



*a play by*  
*Sean O'Leary*

*Winner – 2007 Ruby Lloyd Apsey Award for plays confronting racial issues  
presented by The University of Alabama at Birmingham*

*Finalist – 2006 Playwrights First Competition, The National Arts Club*

*Winner – 2007 Best Play, West Virginia Writers Conference*

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# VALU-MART

## A play by Sean O'Leary

*"He says, 'You blinded by de light, you blinded by de dark, you blinded all de same'. I says, 'I see.'"*

*Sidney Collis Austin, from a dialect poem, 1896*

### Artistic Statement

VALU-MART's provocative beginning sets the stage for a thoughtful and touching exploration of how two black men of different generations and world views confront, with four other department store employees, a crisis that puts their livelihoods at stake and forces them to weigh compassion against self-interest and idealism against pragmatism. It's a struggle we all experience at some time point in our lives . . . or we should.

### Synopsis

A display case key has gone missing at a mass merchandise department store. Two black men – one, a former teacher who still cherishes the idealism of the civil rights era, and the other, a 20 year-old dropout on probation for receiving stolen property -- and three other employees are suspected of taking the key and are detained in a break room from which they are removed one-at-a-time for questioning. Humiliated and fearful that they will all be fired if the key and the person responsible are not found, the five employees struggle to find a way out. Their struggle exposes the hopes, fears, aspirations, and resentments that arise from five very different lives and it is resolved only when the character who seems the most self-interested also turns out to be the most perceptive of the needs of those with whom he is trapped.

### Characters: Employees at the Valu-Mart Superstore (3 Men, 3 Women)

LAINIE WELCH – Age 17. Sales Clerk. A short, plump, white girl whose appearance is only the most visible way in which she disappoints herself and her well-to-do parents.

KHALID BURROUGHS – Age 20. Warehouse Worker. A young black man with decisions to make as he works off a sentence of probation for possession of stolen property.

CHAD CROWLEY – Age 33. Store Security Guard. An overweight white guy doing the work he'll probably do for the rest of his life.

EARL PLUMMER – Age 55. Sales Clerk. Black. A former high school English teacher. Charismatic, inspiring and compassionate . . . maybe to a fault.

BRANDI SOBERS – Age 20. Sales Clerk. Black or white. A struggling single mom; smart, pretty and idealistic, but without the means to go as far as she should.

DOROTHY SHAY – Age 78. Store Greeter. White. Her grace and civility, which now seem quaint, suggest that she's not only of another era, but another stratum of society.

### Setting

The employee lunchroom of a "big box" superstore in small-town America. Present day.

Running Time

Approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes.

VALU-MART is to be performed without intermission or scene breaks.

Author's Bio

Sean O'Leary is the author of five completed full-length plays, three of which are receiving Equity productions. His most recent, VALU-MART, is the 2007 winner of The University of Alabama at Birmingham's Ruby Lloyd Apsey Award for plays confronting racial and ethnic issues. VALU-MART is also the winner of the 2007 Best Play award from the West Virginia Writers Conference and was a finalist in the National Arts Club's 2006 Playwrights First competition. BENEATH SHELTON LAUREL was commissioned by The Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre where it played for 20 consecutive sold-out performances between 2005 and 2006 and won a National Endowment for the Arts "Access to Artistic Excellence" grant for a touring production. Sean's earlier play, POUND, about the poet Ezra Pound, received its professional premiere in October 2004 at The Washington Stage Guild in Washington, DC and has gone on to five other productions. RAIN IN THE HOLLOWS received its professional premiere three months earlier at Tri-State Actors Theater in New Jersey and has gone on to numerous productions as well. Between them POUND and RAIN have won or been finalists in more than a dozen national playwriting competitions. Sean's first play, WINE TO BLOOD was produced by Oglebay Institute's Towngate Theatre and selected by Brandeis University for its permanent collection of works inspired by the Spanish Civil War. Sean is the 2004 winner of the West Virginia Commission on The Arts Fellowship for Drama and was recently added to The Literary Map of West Virginia. He is a member of The Dramatists Guild of America and the Playwrights Forum of Washington, DC. He lives near Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. For more information visit [www.olearyonstage.com](http://www.olearyonstage.com).

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AT RISE . . .

*(A girl's sobbing can be heard as we fade into the employee break room of a large mass-merchandise department store. The walls are bare except for an intercom speaker high up on a wall and a bulletin board that contains assorted posters and legal notices. The only means of exit is a door that has a small square window. The furniture consists of a large folding table, six plastic chairs, and two vending machines, one for soda, the other for snacks. Seated at the table, head down and sobbing, is LAINIE, who wears a blue Valu-Mart smock festooned with a name badge and a smiley face button. In the foreground stands EARL, similarly attired, who gazes over the audience and into mid-space.)*

EARL

*(Quoting.)* “My mouf’s so pa’ched I cain’t swaller an’ my belly’s callin’ out,  
An’ de lights begin ter dance aroun’ me like snowflakes blow’n’ about.  
My knees, dey buckle an’ my eahs go deaf an’ de earf jes kitch me up,  
Like a chile brung to his mammy’s arms quiet as a pup.

I taste de earf an’ feel de’ pebbles hard ‘gainst my face,  
When ‘mongst de’ brambles I spy de’ key ter my restin’ place.  
An’ from dem ev’ry which-way briuhs I rassle dat rusty key,  
Cuz a nigger wid a key got hope -- a nigger wid a key be free.”

*(Pause as EARL savors the passage.)*

EARL

Sidney Collis Austin, 1896. “A nigger wid a key got hope -- a nigger wid a key be free.”  
*(Pause as EARL awaits LAINIE’s response, but there is none, so EARL approaches her gently, but fervently.)*

EARL

Hear that, Lainie? A slave . . . the lowest of the low . . . a dying slave, a man they call “nigger”, and even he’s got hope! Some will call it fool’s hope, but it’s out there . . . out there beyond, beyond these walls – acres and miles and time beyond time – a world just waiting for you, Lainie! Why, I can hear it calling!

FEMALE P.A. VOICE

Aah . . . aah . . . aah . . . CHOO! Wow! It’s allergy season so I’d better get right over to the Valu-Mart pharmacy where you save on every prescription. Talk with one of our friendly pharmacists and find out how easy and inexpensive good health can be. You can’t sneeze at savings like these! It’s one more example of how we have more of what you value at Valu-Mart.

*(Having given it a good shot, EARL shrugs and sits beside LAINIE whose head is still down on the table.)*

MALE P.A. VOICE

Remember, shoppers. Valu-Mart has a zero-tolerance policy toward theft . . .

LAINIE

*(While the announcement continues, she screams to the walls . . . )* Shut the fuck up!

MALE P.A. VOICE *(Continues.)*

Shoplifting drives up the prices you pay. So, if you see an incident, report it immediately to a Valu-Mart associate. That's how we can work together to bring you more of what you value at Valu-Mart.

LAINIE

*(Again, shouting at the walls.)* I didn't do it!

EARL

Lainie . . . ?

LAINIE

I didn't.

EARL

Then, you tell them!

LAINIE

I already did and nobody believes me. Just lock me in a damn room.

EARL

Space and time, Lainie. Nothing but space and time. So, why don't you tell me about this key?

LAINIE

Why? You're probably working for them . . . trying to get me to admit it.

EARL

All I know is Crowley asked me to wait in the lunchroom and you seem distressed about a key.

LAINIE

Like you don't know anything about it.

EARL

Oh, about a lot of things. In fact, the vastness of my ignorance is breathtaking. But, at least my being here means you aren't the only suspect. There's hope in that.

*(There is no response from LAINIE.)*

Lainie, do this for me. Close your eyes and think beyond this room, beyond this time; beyond the clothes on your back . . . .

LAINIE

*(Looking derisively at her Valu-Mart smock.)* Yeah, definitely.

EARL

That's right. Beyond everything in this tiny, eensy, little moment because your life is so much bigger than whatever it is that's happening today. Think of it from years and graduations and love affairs and a thousand other adventures away. Can you do that?

*(LAINIE looks down embarrassed by EARL's passion.)*

Will you?

LAINIE

Why? Is it supposed to make me feel better?

EARL

Perspective – seeing things for what they are. That's all. Besides, your next best hope is that they'll decide I did it and arrest me. Would that make you feel better?

*(EARL looks LAINIE in the eye. Not wishing ill on anyone, she can only shrug. EARL laughs.)*

See that? You're already rising!

*(There are two loud thumps outside the door causing LAINIE to look up. The door bursts open revealing KHALID, also dressed in a Valu-Mart smock, whose angry glare finds LAINIE causing her to shrink back. He is nudged into the room from behind by CROWLEY, a uniformed security guard.)*

KHALID

*(Turning on CROWLEY.)* Get the fuck off me!

CROWLEY

Watch your mouth.

KHALID

Fuck you!

EARL

*(Moving to intervene.)* Come on, Khalid. *(He grabs KHALID from behind to restrain him.)*

CROWLEY

Shut up and sit down.

KHALID

*(To EARL.)* Let go!

LAINIE

*(To CROWLEY.)* I want to call my father.

KHALID

*(Still restrained by EARL.)* If you didn't have that uniform . . .

CROWLEY

Shut up.

EARL

*(To KHALID.)* C'mon, man.

KHALID

*(Calming slightly.)* All right. I'm OK.  
*(EARL releases him and he spins free.)*

LAINIE

I want to call my father!

CROWLEY

What?

KHALID

He don't wet his pants unless they let him.  
*(CROWLEY begins to move toward KHALID, but EARL steps in front of him.)*

EARL

*(To CROWLEY.)* C'mon, Crowley. You've been called a lot worse.

CROWLEY

*(To KHALID.)* I ain't gonna take any more.

EARL

*(Still holding CROWLEY, but looking back at KHALID.)* And you won't have to.  
*(Moving CROWLEY toward the door.)* Come on. Let's step outside for a second.  
*(EARL exits with CROWLEY who shuts the door behind himself. There is the click of the lock turning.)*

KHALID

*(Calls after CROWLEY.)* Fucker! *(Goes to the door and tries the knob, but finds it's locked.)* Shit!  
*(Kicks a chair as the frightened LAINIE watches.)*  
*(To LAINIE.)* What you lookin' at?

LAINIE

Nothing.

KHALID

How 'bout that? That's kidnapping, man . . . do any damn thing they want!

LAINIE

Are you here because of the key?

KHALID

What?

LAINIE

The key . . . to the display case in jewelry . . . is that why they . . . ? *(She trails off.)*

KHALID

*(To LAINIE.)* That's why Crowley threw my ass in here? . . . cuz somebody snatched a key?

LAINIE

I don't know.

KHALID

Well what do you know?

*(LAINIE shrugs sheepishly.)*

You work there, don't you? . . . In Jewelry.

LAINIE

Yeah. So?

KHALID

So'd you take it?

LAINIE

What?

KHALID

Did you take the damn key?

LAINIE

No . . . . No!

KHALID

Well, who did? *(Pause. No response from LAINIE.)* You were there. You gotta know something.

LAINIE

Yeah . . . No . . . I mean, I don't know.

KHALID

C'mon, what'd you see?

LAINIE

Nothing. I didn't see anything! I don't know anything about it!

KHALID

*(Exasperated.)* Shit. *(Pause.)* That's great, man. Something comes up missing, grab Khalid.

LAINIE

Hey, you got a cell phone?

KHALID

What?

LAINIE

A pager . . . anything? *(Pause.)* My dad's a lawyer. If I can call him . . .

KHALID

We ain't allowed to have cell phones and it don't matter who your daddy is. I told you, they do anything they want.

LAINIE

Yeah, well I thought . . .

KHALID

You sure you didn't take the key?

LAINIE

Why are you being such an asshole?

KHALID

'Cuz you're fucking with me!

LAINIE

I didn't take it! All right? I don't know anything about it.

KHALID

Then why are you here?

LAINIE

*(Fed up.)* Why are you here?!

KHALID

Fuck you! I work in the damn stockroom. . . .

LAINIE

Yeah, I know . . .

KHALID

Don't even get near no jewelry section.

LAINIE

Then why . . . ?

KHALID

I ain't done nothing, but you watch me get hung with this shit.

LAINIE

Well, it's not my fault.

KHALID

No? You sure you didn't tell a little story? Looking for an alibi?

LAINIE

You're really fucked up, you know that?

KHALID

*(Takes a step toward LAINIE.)*

"Maybe it was that guy . . . that guy from the warehouse . . ."

LAINIE

*(Retreating.)* Get the fuck away from me!

*(The sound of voices from outside the door. LAINIE and KHALID both look over as CROWLEY opens the door for EARL to re-enter.)*

KHALID

*(Rushing across the room to CROWLEY almost knocking EARL down.)*

Yo, Crowley . . . Crowley . . . !

*(But CROWLEY exits and locks the door before KHALID gets there.)*

EARL

Whoa!

KHALID

Damn!

*(No reply. LAINIE slumps back into her chair head down and KHALID returns to the corner dejected. EARL takes it all in.)*

EARL

Khalid. What's happening?

KHALID

Bunch o' bullshit's what's happening.

EARL

Oh. *(As though that explains anything.)* Any particular kind or just generalized bullshit?  
*(Pause as EARL waits for a reply, which isn't forthcoming.)*  
Well, now that's serious – the bullshit that dares not speak its name.

KHALID

Something about a key . . . I don't know. All right?

EARL

It's a start. What else don't you know?

KHALID

Fuck you.

EARL

Oh, are we playing the street thug today?

KHALID

*(Annoyed that EARL called him out, he angrily gestures to LAINIE.)* Ask her. She's the one who knows.

EARL

*(Still to KHALID.)* I already did

KHALID

Then, ask her again.

EARL

*(To LAINIE.)* Are you all right, Lainie?

LAINIE

*(Looks up and glares at KHALID.)* I'm trapped in a room with an asshole.

EARL

*(To both.)* Now, aren't we getting a little worked up over a missing key?

KHALID

Stole you mean. And we all suspects.

EARL

Who said it was stolen?

KHALID

Why you think they got us locked in a damn room?

EARL

You know what, Khalid? Back when I was growing up, my Uncle Henry had a temper like yours and every once in a while Aunt Esther would come over to see Mama because it was what she called “compound trouble time”. That’s because first there was the problem and then there was Uncle Henry’s reaction to it, which was usually worse.

*(KHALID dismisses EARL, but doesn’t respond.)*

Crowley just told me the display case key is lost -- not stolen . . . lost – and they’re asking the people who might have had access to the key to wait here until they locate it.

KHALID

Well, I didn’t have no. . .

EARL

“Might have had access”. You understand?

KHALID

*(Facetiously.)* Yeah, I understand. But I don’t know nothing about it. You got that?

EARL

*(Ignoring KHALID’s attitude.)* What about you, Lainie? Did you have access to the key this morning?

LAINIE

I asked for the key ring so I could get some cash register tape and, when I gave it back, Mr. Weimer said the key to the jewelry case was missing. And I didn’t even use that key!

EARL

Was it on the ring when you got it?

LAINIE

No! . . . I mean, I don’t know.

KHALID

Listen to this shit. “I guess.” “I don’t know.”

LAINIE

I don’t know! All right?

EARL

*(To KHALID.)* For someone who doesn’t know anything you sure have a lot to say.

*(KHALID turns away.)*

LAINIE

There are like fifteen keys on the key ring. I don’t even know which one is for the display case.

EARL

So, you're sure you don't have it? It couldn't have come off . . . ?

LAINIE

No! I didn't take it!

EARL

I didn't say take . . .

LAINIE

I don't have it. I didn't take it. Now, leave me the fuck alone!

KHALID

*(Laughing. To EARL.)* Fried your ass. See that? You just another nigger.

EARL

*(Daring KHALID to say it again.)* What did you say?

KHALID

Then why are we in here? Huh? Tell me that.

EARL

Same reason Lainie's here.

KHALID

She works in the damn department.

LAINIE

I didn't do it!

KHALID

*(Turning to LAINIE.)* You had the keys!

LAINIE

No!

