Acting Edition

The Ally

by Itamar Moses

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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THE ALLY was first produced by the Public Theater (Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director; Patrick Willingham, Executive Director) in New York and opened on February 15, 2024. The production was directed by Lila Neugebauer, with scenic design by Lael Jellinek, costume design by Sarita Fellows, lighting design by Reza Behjat, and sound design by Bray Poor. The production stage manager was Roxana Khan. The cast was as follows:

ASAF STERNHEIM . . . . . Josh Radnor
GWEN KIM . . . . . Joy Osmanski
BARON PRINCE . . . . . Elijah Jones
NAKIA CLARK/RABBI . . . . . Cherise Boothe
RACHEL KLEIN . . . . . Madeline Weinstein
FARID EL MASRY . . . . . Michael Khalid Karadsheh
REUVEN FISHER . . . . . Ben Rosenfield

CHARACTERS

ASAF STERNHEIM – 40s, Jewish, a writer, and an adjunct professor of writing

GWEN KIM – late 30s, Korean American, University Administrator for Community Relations and External Affairs, Asaf's wife

BARON PRINCE – 21, African American, a college senior

NAKIA CLARK – 40s, African American, a community organizer (doubles with **THE RABBI**)

RACHEL KLEIN – 20, Jewish, a college junior

FARID EL MASRY – 20, Palestinian American, a college junior

REUVEN FISHER – 29, Jewish, a PhD student in Jewish History and Judaic Studies

SETTING

A prestigious American university in a struggling American city somewhere in New England or maybe farther down the East Coast or possibly in the Midwest.

TIME

September 2023.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Ally works best when every single character is portrayed as making their arguments in good faith. Resist any temptation to put a finger on the scale by telegraphing one or another character's "wrongness" or "badness" – this is to oversimplify, as well as to deny the audience the opportunity to experience the play completely and honestly.

ACT ONE

*(***ASAF** *and* **GWEN**.*)*

GWEN. Oh, hey: have you thought any more about the holidays?

ASAF. Oh! Um –

GWEN. Yeah cuz when I brought up doing it just us, here, you seemed *kinda* into that? But then sorta…never decided? So –

ASAF. Right.

GWEN. But if you *did* still want to go to California, to see family, we'd need to start thinking about tickets and hotels, like, *soon.*

ASAF. Right, no, I mean… On the one hand, when you suggested that it sounded potentially really nice?

GWEN. Right? Cozy, quiet –

ASAF. Yeah.

GWEN. – Not responsible for defusing tension amongst the lunatic personalities around us.

ASAF. Right. *(Then –)* There should actually be a dating app for helping the not-crazy members of each family find each other.

GWEN. *(She thinks. Then –)* "Saner."

ASAF. Write that down.

GWEN. But, okay, so is that –

ASAF. Well, so the only thing... First of all, I'm a little nervous breaking the news?

GWEN. Oh.

ASAF. Yeah, you know how they get: under the thin surface of Israeli-immigrant stoicism is plain old Jewish guilt. Plus: there are things I really love about going home, so –

GWEN. Okay, well: you know which *I'd* prefer, but, whatever you decide, lemme know with enough time to plan. I know the semester just started but, before you know it, October'll sneak up and then –

ASAF. Yeah, will do. *(This reminds him –)* Oh! How'd the meeting go?

GWEN. Oh, yeah, good.

ASAF. Good! You were nervous.

GWEN. Well the University doesn't have the best history around expansion.

ASAF. Right.

GWEN. Yeah. So we knew there was gonna be resistance. But I think we did a good job explaining how it could be...mutually beneficial this time.

ASAF. Right. How?

GWEN. Oh, you know, for every unit of student housing we commit to building one of *affordable*. And every student who *lives* there has to volunteer, tutoring or... guiding promising local kids through admissions. We protect local *business* instead of... Y'know.

ASAF. Right. Great!

GWEN. Yeah. I mean there's a lot of boards and votes to get through? But: so far so good! *(Then –)* How 'bout you? How was writing today?

ASAF. Pretty *good*, actually.

GWEN. *(Pleasantly surprised –)* Oh! *That's* nice.

ASAF. Yeah, I've been stuck, I know, but I sorta had a breakthrough.

GWEN. This is nineteenth-century Germany.

ASAF. Von Bismark, yeah. "His chess-like diplomacy unified the country and his marriage. But he abused underlings and was secretly in love with a dead woman his whole life. So does stability just mean you've directed your insanity elsewhere?"

