

One Third

By Larry Bliss

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CHARACTERS

CYNTHIA (CINDY)
MORNINGSIDE

White, early 40s. Child of PAUL Morningside and Diane Whitehurst. Half-sister of ARTHUR. Racist. A working-class woman with a lot of resentments. Divorced. Argues with her half-brother but is devoted to him.

ARTHUR (ARTIE)
MORNINGSIDE

White, late 20s. Child of PAUL and Adele Morningside. Struggling to stay clean; living temporarily with CYNTHIA. Tender-hearted, witty, conflict-averse.

SHENEQUIA MASSENGILL

Black/biracial, 40s. Mother of Demetrius, seven and Tameka, five. Divorced. Reveals as little as possible of herself. Committed an ethical breach by securing a place for PAUL MORNINGSIDE in a clinical trial for a rare disease treatment. Her personality has sharp corners. Will fight for her kids. Pronounces her name “Shuh-NEE-kwah”.

PAUL MORNINGSIDE

(Seen in flashback) Recently deceased. White, 60s. Father of CYNTHIA and ARTHUR. Conflicted, yearning. Periodic drinker. Wants the best for his kids but doesn’t know how that can happen.

SETTINGS

The living room and kitchen of CYNTHIA MORNINGSIDE's apartment. Little decoration except for a few hackneyed art prints on the wall and sports memorabilia. The kitchen area has cabinets, a fridge, and a small stove. A small bar separates it from the living room: couch, end tables, chairs, and a PC/laptop.

A parking lot outside a Narcotics Anonymous meeting.

A hospital room in Arlington, Virginia. A bed, a chair, and diagnostic equipment.

SYNOPSIS

Two adult white children expect to each receive half of their late, white father's estate. Unknown to them, he has amended the will to include a Black woman, reducing each child's share to one third. Both siblings oppose the move, with the daughter's blatant racism fanning the flames. Struggling with drug addiction, the son reacts badly to the ensuing conflict and goes on an extended relapse, leaving his sister alone to file suit to keep all the money in the family. The struggle comes to a head as he returns, chastened by his ordeal, and the new inheritor urges the daughter to relent.

CHRONOLOGY

Several scenes appear out of chronological order. A month-and-year sign would help audiences follow the action.

SCENES

ACT I

- SCENE 1 CYNTHIA MORNINGSIDE's apartment, mid-afternoon, August 2021.
- SCENE 2 The same, early that morning.
- SCENE 3 Five days later.
- SCENE 4 Two years earlier.
- SCENE 5 One week later.
- SCENE 6 A parking lot after a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, April 2021.
- SCENE 7 A hospital room in Arlington, Virginia, September 2018.
- SCENE 8 The same, October 2018.

ACT II

- SCENE 1 The same, the next night.
- SCENE 2 The same, late November 2018.
- SCENE 3 Cynthia's apartment, September 2021.
- SCENE 4 The hospital room, January 2019.
- SCENE 5 A parking lot after a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, October 2021.
- SCENE 6 CYNTHIA's apartment, later that evening.

ACT I

SCENE 1

AT RISE: CYNTHIA MORNINGSIDE's apartment, mid-afternoon, August 2021. CYNTHIA is shutting the front door—someone has just left. ARTHUR MORNINGSIDE stands beside her.

I thought I knew him.

CYNTHIA

Obviously we don't.

ARTHUR

Galls the shit out of me.

CYNTHIA

Did he tell you about any of this?

ARTHUR

Shit no. Who is this person? Did he ever mention her to you?

CYNTHIA

No. What the fuck was he thinking?

ARTHUR

Assuming he *was* thinking. This sounds like one of his impulses we have to clean up after.

CYNTHIA

One third.

ARTHUR

We're gonna fight this. I'll take her to court if necessary. The damn nerve.

CYNTHIA

It's too much. First he's killed in an auto accident, then this. Totally random. It's too damn much.

ARTHUR

Fucking A.

CYNTHIA

ARTHUR
He said we'd split the estate. 50-50... I need a drink.

CYNTHIA
I hope you won't—

ARTHUR
I won't. I'm just pissed.