*(LAINIE bursts from her chair, runs to the door, and starts pounding. When there is no answer, she starts to cry. EARL approaches her from behind and tries to comfort her by putting his hands on her shoulders. She breaks free and takes another chair putting her head down on the table.)*

KHALID

*(Taken aback by LAINIE's outburst.)* Dang!

EARL

(To *KHALID* firmly.) That's enough! You understand? (To *LAINIE*.) Lainie, I had the key ring this morning too and I don't know if the key to the jewelry case was there either. Now, I think we're as worked up as we need to be. Let's let them find the key and . . .

KHALID

Yeah, and what if they don't?

EARL

(Let's *KHALID*'s remark go and approaches *LAINIE* whose head is still down.)  
Lainie, I'm sorry. You hear me?

(*LAINIE* does not respond. After waiting for a reaction, *EARL* sits next to *LAINIE* and leans back, taking it all in. *KHALID* watches him, then slumps in a chair and does the same. A long pause, then the door opens and *CROWLEY* shows in *DOROTHY* followed by *BRANDI*.)

DOROTHY

(To *CROWLEY*.) Is someone going to relieve Harold? His break's in five minutes.

CROWLEY

Don't worry about it.

DOROTHY

He has diabetes, you know.

CROWLEY

Yeah, yeah.

KHALID

Crowley, Crowley. This is about some key in Jewelry, right?

CROWLEY

Wait a minute.

BRANDI

(Starting an avalanche of questions directed at *CROWLEY*.) We're still on the clock aren't we? We're getting paid for the time . . . ?

DOROTHY

He needs his shot.

KHALID

Crowley, c'mon. Is this about a goddamn key?

DOROTHY

What key?

LAINIE

When do I get to talk to Mr. Weimer?

CROWLEY

Just a second.

BRANDI

Are we still on the clock?

KHALID

C'mon, man. What's the . . . ?

CROWLEY

All right , all right! Everybody – just shut up!

LAINIE

When do I . . . . ?

CROWLEY

*(To LAINIE.)* You gonna listen up? *(To the others..)* Y'all gonna listen up!?

*(A pause as all become quiet.)*

*(To DOROTHY.)* I'll tell Mr. Weimer about Harold's diabetes and, *(To BRANDI.)* yeah, you're on the clock. *(To LAINIE.)* Mr. Weimer'll tell you when you can make your phone call. All right? There. You happy?

KHALID

The key, Crowley – what about . . . ?

CROWLEY

I was getting to that. Yeah, somebody took a key to the display case in Jewelry . . .

DOROTHY

How do you know it was taken?

CROWLEY

Taken . . . got lost . . . missing . . . ate by the cookie monster . . . I don't know but it's gone and . . .

BRANDI

Wait a minute. What are you saying?

KHALID

Weimer thinks we all thieves. Ain't that right, Crowley?

CROWLEY

Why don't you just shut up 'fore you get in more trouble'n you're already in?

KHALID

*(Taking a step toward CROWLEY.)* I ain't in no trouble!

EARL

*(Cuts loose with a shrill whistle. All stop and look at him. Authoritatively.)* I think we had all better hear what Mr. Crowley has to say. *(Nods to CROWLEY to continue.)*

CROWLEY

*(Relieved, he continues.)* Ain't nobody been accused o' nothing. Mr. Weimer just told me to get everybody together who had the key ring today. He's takin' an inventory of the display case right now to see if anything's missing.

BRANDI

What if something is missing?

CROWLEY

Look. I don't know. There probably isn't. . .

BRANDI

*(Annoyed.)* Did you ever think to ask us to help instead of herding us into a room?

CROWLEY

I don't make the rules.

KHALID

*(Calmly, but firmly to CROWLEY.)* OK. All right. I heard you. All I want to know is why am I in here, because you know I was out in the warehouse all morning. I wasn't anywhere near no key ring.

CROWLEY

*(Equaling KHALID's even tone.)* Mr. Weimer just told me to get you.

KHALID

*(Temperature starts to rise.)* By name? . . . He tell you to get me by name?

CROWLEY

*(Trying to forestall any hostility.)* I'm just telling you. That's all.

EARL

*(Interceding with KHALID.)* C'mon. You know now. That's the way it is. All right?  
*(KHALID wants to do something, but he doesn't know what.)*

CROWLEY

*(Starts to leave.)* I'll be back as soon as Weimer's done with inventorying the display case.

EARL

Thank you, Crowley.

*(CROWLEY exits and locks the door. EARL is still holding KHALID who is processing what he's just heard. To KHALID.)*

You all right?

KHALID

Fuck Crowley! Fuck Weimer! Fuck it all!

*(He retreats to a chair and looks away from the others.)*

DOROTHY

*(Tentatively.)* Did Mr. Crowley just lock the door?

BRANDI

*(Being nearest to the door she tries it and finds it locked.)* Jesus!

FEMALE P.A. VOICE

Good afternoon, shoppers. The smiles you see on the faces of Valu-Mart associates are there for a reason. If you'd like to work in an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect, and teamwork, with lots of opportunity for advancement, then consider a career at Valu-Mart. Applications are available right now at the Customer Service desk. Find out why we say Valu-Mart is the more than equal opportunity employer!

*(A pause during which they look at each other, then one by one dissolve into laughter – all except KHALID.)*

BRANDI

*(To no one in particular.)* Do you believe this?

EARL

*(Crossing to vending machines.)* Well, I'm going to relax and have a good old Pepsi . . .  
“License to Chill!” Anybody want anything?

*(Gets his Pepsi.)*

DOROTHY

I'll have a bag of Wheat Thins.

*(Crosses to vending machine as EARL purchases the Wheat Thins and hands her the bag.)*

Thank you, Earl.

EARL

You're very welcome.

DOROTHY

You're right. If they're going to pay us to sit around in here, we might as well enjoy it.  
*(Offering the bag to KHALID, who is nearest.)* Would you like some?

*(KHALID hesitates.)*

DOROTHY

Oh, go ahead. Why should we be mean to each other when there are so many other people to do it for us?

*(KHALID removes a crisp delighting DOROTHY.)*

KHALID

Thanks.

*(DOROTHY moves on to LAINIE.)*

LAINIE

No, thanks.

DOROTHY

That's all right. Comfort food isn't a good idea your age anyway.

LAINIE

My mom thinks I'm fat too.

DOROTHY

I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . .

LAINIE

I know. No big deal.

BRANDI

Hey, let me have some. I'm already hooked.

*(DOROTHY extends the bag and BRANDI digs in.)*

DOROTHY

*(Happily sitting down beside BRANDI.)* Gee, we were captured and imprisoned together. That ought to create some kind of special bond, don't you think?

BRANDI

Everybody who works at Valu-Mart has a special bond . . .

KHALID

Yeah. We all screwed.

*(A few chuckles around the room and KHALID realizes he's unintentionally made a little joke.)*

EARL

Dorothy, I'm Earl Plummer.

DOROTHY

How do you do?

EARL

You're new aren't you?

DOROTHY

Started last week.

BRANDI

Reconsidering yet?

DOROTHY

Oh, when you're as old as I am you just kind of go with the flow. Besides, I'm sure anytime now Mr. Crowley's going to come through that door, tell us nothing's missing, and we can all put on our best Valu-Mart smiles and go back to work.

*(A guffaw from KHALID who is otherwise silent.)*

LAINIE

*(To DOROTHY.)* Are you for real?

BRANDI

*(To DOROTHY.)* You aren't from here, are you?

DOROTHY

I am . . . or was. Why, I only moved away sixty years ago.

BRANDI

Sixty years? That's before my mother was born.

LAINIE

Before my grandmother.

DOROTHY

We needn't belabor the point. Anyway, I moved back, last month.

LAINIE

And you came to work here?

DOROTHY

Gets me out. I meet people. Why, just last week I saw an old friend for the first time since high school. Truth is I'd work here for free.

BRANDI

No wonder we barely get minimum wage.

DOROTHY

Well, I didn't mean . . .

BRANDI

Never mind. Just me being bitchy. Where'd you come back from?

DOROTHY

New York.

BRANDI

New York City? (*DOROTHY nods assent.*) No way! And you came back to Charles Town?

DOROTHY

Why? Don't you like it here?

BRANDI

If I could live in New York . . . (*Trails off at the wonder of it all.*)

DOROTHY

Well, why don't you?

(*BRANDI looks down self-consciously.*)

BRANDI

(*Ironically.*) Sure, just cash in my stocks and bonds, but they probably already have too many brain surgeons there.

DOROTHY

You know, you don't have to be rich . . .

BRANDI

No. It's all right. I just have a kid and . . . well . . .

DOROTHY

But, New York's magical for you?

BRANDI

Now you're going to tell me that anyplace gets old if you live there long enough.

DOROTHY

Oh, no. New York IS magical.

BRANDI

How?

DOROTHY

However you want it to be, I guess. It can be whatever you want it to be . . . (*Pause as she considers.*) . . . and sometimes what you don't want it to be.

EARL

But, people keep going, because when one dream is crushed another takes its place.

DOROTHY

Most of the time. (*To BRANDI.*) So, what's your dream?

BRANDI

More like a fantasy.

EARL

(*To DOROTHY.*) I keep telling her, there's no such thing as a fantasy as long as you're working at it. And this girl works.

DOROTHY

I like that, Earl.

BRANDI

I want to be a writer . . . Mr. Plummer . . . he used to be my English teacher . . . He gives me books and magazines and . . .

DOROTHY

You're pursuing the life of the mind!

BRANDI

Like it does a lot of good here.

DOROTHY

Oh, but it does!

BRANDI

(*Soberly.*) Oh yeah? Look around

DOROTHY

What's that got to do with where you are? With a dream like yours, where you're at doesn't have to matter.

BRANDI

See if you feel that way in about a year.

DOROTHY

I shouldn't argue. It's just that all those years I was in New York, I needed a dream like yours and didn't have it and the place seemed just as barren for me as Charles Town does for you.

BRANDI

Well, I'd still like to go . . . I mean, even if it was just to see it.

DOROTHY

Maybe I could take you sometime.

*(BRANDI looks at her wide-eyed.)*

I'm on a budget now, but . . .

BRANDI

*(Astonished.)* Are you serious?

DOROTHY

Well, I expect I am. *(Looks around at others to see if they share BRANDI's astonishment at her offer.)*

EARL

*(To DOROTHY.)* I believe a genuine genie has appeared in our midst.

LAINIE

Then, maybe she can get us out of here.

DOROTHY

Now, stop it. It's not that big a thing and you shouldn't be so impressed.

BRANDI

But, you really did it. You got all the way to New York and . . .

DOROTHY

And what? Do you want to know why I went in the first place?

BRANDI

Who doesn't want to get out of Charles Town?

DOROTHY

The reason I went – in fact the only reason – was to find a man. Sounds silly, doesn't it?

BRANDI

No . . . .

DOROTHY

Well it was silly. But, I found one anyway and I was hitched before I was twenty.

BRANDI

If you got him to marry you, it sounds good to me.

DOROTHY

Oh, he did and we stayed married until poor Jim passed away fifteen years ago.

BRANDI

I'm sorry.

DOROTHY

Don't be. He died happy. We had just returned from a lovely vacation in Honolulu.

BRANDI

Sounds beautiful.

DOROTHY

*(Ruefully.)* I wouldn't know. I only found out I had been there when the King Kamehameha Resort sent Doctor and "Mrs. Shay" a lovely flower arrangement thanking us for being such loyal customers. It seems we'd been going there for years.

BRANDI

*(Grasping the implication.)* Oh. . . .  
*(A pause.)*

LAINIE

*(Helping out.)* My parents and I stayed there when I was ten. I didn't think it was so great.

DOROTHY

Thank you, Dear.

BRANDI

Maybe that's how God punished your husband.

DOROTHY

And for forty years he punished me by making me a stupidly smug housewife while everyone around me knew precisely what was going on. No, if God wanted to punish Jim he should have left him to me. *(Pause.)* In any case, the Polynesian Mrs. Shay apparently had expensive tastes because by the time Jim died our nest egg had hatched and flown away.

LAINIE

How could he have done that to you for all that time without you finding out?  
*(DOROTHY smiles wanly, but does not reply. EARL comes to the rescue.)*

EARL

Because, try as we might, none of us can see into other folks' souls.

DOROTHY

Because, when your entire life is dependent on one person, you don't want to know.

EARL

Dorothy, you're a fascinating lady.

DOROTHY

Just a marvel of gullibility. *(To BRANDI and LAINIE.)* And that's something the two of you don't ever have to be.

BRANDI

Well, I've already been had.  
*(Pause.)*

LAINIE

*(Looks at her watch and out the window in the door.)* God, how long does it take to inventory a display case?

KHALID

Why do you care?

LAINIE

Because if nothing's missing, they'll let us go back to work.  
*(KHALID begins to laugh and even the others are baffled. KHALID notices that they're looking at him.)*

KHALID

You believe that? Earl? Brandi? You been around here long as I have. They gonna let us go back to work?  
*(Neither EARL nor BRANDI respond causing LAINIE to get nervous.)*

LAINIE

Crowley said if nothing's missing . . .

KHALID

I got good news for you and I got bad news for you. The good news is, ain't nothing gonna be missing from that display case cuz ain't nobody stupid enough to pocket something when he still got six hours left on the shift. The bad news is, it don't matter cuz what they want is the key.

DOROTHY

Oh, it's probably just lost. They only have to change the lock.

KHALID

Now, that's what you or I would do because we know accidents happen – no harm, no foul. But Valu-Mart don't trust nobody and there ain't no such thing as an accident. There's just loss and responsibility. You got a loss, somebody gotta be responsible. They gotta change that lock . . . cost 'em money . . . somebody gotta be responsible.

LAINIE

So, what are you saying?

KHALID

*(A warning to all.)* I'm saying, that unless they get that key back they gonna come down on somebody . . . And the other thing I'm saying is, it's gonna be one of us and I'm gonna make damn sure it ain't me.

BRANDI

*(To KHALID feigning fear.)* Ooooo, what are you gonna do?

KHALID

Fuck off, Brandi.

BRANDI

*(Scoldingly.)* Then, stop trying to scare everybody.

KHALID

*(Acidly.)* Ain't you getting above yourself?

EARL

*(Intervening to stop the coming explosion. Quoting.)*

"We is all constructed diff'ent, d'ain't no two of us de same;  
We cain't he'p ouah likes an' dislikes, ef we'se bad we ain't to blame.  
Ef we'se good, we needn't show off, case you bet it ain't ouah doin',  
We gits into su'ttain channels dat we jes' cain't he'p pu'suin'.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1897.

*(BRANDI takes the hint and DOROTHY is delighted. LAINIE smiles, although she's not sure why.)*

BRANDI

*(To DOROTHY.)* I told you he was my English teacher.

KHALID

I had to listen to that slave shit in school, but not now.

EARL

Just taking the edge off.

DOROTHY

Khalid, I believe you have a Cary Grant complex.

*(KHALID frowns uncomprehendingly.)*

You know. Cary Grant . . . the movie star? Oh, he was gorgeous. Did you ever see, "North by Northwest"? He plays an innocent man accused of murder, and nobody believes him.

KHALID

Yeah? How's he make out?

DOROTHY

*(Brightly.)* When it's over he's saved and ends up with Eva Marie Saint!

KHALID

Well, I ain't no Gary Grant.

DOROTHY

Too bad, because I'm a dead ringer for Eva Marie Saint.

*(All but KHALID laugh.)*

KHALID

You all laughing now, but you remember last year in Sporting Goods when the baseball gloves were missing and they couldn't find out who did it? They fired everybody who worked there. *(To the others.)* You hear that? Ain't that right, Brandi?

BRANDI

Yeah. So what?

KHALID

I'll bet replacing that lock'll cost a lot more than three baseball gloves.

DOROTHY

I'm sure they don't just fire people without proof.

KHALID

They fire you anytime they want.

LAINIE

Yeah, well who cares? Long as we get outta here.

KHALID

Brandi, why don't you explain to Lainie here that some of us need this job.

LAINIE

That's not my problem. I just want out.

KHALID

Hear that? You better hope she ain't the one took the key cuz she'll take us all down just like those dudes in Sporting Goods.

LAINIE

I told you, I didn't do it!

KHALID

Bullshit.