GWEN. Uh-oh. Does it?

ASAF. I will let you know. *(Then –)* But, yeah, another play about Enlightenment Europe. Don't know why I keep doing that.

GWEN. Yeah, I don't know either.

(Pause.)

ASAF. Hey if we *did* do the holidays here, just us, would that be *just* us? Which, I'm not saying… That would be nice! I'm just asking cuz *I* don't really – I mean *you* know people at the university but *I* don't really know them so… I'm just asking.

GWEN. Right, no. I'm not sure. What do you think?

ASAF. Yeah, I'll…think about it.

GWEN. Okay. *(A moment. Then –)* Hey, listen. You've been incredibly supportive. But if you ever have second thoughts about us having moved here?

ASAF. Whoa, what?

GWEN. No, I'm just saying: I know we talked about it when I first got the offer but that doesn't mean we can't ever revisit this decision. If you're unhappy, and you wanna try, I don't know, splitting time, or –

ASAF. I don't.

GWEN. Okay but you can *tell* me.

ASAF. When this job came up, *I* said, "That's perfect. You *have* to go for that."

GWEN. Yeah but I'm asking about *you*.

ASAF. Well and this has been good for me too! *(Off her –)* Really! It's a nice neighborhood. There's…*space*. *(Beat.)* If we decide to have a *kid*, they get a break on *tuition* in eighteen years.

GWEN. This is not making me feel better.

ASAF. Are you sure? Cuz that's a good perk. *(Off her –)* Okay, no, look: New York was great. I love New York. But it obviously hasn't been the *same* these last few years. And I can do *my* work anywhere…theoretically. *(Beat.)* Plus, I *love* college towns. I grew *up* in a college town. I went to *college* in a college town. It's kinda like coming home.

GWEN. Okay! *(Beat.)* But then can I make a suggestion without you getting mad?

ASAF. Let's find out.

GWEN. No, just… I wonder if maybe you should try to get more…involved. *Locally*, like: join an *activity* or some –

ASAF. What, like take a spin class or join a book club?

GWEN. Well it would be nice if it were something for which you were not preemptively dripping with *contempt* but –

ASAF. Why?

GWEN. *Why?* Cuz you don't have anything to *do* other than try to write all day 'til I get home and it's making you *miserable*.

ASAF. I *just said* it went well!

GWEN. Yeah, *today*. Which is why I'm saying this *now*: you're less likely to bite my head off. But we *both know*, as soon as that *stops*, you'll be back in a funk. So, *before* that, maybe figure out a few other…sources of stimuli that could balance your life. I mean we *do* get discounts at everything affiliated with the school: museums, concerts. You could go to the campus synagogue!

ASAF. What?

GWEN. I hear the Rabbi's cool.

ASAF. I'm an *atheist*.

GWEN. Not to *pray*! To…! They have *events*, speakers –!

ASAF. And I *do* have an activity. I teach.

GWEN. *One* class.

ASAF. I teach playwriting, screenwriting and TV writing.

GWEN. That's *one class*. You teach *one* day a week, *one* semester a year. You literally teach *fourteen days* a *year*. No, look: I'm not saying you don't work hard. Just the opposite. You're working *constantly*, in your *head*. Right now you're like someone who's exhaling non-stop and wonders why he's out of *breath*. *I'm* just saying breathe *in* once in a while. In *fact*: don't you *have* a friend here? *(Then, off him –)* Your ex. From college.

ASAF. Oh. *(Beat.)* Well, yeah, she…grew *up* here and then moved *back* I think. But she's not a friend, she's an ex.

GWEN. Okay. So? *(Then, off him –)* I mean, don't not call her on *my* account. *I* don't care who you were sleeping with when you were twenty-*three*, or –

ASAF. No, no, nothing like that, it's just… We haven't really kept in touch. I mean it's been, like, yeah, twenty years. More.

GWEN. Fine. *Don't* call her. The point is: maybe get out of the *house*.

ASAF. I am, I will. In fact, I'm getting out of the house *tomorrow*.

GWEN. *(Pleased –)* Oh! For what?

ASAF. Office hours.

GWEN. *(Less pleased –)* Oh.

ASAF. Yeah, a student from last semester wants to meet. Baron Prince? *(Off her blank look –)* He sorta wrote the…best script in class. Two-thirds of it, anyway. He didn't quite finish.