CYNTHIA
Maybe you ought to call your sponsor.

ARTHUR
Later.

CYNTHIA
Now.

ARTHUR
Hey, will you just lay off me? God, mention an urge one little time and it's time to call the cops.

CYNTHIA
Okay, okay.

ARTHUR
Sorry to snap.

CYNTHIA
Compared to this, a snap won't hurt.

ARTHUR
At least Jane tried to be nice about it.

CYNTHIA
She'll look after us.

ARTHUR
She's all right. For a lawyer.

CYNTHIA
I'm glad one of us can laugh. God damn, that's a huge chunk of money to lose.

ARTHUR

She said she's not sure how much.

CYNTHIA

She knows. She's holding back 'cause she knows it'll make us mad.

ARTHUR

We're mad already.

CYNTHIA

Look, I don't want to trigger you, but I could really use a drink.

ARTHUR

I'm not a prohibitionist.

She goes into the kitchen area, reaches into a cabinet, pulls out a bottle of bourbon, pours herself a glass. Drinks.

CYNTHIA

God that's good.

ARTHUR sits at the sofa and opens one of two large envelopes sitting on the coffee table, takes out a file, examines it.

ARTHUR

Her bio. Hm... Shene-qua—

He stumbles on the name.

CYNTHIA

One of *those* names.

ARTHUR

—Massengill... Born in Kinston. Only daughter of Edward and Laverne Massengill. Employment. Paxton Pharmaceuticals, Clinical Trials division... focus on rare diseases.

CYNTHIA

Daddy had Wilson's Disease back in 2018. Maybe there's a connection.

ARTHUR

That's the year she moved into critical care nursing at Arlington General, in Virginia.

Where Daddy was.

CYNTHIA

ARTHUR

Left in 2019 and moved back to Durham. Doesn't say what she's doing now... Divorced. Two children. Tameka, age eight. Demetrius, age six. Oh, you won't like this.

CYNTHIA

I don't like it already.

ARTHUR

Professional affiliations. Society of Black Health Professionals.

CYNTHIA

Jesus fucking Christ.

She virtually slams the drink down.

ARTHUR

Cynthia—

CYNTHIA

It's how I feel.

ARTHUR

You cannot be doing that when we meet her.

CYNTHIA

Don't censor me.

ARTHUR

I'm not— Look, you going all racist on her is not going to help.

CYNTHIA

I don't want to meet her.

ARTHUR

You have to. You're the executor.

CYNTHIA

Don't tell me what to do.

ARTHUR

Dad said we have to make a “good faith effort” to communicate in person. And understand.

CYNTHIA

That man drove me nuts. All right.

ARTHUR

I don’t like this either, but we have to make the best of it.

CYNTHIA

You’re right. As usual.

ARTHUR

Not as usual. I’m having a tough time tamping down my emotions.

CYNTHIA

She’s a little Black gold-digger. Played Miss Nicey-Nice Nursie, flashed a little tit, and slithered her way into the Morningside estate.

ARTHUR

Maybe...

CYNTHIA

What else could it be? Daddy was a widower, sick, lonely, and even at that age, horny.

ARTHUR

I’d like to think he was better than that.

CYNTHIA

Artie. Daddy was a brilliant man, but even the smartest of them think with their little captains.

ARTHUR

Show some respect for our father.

CYNTHIA

I’m sorry. I got carried away for a second.

ARTHUR

It’s that kind of day.

CYNTHIA

It just hit me. What with Adele gone, we’re alone.

You have friends.

ARTHUR

Not that many.

CYNTHIA

Me neither.

ARTHUR

This has been one fucked up year.

CYNTHIA

Dad moves back, we settle him in to his new place.

ARTHUR

He was happy. At least he seemed that way.

CYNTHIA

He was. Hang on to that, Cyn.

ARTHUR

I was planning to fix him dinner. His favorite...

CYNTHIA

She starts to cry. ARTHUR goes to her.

ARTHUR

Shh. Shh. I'm torn up too. A giant passed and we're living in the shadow. Shh. Shh. Just hold on. Little sister. Shh.

CYNTHIA

I'm your *big* sister.