BRANDI

*(To KHALID.)* What do you wanna do? Beat her up? Torture her? Make her confess?

MALE P. A. VOICE

Mr. Crowley, please report to the manager's office. Mr. Crowley, to the manager's office.

BRANDI

*(To KHALID.)* I get so tired of your crap. It's bad enough they got us all in here. We don't need to be bustin' on each other.

KHALID

Whatever it takes.

BRANDI

*(Acidly.)* That's you, Khalid.

EARL

*(Intervening again to keep things in control. Facetiously.)* Oh, lordy, lordy . . . the sky's falling and somebody's out to get us. The bogeyman's on the prowl. Look around!

*(Motions broadly.)* Anybody here the bogeyman?!

*(KHALID turns away disgusted.)*

DOROTHY

*(Playing along with EARL.)* What's he look like?

EARL

*(Animatedly.)* Let's find out! *(To BRANDI.)* Brandi, are you the bogeyman out to get someone?

BRANDI

Not yet. *(A sidelong glance at KHALID.)*

EARL

*(To DOROTHY.)* What about you? The devil comes in many disguises.

DOROTHY

Well, this one has arthritis and irritable bowel syndrome. So, I don't think so.

EARL

*(To KHALID who is still looking away.)* Khalid, are you planning to stick it to Brandi . . . make her lose her job . . . and Dorothy . . . and Lainie . . . ?

KHALID

Fuck off.

EARL

But, would you?

KHALID

I told you . . .

EARL

Would you do it to me? Huh?

*(KHALID looks hurt at the suggestion.)*

I know you wouldn't. *(Earnestly.)* I know you!

LAINIE

Yeah, well he wants to stick it to me.

EARL

*(To LAINIE.)* You two didn't even know each other before you came in here, did you?

*(LAINIE and KHALID eye each other, but don't dispute EARL's point.)*

Now, why . . . why would either of you have it in for the other?

KHALID

To beat the rap, man.

EARL

Beating the rap . . . is that what it's about?

KHALID

That's what it's always about.

EARL

I don't believe that . . . that it's always about beating the rap. But, how about if we say this time you're right. One of us took that key and isn't admitting it. What are we going to do? What's going to happen?

*(Looks around, but there are no suggestions forthcoming.)*

I'll tell you what I think will happen if one of us has the key. That person's going to look around and say, "I don't want other folks to get fired because of me. Before, I was just afraid for myself, but now it's other people and . . ."

KHALID

And what? They just going to hand it over?

EARL

What's wrong, Khalid? Are you afraid I'm right . . . that sometimes folks care about each other? Even more than they care about themselves?

*(KHALID scoffs.)*

Well, let's see! If one of us has the key maybe that person will look around at his fellow human beings and know that his soul would weep if he allowed them to be punished. So, let's give him a chance.

LAINIE

To admit it you mean?

EARL

A chance to prove he's a better person than Valu-Mart thinks he is . . . maybe even better than he thinks he is.

KHALID

Yeah, well if they are, it wouldn't a got this far.

EARL

I'm betting . . . I'm betting right now that you're wrong! If one of us has the key – and I'm not sure any of us does – but if one of us has it, he'll hand it over right now!

*(EARL starts going from person to person.)*

Whoever you are, we'll be with you. Every one of us will go to Weimer and tell him that you could have harmed Valu-Mart and a lot of people besides, but you chose not to . . .

*(The key is not forthcoming.)*

KHALID

*(A shake of the head.)* It ain't happening, Earl.

EARL

*(Urgently.)* Listen to me. If one of you gives me that key, I'll take it to Weimer!

DOROTHY

What?

KHALID

And what'll you tell him when he asks where you got it? You gonna lie to him . . . tell him you found it, you stole it? *(Shakes his head and smiles.)* Hunh unh. I know you, Earl. You don't tell no lies.

*(Still, no key. Pause. KHALID looks at EARL knowingly. CROWLEY enters.)*

CROWLEY

Khalid, you wanna come with me?

KHALID

*(Surprised to be called on and frightened.)* Why?

BRANDI

What happened? Was something missing from the display case?

CROWLEY

(To KHALID.) C'mon. Let's go.

LAINIE

What about us? Can we leave?

CROWLEY

The rest o' you ain't goin' nowhere yet.

EARL

Crowley, was something missing?

CROWLEY

Just the key so far. (To KHALID.) C'mon. Mr. Weimer's waiting.

KHALID

(Looks back at LAINIE and his expression hardens.) What about her? She was here first.

CROWLEY

Mr. Weimer asked for you.

KHALID

(Bewildered at the unfairness.) C'mon, Crowley, you know I wasn't nowhere near Jewelry . . .

CROWLEY

Tell Mr. Weimer.

BRANDI

Hey, the key could just be lost. It could have fallen on the floor somewhere.

CROWLEY

(Scoffs at the notion.) You ever try to get a key off that ring? Need a pair o' pliers.

EARL

Crowley. Wait a minute. Take me. Let me talk to Weimer. We'll find the key . . .

CROWLEY

He said Khalid . . .

EARL

(To CROWLEY.) C'mon. Work with me and we can solve this!

CROWLEY

Earl, I gotta do what I'm told. (To KHALID.) Are you coming or not?

KHALID

*(Defeated and scared, KHALID looks at the others.)* I don't know which one o' you did it, but if I get hung . . . !

CROWLEY

*(Gruffly.)* C'mon.

*(Exits with KHALID. The door locks and all look stunned except LAINIE. After a lengthy pause . . . )*

LAINIE

Thank God!

*(EARL who has been watching KHALID and CROWLEY through the small window until they are out of sight, retreats to the nearest chair absorbed in his own thoughts. BRANDI stares daggers at LAINIE.)*

BRANDI

What are you thanking God for?

LAINIE

Crowley said it's just the key and he took Khalid, so maybe now we'll get out of here.

BRANDI

And you don't care what happens to him?

LAINIE

Why should I? He's a jerk.

BRANDI

You're as bad as he is.

LAINIE

Then, why's he so scared all of a sudden?

DOROTHY

Aren't you scared?

LAINIE

Not any more.

BRANDI

This is all just a big pain in the ass for you, isn't it?

LAINIE

Yeah, it is! Because I didn't do it.

BRANDI

And you don't care who gets fired. You know, if Khalid doesn't have that key, it could be all of us.

LAINIE

So what? At least we won't have to work here any more.

BRANDI

You don't know anything, you know that? *(Pause, but LAINIE doesn't respond. BRANDI turns away in disgust.)* God!

DOROTHY

*(Sitting down beside LAINIE.)* You know, for all his bravado, I think you're right. Khalid really is afraid.

LAINIE

There's probably a reason.

DOROTHY

Really? Because I'm afraid too and I don't even know why. Feel . . .  
*(Takes one of LAINIE's hands in hers, causing LAINIE to feel the discomfort that adolescents experience when touching older people.)*  
They always get cold when I'm afraid.

LAINIE

You're shaking.

DOROTHY

Oh, that's my tremor. It never goes away . . . or maybe it means I'm afraid all the time.  
*(Smiles at her little joke.)*

FEMALE P. A. VOICE

Good afternoon shoppers! Hop! Hop! Hop! Hop on over to our Outdoor Living department where you can get everything for your Great American Cookout. Today Lansford Charcoal Briquettes, two bags for five ninety-nine and the new Kansas City Barbecue Grill just ninety-nine dollars. Remember, we have more of what you value at Valu-Mart.

BRANDI

*(To EARL.)* Do you think Khalid's right about what they'll do if they don't find the key?

EARL

I think things will work themselves out.

BRANDI

*(Beginning to tear up with worry. To EARL.)* They did fire those guys in sporting goods.

EARL

*(Puts his arms around her to comfort her.)* I know.

BRANDI

Do you think there's any chance Khalid did take the key?

EARL

Is that what you're hoping for?

BRANDI

*(Suddenly ashamed.)* No. I just wish it would turn up or whoever has it would take responsibility so the rest of us can get out of here.

EARL

*(To LAINIE.)* Well, let's see. You said you didn't take it. I told you I didn't. Khalid said he didn't . . .

LAINIE

And you believe him?

EARL

I believe everybody.

DOROTHY

You must own lots of marshland in Florida.

EARL

*(Smiles.)* I've bought my share.

LAINIE

*(Confused by the unfamiliar allusion to Florida marshland.)* What?

EARL

*(Still to DOROTHY.)* The great panjandrum says the damage you do to the world when you don't believe a truthful man is a lot worse than the damage you do when you're fooled by an untruthful one. Or at least you're not responsible for anyone's suffering but your own.

DOROTHY

*(Reflecting on her own history of misplaced trust.)* Then I must have been a saint all those years I was married to Jim. Who knew?

*(EARL's knowing smile shows that he takes DOROTHY's point.)*

BRANDI

I just don't think Khalid would have taken the key. He's on probation for receiving stolen property. If he gets caught in something like this, they'll send him to jail.

LAINIE

Well, nobody ever had to take an IQ test to be a criminal.

BRANDI

Why don't you get off him?

LAINIE

(*To EARL.*) You saw the way he acted when he came in.

EARL

He isn't as bad as he seems.

LAINIE

I guess I just bring out the worst in him.

EARL

Problem is the boy just "ain't got no leverage."

LAINIE

What?

EARL

That's what my father used to say about folks on the street. "Ain't got no leverage and you can't get by without it."

LAINIE

What's "leverage"?

EARL

(*Becoming facetiously animated to make his point.*) You . . . You got leverage!

(*LAINIE is still uncomprehending.*)

I'll bet you're smart . . . get good grades.

LAINIE

(*Tentatively.*) Not good enough for my mom.

EARL

Are you planning to go to college?

LAINIE

I guess.

EARL

Then, you got LEVERAGE!" (*He turns to BRANDI.*) "What about you?"

BRANDI

I've got a two-year-old. He's got leverage.

EARL

Derek, right?

BRANDI

Yeah.

DOROTHY

How sweet!

BRANDI

Tell his father if you can find him.

EARL

And what about that Manager Trainee test?"

DOROTHY

(*Delightedly.*) Brandi . . . ?

BRANDI

(*Embarrassed by the attention.*) I guess I did OK.

EARL

OK? OK? And what was your score? (*To LAINIE and DOROTHY.*) Go on. Ask her.

DOROTHY

Well?

(*BRANDI still demurs.*)

EARL

Best ever by someone in this store is what I heard! This fine young woman has leverage!

DOROTHY

And what's my leverage?

EARL

Oh! Dorothy who doesn't care about pay, who just loves meeting old and new friends?

DOROTHY

I may have exaggerated.

EARL

That's the big leverage – mojo leverage!” Not a care in the world, but for other folks.

DOROTHY

I never knew until now how great it is to be a lonely old woman. (*To EARL.*) And what's your leverage?

BRANDI

Mr. Plummer? He's the smartest man I ever knew.

(*DOROTHY thinks she's being put on.*)

No, really. Ask anybody who had him for English. He was awesome. He used to talk about Shakespeare and Ralph Ellison and George Orwell, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar like they were friends of his – like they hung out together on weekends.

EARL

(*Corrects BRANDI's grammar.*) Hanged.

LAINIE

You sound a lot better than the jerks we have now.

DOROTHY

A teacher of English. Maybe you do see into men's souls.

EARL

Sorry. A skill I never picked up

DOROTHY

I'm not so sure.

EARL

I was fired.

DOROTHY

Maybe you made the mistake of seeing into the wrong men's souls.

EARL

Nothing so romantic. I was just fired.

BRANDI

Huh uh. It was a lot more than that. (*To EARL.*) Tell them, Mr. Plummer.

EARL

Ancient history.

DOROTHY

(*To BRANDI.*) Sometimes people don't like to talk about . . .

BRANDI

*(To EARL.)* C'mon, Mr. Plummer. You should be proud. It's the principle and the idiots on the school board who should be ashamed.

DOROTHY

Brandi, don't . . .

BRANDI

He was trying to help Khalid.

LAINIE

*(Sarcastically.)* Great.

*(Gets EARL's attention.)*

EARL

Lainie, a few minutes ago you said your grades didn't satisfy your mom . . .

LAINIE

And it wouldn't hurt if I lost twenty pounds, put on a little make-up, wore a skirt instead of blue jeans all the time . . .

EARL

So, she expects the world of you.

LAINIE

She's just pissed off because she got "frog-girl" for a daughter.

DOROTHY

*(Distressed at LAINIE's self-deprecation, she gives her a hug.)* Oh, dear.

EARL

I understand what you mean. But, how would you feel if she didn't expect anything of you . . . if nobody expected anything of you? *(LAINIE shrugs.)* Expectations can be a burden, but they're also hope and that's something Khalid doesn't have much of.

LAINIE

That doesn't make it all right for him to kick me around.

EARL

No, it doesn't.

DOROTHY

*(To EARL.)* Brandi said you were helping Khalid. What happened?

*(EARL hesitates.)*

BRANDI

Go on, Mr. Plummer. It's better for him if folks know what really happened.

EARL

He was charged with Possession of Stolen Property. A few boys – Khalid, my son, Emmett, and two others – were arrested when a car they borrowed turned out to have a box of stolen watches and jewelry in the trunk. They didn't know anything about the box and had alibis for the robberies, but the police decided to charge them anyway with Possession. First, they were suspended from school, then the police prosecuted and, just like that, four boys – four kids with promise – were on their way to jail. We were more interested in getting rid of them than saving them.

BRANDI

And Mr. Plummer said so.

DOROTHY

(*To EARL.*) To all the wrong people I bet.

BRANDI

He told the truth! They look for ways to get rid of kids who aren't going to college and don't make good test scores.

DOROTHY

Is that true?

EARL

Whether it is or not some kids live between two worlds, the one we hope they'll aspire to and the one we fear they'll aspire to. Sometimes tossing them into jail makes the right choice a lot tougher.

BRANDI

They said Mr. Plummer was defending criminals.

DOROTHY

It couldn't have helped that your son was one of them. What happened to him?

EARL

He's in jail.

BRANDI

And Mr. Plummer was fired.

DOROTHY

Just like that?

EARL

Oh, there were hearings and grievances, but if you're not wanted, there's always a way.

DOROTHY

Isn't there ever. So, how long will your son be in jail?

EARL

Emmett and another boy are in the second year of a five-year sentence. The other two got probation. Khalid was one of them.

LAINIE

Jesus!

DOROTHY

I'm so sorry.

EARL

No need to be sorry! There are still appeals and we're keeping the faith.

DOROTHY

And Khalid?

EARL

He's a bright kid. He has a future if he'll give himself a chance.

LAINIE

Is that why you're always making excuses for him?

EARL

Not excuses. Just trying to preserve whatever hope he has.

BRANDI

He doesn't think he's got any.

EARL

Not much of his own maybe. But, he has mine – he'll always have mine.

LAINIE

What do you mean?

BRANDI

Like when Mr. Plummer said he hoped we're better than we think we are . . . That we'll care for each other as much as we care for ourselves?

LAINIE

My mom hopes I'll turn out to be her little princess? But, hoping doesn't make it so.

EARL

Hope can be selfish, but it's still a gift that I can give Khalid. It's saying, even if no one else believes in him and the world's telling him he's got nothing to offer, there's still something he can offer me. He can fulfill my hope. He has that power to do good. He has that "leverage".

DOROTHY

(*To LAINIE.*) Maybe your mother's human after all.

LAINIE

Not really.

EARL

(*To LAINIE.*) I'm sorry Khalid's been so rough with you, but in a way I'm glad. Maybe he's finally figuring out how much he still has to lose.

LAINIE

Yeah, but what if he took the key . . . ?

EARL

What if he did?! It's just a key! But, the four of us . . . and Khalid . . . we have the rest of our lives and, and wouldn't it be a tragedy, wouldn't it make the angels weep if we let what's happening today destroy those lives? Especially if we can walk out of this room better people than when we walked in! Now, wouldn't that be something?

DOROTHY

(*To EARL admiringly.*) You are a dangerous man.

BRANDI

See. I told you!

LAINIE

Well, I don't see how getting fired or arrested is going to make me a better person.

EARL

Brandi, do you remember Bobby Carlson in Senior English?