GWEN. What about?

ASAF. The…presumably autobiographical story of a black kid from a rough neighborhood that *abuts* a prestigious university, which he then ends up *attending*, forcing him to sort of *straddle* –

GWEN. *(That wasn't her question –)* What does he wanna *meet* about.

ASAF. *Oh*. Not sure. But he's a *senior* now? So probably how to break into the industry or get an agent or something. That's usually what they want to meet about at this stage.

GWEN. Is that annoying?

ASAF. When they're bad *writers*, yeah. But, like I said, he's good. So it's fine. I'm actually looking forward to seeing him.

*(***ASAF** *and* **BARON**.*)*

BARON. Good to see you too.

ASAF. How was your summer? You finish that script?

BARON. What? Naw. I mean, I *tried*, but –

ASAF. Oh you gotta! That thing was really good.

BARON. Thanks. It was just…kinda hard to focus with everything, so –

ASAF. What? What do you mean?

BARON. You serious?

ASAF. No, did…something happen? We were away most of the summer and when I'm here I don't get out much or…talk to anyone, so –

BARON. You didn't hear about Deronte Lee.

ASAF. Oh. Wait, yes. Police brutality, right?

BARON. Well they…killed him, so –

ASAF. Yeah, no, I *did*. Wait, did you *know* him?

BARON. He was my cousin.

ASAF. Oh god. *(Beat.)* Oh god, I'm *so sorry*.

BARON. Thanks. Yeah, it's been a lot.

ASAF. I bet. Jesus. How *are* you? Are you…okay, or –?

BARON. I mean, it's worse for my aunt. His kid sister. So just…trying to be there for them, which…gives me something to *do*.

ASAF. Right. Were you close?

BARON. I mean…more when we were little? Not so much lately. But still –

ASAF. Right, no.

BARON. Did you see the video?

ASAF. No. I mean: I saw there *was* one? But just out of *respect*… I mean, a video where someone *dies*?

BARON. You should watch it.

ASAF. Oh! Okay. I mean, yeah, I will. Yes. *(Beat.)* Yeah, *sorry*: this is *your* time.

BARON. What?

ASAF. No, just: we can talk about this for as long as *you* want. Obviously. I just want to make sure we *also* meet about whatever you wanted to *meet* about.

BARON. This *is* what I want to meet about.

ASAF. Oh. *(Beat.)* Sorry, so –

BARON. Yeah lemme back up.

ASAF. Okay.

BARON. Cuz, first of all – and, again, you should just watch the video, cuz I can explain it? But it's sorta undeniable once you –

ASAF. No, I'm sure.

BARON. But just so you know what happened, cuz you said you don't talk to anyone.

ASAF. Well –

BARON. But, basically, someone had been stealing cars from *campus* lots, which: can't have *that*, right? So the cops are extra on guard, extra vigilant, and then one day someone calls in someone "acting suspicious" around a campus parking lot and so, like, *eight* cops head down there right away. And Deronte happens to be in the neighborhood, cuz he, you know, *lives* in the *neighbor*hood, so he's just walking by, and… And I don't know if he's even the person that, um, Parking Lot Karen saw? But he musta, um, "matched the description," plus one of the cops apparently recognized him from…whatever: whatever petty bullshit he'd done in the past, graffiti, or having an ounce of weed, *nothing* serious, *definitely* not stealing *cars*. But so dude's like: "Hey you. Stop." And Deronte's like, "Why? What did I do?" But *that's* resisting, right? "Contempt of cop"? So they just slam him to the ground and… *(Pause.)* This is the other reason you should just watch, cuz I don't really wanna –

ASAF. No, of course. –

BARON. In their, like, initial statement? They said he grabbed for their guns and so they "feared for their lives." But in the video, you can see he didn't. He just keeps asking, "What did I do? What did I do?" *(Beat.)* Then like a hour later they caught the guy, the *real* guy, who'd been stealing cars, *in* one of the cars that he stole.

ASAF. Un-fucking-believable.

BARON. Yeah.

(Beat.)

ASAF. And so... What, you wanna...find a way to *write* about it? Or –

BARON. What? *No*.

ASAF. Oh, okay.

BARON. Yeah, no, it made me wanna actually *do* something.

ASAF. Oh. *(Beat.)* No, right –

BARON. Yeah, so, I joined this group. This, like, activist group? Voice to Action? Run by this local organizer lady who's been agitating about this stuff for a while. Actually, Nakia contacted *me* cuz –

ASAF. Wait, Nakia *Clark*?