ARTHUR

Whatever.

CYNTHIA

I'm hungry.

ARTHUR

According to the Southern grief tradition, we're supposed to gorge ourselves.

CYNTHIA

There's some leftover meatloaf in the fridge.

ARTHUR

I'm not that hungry but I'll bring you a plate.

She sits. ARTHUR goes to the kitchen, gets the meatloaf, prepares it.

CYNTHIA

I'm wondering if we didn't meet her. I mean, I didn't visit a lot, but you'd think I would have bumped into her.

ARTHUR

I only went there once or twice. When you're using, things like family go by the wayside.

CYNTHIA

Don't beat yourself up. I had to miss a few weeks when there was too much work.

ARTHUR

Can't help it.

CYNTHIA

I'm sure there's a Step for that.

ARTHUR

Nine. I've never gotten that far.

CYNTHIA

We need to stick together.

ARTHUR

Glad you're on my side.

CYNTHIA looks at the picture again.

CYNTHIA

Maybe she worked a different shift.

ARTHUR brings a plates and a fork. She digs in.

ARTHUR

(sitting)

Maybe we can talk her out of this.

CYNTHIA

You've always had more faith in humanity than me. I don't see us getting anywhere.

ARTHUR

So if we don't...?

CYNTHIA

That's what Jane is for. Daddy's mental condition was kind of iffy sometimes. I think we can prove she pulled the wool over his eyes.

ARTHUR

I hate this.

CYNTHIA

It's not my idea of fun either, but the amount of money we stand to lose could be in six figures.

ARTHUR

This is the last thing I need.

CYNTHIA

I need treat myself to a smoke.

ARTHUR

I live here too.

CYNTHIA

I'll go outside in a minute. Sorry. I'm not trying to disrespect you, Artie. Even though you're only staying here a while, I'm glad you're here. I couldn't get through this without you.

ARTHUR

Likewise.

CYNTHIA

I love you.

ARTHUR

The same. We'll get through this... Listen, I wanna hit the 4:30 meeting.

CYNTHIA

Don't stop anywhere you shouldn't on the way.

Always the worry.

ARTHUR

He gives her a hug, goes to the door, waves goodbye, exits.

CYNTHIA sits on the couch and stares into space for a while. She drains the drink, sets it down loudly.

You picked the wrong people to fuck with.

CYNTHIA

She gets her cigarettes and exits.

FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 2

The apartment, early morning. The room is mostly dark, lit only by light from the windows. CYNTHIA is behind the bar, pouring herself a drink in a shot glass, dressed in her bathrobe.

CYNTHIA

Artie would say I have a problem.

She downs the drink.

CYNTHIA

Maybe he's right. Huh. He's in no position to judge.

She regards the bottle, mulls, shakes her head.

CYNTHIA

Don't want to be shitfaced when we meet with Jane.

She puts the bottle under the bar, but leaves the shot glass out. She moves to her easy chair, where there's a copy of the Weekly World News. She tosses it to the coffee table, sits. Gets back up, gets her phone, sits again.

CYNTHIA

God damn.

She swipes the phone to replay a voice message from PAUL MORNINGSIDE.

PAUL

Hi, sweetie. Sorry I missed you. I was over at the farmer's market this morning and found some really nice zucchini. I know you make a killer lasagna and I thought I'd drop them by, chat a bit. Give me a call back, or a text back, or whatever it is you kids do these days. I could use some company. Been thinking of Adele... Ah, well. Dad out.

Pause. She restarts the message.

PAUL

Hi sweetie. Sorry I missed you. I was over at the farmer's market—

With a convulsive motion she shuts off the message and puts the phone down.

CYNTHIA

I miss you so much... So sudden... shit... I remember... Oh, we had good times. You'd show me how to drink water straight from the hose... play Nerf basketball... rock paper scissors... You and Mom gave me a big ole teddy bear from the fair... I remember one day you came home with a big smile on your face... "I've got a present for the best little girl in the world," you said. Mom was smiling too. That sweet smile... "I bet you'll never guess in a million years what I've got." It was a little shiny box. It said "Music Magic" on the side. There was a teeny little crank. You turned it and out came this sweet music.