BRANDI

Yeah, the guy who told you he didn't "need to read all this shit, cuz if it's any good it'll be on TV"? (*Laughs.*)

EARL

(*Smiles.*) That's it! And what did I tell him?

BRANDI

You told him that the problem was yours. (*Addressing DOROTHY and LAINIE.*) Mr. Plummer said to this total jerk, "I'd like to make it worth your time to read these books. Would you let me try?" And Carlson thought he was getting jerked around, so Mr. Plummer said, "Really. I just want to try and, every once in a while, I'd appreciate it if you let me know how I'm doing. Is that OK?"

LAINIE

That's bullshit.

BRANDI

No, it's the truth. (*To EARL.*) And you meant it too, didn't you, Mr. Plummer?

(*EARL smiles somewhat embarrassed by BRANDI's gushing.*)

Honest to God. We'd read these books and talk about them in class and every once in a while Mr. Plummer would just ask this guy, "How am I doing?" And, at first, the guy just blew him off, but then one day, when Mr. Plummer asked, the guy said, "I think it's about the pigs."

(*DOROTHY and LAINIE look confused.*)

The pigs! Right? We were reading *Animal Farm*, you know? The pigs! And Bobby Carlson actually knew what was going on!

(*Speaking to the others, but looking at EARL.*)

He just made us feel like we mattered . . . like he was putting himself in our hands.

DOROTHY

So, whatever happened to Bobby Carlson?

BRANDI

Do you know, Mr. Plummer?

EARL

He's in college!

BRANDI

(*Amazed.*) What? Bobby Carlson went to college?

EARL

He graduates in the spring.

BRANDI

You're serious?

EARL

An English major!

BRANDI

Whoa!

DOROTHY

That's wonderful!

EARL

*(Motioning to BRANDI.)* But, here's the one who should go.

BRANDI

God! I miss those days . . . *(To EARL.)* Don't you?

EARL

Who said they're over? *(Smiles as they savor the moment of remembered passion as with DOROTHY looking on admiringly.)*

LAINIE

*(From out of the blue, walks to the door and looks out, suggesting that she's speaking of KHALID.)* Well, it may not matter. What do you think they're doing?

BRANDI

Probably asking a ton of questions.

DOROTHY

It won't matter if he didn't take the key.

LAINIE

*(Hopefully.)* Maybe none of us did!

DOROTHY

And . . .

BRANDI

You heard what Crowley said. Somebody had to take it off the key ring. I couldn't just fall off.

LAINIE

So, you're saying one of us is lying.

*(They look around at each other apprehensively.)*

BRANDI

I don't know. I just keep thinking about what they did to everybody in Sporting Goods.

EARL

All right, we may not want it to be true, there's a chance that one of us took the key. So, what should we do? *(Looks around, but no one seems to have an answer.)* I say we persuade whoever has the key to give it back.

LAINIE

You already tried that.

EARL

*(An idea begins emerging.)* I tried asking the person to admit it. But, what if he didn't have to admit anything? What if he could give back the key without anyone knowing that he was the one who had it?

LAINIE

I don't get it.

EARL

Let him turn over the key anonymously. No merchandise was taken, so they're just looking for a key. If they get that back, we're one big, happy Valu-Mart family again.

LAINIE

They'll still want to know who did it.

EARL

They'll know something better -- that the person who took the key repented and that four other employees cared so much about their jobs that they solved the problem. I don't know about you, but if I were Mr. Weimer, I think I'd give that group another chance.

DOROTHY

Yes, but how . . .

EARL

*(Looking around the room.)* The logistics might be a little a little tough, but we can do it.

LAINIE

Wait. You're talking about all of us turning the key in. What if Mr. Weimer decides to hold us all responsible and fires us anyway?

EARL

*(Brightly.)* He might . . . !

BRANDI

But, he might not and, if he doesn't get the key back at all, he'll definitely fire us.

DOROTHY

So, he's simply going to say, "OK, everybody back to work"?

BRANDI

Yeah! *(LAINIE scoffs in disbelief.)*

EARL

Lainie, you know what? I can't promise anything and I know it will hurt all of us, you included, if we get fired. What's the alternative? I don't see anyone who's going to admit it on his own.

LAINIE

Khalid might be in there giving them the key right now . . .

EARL

Do you think so? I hope not. Because I know what it would do to him. I know what having to take the blame would do to any one of us and I don't want to see anyone leave this room damaged -- robbed of hope the way he was three years ago. You know, the four of us and Khalid have the power to bring this thing to an end in a way that -- and I'm going to use an old word -- ennobles us. It's true that we may lose our jobs, but we may not. And even if the worst happens at least we'll know we did something worthwhile. We gave someone who may very well need it another chance. That's a gift!

LAINIE

But, I didn't take anything! Why should I . . . ?

BRANDI

Don't you understand?

LAINIE

Why do we have to be so goddamn noble? What about whoever did it? Why is it OK for them to take us all down?

EARL

It's not OK . . .

LAINIE

You know as soon as we give them the key, they're going to ask every one of us who took it. What are we supposed to say?

EARL

We won't know.

LAINIE

How won't we know? We're in a damn room. How can somebody give the key back without us knowing?

EARL

If we all stand in a corner, face to the wall, close our eyes and cover our ears, whoever has the key can put it on the table without anyone else knowing.

LAINIE

*(Incredulously.)* That's really whacked.

EARL

Why?

DOROTHY

I'm fascinated. I really am. But, don't you think Lainie has a point. If we're going to stand up for whoever it is, shouldn't they at least trust us . . .

EARL

It won't work.

DOROTHY

But, if we're going out on a limb for this person . . .

EARL

It's not about us. It's about some person who . . .

LAINIE

Protect them even though they won't get honest with us?

EARL

That's the gift! We're putting ourselves in that person's hands. I don't know, perhaps in the end they'll come forward, but you know what? Even if they don't, I'm willing to trust that whoever it is is truly desperate and, if that's so, I willingly give . . . I give him my permission to not come forward. *(Looks at them all.)* I'm in your hands.

LAINIE

But, they don't have to put themselves in ours? I'm not going to get fired for somebody who doesn't give a damn about me.

BRANDI

I thought you didn't care about this job . . .

LAINIE

You want to get fired for some asshole?

BRANDI

Yeah! You know why? Because I don't know whether who did it is an asshole or not. I don't know why they did it. Maybe they had a good reason.

LAINIE

Like you can afford to . . . .

BRANDI

What do you know, huh? You think just because I have a kid and live in a trailer park, I can't be human? You know, you're just as bad as Khalid.

EARL

Brandi, we can't make anybody do anything.

DOROTHY

And what about Khalid?

LAINIE

*(To EARL.)* You probably think we should leave him out.

EARL

No. We can wait until he's back.

BRANDI

If he comes back.

*(EARL smiles faintly and there is a pause while all contemplate what to do.)*

LAINIE

You know, this is so much bullshit. I mean, even if we do it, somebody'll look and . . .

EARL

Maybe. That's the risk the person who has the key will have to take.

*(EARL looks at them one at a time coming last to DOROTHY.)*

DOROTHY

What if Khalid won't do it?

LAINIE

He'll do it because he knows Earl's covering for him.

EARL

No more than for everyone else. If Khalid wasn't involved and it was just the four of us, I'd be saying the same thing!

BRANDI

*(With conviction.)* He would.

EARL

Dorothy, before, you called yourself a lonely old woman. Well, we're going to put an end to it -- bring folks together -- not just companionship or friendship. We're talking about devotion, the kind that binds folks who share a life-changing experience, the kind that one way or another you remember every day and even thirty years later the thought of it brings a glow to your heart.

DOROTHY

In thirty years there won't be anything that brings a glow to my heart.

EARL

*(Taking her by the shoulders. Earnestly.)* How do you know, Dorothy?! How do you know?!

DOROTHY

*(Chuckles because even though she knows it can't be true, for the first time in years she wants it to be.)* Earl Plummer, you're either a savior or a fool, but, my! You are audacious!

EARL

*(Turning to LAINIE with fervor.)* How about it, Lainie?

*(Pause as LAINIE looks away uncomfortably, but EARL won't let her escape.)*  
Do you remember earlier when you said you only took this job to piss off your mom? Well, why not do something that will really get to her? Make her respect you despite herself. Do something that will make her understand that you have something that no amount of clothes or make-up can give anybody. Make her respect you for who you are!

LAINIE

Oh, this is not only going to get me out of trouble, but it's going to make my mom love me.

EARL

Can't make her love you, but you sure can make her know that she should!

*(LAINIE is torn. Unsure what to do, she turns away.)*

MALE P.A. VOICE

Good afternoon, Valu-Mart shoppers! Remember that all this month Valu-Mart will donate a portion of every purchase you make to Jefferson County Schools' Character Education Program, because at Valu-Mart we care.

FEMALE P.A. VOICE

Hey, do you want to have some fun? Put away that shopping list and let your imagination wander by exploring the more than 80,000 items we have for you at Valu-Mart! Take a chance, get a little crazy and you'll find great new values for you and your family right now! See for yourself how we have more of what you value at Valu-Mart!  
*(The pained LAINIE is about to speak when the door opens and a subdued KHALID enters followed by CROWLEY. KHALID crosses to the opposite corner of the room, as far away from the others as possible. He sits with his head down.)*

CROWLEY

*(To EARL.)* Earl, would you come with me?

*(EARL looks at KHALID hoping for a sign, but KHALID stares at the floor.)*

Earl, you coming?

EARL

Khalid?

*(No response from KHALID.)*

CROWLEY

Mr. Weimer's waiting. Let's go.

EARL

Just a minute. Let me talk to Khalid.

CROWLEY

Now.

EARL

Crowley, I just need a couple of minutes. We may be able to . . .

CROWLEY

Earl, c'mon. He's waiting.

*(Takes EARL by the arm. EARL turns, but does not budge.)*

EARL

You must not have found what you were looking for, but, if you want to, give me a minute with Khalid.

CROWLEY

I want to do what my boss told me. Now, don't make it any worse . . .

EARL

All right. All right.

*(To the others as CROWLEY leads him out the door.)*

Brandi, talk to Khalid. All of you . . . talk. When I get back we'll . . . !

*(CROWLEY and EARL exit. The door locks behind them. BRANDI, LAINIE, and DOROTHY are intensely curious about what KHALID can tell them, but are afraid to ask. Finally, BRANDI summons the courage.)*

BRANDI

How was it?

*(KHALID continues to look down.)*

Khalid, what happened? Did they ask about the key?

*(Still no response.)*

DOROTHY

Why don't we let him be? He can tell us when he feels like it.

BRANDI

*(Ignoring DOROTHY's comment, takes a riskier approach with KHALID.)* I guess you didn't have the key after all.

KHALID

*(Looks up, bemused. It appears he has been crying.)* I'm your worst nightmare, ain't I. Y'all thought they were gonna nail my ass and you were gonna walk.

*(Pauses for a rueful smile, then shakes his head and resumes staring at the floor.)*

BRANDI

Mr. Plummer told us you didn't do it.

KHALID

Yeah, well in about ten minutes he'll wish I did.

DOROTHY

Why? What are they doing?

KHALID

Asking questions. What do you think?

LAINIE

If you didn't do it, why'd they send you back here? Why didn't they let you go?

KHALID

I told you. I ain't here cuz o' what I done.

DOROTHY

We're just curious . . .

KHALID

Hey, look. I did my piece. All right? I'm a spectator now.

*(Walks over to the soda machine and scans the selection.)*

Anybody got a dollar?

*(BRANDI pulls out a dollar bill and gives it to him.)*

I'll pay you back.

*(He gets a Sprite.)*

LAINIE

*(Impatient.)* Come on, are you going to tell us what happened?

KHALID

I told you – questions.

LAINIE

*(Fed up.)* Why don't you stop jerking us around?

KHALID

*(Unperturbed.)* Hey, if you got other shit going on in your head, I can't do nothing about that. You understand?

LAINIE

You enjoy this, don't you? Watching us suffer . . . ?

KHALID

Suffer? That what you were doing while I was in there?

BRANDI

C'mon, let's not start . . .

KHALID

It's all right. No problems here.

BRANDI

Did they tell you not to say anything to us?

KHALID

*(Addressing all of them.)* Look, you know what this is all about and I ain't trying to mess with you. OK?

*(He retreats to his corner and takes a drink of Sprite.)*

LAINIE

*(In a tone of resignation.)* Shit, this isn't ever going to end.

BRANDI

Hey, we still have our plan.

LAINIE

I don't know. This is like so fucked up.

BRANDI

But, you remember what Mr. Plummer said about . . .

LAINIE

And why do you always call him, Mr. Plummer, Mr. Plummer? He's Earl, just Earl, like the rest of us . . .

BRANDI

Nobody impresses you, do they?

LAINIE

If he's so smart, why's he working at Valu-Mart?

BRANDI

You know, when I was seventeen I didn't understand that shit happens either.

KHALID

*(A rueful chuckle.)* Yeah, but you sure found out.

BRANDI

So did you.

KHALID

No shit.

LAINIE

*(To KHALID.)* You know, Earl told us all about what happened to you, so you can quit being such a jerk.

KHALID

Oh, somebody been telling stories . . .

BRANDI

He was just explaining why he didn't think you took the key.

KHALID

Yeah, well, whatever Earl says.

BRANDI

Why are you being so shitty to him? He stuck up for you. He always sticks up for you.

KHALID

What do you want me to do? I'll say "thank you" when he gets back.

BRANDI

How can you be that way? After everything . . .

KHALID

Look. He was a good guy. All right? He tried and I give him all the credit, but he ended up screwed and so did I. OK?

BRANDI

After what he did . . .

KHALID

It was two damn years ago and it didn't make any difference!

BRANDI

You gotta . . .

KHALID

It was another life, man!

DOROTHY

Oh, we get more than one? Maybe I do have something to look forward to.  
*(Her inappropriateness causes the others to give her frowning looks.)*  
Sorry.

BRANDI

*(Solicitously to KHALID.)* All I'm saying is he's trying to help . . . like he helped you and me and Bobby Carlson . . .

KHALID

Bobby Carlson?

DOROTHY

It was an inspiring story.

BRANDI

You know what I mean.

KHALID

Yeah, I do. And Earl got screwed.

BRANDI

Well, at least he's got a plan for getting us out of here.

LAINIE

God! I just want to go home.

BRANDI

We can, if we do what Mr. Plummer said.

KHALID

What the hell you talking about? What plan?

BRANDI

Mr. Plummer's plan – it means nobody has to get fired . . .

LAINIE

Maybe.

BRANDI

All right. Maybe. But it's still the right thing to do and, if we don't, we're going to get fired anyway.

LAINIE

Maybe.

BRANDI

Definitely. *(To KHALID.)* Even you said it. Didn't you, Khalid? If they don't find the key, they'll fire us all.

KHALID

All right. All right. What's the plan?

BRANDI

We don't have a choice . . .

KHALID

Just tell me the damn plan!

BRANDI

Well, the person who has the key gives it up anonymously . . . to us. They don't have to admit anything and we take it to Mr. Weimer as a group.

KHALID

As a group?

BRANDI

Yeah. You know . . . we do it together.

KHALID

You mean we give Weimer the key, but we don't say who did it and we all take the rap?

BRANDI

They get the key back. And the person who took it gets another chance.

KHALID

Another chance? *(Chuckles.)* Another chance for what? *(Not wanting to annoy BRANDI.)* Wait. Never mind. You're saying even though I didn't have nothing to do with it I'm supposed to . . .

BRANDI

When they get the key back, they won't fire us!

KHALID

Why not? Shit, I'd fire us!

DOROTHY

Fortunately, you're not making the decision. Mr. Weimer on the other hand might appreciate a group of employees banding together to solve a problem.

KHALID

*(Bemused. Not believing what he's hearing. Looks at LAINIE.)* What about you, Lainie? I'll bet you all for this – get you off the hook . . .

LAINIE

He's doing it for you, asshole.

KHALID

Who? Plummer . . . is doing it for me? He tell you that? What else he tell you?

BRANDI

That's not the point. It's for all of . . .

KHALID

No, no, no, no, no. I want to know what's in this for me.

DOROTHY

For everybody. We solve the problem for them, save our jobs, and the person who did it gets the gift of another chance.