BARON. Oh, you know her?

ASAF. I know...*a* Nakia Clark. Who *lives* here and I think does this kind of *work*.

BARON. Well that's probably her then. Anyway, yeah, so she got the family involved, and, cuz I'm *at* the university, that's part of it too, cuz this is part of a looooooong history of –

ASAF. No, sure.

BARON. – Yeah, how this town works, which is like two different towns.

ASAF. Right.

BARON. Yeah, *you* know. Anyway so: we have *this*...

(He pulls a document out of his bag.)

...I guess you could call it..."manifesto"? Modelled on some other ones about reforms that can prevent stuff like this happening. And how those could scale. Nationally. Globally, even.

ASAF. Yeah this is definitely the same Nakia Clark.

BARON. What? Oh. Yeah, it's a lot. I was like: "*Damn*, some of this wasn't even on my radar." But the *hope* is Deronte's case could be a tipping point. *Here*, anyway. Cuz the cops that did it? *Nothing's* happened to them. I mean they're on, you know, "paid administrative leave" and supposedly a grand jury's deciding if to indict, but no one's, like, *optimistic*. Cuz between the DA and the police, everybody has to stay friends, right? So. What we're doing right *now* is, basically, collecting signatures.

ASAF. Oh! *(Holding out his hand for the document –)* Of course, lemme –

BARON. Really? Cool.

ASAF. Of *course*.

*(***BARON** *hands the document to* **ASAF**, *who starts to flip through it. Meanwhile –)*

BARON. Well you'd be surprised. Or maybe not. I mean, there's a lotta support in the city. *And* from students. Mostly. But the suburbs? Professor's Hill?

ASAF. Yeah that's where I live.

BARON. Exactly. So, we're targeting people more directly where we have, you know, personal relationships. Hence my coming to you.

ASAF. Right, and: signing just conveys my support for the demands.

BARON. Yes. *And* we're also planning a march? For whenever the grand jury decision comes down. Which could turn into a protest, depending, so signing is also sort of a pledge to be with us that day. More pressure on them to do the right thing.

ASAF. Right. *(Beat.)* I mean, yeah, sounds great, I'll –

BARON. Cool. Thanks.

ASAF. Definitely. I mean I'll actually want to *read* the thing before I –

BARON. No, sure.

ASAF. – Put my *name* on it, but, yeah, yes, I will…help in any way I can. *(Beat.)* Baron, again, I'm so sorry this happened.

BARON. Thanks. Yeah. *(Beat.)* I mean, he and I were *very* different? We did not, um, *agree* with all of one another's choices. But he had a good heart. And he didn't steal that car.

ASAF. Well and even if he had.

BARON. What?

ASAF. Even if he *had*. If he'd stolen *ten* cars. You don't… execute someone without a trial. Or even *with* a trial. There's no death penalty for stealing cars.

BARON. Right but he didn't.

ASAF. No, I know, I'm just…saying.

*(***ASAF** *and* **GWEN**.*)*

GWEN. Oh god, yeah, that was bad.

ASAF. Yeah.

GWEN. No, and have you seen the video?

ASAF. No, not yet, I'm…gonna, I just –

GWEN. It's bad. He asks what he did and they *instantly*… And then they lied about it for weeks. They're still lying. I mean, it highlights all the legit complaints the community has about the way the area near campus is policed versus…*other* parts of the city. Like: do they send a small *army* if cars are getting stolen downtown? Do the cops even *go* there? But God forbid any full-tuition parent has to worry about the SUV they bought Junior for his eighteenth birthday.

ASAF. Right.

GWEN. Right? *(Beat.)* But, hey: it's great he *came* to you. And that you can be a part of the *solution,* or… Not that there *is* one, or not an *easy* one, but: *you* know what I mean: great that you can *do* something. *(Beat.)* And! Weird coincidence that your ex is the one *running* this, we were just –

ASAF. Yeah. Weird. Yeah.

GWEN. What.

ASAF. Well, um… *(Beat.)* Okay so I read this thing, and it's great, it's…thorough and passionate and intelligent and everything I'd expect from Nakia.

GWEN. *(Slightly threatened –)* Wow, okay.