She starts singing)

CYNTHIA

"You are my sunshine. My only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray." I loved that little box. Played it all day... Somehow I lost it.

She gets out a cigarette, lights it, takes a few puffs.

CYNTHIA

Shit. Artie will raise Cain.

She goes to the sink, stubs it out, then opens a window, trying to swoosh the smoke toward it.

CYNTHIA

I don't know why I do anything any more.

She sits back in the chair, picks up the tabloid, skims it, puts it down.

CYNTHIA

God damn.

FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 3

SHENEQUIA enters, carrying a bag with a wine bottle and loaf of bread in it and her purse. She is talking silently on the phone to her son, who is on the autism spectrum.

She ends the call and tries to put the phone in her purse. As she does so, the bag threatens to slip out of her grip. She sets the bag down and puts the phone in the purse.

She picks up the bag and then remembers she hasn't silenced the phone. She sets the bag down again. She takes the phone out of her purse, silences it, and replaces it. While glancing at the phone she realizes she is ten minutes late. She silently mouths shit.

Worried, she says a silent prayer, ending it with an amen gesture. She moves to pick up the bag, remembers one more petition, prays again, and says amen again. Finally she lifts the bag, gets everything situated, and composes herself.

She then strides purposefully to CYNTHIA's front door.

The apartment, five days later. ARTHUR MORNINGSIDE paces, CYNTHIA is on the couch, fidgety. There is an open can of soda on the coffee table.

CYNTHIA

She's ten minutes late.

ARTHUR

Don't make a big deal of it.

CYNTHIA

If she doesn't show in the next five minutes I'm going out for a smoke.

ARTHUR

Nothing like a cloud of carcinogens to welcome a visitor.

CYNTHIA

Dial back the wit and charm. I need you sharp.

ARTHUR stops pacing. Takes a seat, takes a swig of soda.

CYNTHIA

I'll ask the questions. You fill in the details.

ARTHUR

Yes, ma'am.

CYNTHIA

Can the sarcasm. We have to present a united front.

ARTHUR

This isn't the Normandy invasion.

His phone rings. He answers

ARTHUR

Hey Cedric... I'm a little busy, I may have to hang up... Our lawyer was over here, discussing the will... There's been a complication. I don't want to talk about it... I know it's been two weeks since I've called... There's a lot going on... No, I haven't done any step work. But I'm staying clean... Of course I think about using... You don't have to tell me it's a warning sign... Hey, ease up. I've been clean longer than I ever have been. I don't need you harping me... God damn, man... Hey, Ced, enough. I'm not your son.

He punches off the call.

ARTHUR

Jesus Christ.

CYNTHIA stares at him.

ARTHUR

What?

CYNTHIA

I worry about you when you get like that.

ARTHUR
Well don't.

CYNTHIA
You've given me a lot to worry about these last few years.

ARTHUR
I'm not in the mood to be guilty.

CYNTHIA
You need to take some responsibility.

ARTHUR
Here we go again.

CYNTHIA
Well, you do.

ARTHUR
How many times do I have to say I'm sorry?

CYNTHIA
Sorries are cheap.

ARTHUR
I swear to God, this feels like when I was eight and you were mother-henning me. You've always been this way. Artie, don't do that. Artie, wipe your nose. Don't stay out in the sun too long.

CYNTHIA
It's called looking out for you.

ARTHUR
You could barely look after yourself. You were too busy trying to make decisions for me.

CYNTHIA
Someone had to. Mom and Daddy were too busy with their own shit. Where is this all coming from?

ARTHUR
He *died*. He was sick and we thought he'd gotten better and he *died!*

CYNTHIA
I know, honey. I know.

ARTHUR

Without a word to either of us.

CYNTHIA

I know, baby. It kicks my ass too. Oh, I hate to see you like this. You're so strong and sweet.

ARTHUR

(weak laugh)

Well, maybe sweet.

CYNTHIA

Let's go easy on each other, okay? Try to roll with the punches. Everything's kind of loosey-goosey right now.

ARTHUR

Yeah.