KHALID

“The gift of another chance” . . . That what Earl said? Yeah, that's “Mr. Plummer” talking . . . through and through! *(Laughs.)*

BRANDI

He means it.

KHALID

Oh, I know he means it. Earl's one serious dude when he starts talking like that.

BRANDI

You know he's right.

KHALID

Crazy's what he is.

BRANDI

How can you say that? You know him.

KHALID

Damn right I know him. Thinks he's fucking Gandhi – peace be with you, man -- while dudes is sticking it to him all over. *(To DOROTHY.)* That's Earl Plummer.

BRANDI

But, it works out sometimes.

KHALID

Oh, yeah? When?

BRANDI

Bobby Carlson . . .

KHALID

Fuck Bobby Carlson. What about his own kid? What about why Earl's working at goddamn Valu-Mart? *(To LAINIE and DOROTHY.)* He tell you about that?

DOROTHY

Yes, he did and I think if you had heard him . . .

BRANDI

He told them about you and Emmett and . . .

KHALID

*(Looks in DOROTHY's and LAINIE's eyes and thinks he sees pity.)* What? He make you feel sorry for me? . . . Yeah, he's good at that, man.

BRANDI

He cares about you.

KHALID

You just don't get it, do you? *(Looks BRANDI firmly in the eye.)* It don't make no difference. You understand?

LAINIE

You won't let anybody else help.

KHALID

*(Finds the notion amusing.)* Help? And what kind of help would that be? The kind he's giving his kid? He tell you about that?

DOROTHY

He said they've got an appeal.

KHALID

I'll bet they do. You know why? Because Earl works here and three other places to pay some shithead lawyer who just takes his money.

DOROTHY

And you don't think it's admirable that he's working so hard to give his son a chance?

KHALID

*(Facetiously.)* You mean “po’ Emmet getting picked on in that big old prison by all those bad men?” Shit. Anybody touch “po’ Emmet Plummer’ll” get his ass kicked for good. *(To BRANDI.)* You tell ‘em about “po’ Emmet”? What an innocent little thing he is?

*(BRANDI just looks down. KHALID addresses DOROTHY and LAINIE.)*

Well, let me tell you about him. If po’ Emmet wanted to, he could pay for ten lawyers because he got more money than God. He wants outta that prison about as bad as you want to get out of bed on a cold morning. Fuckin’ prison’s Emmet Plummer World Headquarters. You hear what I’m saying? He got this county so wired, there ain’t nothing goes on here he don’t get a piece of. *(To BRANDI.)* Ain’t that right?

*(BRANDI continues to look down. KHALID continues addressing the others.)*

Mr. Plummer didn’t tell you none of that, did he? You know why?

BRANDI

Because it might not be true. . .

KHALID

He don’t want it to be true!

DOROTHY

What are you saying?

KHALID

I’m saying Earl is a nice guy – he tries – but he’s fucked up. You understand?

DOROTHY

A father doesn’t just walk away from his son.

KHALID

Maybe where you come from.

DOROTHY

Maybe Earl does know and . . .

KHALID

You know the convenience store down on Front Street?

DOROTHY

I think so.

KHALID

Does it ever get held up? *(Pause. Turns to LAINIE and BRANDI as well.)* C’mon. All you hear about’s the local crime wave – all the bars and convenience stores getting held up. But not that one . . . right?

DOROTHY

I don't know.

KHALID

Guess who owns it.

LAINIE

The kids say the old guy who sits in front on the bench with a bottle.

KHALID

Yeah, on paper maybe. Emmett takes in more from that one store in a day than his old man makes in a week. And nobody sticks it up cuz nobody wants to mess with Emmett. (*To BRANDI.*) You know.

BRANDI

You can't stop trying just because some people take advantage . . .

KHALID

Some people? Brandi, this is his own damn kid playing him for a chump.

BRANDI

Maybe he just can't see . . .

KHALID

Won't, Brandi. Won't!

BRANDI

How do you know?

KHALID

Because I told him! (*Pause.*) And I ain't the only one.

BRANDI

You don't know . . .

KHALID

Jesus! What is wrong with you? He got you brainwashed?

BRANDI

He cares. He cares! And we just keep letting him down.

KHALID

Who? Who keeps letting him down?

BRANDI

Emmett . . . you . . . me.

KHALID

Fuck Emmett and fuck me. How'd you let him down?

BRANDI

I wanted to make it for him. . . . I coulda' made it for him. And then I got pregnant . . .

KHALID

OK, so you fucked up. But it's your life. You don't owe him.

BRANDI

Yes, I do.

KHALID

You owe yourself. You're the only person you owe.

BRANDI

That's so damn selfish.

KHALID

Who's he to put his happiness on you? Hunh? I have a hard enough time making myself happy . . . making my mama happy. What you going to do if one of these days he gets so bummed out because "we let him down" that he blows his fucking head off?

BRANDI

He wouldn't do that.

KHALID

We're talking about a dude whose own kid's the biggest damn gangster in the county and he can't even admit it. How do you know what he's going to do?

BRANDI

I won't let him.

KHALID

Oh! What is he now, your kid? Well, he ain't your responsibility. You understand? He ain't my responsibility. *(Pause.)* I like the dude. I really do. And I know he tries to help, but it ain't right laying guilt trips on . . .

BRANDI

He doesn't lay guilt trips . . .

KHALID

The hell. I've heard this shit and you can call it hope or you can call it guilt, but all I know is I can't handle it. You hear me? I admit it. I gotta just do my best and I can't be worried about him and his hopes too.

*(A long pause while all contemplate.)*

LAINIE

(To KHALID.) I guess you're not going to be part of the plan.

DOROTHY

I still think we should do it.

KHALID

(Shaking his head in disbelief.) Damn.

DOROTHY

Well, what you said about Earl, it really doesn't change our situation. The man may be everything you say, but if they're going to fire us anyway . . .

KHALID

Let me ask you something. The whole idea is we're going to take the blame together . . .

DOROTHY

Well, I think Earl would say that we'll take credit for recovering the key.

KHALID

Yeah. Right. Whatever. We gonna to take credit for finding the key and whoever took it is gonna be so grateful they're gonna change their life and never do anything bad again?

BRANDI

If someone did that for you, wouldn't you think twice before hurting other people?

KHALID

We ain't talking about me . . . you understand? And the answer is I know lots o' dudes'd think you're dumber'n hell for doing it and you deserve what you get. Wouldn't give a damn about what you done.

BRANDI

We're talking about us.

KHALID

So?

BRANDI

All right. All right! I'm gonna look you right the eye and even if you did it, all you gotta say is that you won't do stuff like this any more – I don't care if you took the key – that's good enough for me.

KHALID

(KHALID almost falls over laughing.) Well, I got a deal for you. Why don't you just leave me out of it? Why don't the three of you get together with Earl, find the key, take it back, and while you're there tell Weimer Khalid didn't have nothin' to do with it?

BRANDI

We're all in this together . . .

LAINIE

It's not fair.

KHALID

Why? You come up with the key, you know I didn't take it.

LAINIE

Well, you're not the only one who didn't do it, so why should you get off?

BRANDI

Khalid, it'd be easier for them to fire four of us than five.

KHALID

Oh, it's that big a difference, hunh? Five instead of four. And, of course, it don't have nothing to do with who number five is . . .

BRANDI

That's not the point.

KHALID

The hell! That's exactly what y'all meant when you said Earl was doing this for me. Folks ain't gonna assume you did it or Lainie or Dorothy. They figure Khalid did it, but he just didn't get caught. 'Course, you take Khalid outta the mix, well then . . .

BRANDI

This isn't about what people think.

KHALID

That's what it's always about.

BRANDI

It's about doing something because it's right, because it'll make me better than a goddamn sales clerk at Valu-Mart.

KHALID

Why, 'cuz you're saving whoever took the key from taking the rap and he's gonna be a better person in the future? Well, my question is, if the fucker's supposed to get so damn good after we get him outta this, why don't he just admit to it now when it'll do us some good?

*(Pause. No one responds.)*

Look, Earl Plummer is a nice man. It's just that he don't know shit. I wish – I really do wish the way he does things worked because then we wouldn't be in here, Emmett'd be a

choir boy and Earl'd be Mayor or Governor or something. You tell me where I can find that world and I'll go live in it. But it ain't here and it sure as hell ain't now.

LAINIE

*(Giving up.)* I think I'm just going to tell the truth.

BRANDI

You took the key . . . ?

LAINIE

No. I mean that I didn't do it. That's all. I can't do anything about whoever took the key and I think if you just tell the truth things will work out.

BRANDI

But, you can't. You'll lose your job. *(LAINIE shrugs and looks down.)* Dorothy?

DOROTHY

*(To KHALID.)* All that legal experience you've had certainly hasn't been lost on you. *(To BRANDI and LAINIE.)* You know, there's something else that's been bothering me. If Valu-Mart doesn't get the key back . . . if nobody turns it in, we don't know that Mr. Weimer will fire us.

BRANDI

You heard what happened to everybody in Sporting . . .

DOROTHY

Perhaps there was a reason. Maybe Mr. Weimer knew . . . .

BRANDI

But, when Earl was here, you said . . .

DOROTHY

Audacious . . . yes, I know . . . It certainly would have been audacious . . . maybe a little too audacious . . . for me anyway.

BRANDI

We can do it. Please?

DOROTHY

Oh, bless you, dear. I understand. I admire you so much because you're working for a better life and now you're even trying to make me – all of us – better people. But maybe some of us just are what we are.

BRANDI

But . . .

DOROTHY

You're so smart and you have so much determination. You don't want it to look like you're covering up for somebody else.

*(BRANDI realizes that she's lost.)*

LAINIE

Besides, if none of us did it, there won't be any key to return anyway

DOROTHY

But, who else could have . . . ?

LAINIE

I don't know. Maybe the Assistant Manager . . . maybe Mr. Weimer.

KHALID

Then we really screwed cuz they ain't ever gonna find it. So, one of you better be the one.

DOROTHY

It doesn't matter if the person won't admit it.

KHALID

Well, maybe they will admit it.

LAINIE

What do you mean?

KHALID

I'm just saying . . .

LAINIE

We all said we didn't do it. What makes you think . . . ?

KHALID

Maybe whoever did it won't be able to help himself.

BRANDI

What are you talking about, Khalid?

KHALID

I'm just sayin' there's a chance.

BRANDI

Why?

## P. A. FEMALE VOICE

*(All turn to look at the speaker.)* Good afternoon, Valu-Mart shoppers. Are you having one of those days when you just want to make it all go away? If you are, give yourself a treat. Stop by our housewares department for a relaxing massage from the new thermostatic lounger by Cloud Nine. The demonstration is free and Valu-Mart's price for Cloud Nine loungers is the next best thing at only \$499. Remember, we have more of what you value at Valu-Mart . . . everyday!

*(The sound of the key turning in the lock and all but KHALID approach the door in anticipation. KHALID sits at the opposite end of the table and waits. EARL enters followed by CROWLEY. EARL looks at the women as though he is trying to read something in their faces. When he doesn't find it he looks to KHALID.)*

## CROWLEY

*(To EARL.)* I'll be back in five minutes.

*(EARL is still looking at KHALID and doesn't respond.)*

You hear me, Earl?

## EARL

Yeah . . . yeah, thanks.

*(CROWLEY exits and locks the door.)*

## BRANDI

What happened? What did they do?

## EARL

*(Earnestly.)* We have to talk.

## LAINIE

Just tell us what happened. *(Motioning to KHALID.)* He won't say anything.

## EARL

*(To KHALID.)* Why didn't you?

## KHALID

What?

*(Pause. EARL is baffled and concerned by KHALID's nonchalance.)*

## LAINIE

He said they asked questions. Were the cops there? Was that . . . ?

## EARL

*(Still looking at KHALID who shrugs as though to say, "What did you expect.")* No.

## BRANDI

What was Khalid supposed to tell us?

*(EARL still pauses.)*

KHALID

I wasn't supposed to say nothing and he ain't either.

BRANDI

*(Still to EARL.)* Why not?

KHALID

Because he don't make the rules . . .

LAINIE

*(To KHALID.)* You're such a jerk.

BRANDI

*(To EARL.)* Is it true that you can't say?

EARL

They asked me not to.

LAINIE

But, you will. Won't you?

*(EARL appears torn, but says nothing.)*

BRANDI

Why did Crowley say you have five minutes?

EARL

I asked for some time. I told Mr. Weimer we'd find the key.

BRANDI

You mean the plan?

LAINIE

Did Weimer say he'd let us go . . . if we do it?

EARL

He said, "We'll see."

BRANDI

That means there's a chance!

EARL

*(Getting motivated.)* And that's more than we had before. *(To all.)* So, are you ready!?

DOROTHY

Did he say what he'll do to us if he doesn't get the key?

KHALID

Same thing, “We’ll see.” (To EARL.) Ain’t that right, Earl?

EARL

(Almost with bravado.) He didn’t say because I didn’t ask.

LAINIE

Why not?

EARL

Because there was no need. There’s only one way out and we know what it is.

(LAINIE, BRANDI, and DOROTHY look down uncomfortably.)

Khalid, did they tell you?

KHALID

“The Plan” – right. Yeah. We had a real good classroom discussion. You’d a been proud.

BRANDI

He talked them out of it.

DOROTHY

There is a certain attraction to simply being honest and telling what we know . . . or don’t know as the case may be.

(EARL contemplates what he’s hearing.)

BRANDI

(To DOROTHY.) Nobody was going to have to lie. It was going be anonymous. We weren’t going to know who...

KHALID

Except for whoever took the key.

BRANDI

But, I told you . . .

EARL

(To BRANDI.) It’s all right, Brandi. Let me talk to him.

KHALID

Brandi told us how we supposed to act deaf n’ dumb while we take the key back to Weimer sayin’, “Oh, massa, massa, we don’t know nuffin’ -- don’t whip our po’ asses”?

EARL

We’re not talking about begging.

KHALID

That's exactly what it is!

EARL

We're giving, not taking – giving the person who took the key another chance and giving Weimer a chance to do the right thing too. Caring for other folks doesn't make you a beggar.

KHALID

Makes you a fool. Putting your ass on the line to save the dude that's fucking you. *(Then, before EARL can respond.)* And don't give me one your lectures about giving so and so another chance, because this ain't about that fucker's chance. It's about mine . . .

EARL

It's about all of us.

KHALID

It's about yours, mine, and anybody else's who didn't take the damn key!

EARL

But, what about the person who did it? You gonna throw him overboard like they threw you overboard?

KHALID

Oh, gonna make it personal are we? Well, it don't matter, Earl, cuz Weimer told you to fuck off.

EARL

He said, "We'll see", and you know what? For a noble quest, that's a pretty generous starting point.

KHALID

*(Scoffs.)* Shit . . .

EARL

Is there any other alternative that's going to let us walk out of this room better people than when we came in?

KHALID

Yeah, there is. Let Weimer figure out which one of 'em did it. I don't know about you, but I seen how the man works and I think he just might do it.

LAINIE

*(To Earl.)* I'm sick of this! Tell us what they're doing!

KHALID

*(Motioning toward LAINIE.)* See that, Mr. Plummer. In a few minutes she gonna go in there, spill her guts, and the rest of us get to put on our Valu-Mart smiles and go back to work.

EARL

Is that really what you want?

KHALID

I don't make the truth.

EARL

And what is the truth?

KHALID

That I didn't do it and you didn't do it.

EARL

You don't know me that well. You can't know anyone that well.

KHALID

I don't have to. The fact that you're back here and they ain't lettin' us go proves it.

EARL

Maybe I lied to them.

KHALID

*(Smiles knowingly.)* Yeah, right.

LAINIE

*(To EARL.)* What does he mean? What did they do to you?

EARL

*(To KHALID.)* If the person who did it doesn't want to tell, there isn't anything . . .

KHALID

*(Interrupting forcefully.)* Be one tough dude.

LAINIE

What are they doing? Are they like threatening . . . ?!

*(EARL and KHALID glare at each other and do not respond.)*

No . . . are they searching?

*(EARL looks at LAINIE unsure of what to say.)*

DOROTHY

What kind of searching?