ASAF. What? No, just… It covers a *lot*. That I *agree* with, ninety, ninety-*eight* percent of it. How, under the incentives of brute capitalism, nothing matters more than profit, not even people, but how the people you can get away with *harming* are whoever's marginalized, so, in large part, black and brown. It's who we jail. It's whose water we fuck up and whose health care we deny. It's who we send to war and who we go to war against. And if support for this ever wavers, we just exaggerate or *invent* the threat that these marginalized people pose, here and elsewhere. And how the *antidote*

to this is a systemic overhaul to change the incentives, everything from ending qualified immunity for cops to reallocating military and police funding to things like jobs, mental health, education. I know you *know* all this, I'm just setting the –

GWEN. Yeah.

ASAF. Right, but: there's *one* section, about America's involvements *overseas*, which, well, listen: *(He reads –)* "The United States must also end all military aid to and impose sanctions on the apartheid state of Israel until it ends the settler-colonialist oppression of the Palestinians through its ongoing occupation of the West Bank, blockade of Gaza, and refusal to recognize any right of return for the refugees of 1948."

GWEN. Okay. *(Beat.)* And you *disagree* with that.

ASAF. I, well, *no*, not *mostly*. I *oppose* the occupation. I always *have*. It's why my parents *left*! Or, *that's* not true cuz they left before it started, but it *continuing* is at least *partly* why they never went back, and the *settlements* are a...*kind* of colonialism. And the blockade... I mean: you hear stuff that's just inhumane. And, as for the refugees, I mean... Between *us*, I don't see that *happening*. But doesn't mean they don't have a *point*. And the United Sates is complicit in *all* these things, yeah, through aid, military and otherwise.

(Beat.)

GWEN. So you *agree*.

ASAF. Well, not *entirely*, cuz... Well, first of all I don't know if I'd use the word "apartheid"? Just cuz I don't think you can go around plucking terms from one historical moment and dropping them into others like they *apply*. Though, on the other hand, if what's meant is just different laws for two groups of people, based sort of on ethnicity, within areas *one* mainly *controls*, it might, as analogies go, be the best we have.

GWEN. Okay. So –

ASAF. And, hang on, while I can see the need, given the *extreme* rightward tilt of Israel's leading politicians *lately*, for pressure to move the needle back towards creation of a Palestinian state? Which of course I *also* support? And while divestment and sanctions are legitimate tools for *applying* that pressure – non-violent ones, which is *great* – doing it unilaterally, overnight doesn't strike me as sensitive to the complexities of a region where *many* groups contribute to what's happening.

GWEN. Oh…kay –

ASAF. Well but the *real* problem… And, again, this is like a twenty-page document. And what struck me as sort of weird is that Israel is the *only country* mentioned. In this way.

GWEN. Huh.

ASAF. Yeah. *(Beat.)* What I mean is other countries are *mentioned*? But in the context of America doing terrible things there. But *Israel* is the *only country* whose *own policies* are condemned, where it says *not* "we shouldn't be involved there cuz of what *we* do" but rather "we shouldn't be involved cuz of what *they* do."

GWEN. Right.

ASAF. Well don't you think that's weird? That it doesn't say…stop aid to India over Kashmir, or how they treat *their* Muslims? Or sanction China over Tibet, or Taiwan, or the Uyghurs –?

GWEN. I'm pretty sure we *did* sanction China.

ASAF. Or Turkey cuz of the Kurds! Or a…dozen other examples. Argentina.

GWEN. Yeah, no, I guess. *(Beat.)* Huh.

ASAF. What.

GWEN. No, just… First of all, I didn't realize you felt so strongly about this.

ASAF. About what?

GWEN. So…*defensive* of Israel.

ASAF. I *don't* feel *so*… I'm not *saying*… No. *I'm* just defensive of…internally consistent *logic.*

GWEN. Okay.

ASAF. Yeah which this document seems to *lack* on this one subject.

GWEN. Okay. Cuz it would make sense if you *did*. Feel defensive. Your parents *are* from there. They may have *left* but they're *from* there. *Most* of your relatives still live there. You're a *citizen.*

ASAF. Yeah cuz they're desperate for more of us. And my dad's *barely* from there: his father dragged the family back to Europe when he was a kid.

GWEN. Well, and: remember your twenty-year reunion? That old roommate of yours, works for a hedge fund or something, had just come back from like a *week* in South Korea, so was *holding forth* on how the media there fearmongers about mad cow or whatever, and I bit his head off?

ASAF. Yeah, sorry, that guy's an asshole.