CYNTHIA

Let's focus on this Sheneek woman. Get the truth out of her.

ARTHUR

It isn't an interrogation.

CYNTHIA

Didn't you see the estimate from Jane? The difference between one-half and one-third?

ARTHUR

I can read emails. Two hundred thousand dollars.

CYNTHIA

At least.

ARTHUR

I've lived on next to nothing for a long time. I can't even comprehend numbers that big.

CYNTHIA

I can. House. New car. Retirement savings. A real vacation.

A knock at the door.

CYNTHIA

United.

Within reason.

ARTHUR

CYNTHIA waves off the comment as she goes to the peephole. She opens the door. SHENEQUIA MASSENGILL is waiting, dressed very nicely and carrying a tote bag that appears to have a bottle in it and something else.

May I come in?

SHENEQUIA

Yes.

CYNTHIA

Thank you.

SHENEQUIA

She spots ARTHUR and appears surprised. So does ARTHUR. CYNTHIA misses this. SHENEQUIA enters.

I assume everyone here is fully vaxxed? I am. Tested negative all week.

SHENEQUIA

I wouldn't let you in otherwise.

CYNTHIA

We're good. Why don't we sit down. Can I get you something?

ARTHUR

I'm fine, thanks. And please— call me Shenequia. Since we're sort of connected.

SHENEQUIA

Right.

CYNTHIA

SHENEQUIA sets her tote bag on the table. CYNTHIA eyes it suspiciously.

I'm so very sorry for your loss.

SHENEQUIA

Thank you. ARTHUR

He left quite a footprint. SHENEQUIA

We're just trying to manage. CYNTHIA

I'm praying. SHENEQUIA

I'm not that big on God, but we can use the help. CYNTHIA

This must be very hard on you. ARTHUR
(to SHENEQUIA)

Yes. I... I miss him. The world lost... You have a very nice place. SHENEQUIA

I do all right. With what I have. CYNTHIA

Where do you work? SHENEQUIA

Downtown Hospital. Sanitation and maintenance. CYNTHIA

COVID's hit you folks hard. SHENEQUIA

It's rough. We're in a lull now, thank God, but I keep hearing about a new variant. CYNTHIA

I brought you all something... not exactly a housewarming gift, but maybe... a calling card? SHENEQUIA

We know who you are. CYNTHIA

SHENEQUIA takes out a loaf of homemade bread wrapped in foil and presents it to CYNTHIA.

CYNTHIA

Well, that's very... thoughtful of you.

SHENEQUIA

My mother's recipe.

CYNTHIA unwraps the loaf.

ARTHUR

I'll get a tray and some butter.

CYNTHIA

There's some in the little door thingy.

(to SHENEQUIA)

Thank you.

SHENEQUIA

You're most welcome.

ARTHUR goes to the kitchen, gets out a tray, finds butter and a plate, and brings it out. SHENEQUIA and CYNTHIA look on uncomfortably.

SHENEQUIA

Hard times for everyone lately.

CYNTHIA

Yes.

More awkward silence as ARTHUR returns with the tray.

ARTHUR

Don't fall all over each other talking... I figure we can just help ourselves.

CYNTHIA

Some of us are doing that already.

SHENEQUIA

It's simply a gesture. I believe in those.

CYNTHIA

Mm-hm. Listen, we can be all warm and cozy and have a nice little tea party, but what I want to know is: what was your relationship with my father?

ARTHUR

Good God.

CYNTHIA

No point beating around the bush.

SHENEQUIA

Paul said you get right to the point. He described you as a pit bull.

CYNTHIA

I'm fierce when cornered.

SHENEQUIA

Are you feeling cornered now?

CYNTHIA

Let's leave my feelings alone for a while.

ARTHUR

Can't we have a few peaceful moments and be social?

CYNTHIA shrugs.

SHENEQUIA

Well, I'll be as open as possible... I developed a... kinship with your father. Despite the differences in our backgrounds, we had a lot in common. We were both raised in Kinston. In fact, we figured out we lived at the opposite ends of the same street. We were both Baptists.

ARTHUR

Not the same church, I imagine.