KHALID

He can't say.

LAINIE

Are they gonna make me . . .

*(Again, it appears EARL is about to respond.)*

KHALID

Be careful, Mr. Plummer. That intercom . . .

*(Motioning to the speaker above the door.)*

. . . looks just like the one in English class. Bet it's got a microphone and everything.

LAINIE

Holy shit!

BRANDI

Mr. Plummer, they can't do that to us, can they?

*(Before EARL can answer, they hear the lock being opened and in steps Crowley.)*

CROWLEY

Earl, five minutes is up. You got anything?

EARL

Crowley, just a couple more . . .

CROWLEY

You know what Mr. Weimer said . . .

EARL

Tell him I just need . . .

CROWLEY

I can't go back there, Earl. He's already madder than . . .

KHALID

There's your "We'll see!"

EARL

No . . .

CROWLEY

I'm sorry, Earl. *(To LAINIE.)* You gotta come with me.

LAINIE

No! I didn't take the goddamn key!

*(CROWLEY approaches and tries to take her by the arm. She pulls it away.)*

EARL

Crowley, wait . . .  
(*But, he doesn't.*)

LAINIE

Get the hell away from me! I'm not going in there! I quit!  
(*She runs for the door and exits with CROWLEY in close pursuit. He pulls the door shut behind him.*)

BRANDI

Jesus Christ!

DOROTHY

Oh dear.

BRANDI

(*Intensely.*) I hope she got away. I ain't gonna let them . . . I'll beat the shit outta anybody . . . !

EARL

(*Enraged at KHALID.*) That didn't have to happen! You hear me? We could have stopped it!

KHALID

You get that upset when they hauled my ass outta here?

EARL

You know what's going to happen to her? . . . what that can do to a person?

KHALID

Yeah, after they arrested me, I found out three times a day!

DOROTHY

When I get to heaven – if I get to heaven – I shall tell God Almighty about Valu-Mart.

BRANDI

Do you think maybe, if she did it, she'll tell before . . .  
(*Fades off as DOROTHY hugs her.*)

EARL

(*To KHALID.*) How can you let this happen? We could have stopped it if you . . . !

KHALID

Why you always comin' down on me? Hunh? I ain't the one took no key! I ain't the one doing strip searches!

EARL

Ten minutes ago you had the power. We had the power, if we'd given the person who took the key the chance.

*(KHALID shakes his head in exasperation and turns away.)*

DOROTHY

*(To BRANDI who is still in her arms.)* We won't let anything happen to you.

BRANDI

*(Looking at the door after LAINIE.)* What about her?

DOROTHY

Can they do that . . . legally I mean? Strip search us?

EARL

Weimer showed me the employment agreement we all signed. It says right there that we grant Valu-Mart the right to search "our possessions or person" on demand. He said that some stores have even searched employees' homes for stolen store property.

DOROTHY

They can test us for drugs, search us . . . even the police can't do that.

EARL

*(To BRANDI and DOROTHY.)* I'm sorry.

DOROTHY

*(Looking at the door.)* I'm sorry. If I'd gone along, I could have stopped it.

BRANDI

We could have. *(Comforts DOROTHY.)* Don't worry. She'll be OK *(Then to KHALID accusingly.)* She won't have any choice!

EARL

*(To DOROTHY.)* Dorothy, we'll think of something. We won't let them take you.

DOROTHY

Why not? Why am I special? You're the ones with something to lose. I'm just a stupid .

..

BRANDI

You're not stupid.

DOROTHY

. . . a stupid, pathetic, lonely old woman who was given a chance to do something worthwhile and again I ran.

EARL

Don't do that to yourself. This isn't . . .

DOROTHY

Look at me! What do I even have to be afraid of? That I'll lose a job I don't need? That my "privacy" will be invaded?

EARL

That your dignity . . . .

DOROTHY

What dignity? You have dignity . . . and Brandi and Lainie and Khalid too. You have lives with possibilities, people who depend on you, and you fight – you're all fighters!

EARL

Fighting doesn't . . .

DOROTHY

It does! When you got angry with Khalid a few minutes ago, you should have been just as angry with me. I said no to your plan. I also refused.

BRANDI

You were talked out of . . . .

DOROTHY

Don't patronize me. Lainie didn't deserve to go in there. I did!

*(All go silent as they retreat into their thoughts. KHALID reclines in a chair and closes his eyes. BRANDI sits and puts her head down in her arms on the table.)*

EARL

Khalid, we have to stop this.

KHALID

*(Turns to respond angrily, but EARL turns his head to the distraught DOROTHY who is in BRANDI's arms. KHALID's eyes follow EARL's and he is chastened.)*

Too late.

EARL

*(Grimly determined.)* No. It's never too late.

KHALID

*(Plaintively.)* C'mon, man. I'm tired of arguing with you. Ain't you figured it out yet? Shit like this starts going down, there ain't nothin' you can do . . . ain't nothin' any of us can do. Just ride it out.

EARL

You're not that helpless. You never have to be that helpless.

KHALID

I don't know 'bout you, but I felt 'bout as helpless as I could be when I was in there.

EARL

We still have to try . . . for them.

*(Referring to DOROTHY and LAINIE who are still holding one another.)*

KHALID

When you can't win -- when you got no chance, it ain't tryin'. It's pretendin'. You hear me?

BRANDI

Mr. Plummer? *(Pause.)* Mr. Plummer, we gotta think of something.

KHALID

*(Sarcastically.)* Like what? Next time Crowley comes in, how 'bout I grab him from behind and y'all escape?

DOROTHY

*(Recovers somewhat.)* Could I borrow a dollar from someone for the soda machine?

*(EARL pulls out a dollar bill and starts toward the vending machine.)*

EARL

What would you like?

DOROTHY

Doesn't matter.

EARL

Lemonade?

*(DOROTHY nods and EARL makes the purchase and takes her the bottle.)*

Sorry, no cups.

*(DOROTHY waves off his concern and gratefully accepts the lemonade.)*

I'm sorry about all this.

DOROTHY

You don't have anything to be sorry for. Nobody does.

EARL

I mean I'm sorry for you.

DOROTHY

Why for me? I'm just as likely as anyone else to have taken the key.

EARL

That doesn't matter.

DOROTHY

Am I that pathetic?

EARL

Tragic.

DOROTHY

Why? Because I'm an old lady who hasn't lived? Well, I'll tell you one thing. Not living isn't easy. It takes a special kind of timidity to waste a life from start to finish. And I did it without . . . without, mind you . . . chemical assistance. I'm not beaten, abused, or otherwise incapacitated! My life is the product of sheer determination! No. It's not a tragedy on my account. To be a tragedy, something has to be at stake . . . you have to have risen in order to fall and I haven't even done that.

EARL

None of us is a pretty picture, but we can . . .

DOROTHY

Pretty? Who wants to be pretty? They're threatening you with losing your jobs or jail. I've been "pretty" all my life. Believe me, you're better off fighting.

EARL

But, not with each other.

DOROTHY

Better than not at all. And that's what I do.

EARL

You would have fought with us.

DOROTHY

No. I would have tagged along . . . whichever way the wind's blowing. That's my genius -- taking the temperature of the room and adapting.

EARL

You're no more of a coward than the rest of us.

DOROTHY

*(Pats her hand on her chest two times to indicate something within.)* Believe me.

EARL

You're wrong.

DOROTHY

Oh, I put a lot of effort into making it look like something else – anything else. After seventy-eight years I hope I've at least gotten good at that.

EARL

I don't believe it. I think you've got . . . .

DOROTHY

Leverage? Wasn't that the word you used. Yes, I remember – my only care is for others. A very nice way to dress up being lonely. You saved me the trouble.

EARL

I meant it.

DOROTHY

You wished it. That's what the best lies are – wishes – because we believe them. The only thing that makes you unusual, Earl, is that you do it for other people, but not for yourself.

*(EARL looks down not wanting to argue with DOROTHY.)*

I'm sorry. It's not my place to judge.

EARL

At least you haven't hurt others.

DOROTHY

Now you're making presumptions.

EARL

If you're going to tell me you did terrible things . . .

DOROTHY

Present tense, please. I'm not dead yet.

EARL

I don't believe it.

DOROTHY

Do you want me to shock you – tell you a real doozy?

*(EARL looks at DOROTHY as though asking whether she really wants to do this.)*

Don't worry. There's no sex, violence, or bad language. This is my life we're talking about after all.

EARL

Why are you doing this?

DOROTHY

Who knows? Maybe I'm building up to a big confession.

*(Pauses to watch the suddenly more urgent expressions on the others' faces.)*

Do you remember I told you that I grew up here?

EARL

Yes.

DOROTHY

The daughter of a doctor. We lived on Chapel Street, Daddy and I, in a big house – Mom died when I was fifteen. Well, one day I received an invitation on engraved stationery informing me that I had been nominated to the Cotillion.

BRANDI

What's a cotillion?

DOROTHY

The most snobbish of dinner dances for the young well-to-do, where we were trained in the social graces – dance, poise, etiquette -- how to be respectable.

BRANDI

Too late for me.

DOROTHY

Oh, it's a thing of the past, thank God. The only ones it helped were people whose behavior would have gotten them disinvited in an instant – the drunks, the naughty girls, the out-of-wedlock mothers – the Cotillion showed them all how a proper demeanor and disdain for anything common could allow you to retain your place in society. And, Lord knows, I was in need of it – a young lady without a mother. So, kind Mrs. Altman, the grand dame of Charles Town society instructed her daughter, Lucy, to take me under her wing and make sure that I was appropriately dressed and coiffed. So, Lucy, the most popular girl in school took me to Bernhardt's to select a dress and be fitted.

BRANDI

You mean the old empty place on Market Street?

DOROTHY

It was once the most fashionable shop in town. A girl I knew, Ruby Geer, worked there and, when we walked in she said, "Good afternoon, Miss Altman. Good afternoon, Miss Carter." Well, I felt so silly having Ruby call me "Miss Carter", I laughed and, while I was giggling, I realized I was embarrassing her. I suppose to make me stop she finally said, "I'm sorry, Dorothy". Well, then came the voice of God, as mean as she could be, "Ruby, what did you call Miss Carter?" I guess Ruby had been embarrassed enough because she looked back at Lucy and said, "Her name." Well, there were certain things one did not do in Charles Town and one of them was challenge Lucy Altman who shot back, "And what's my name?" daring Ruby to call her "Lucy". I was so relieved when

poor Ruby whimpered, “Miss Altman”. It was awful, but at least it was over -- I thought. Later, after I’d been measured and we were about to leave, Lucy told me to wait a minute and she went to a display of ladies gloves and waited . . . waited until Ruby was looking. Lucy picked up the gloves, put them in her purse, and said, “Now we can leave.”

How poor Ruby must have felt, but somehow she summoned the courage and as we reached the door she said, “Miss Altman, did you want to pay for those gloves?” Well, Lucy always could strike an attitude and this one used to be called “high dudgeon” – all for the benefit of the manager who had arrived just in time to see Lucy’s look of condescending injury. Of course, she ever so gently asked, “Is something wrong, Miss Altman?” “This girl,” said Lucy, “Accused me of stealing these gloves.”

Well, you can imagine the rest -- Ruby argued, which only compounded the insult to Lucy who luxuriated in her superiority while I – the only person who could have saved Ruby –just stood there, too frightened to say anything.

BRANDI

What happened?

DOROTHY

Lucy was given the gloves as an apology for Ruby’s stupidity. And as for Ruby, I don’t know. She wasn’t there when I returned to pick up my dress and, even when I saw her in school, neither of us could ever bring ourselves to say anything.

*(Pause as DOROTHY tears up and the others look on in awkward sympathy.)*

KHALID

You was just lookin’ out for yourself.

DOROTHY

Exactly!

EARL

The important thing is that you know it and you’re sorry.

DOROTHY

But, I didn’t do anything -- then or now.

EARL

I think you would.

DOROTHY

Would I? You gave me the chance earlier and I blew it – just like I blew it back then.

EARL

If the rest of us . . .

KHALID

C'mon, Earl. That ain't the same.

BRANDI

*(To KHALID.)* Shut up.

DOROTHY

*(Puts a hand on BRANDI's to calm her, then looks at KHALID to validate his point.)*  
It's OK. Khalid's right. It's not the same.

EARL

But, it's something.

DOROTHY

When I took this job as a greeter I thought that one day Ruby Geer might walk in that door and I kept wondering what I'd say to her. I wish it would happen . . . and dread it.

EARL

You're a caring person. It would work out.

DOROTHY

*(Amused by EARL's relentless optimism.)* You find the good in everybody, don't you?

EARL

I look for it anyway.

KHALID

*(Sincerely. Not confrontationally.)* Too bad it ain't always there.

EARL

*(EARL takes a long look suspecting KHALID's comment refers to Emmett.)* Just because I can't find the good doesn't mean it's not there. *(Puts the unspoken issue front and center.)* Like with Emmett.

DOROTHY

Your son who's in jail.

EARL

He's done some bad things, so bad I couldn't get angry because my fear was even bigger.  
*(DOROTHY and BRANDI look at KHALID in a way that suggests maybe EARL isn't so naïve.)*

KHALID

That include dealing?

BRANDI

Khalid . . . !

EARL

Maybe. (*Pauses to consider KHALID's challenge.*) But, as long as Emmett tells me he's not, I have to trust him.

KHALID

What if he's lying?

EARL

I didn't say, believe him. The only thing that can save that boy . . . that can save any of us . . . is if he starts caring about somebody else as much as he cares about himself. Doesn't matter who. But it can't happen unless someone is willing to put themselves in his hands and give him a chance to care.

KHALID

But that don't mean you gotta . . .

EARL

What? Lose my job, spend money I don't have on lawyers for a case that can't be won?

KHALID

Yeah. So, why you do it?

BRANDI

Stop it!

KHALID

You're getting used.

BRANDI

(*Angrily to KHALID.*) Let him alone!

EARL

Khalid, you're right. I can't do it for everybody, but for those I can . . .

BRANDI

You do, Mr. Plummer. You do it for all of us.

KHALID

Did. He ain't a teacher no more because he's working at goddamn Valu-Mart.

BRANDI

(*Bitterly to KHALID.*) You're just trying to bring him down to be like you . . . like us!

EARL

*(Aching for BRANDI. Feeling unworthy.)* Brandi, I am like you . . .

BRANDI

It was our fault! We're the ones who messed up. We let you down.

EARL

I hope you don't believe that.

BRANDI

I tried because you tried. You always try.

EARL

Brandi, lots of folks try . . .

BRANDI

*(Becoming distressed now that her rock is crumbling.)* Who, Mr. Plummer? Who in this damn town? Because I could sure use them right now.

EARL

I'm sorry.

*(Pause. BRANDI looks away perhaps in tears. EARL approaches her.)*  
Brandi, the truth is, I was glad when they fired me.

BRANDI

It's because we let you down!

EARL

No. It's because of kids like you and Bobby Carlson . . . and Khalid . . . that I was able to hang on as long as I did.

BRANDI

Mr. Plummer, I . . . . shit!

*(Looks away embittered. All descend into silence when the door opens and CROWLEY gently leads in LAINIE who takes a chair without making eye contact with the others. BRANDI embraces her, but LAINIE does not respond. CROWLEY looks apprehensively at DOROTHY. EARL, KHALID, and BRANDI notice and look at him in disbelieving condemnation.)*

CROWLEY

Mrs. Shay . . .

KHALID

*(Angrily.)* Crowley, come on, man!  
*(CROWLEY is visibly uncomfortable.)*

Why don't you just go on back up there to Weimer and tell him she didn't have nothing to do with it? You know she didn't.

*(DOROTHY looks up, away from the others into midspace.)*

EARL

Crowley, for God's sake . . .

CROWLEY

I'm sorry, Mrs. Shay, but you gotta . . . .

*(Starts to move toward DOROTHY, whereupon LAINIE bursts out and throws herself between CROWLEY and DOROTHY.)*

LAINIE

Let her alone, you pig! *(She pushes CROWLEY a step back and stands defiant.)*

BRANDI

*(Trying to prevent something awful from happening.)* Crowley, Take me!

CROWLEY

Now, c'mon. Mr. Weimer said . . .