GWEN. Yes. But the *point* is: this is *your* tribe.

ASAF. No, I hear you, I just – and it's twelve tribes, but – I'm not, I've never *been*, like, a "mob enthusiasm" person. I find it embarrassing if not scary. I can't even really cheer at *sporting* events.

GWEN. Weren't you *in* a Jewish youth group?

ASAF. Yeah in Northern Cali*forn*ia. We practiced the acoustic-*guitar*-based variety of Judaism, where you go into the *woods* and sing egalitarian versions of the prayers and try to hook up with girls from the Central Valley named, like, Serena, it wasn't –

GWEN. Fine, I'm just saying it wouldn't be weird or unusual if you felt –

ASAF. *(Snapping –)* Yeah but I *don't*!

GWEN. I…stand *corrected*.

ASAF. I… Look. My "feelings" about Israel are the… *reasonable* ones.

GWEN. Which are?

ASAF. That there were strong arguments for creating it, so it's maybe good that it exists, but that I *don't* like a lot of things it actually *does*.

GWEN. Okay. *(Beat.)* So to clarify: you don't disagree with the actual *criticisms*.

ASAF. I… *No*, I don't think so, not mostly.

GWEN. You just disagree with Israel being singled out like this.

ASAF. I… I mean, yeah, I guess I do.

GWEN. Okay –

ASAF. And even if I *did*! Even if I *do*…disagree with *some* of the criticisms, the, the *freedom to criticize*, itself, is… If someone said these things in a context where criticism of Israeli policy was the *actual subject*, I'd be *fine* with that, but, framed like *this*…

GWEN. Right. *(Beat.)* And so are you really thinking of not *signing* it now, or –?

ASAF. Well –

GWEN. Cuz this kid, Baron –

ASAF. No, I *know*.

GWEN. Right? Won't that seem *petty*, in the face of…? Plus… *(Beat.)* And look: this is kind of neither here nor there? But at this *particular* moment, for *me*?

ASAF. What.

GWEN. Well… *(Beat.)* Never mind, it doesn't matter.

ASAF. No, what.

GWEN. Well: I'm in the middle of negotiating this deal. Between *that* neighborhood and the school so it's… kinda delicate.

ASAF. You said the meeting went well.

GWEN. Yeah but the last time the university did this in like, the '60s? They did *not* do a good job of…let's just say "preserving local culture." And it left a pretty bad taste. So, yeah, I made promises, but if the *next thing* people see is *my husband*, on this *other issue of importance* to them, taking what will at least *appear* to be the opposing *stance* –

ASAF. Right, right.

GWEN. Right? So: I'm not telling you what to *do*. But if *one sentence* is your only problem with a, like you said, a *twenty-page* document, then maybe –

ASAF. Well, except there is one other thing.

GWEN. What? What.

ASAF. They use the word genocide.

GWEN. What?

ASAF. It *also*… Here: *(He reads –)* "*Failure* to do so will leave the United States complicit in the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people." Which, again, so much of what happens there is terrible, truly. But: *genocide*? *That's* a term you *really* can't just throw around. *Especially*… Well: you know.

GWEN. Right. *(Beat.)* But if *two* sentences are your only prob–

ASAF. Gwen!

GWEN. What? I'm just –!

ASAF. I *know* but...! Look it's not like I signed *already* and now I'm *withdrawing* my support. No one even knows I'm... No one's gonna look at a list of hundreds of names and go, "Where's Asaf Sternheim?" No one will *care*.

GWEN. Your *student* knows. He knows he asked and that you said you would.

ASAF. I *also* said I had to *read* it first.

GWEN. No, I know, just... No, like I said: do what you think is right.

ASAF. Look, I haven't actually... *(Beat.)* Obviously I'd *like* to be able to sign it. I just have some *questions*. *(Beat.)* Maybe I should just ask my questions.

*(***ASAF** *and* **NAKIA**. **BARON** *is also here, working on a laptop.)*

NAKIA. Asaf Sternheim.

ASAF. Nakia Clark.

(They hug sort of awkwardly.)

NAKIA. What's it been, like fifteen years?

ASAF. Twenty. But you look exactly the same.

NAKIA. What? God, I hope not.

ASAF. No, I just mean: you look great.

NAKIA. Thanks. You too. And I take it you already know Baron?

ASAF. Yeah. *(To* **BARON** *–)* Hey.

BARON. Hey.