SHENEQUIA gives him a funny look at his aspiration to wokeness.

SHENEQUIA

No. Anyway, we found out our lives had been remarkably similar, even allowing for the differences.

ARTHUR

Just in case you're worried, I'm very progressive. I deplore the racism you must encounter every day.

SHENEQUIA

Do you really know that much about what I *encounter*?

ARTHUR

I like to think I do.

SHENEQUIA

I'm just being straight with you. Since that's what you're asking of me.

CYNTHIA

This talk of things in common. Is it leading somewhere? Were you and Daddy just buddies? That doesn't seem like enough to be included in his will.

SHENEQUIA

(to herself)

Help me... Paul and I had what you might call a relationship.

CYNTHIA

(to ARTHUR)

Right the first time.

SHENEQUIA

It wasn't what you're thinking. In his condition, it couldn't have been anything but an emotional connection.

CYNTHIA

So you and he were—

SHENEQUIA

Together. We were together. We cared about each other. We saw the world through the same eyes. Dreamed the same dreams. Look, I'm not defending this. It's a big world and people are complicated. Things happen without our knowing why.

ARTHUR

Do *you* know why?

SHENEQUIA

I never ask why. I live by what's in front of me.

CYNTHIA

We're not getting the whole truth. Are we?

SHENEQUIA

And nothing but the truth? I'm not in court.

CYNTHIA

Not yet.

SHENEQUIA

Which of us really knows the whole truth? That's Godly sight. Not ours.

ARTHUR

Excuse me, Shenequia. I need a moment in private with my sister.

ARTHUR gets up and pulls her off to the side. They converse in earnest whispers.

CYNTHIA

What?

ARTHUR

Dial it back. You're just making things worse.

CYNTHIA

We need to fight this.

ARTHUR

And we will. But going after her every chance you get will just make her dig in.

CYNTHIA

Have some bread.

She marches back to her seat. ARTHUR follows.

SHENEQUIA

This is hard territory. I understand.

CYNTHIA

I hope you do. I hope you *understand* I'm trying to give you a chance. I'm part pit, but I want to be fair about this. So just tell me what went on.

ARTHUR

We want to know if Dad was in his right mind when he was with you.

SHENEQUIA

There's no simple answer. The doctors on his team were the best in the country, but Wilson's is generally found in younger people. There was necessarily some speculation involved in the diagnosis and treatment.

ARTHUR

I Googled it. There are psychological effects, right?

SHENEQUIA

Yes, and neurological. Tremors, difficulty articulating his words. There were times when I had to strain to understand him. But his mind generally seemed focused. You have to remember some of the sedatives he was on made him confused.

CYNTHIA

That happened with us, too. Sometimes I wasn't sure he knew who he was or where he was.

SHENEQUIA

There have even been cases of Wilson's patients being mistakenly diagnosed with depression, or even schizophrenia. So it's a very complicated picture.

CYNTHIA

So in your medical opinion...

SHENEQUIA

Go with his doctors. I don't have their training.

ARTHUR

But you saw him regularly.

SHENEQUIA

We talked mainly about family. Things he knew well. As far as his plans went, I just assumed you two would share the estate equally.

CYNTHIA

So you brought it up.

SHENEQUIA

I didn't have to. I simply assumed.

Assumptions can be dangerous.

CYNTHIA

I don't feel endangered. Do you?

SHENEQUIA

I was a regular visitor. Why didn't I see you?

CYNTHIA

It's quite possible we missed each other. I worked mostly nights to be with my kids during the day.

SHENEQUIA

I bet you're real good at caretaking.

CYNTHIA

Enough.

ARTHUR
(getting agitated)

There is a knock at the door.

Christ.

CYNTHIA

She goes to the door and looks out.

FedEx.

CYNTHIA

ARTHUR leans into SHENEQUIA and says in a loud whisper.

ARTHUR

After the meeting. That night.

SHENEQUIA

So you remember me.

ARTHUR

Yes. But don't expect me to change my mind.

CYNTHIA opens the door, bends down, retrieves a package. Sets it on the bar.

SHENEQUIA and ARTHUR act like nothing has happened. ARTHUR busies himself with buttering a slice of bread.

