravedigger's Art

University of Arkansas (staged reading), June 2011/Bob Ford, dir.

Full-length comedy

The French Confection

Winner, TheatreSquared 24-Hour Playoff, June 2011/ Jules Taylor, dir.

10-minute comedy

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

"At This High School. Losing Games Isn't Everything; It's the Only Thing"

Sports Illustrated, October 7, 1985

MEMBERSHIPS

Dramatists Guild of America

REFERENCES

(Contact information upon request)

Bob Ford, Head of Playwriting, University of Arkansas

Amy Herzberg, Head of Acting, University of Arkansas

Roger Gross, Professor Emeritus, University of Arkansas

To: Graduate School and International Studies, University of Arkansas
From: Ashley Cohea, Business Manager for University Theatre
Date: April 25, 2013
Re: Use of UT production programs in thesis publications

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If there are any questions on this matter, or any dispute over whether a program is being used in an inappropriate manner, please contact the University Theatre business manager, listed below.

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