NAKIA. I've roped him into handling our web presence. We've learned it's best to let the young people handle the online stuff.

ASAF. You're in good hands. He was my star pupil.

BARON. All right, everybody settle down.

NAKIA. That is so wild. Small world!

ASAF. Yeah. *(Beat.)* So how've you *been*? What've you –

NAKIA. *Oh*.

ASAF. – Been *up* to the last, yeah, decade or two?

NAKIA. I mean basically *this,* in one form or another. Since law school.

ASAF. Great. And it's been…good?

NAKIA. It's been rewarding. But challenging. Especially at times like this. But it's good to be doing it *here*.

ASAF. Right! Are your folks still nearby, or…? *(To* **BARON** *–)* You know, her dad was a big deal professor here.

BARON. What? Really?

NAKIA. He was a *professor*. History. *(To* **ASAF** *–)* But, no, they moved when he retired. Somewhere warmer. How 'bout you? What have you been up to?

ASAF. Oh, I mean: writing, mainly. *(Indicating* **BARON** *–)* Now teaching. Which is yeah, rewarding. Challenging.

NAKIA. Nice. Yeah, I remember a lot of plays about… England and Russia in, like, the seventeen and eighteen hundreds.

ASAF. Heh. Yeah, I was…young.

NAKIA. Right. And you followed your wife here, right?

ASAF. What? Oh –!

NAKIA. Sorry, just: when they created that position, um: "Community Outreach –"

ASAF. "Administrator for Community Relations and External Affairs."

NAKIA. That's the one. There was a *press* release. And I saw who she was married to and was like: oh!

ASAF. Yeah, that's me!

NAKIA. How'd you two meet? You start…showing up at University Administrator events, or –?

ASAF. Ha! No, that…kind of stalking's a young man's game. No, we got set up by mutual friends. But they were smart, they tricked us, invited us both to a thing where we were the only two single people, but didn't tell us it was a set-up? Later they told us they were just tired of hearing us each complain about the intense, unstable people we were dating like *we* weren't the ones *choosing* it and…decided to choose for us. *(Beat.)* I don't mean *you*. I mean later, I –

NAKIA. *(Conscious of* **BARON** *–)* It's fine.

ASAF. Oh. Yeah. Anyway… Then we got married, and then she got this job.

NAKIA. And how's she handling it?

ASAF. Being married to me? It's tough. No, um, you know: it's…delicate –

NAKIA. Yeah, they really dropped her in it. *(To* **BARON** *–)* You know your school's trying to take over more of the city.

BARON. *(Steadfastly focusing on the laptop –)* Hey I just *go* there.

ASAF. Well, but –

NAKIA. *(Back to* **ASAF** *–)* Yeah, this time they're gonna do it nice, right? Cuz you know what happened *last* time.

ASAF. Yeah, I mean: let's just say they didn't do the best job of "preserving local culture," right?

NAKIA. I mean you…*could* put it like that. *(To* **BARON** *–) You* know about Bottomville. Right?

BARON. *(Uncertainly –)* Um –

NAKIA. *("Unacceptable.")* Uh-uh. No. There used to be a neighborhood, south of campus, called "Bottomville." Great Migration town. *Nice.* Families. Businesses. People left doors unlocked. This is the late '50s. But the city wanted the school to be able to expand and you can't just *do* that if a place is *nice.* You need it to be neglected, dilapidated. Dangerous. So they colluded with the landlords, who were white, to raise rents 'til folks had to move *out*, and then didn't move anybody else *in.* Pretty soon you've got abandoned buildings, boarded up businesses, unemployment, crime, 'til *one* day a student who was renting an apartment out there got *stabbed.* At which point, the city, shocked at these terrible new conditions that had mysteriously arisen, commissioned a study, which, lo and behold, showed that Bottomville was now neglected and dilapidated and all the things they needed it to be in order to bulldoze and start over. And now they want to do it again, in *your* neighborhood.

BARON. Yeah, I heard that.

ASAF. *(Lamely –) Yeah* but, like you said, this time they're trying to do it…*well*… *(Beat.)* How 'bout you, you seeing anybody?

NAKIA. No. So what brings you here today, Asaf?

ASAF. Right, um… *(He hesitates. Then plows ahead –)* Okay, so: I *read* this.

BARON. *(Seeing something on his laptop screen –)* Shit.

ASAF. *(Thinking* **BARON** *is anticipating his question –)* What? No, I'm just –

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