LAINIE

No! You're not going to take her. *(Then to the others.)* Nobody go! Nobody!

CROWLEY

Look, don't make this any worse . . .

LAINIE

They can't make us do anything. *(To DOROTHY.)* Don't go! *(To a surprised KHALID.)* Don't let him take her.

EARL

Lainie, wait a minute . . .

LAINIE

Why should we help them? They're just going to fire us anyway.

EARL

It's not Crowley's fault . . .

CROWLEY

*(To LAINIE.)* Look, this ain't got nothin' to do with you .

*(Again starts to move toward DOROTHY.)*

I'm just gonna . . .

LAINIE

*(Pushes him back again.)* Get the fuck away! Get outa here!

*(CROWLEY stands there unsure of what to do next.)*

Get out!!

*(A faint smile crosses KHALID's face and he joins LAINIE in standing between CROWLEY and DOROTHY.)*

EARL

No, Khalid, you can't do this. You're going to . . .

KHALID

*(Ignoring EARL.)* What's the matter Crowley? Ain't you gonna do your job?

CROWLEY

You're getting deeper 'n you know. . . *(Looks at them all.)* . . . diggin a hole for yourselves!

LAINIE

Fuck you!

EARL

Wait a minute. Let's think about this. . . . Please.

LAINIE

All we have to do is stay here until the shift ends. Then they have to let us go.

*(CROWLEY looks at their faces and doesn't see a friend in the room.)*

EARL

Crowley, Listen to me. There's a better way . . .

*(CROWLEY starts backing out.)*

Try to get Mr. Weimer to come down here and talk . . .

*(CROWLEY is gone, locking the door behind him. EARL looks down worriedly, but LAINIE stands in stunned exultation. BRANDI and KHALID look at her smiling. DOROTHY looks up apprehensively.)*

BRANDI

Did you see that!? Did you!?

*(EARL looks at her with great concern.)*

Whooo! Kickin' ass and takin' names! *(Then to LAINIE.)* Where did that come from?!

LAINIE

*(Amazed at herself.)* I . . . I don't know. I just . . . I just . . . jeez . . .

BRANDI

That was so great!

KHALID

Crowley ain't never gonna live this down. Get his ass kicked by a girl.  
(Laughs and goes down on his knees before LAINIE in mock worship.)

LAINIE

I just couldn't let them . . . (Looks directly at DOROTHY who smiles wanly.)

DOROTHY

It's Frog Girl to the rescue!

LAINIE

I just couldn't let them do that to you . . . (Then looks to BRANDI.) Or you.  
(KHALID rises and steps aside near DOROTHY.)

BRANDI

They're not going to do that to anybody any more!

LAINIE

Yeah, but what do you think they will do? He locked the door again.

BRANDI

I don't know. Probably . . . .

EARL

Probably fire us all on the spot. Exactly what we've been trying to avoid.

BRANDI

But, they don't have the key yet.

EARL

I told you, it's not about the key. It never was.

KHALID

C'mon, Mr. Plummer. Lighten up. There wasn't anything we could do anyway.

EARL

We didn't have to do that.

KHALID

Fuck, man. If whoever got that key hasn't handed it over by now . . .

LAINIE

I don't care! It just felt so good.  
(BRANDI high five's her.)

EARL

Did it? I hope so, because it may be all we get.

BRANDI

*(Bitterly.)* Yeah, well it's pretty damn good.

EARL

*(Soberly.)* I hope it feels that good tomorrow, next week, next month . . .

*(Looks at BRANDI, LAINIE, and KHALID one by one.)*

Khalid, what's going to happen when you have to see your probation officer? Brandi, what about that Manager Training program. In fact, what about your rent? Lainie and Dorothy, maybe they can afford . . .

LAINIE

Hey, there's some shit I won't eat.

EARL

And there's some you will . . . all of us will, like when we came to work here.

LAINIE

Are you working for them. You and Crowley have a "good cop/bad cop" thing going?

BRANDI

*(To EARL.)* You know, I respected you because you didn't eat shit. You used to stand up for us . . . You fought.

EARL

When I had to! . . . when there was no other way! And most of the time I lost.

KHALID

Open up your damn eyes, Mr. Plummer! We ain't got any other way.

EARL

We did. We could have . . .

KHALID

You had nothing -- nothing! You asked Weimer and he said, "We'll see." That's nothing, you understand?!

*(DOROTHY is visibly upset by the ferocity of the argument.)*

EARL

It's not nothing unless you want it to be . . . unless you're looking for a reason to fail!

KHALID

Yeah, right. I'm the one looking for a reason to fail and you're not? So, what's it got you, man? Who are you helping now? *(Pause.)* You're forty-some years old, the best

damn teacher in the world, and you're right in the same place as dumbass Khalid who's always lookin' to fail. You and me, Earl --we're just a happy Valu-Mart family!

*(Lengthy pause as EARL is disarmed by the validity of KHALID's point.)*

DOROTHY

*(Crying.)* Please, stop it.

KHALID

Fuck it. I don't give a shit.

*(He retreats.)*

DOROTHY

Look, lose your jobs, but don't lose each other. It's not worth that . . .

*(She fades off and looks down again still crying. BRANDI goes to her.)*

BRANDI

I'm sorry.

DOROTHY

I don't want to be the reason . . .

*(CROWLEY re-enters.)*

CROWLEY

Mr. Weimer says he'll give you one more chance, but Mrs. Shay, you gotta come with me right now.

EARL

*(To DOROTHY.)* What do you want to do?

CROWLEY

She ain't got a choice, Earl.

EARL

We always have a choice!

LAINIE

Dorothy, don't go, like we said.

DOROTHY

No, no. It's foolish to lose your jobs over me. You all went through it. *(Starts to rise.)*

LAINIE

No!

BRANDI

I didn't go through it. Crowley, take me first. It doesn't matter . . .

DOROTHY

*(Assertively.)* No. It's my turn and I'm going.

LAINIE

We're going to lose our job's anyway. Don't let 'em . . .

DOROTHY

It's all right. I know what's going to happen and it isn't necessary to lose your jobs.  
*(Turns to CROWLEY.)* Mr. Crowley, would you wait outside for just a minute?

CROWLEY

Mr. Weimer said you gotta . . .

DOROTHY

*(Firmly.)* I'll be with you in a moment, Mr. Crowley, and I won't give you any trouble.  
But, I have to say something to the others first.

CROWLEY

*(Considers.)* Two minutes. *(Steps outside and shuts the door behind him.)*

EARL

*(Guessing at DOROTHY'S intention.)* I don't believe for a minute that you took the key.

DOROTHY

No, I didn't. But, we're the only ones who have to know. *(Pause.)* If one of you has the key, I'd like you to give it to me.

LAINIE

What?

BRANDI

No. It shouldn't all come down on you. You don't owe us . . .

DOROTHY

I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for me . . . and for Ruby.

LAINIE

Who's Ruby?

DOROTHY

They'll tell you when I'm gone. Now, please, would whoever has the key give it to me?  
*(They look around at each other, but no one moves.)* Please. I won't tell.

BRANDI

It's not fair . . .

DOROTHY

No, it's not fair. I'm the lucky one.

LAINIE

Are you serious?

DOROTHY

They won't have any reason to strip search me.

LAINIE

Yeah, but . . .

DOROTHY

Please, someone give me the key? *(Waits, but there is no response.)*

BRANDI

Are you sure about this?

*(DOROTHY replies with a serene smile, then looks at all, but still no response.)*  
Maybe we shouldn't look.

DOROTHY

No! No. I want us all to trust each other. I promise, no matter who you are, no one . . . no one will ever say anything. Now please . . . *(She looks each person in the eye. Still no response.)* If you don't have it with you . . . if you hid it somewhere before they brought you in here, just tell me where it is. *(She waits, but again no one responds.)*

BRANDI

*(In agony.)* Oh God!

DOROTHY

You don't have to feel like you're taking charity. I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for me. Please, I need to know that I can do this.

*(There is a knock at the door. CROWLEY enters.)*

CROWLEY

*(To DOROTHY.)* Are you ready?

DOROTHY

*(Pushing CROWLEY back out the door.)* Get out and don't you dare look in. I'll be ready in a moment. *(Urgently.)* All right. Don't do it for yourself. Do it for me. *(Lengthy pause.)* Please . . .

KHALID

You mean it, huh? You want to be as crazy as Earl?

DOROTHY

I guess so.

KHALID

*(Smiling.)* Well, here you go.

*(Removes a key from his pocket and hands it to DOROTHY as all look on in stunned silence. DOROTHY looks at the key half in gratitude and half in despair because she wanted to think better of KHALID. KHALID just shrugs with an “aw shucks” smirk.)*

See, there’s body searches and then there’s body searches. Know what I mean?

*(CROWLEY bursts in.)*

CROWLEY

C’mon, I can’t wait no more, we gotta . . .

*(CROWLEY sees the key, which DOROTHY holds in her hand, and stops cold.)*

What the hell . . . ?

*(DOROTHY hesitates, not sure she wants to go through with it. Then, she decides and hands CROWLEY the key.)*

EARL

Wait!

DOROTHY

I’m ready to go, Mr. Crowley.

CROWLEY

You . . . ?

EARL

Crowley . . .

DOROTHY

Yes, Mr. Crowley. I think Mr. Weimer is waiting.

*(CROWLEY nervously starts to lead DOROTHY out when KHALID yells.)*

KHALID

Crowley, you goddamn, fatass, cracker! What you think you’re doin’?

*(CROWLEY wheels angrily.)*

CROWLEY

What?

KHALID

You heard me, you redneck peckerhead.

CROWLEY

You want to come over here and say that to my face?!

*(Starts for KHALID. EARL jumps between them trying to restrain CROWLEY.)*

KHALID

You're dumber'n a motherfuckin' stump!

EARL

*(Continuing to struggle with CROWLEY.)* Shut up, Khalid!

KHALID

What's wrong with you. Crowley? I just saved your sorry ass.

*(EARLY finally succeeds in wrestling CROWLEY to a standstill.)*

CROWLEY

*(To KHALID.)* I'm gonna get your ass fired . . .

KHALID

Fired . . . after I just saved your life.

CROWLEY

Asshole!

EARL

*(To KHALID.)* What are you doing?

KHALID

What's that you got in your hand? . . . Huh? . . . You even looked at it?

*(CROWLEY holds up the key.)*

Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. You looked at it?

*(CROWLEY studies the key closely as do the others.)*

CROWLEY

This ain't the key to the display case.

KHALID

It's a locker key you dumbass. And there you were gonna take it to your boss and make a fool o' yourself. You oughta buy me lunch!

CROWLEY

What the fuck . . . ?

P.A. VOICE

Mr. Crowley, please report to the manager's office. Mr. Crowley to the manager's office.

KHALID

*(Laughs.)* Give me my locker key back.

*(CROWLEY angrily throws the key at KHALID's feet, grabs DOROTHY and exits. While the others look on in disbelief KHALID casually crosses to the soda machine.)*

Anybody got a dollar?

LAINIE

What an asshole!

BRANDI

You shit! You think that was funny?

*(KHALID rolls his eyes at their inability to understand.)*

EARL

*(To KHALID in barely contained anger.)* In all the things you've ever done, in all the trouble you've been in I never stopped believing you were a good kid because I never saw you carelessly abuse or toy with the feelings of others . . . until today.

KHALID

*(Trying to explain he was just allowing DOROTHY to realize she could do it.)* Earl . . .

EARL

Do you know what you did just now? And earlier, with Lainie – the state you had her in.

KHALID

*(Sits down realizing he's not going to get the dollar.)* That's not . . .

EARL

Khalid, it's a terrible thing if you don't care about yourself any more and the life you could have, but that's your business. But you have no right . . . no right . . . to hurt other folks the way you did today. I don't care what the world's done to you, however unjustly you've been persecuted . . .

KHALID

I did it for Dor . . .

BRANDI

*(Enraged.)* What do you think they're doing to her right now?! Huh?!

*(She flies at KHALID with a flurry of slaps. He covers up, but does not respond.)*

*EARL grabs BRANDI from behind and pulls her off KHALID.)*

EARL

Don't! . . . Stop it! . . . He's not worth the trouble.

KHALID

*(Giving up.)* Shit, man!

LAINIE

(To EARL.) Now do you believe me about him? And he's gonna get off just because they didn't find the key on him. (To KHALID.) Asshole, you probably knew where the key was all along . . . You probably know right now!

*(KHALID shakes his head and gives up trying to explain.)*

BRANDI

I thought I knew you. From the time we were kids . . . What the hell is wrong with you?!

*(She slumps into a chair and EARL unable to think of anything else he can do crosses to the door and knocks loudly trying to get CROWLEY's attention.)*

EARL

Crowley! CROWLEY!

*(There is no response.)*

LAINIE

What are you doing?

EARL

I don't know . . . There's got to be something I can say . . . make him take me to Weimer before Dorothy has to . . .

BRANDI

Do you think they're really gonna make her . . . ?

LAINIE

It didn't even take them a minute. They asked me if I took the key and if I knew who did it and when I said, "No", they just took me into a dressing room and made me undress.

*(The memory almost brings her to tears.)*

BRANDI

Why'd they have to take her? Why not me?

EARL

She's a great woman to have tried to do what she did . . . and the story she told us.

LAINIE

What story? What was that thing about Ruby Geer?

EARL

A sin . . . a sin from way back for which she's never made amends.

LAINIE

What did she do?

EARL

She had a friend who worked as a clerk in a very fashionable dress shop and the girl was accused of insulting a customer who was also a friend of Dorothy's . . . or almost a friend. She was the most popular girl in town whose group Dorothy wanted to be part of. So, even though Dorothy knew the accusation was false, she didn't say anything and let the clerk, Ruby Geer, suffer the consequences.

LAINIE

Well, what happened?

EARL

Dorothy doesn't know. She thinks Ruby lost her job, but she never found out for sure because she never had the courage to talk to her about it.

LAINIE

That's it?

EARL

It's pretty hard to understand now, but when Dorothy grew up it was big deal.

LAINIE

My parents . . . my mom . . . wanted me to work in one of the "nice" stores over in the Elm Grove mall. I can imagine what it would have been like if I'd done something like insult someone . . . especially if my mom knew them.

BRANDI

Why in the hell did you come to work at Valu-Mart if you could have worked over there?

LAINIE

In Saks or Jasmine's? Are you kidding me? Look at me – little piglet. If you don't weigh less than a hundred-twenty and have tits out to here, they don't even speak to you.  
*(Remembers that she's in mixed company and says to EARL.)*

Sorry.

BRANDI

Maybe you should have tried. You might have gotten lucky. Then you wouldn't be here.

LAINIE

Go ask for applications and watch they way the whores look at me? . . . the giggling bitches. I'd rather be here getting strip-searched.

EARL

I'm sure your mother could understand.

LAINIE

(*Parodying her mother.*) “Well, you know, if you’d just take care of yourself a little more . . .”. See, inside all this insulation, J. Lo’s just waiting to pop out. I’m the egg that hasn’t hatched the daughter my mother is sure must be hers. (*Looks over at BRANDI who is tall, thin, and pretty.*) You could get a job there.

BRANDI

If I lied about where I live, having a kid . . .

LAINIE

I guess we’re just Valu-Mart material.

(*They smile and relax. EARL is in his own world. KHALID watches.*)  
Are you going to let them strip search you?

BRANDI

Guess I don’t have a choice. Did you try to stop them?

LAINIE

I told ‘em my dad’s a lawyer and he was going to sue them. But they didn’t care. They just took me into the dressing room and told me to get undressed.

BRANDI

What about just refusing?

LAINIE

They told me if I didn’t they’d just call the police and they had this one lady who was dressed like a manager – I’ve never seen her before – and she went in with me and was trying to be all nice and stuff.

BRANDI

You shoulda told her to go to hell.

LAINIE

I don’t know. She just kept saying stuff like it was no different than the locker room at gym class and how she knows what it’s like and how she had to do it once. She made it seem kinda OK. Then, when I was done, I walked out of the dressing room and she was gone and there’s that asshole, Crowley, smiling at me.

BRANDI

Maybe he was just tryin’ to be nice.

LAINIE

You know how they talk about guys mentally undressing you? Well . . .

BRANDI

So, do you think your dad will sue them?

LAINIE

I don't know if I'm even going to tell my parents. They'd probably say that's what I get for coming to work here.

BRANDI

I thought your mom told you you had to go to work.

LAINIE

Yeah, but she thought it'd be someplace nice. I knew I'd really piss 'em off by coming here. Showed them, didn't I? *(They laugh softly.)*

BRANDI

Do you think Dorothy's in that dressing room right now?

*(LAINIE shrugs, "I don't know.")*

Mr. Plummer, how long has Dorothy been gone?

EARL

*(Looks at his watch.)* Only about five minutes.

BRANDI

I just wish I could get it over with. It doesn't seem like it should take that long . . .

LAINIE

When you're in there it's like forever.

*(Unexpectedly CROWLEY opens the door.)*

CROWLEY

Brandi, could you come with me?

BRANDI

Where's Dorothy?

EARL

Is she all right?

CROWLEY

Far as I know, she's fine.

KHALID

What do you mean, far as you know? *(To BRANDI.)*

CROWLEY

Mr. Weimer wants to see you right now. *(BRANDI rises apprehensively and goes to CROWLEY.)*

KHALID

Crowley, you take good care of Dorothy. You hear me?  
(*CROWLEY and BRANDI exit.*)

LAINIE

(*To KHALID.*) What? Are you supposed to be feeling all guilty now?

KHALID

About what?

LAINIE

Like you don't know.

EARL

Stop it, both of you. There's no point arguing any more.

KHALID

Hey, when it's kickin' Khalid's ass around, it's always open season.

EARL

(*Sensing an imminent explosion.*) Let it go, Khalid.  
(*KHALID takes on a threatening posture and starts moving toward LAINIE as though he's going to hit her, but he's careful to give her opportunity to move to the other side of the table.*)

KHALID

(*A mock threatening tone.*) How 'bout it? What if I punch the bitch's lights out?

LAINIE

Stay away!

EARL

Stop it! What's wrong with you?

KHALID

(*Still in mock tone.*) I'm a baaad man. Khalid – same dude was messing with Dorothy, gonna slap Lainie around now. (*He makes as though he's going to push past EARL.*)

LAINIE

(*Retreating in fear.*) Get away!

KHALID

And when I get outa here, gonna rob a bank, hold up a liquor store!

EARL

Quit scaring her.

LAINIE

*(Beats on the door, calling . . . )* Crowley! CROWLEY!

KHALID

Anybody do the stuff I done ain't no tellin' what . . . !

EARL

That's enough!

*(Pushes KHALID back. KHALID falls back with a smile. LAINIE looks on uncertainly.)*

Enough!

LAINIE

*(To KHALID.)* FUCK YOU!

KHALID

*(Pleasantly.)* Just being the man you always wanted me to be.

*(LAINIE turns away.)*

EARL

You're playing dangerous games.

KHALID

That what you think they are?

EARL

You weren't any more going to hurt Lainie than . . .

KHALID

Than what? Jerk Dorothy around about the key?

EARL

You did jerk her around. When you gave her that key she thought she was getting the greatest gift in the world.

KHALID

I did give her the greatest gift in the world! And you don't see it, do you? *(KHALID waits for EARL to process what he has said, but runs out of patience.)* Shit! *(Figures it's hopeless and sits back down.)*

LAINIE

Yeah, well, do you think she felt that way?

KHALID

I don't know, Lainie. You tell me.

*(A lengthy pause during which they retreat to their corners.)*

LAINIE

(*To EARL.*) Earl, I'm sorry I was such a bitch before . . . when you told us about your plan . . . it would have been better – I could have been better.

KHALID

Damn, Earl. You're contagious.

LAINIE

(*To KHALID.*) You don't understand anything.

EARL

It's history. All right?

KHALID

No, it ain't history, because pretty soon somebody might walk in that door and tell me I'm losing my job because o' what somebody else done. And I don't want to hear no more about how we shoulda covered up for the bastard. I don't care who it is!

LAINIE

You don't care about anybody else.

KHALID

I can't help what you think.

EARL

Do you care about anybody else? The thing you said you did for Dorothy . . .

KHALID

So's this the new line on Khalid? Boy don't give a shit about nobody or nothing? That what you decided about me because I didn't go along with your plan? Because I wouldn't take the rap for some fucker? Because I . . .

EARL

Because when you had the chance to choose between yourself and everybody else, you chose yourself! Because you scared the hell outa this little girl! Because it was bad enough when you were hurting yourself, but now you're hurting other people.

KHALID

So, you givin' up on me, Earl?

EARL

If you end up in jail, you deserve it.

KHALID

Sounds like you're givin' up on me – Earl Plummer, the man who don't give up on nobody is givin' up on Khalid Burroughs. Next thing the sun won't come up tomorrow.

EARL

Khalid, if you don't have any hope for yourself, I can't have hope for you either.

KHALID

I agree. Now you ain't gonna go soft on me are you? Like tonight, when you get home, you ain't gonna sit there thinking, "Well Khalid didn't do anything that was that bad and he was under all this pressure and his daddy left when he was . . ."?

EARL

No, Khalid. You know better and your saying it proves it. There aren't any excuses for what you do or who you've become.

KHALID

Unbelievable! But you just gotta do one more thing for me, Earl . . . for old time's sake. The next time you go see Emmett, you tell him all about me, everything I done, and that you ain't gonna help folks who don't care for others no more, who don't have no excuses. You understand?

*(Turns away and sits down. EARL looks away. A lengthy pause before the door opens. BRANDI and DOROTHY enter together. CROWLEY does not enter, but pulls the door shut behind them and locks it.)*

EARL

Dorothy . . . Brandi . . . are you all right?

*(BRANDI looks down and DOROTHY smiles wanly.)*

DOROTHY

They didn't find the key, if that's what you mean.

LAINIE

*(To BRANDI.)* Did they . . . you know?

*(BRANDI nods no and LAINIE hugs her. At the same time EARL gives DOROTHY a handkerchief with which she dabs her eyes.)*

DOROTHY

I guess being old and pathetic has its advantages.

BRANDI

They just asked me if I knew anything about it and that was it.

EARL

*(To DOROTHY.)* Are you going to be ok?

DOROTHY

Yes, thank you. *(She smiles at EARL, but then crosses to KHALID and hugs him after which she looks at him and says . . .)* Yes. I could have done it. I would have. And, without what you did, I wouldn't have ever known. Thank you, Khalid. But, whatever

gave you the idea of handing me your foolish locker key? And when you took it back, at first I wanted to hit you. You know that?

*(To the others.)*

And what about you? You didn't give Khalid a hard time after I left, did you?

*(All look down sheepishly.)*

KHALID

Nah, man. Everybody was cool.

LAINIE

But, what happens now? *(To BRANDI and DOROTHY.)* Did they say anything to you?

BRANDI

Weimer told us to wait here, that they'd be in in a few minutes.

LAINIE

What do they have to talk about . . . I mean if they're just going to fire us.

EARL

They have procedures . . . paperwork.

DOROTHY

Maybe they won't.

EARL

Maybe.

DOROTHY

Well, if they do, what will you do? Brandi?

BRANDI

I don't know. I can always get a job at McDonalds. Maybe waitressing somewhere where I can make some tips. *(Begins sniffing as though she's about to cry.)* You know, I thought I had a chance here . . . This damn place.

*(DOROTHY gives her a hug.)*

LAINIE

Brandi, I'm sorry about all that stuff about no one wanting to work here . . . and I meant what I said about you getting a job at the mall. You're like beautiful . . . And I've got a little money I could loan you for some clothes . . .

DOROTHY

I'll have some free time, if you ever need someone to watch your little boy. . .

BRANDI

*(To DOROTHY.)* What about you?

DOROTHY

I suppose it was pretty odd in the first place, going to work at Valu-Mart because you're bored and lonely. Maybe I should have joined the Bridge Club.

BRANDI

That sounds good.

DOROTHY

But, I don't know how to play bridge. *(She laughs a bit and the others join in. Then, to LAINIE.)* Aren't you going to be in trouble when your mom finds out?

LAINIE

*(Shrugs.)* I came to work here in the first place just to piss her off. This'll really do it. It's kind of like perfect – piss them off and never have to come back.

DOROTHY

Well, now that you've slain that dragon maybe you should take all that strength and energy you showed Crowley and do something positive for yourself.

*(LAINIE smiles in silent acknowledgment.)*

*(To EARL.)* Well, Earl, you tried. I guess we did let you down.

EARL

Wouldn't have worked anyway. None of us had the key.

DOROTHY

But, you know, I'd feel a lot better about myself if we'd tried it.

KHALID

Hey, you did good, Dorothy.

DOROTHY

So, what are you going to do?

KHALID

Ain't up to me. See what my probation officer got to say.

DOROTHY

Well, you tell him before he does anything bad to you, he'd better talk to me.

*(KHALID smiles at the thought.)*

*(Earnestly.)* I mean it! Do you hear me?

*(KHALID smiles. DOROTHY nods to him, then looks to EARL.)*

Now, what about the two of you?

EARL

*(A long pause as KHALID and EARL exchange looks.)* We'll talk.

KHALID

Yeah.

*(The door opens and CROWLEY enters.)*

CROWLEY

All right. Listen up. Mr. Weimer . . .

EARL

Crowley, wait a minute . . .

CROWLEY

Earl, I don't got time . . .

EARL

Please, Crowley! Give us just a few minutes . . .

CROWLEY

I gave you a few minutes before. You remember where that got me? *(CROWLEY glares daggers at KHALID.)*

EARL

It's not going to be that way this time . . .

CROWLEY

No, it ain't. Cuz this time I'm gonna give you five minutes and I'm gonna beat the shit out of anybody who gives me any crap. And, when the five minutes is up, Mr. Weimer wants all of you back out there on the floor doing your jobs.

LAINIE

What?

EARL

What do you mean?

CROWLEY

You heard me. You still got three hours left on your shift.

BRANDI

You mean he isn't going to fire us?

LAINIE

We get to keep our jobs?

KHALID

Even me?

CROWLEY

Yeah, it's over. All right?

*(All stand there silently stunned.)*

Well, what do you want, a fucking diploma?

*(KHALID begins laughing. Slowly the others join in.)*

KHALID

Free at last, free at last! Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!

DOROTHY

*(Approaching KHALID.)* I'm so happy for you.

*(They embrace.)*

EARL

*(Embracing with BRANDI.)* I guess you're going to be my manager after all.

BRANDI

You think they'll still let me?

EARL

Why not?

BRANDI

I'm just glad you were here. I don't care what you said, without you I wouldn't have had any hope.

EARL

You have more than hope. You have a future!

*(They embrace tightly. KHALID and LAINIE have been eying one another warily.)*

KHALID

*(To LAINIE.)* If you ever need anything from the warehouse.

LAINIE

Yeah.

*(Meanwhile, BRANDI and DOROTHY are now hugging.)*

DOROTHY

I was so touched when you volunteered to go in my place.

BRANDI

Hey, that was nothing . . . after what you did. That took more guts than I'll ever have.

DOROTHY

What you have to do every day – working here, taking care of your son – takes more guts than I'll ever have. You're going to be a great manager. Congratulations!

*(CROWLEY has been watching the celebration impassively.)*

KHALID

Yo! Crowley! Crowley! No hard feelings, man!

*(CROWLEY gives KHALID the finger.)*

Ah, c'mon, man. Look here. I'm gonna give you a peace offering.

*(As the others watch, KHALID gets a Snickers bar from the candy machine and offers it to CROWLEY.)*

Hey, you know I was just jerking your chain. That thing about you being a dumb, fatass cracker was just because I was supporting Dorothy. You understand? Here.

*(As the others watch, smiling KHALID tries to give CROWLEY the candy bar, but CROWLEY won't raise a hand.)*

Now, don't be that way, man!

CROWLEY

Khalid, fuck you.

KHALID

Now, is that any way to talk to an innocent man?

CROWLEY

Just because you didn't get caught doesn't mean you're innocent.

KHALID

What's wrong with you? You strip searched me. I ain't got no key.

CROWLEY

Then, who does?

KHALID

I don't know, but it ain't us, so why don't you let it go?

CROWLEY

No. It is you . . . or one of you. *(Looks around at all of them.)* You ain't getting off because you're innocent. You're getting off because it's too big a pain in the ass to figure out which one of you did it and the lock's been changed anyway. If Weimer wants to believe the key's just lost, that's his business.

EARL

Crowley, after all this, you don't really believe . . .

CROWLEY

I know what you all think of me. Well, let me tell you what I think of you. If it was up to me, I'd put you all through it again and again, til one of you confessed.

DOROTHY

*(Indignant.)* Mr. Crowley, you couldn't be more wrong. I want you to know that not only did none of us take your damn key, these are the bravest, finest, most wonderful people I've ever met.

CROWLEY

*(Amused at DOROTHY'S description.)* Bravest? *(Scoffs.)* You know what I saw? When you weren't fighting with each other, you were taking turns going in there to be strip searched and you know what? None of you said no. Not even one of you said, "I don't care what you do to me, I ain't gonna be stripped naked for anyone."

LAINIE

I suppose you woulda said no.

CROWLEY

Damn right! And so would a lot of people. And don't give me any shit about how much you all had to lose. I'm a goddamn high school dropout and a security guard at Valu-Mart. I got a family to feed. And you know what? I'd get fired before I let 'em strip search me because at least I'd have my pride even if it meant flipping burgers three shifts a day. At least they'd know that they can't just roll over everybody.

BRANDI

Lainie tried to stop it.

CROWLEY

Yeah . . . after she said yes.

LAINIE

I didn't say yes!

CROWLEY

You all said yes! All of you. And what about your plan, Earl? The one you told Weimer about – What happened with that?

EARL

But, that doesn't mean any of us took the key.

CROWLEY

Just like with your kid, Earl. You can close your eyes, but the fact is any one of you . . . Brandi, Khalid, Dorothy . . .

EARL

Dorothy didn't take it. She was going to give Weimer the key and take the blame.

CROWLEY

You think so? Maybe she was going to rat out Khalid out as soon as she saw Weimer.

DOROTHY

No!

CROWLEY

Maybe she's the one that took the key, so she knew the one Khalid gave her was a fake.

*(DOROTHY steps up and slaps him across the face. CROWLEY does not respond, but instead gathers himself.)*

No. One of you took it. One of you put everybody else through strip searches and when you had to make a choice about whether to say no, you just rolled over.

MALE P. A. VOICE

Will all associates return to the floor? Will all associates please return to the floor?

*(Pause.)*

CROWLEY

*(To DOROTHY.)* The bravest, finest, most wonderful people you've ever met? Maybe that's why the Lord blessed us with our jobs at Valu-Mart. Now, could we all get back to work?

*(All except KHALID file out silently by CROWLEY who waits at the door as they pass. When the last person has exited CROWLEY looks impatiently at KHALID.)*

CROWLEY

You coming?

KHALID

That was something, man. You got it all figured out don't you?

CROWLEY

Yeah, I do.

KHALID

So, explain one thing to me. How come you didn't get searched?

CROWLEY

What do you mean?

KHALID

They try and you tell 'em "no" like you said?

CROWLEY

They didn't have any reason to search me.

KHALID

C'mon, Crowley. You coulda got the key. Isn't one of your jobs to go around checking the locks every shift?

CROWLEY

You're full of shit.

KHALID

So, they didn't even try to search you? Mr. "I'd get fired before I let 'em strip search me" didn't even have to say "no" . . .

CROWLEY

So, what do you want, Khalid? You want me to go to Weimer and volunteer? *(Sarcastically.)* Or do you want to do the job yourself?

KHALID

You'd let me?

CROWLEY

Why don't you try and find out?

KHALID

That's Weimer's job.

CROWLEY

You gonna say anything to him?

KHALID

*(Pauses and considers, then smiles.)* Nah, that's all right, Crowley. *(Tosses the Snickers to CROWLEY who catches it. Then, sincerely – without sarcasm or irony . . .)* Just call it the gift of another chance.

*(KHALID exits as CROWLEY stands watching.)*

*(BLACKOUT. End of play.)*