CYNTHIA

How long was he under your care?

SHENEQUIA

Six months. Long enough for the symptoms to pass.

CYNTHIA

He loved you, didn't he?

SHENEQUIA

Yes.

CYNTHIA

How come he never mentioned you? You're just showing up out of nowhere with your hand out.

SHENEQUIA

Don't you think it would have embarrassed him to say he was in love with a nurse twenty years younger? I'm sure he wondered what you'd think.

CYNTHIA

Men his age do strange things. Maybe out of gratitude he offered you something.

SHENEQUIA

Look. I'm only going on what he said. I don't assign motives to people.

CYNTHIA

If that's a shot at me I can take it.

SHENEQUIA

So can I.

ARTHUR

Cyn—

CYNTHIA

I'll do the talking. Did you ever discuss money?

SHENEQUIA

I've already told you what we talked about.

CYNTHIA

So Daddy left the hospital in December 2018. What happened then?

SHENEQUIA

Well, I wanted to be nearer to my parents. Around February we moved to Durham.

CYNTHIA

And you kept seeing him?

SHENEQUIA

When I could find the time. It's kind of hard when you have kids.

CYNTHIA

And your feelings—?

SHENEQUIA

I've already told you.

CYNTHIA

Your attitude—

ARTHUR

Cindy.

CYNTHIA

Where are you working now?

SHENEQUIA

I'm a home health aide. When I moved back to Durham, I wanted more family time.

CYNTHIA

How are you getting by on that kind of pay?

SHENEQUIA

How do you get by on yours?

CYNTHIA

It's my job to ask questions. The estate is my ball to carry.

SHENEQUIA

But not yours to decide.

CYNTHIA

Listen, lady. I was the first-born. I took care of Arthur when he still shitting his diapers. I helped raise him when Daddy wasn't around. When he got pushed around at school, I'm the one who put a stop to it. I took care of him and I can take care of you.

ARTHUR

Go easy, willya?... Jesus. Shenequia, somewhere along the line, if he... had feelings for you... wouldn't he have wanted to take care of you after he's gone?

SHENEQUIA

He did want me to be... secure. I told him I had my resources. He didn't ask for details, but I think he took me at my word.

CYNTHIA

I think you're lying.

SHENEQUIA

I make my own place in this world. Your only problem is you don't like it.

CYNTHIA

What I don't like? After you saying the truth is up to some guy in the sky? After it takes two or three tries to get an answer out of you? What I don't like? Our family has a name. There have been Morningsides in these parts for six generations. People know us as decent folks who stand by their word without watering it down.

SHENEQUIA

Massengill is a respected name, too, and people swear by us too... Believe me, we were brought over here a long time before you.

CYNTHIA

Here's what's in front of me. A conniving bitch with dollar signs in her eyes.

ARTHUR

Goddamnit. You're making a hard situation worse.

SHENEQUIA

I never suggested he change the will. But since he did... I want in.

CYNTHIA

From the moment I laid eyes on you I knew you were trouble. I've seen a lot in this world and I have a pretty sharp eye for bullshit.

ARTHUR

How do you think Dad would feel if he saw this?

CYNTHIA

He'd be damn glad we're defending the family honor! Remember that?

SHENEQUIA

I cared about your father. I felt close to you because of all the stories he told me. How Arthur played in the school band and was the star quarterback. What a sweet kid he was before he got into trouble. And you, Cynthia, especially you, how happy he was when he first saw you. Paul was *real* to me. I know you don't like me, and I know if I was white it would make a difference.

ARTHUR

I don't care about that, Shenequia. Not like she does.

SHENEQUIA

I don't need you to defend me.

CYNTHIA

Back off. I'm pissed at anyone nosing their way into our good graces, even if they have scales and purple hair.

SHENEQUIA

He wrote me in.

ARTHUR

Dad made a choice and we have to live with it.

CYNTHIA

Says you.

ARTHUR

Says the law! Christ, my stress level is going through the roof.

SHENEQUIA

You're not alone.

CYNTHIA

Two hundred thousand dollars.

ARTHUR

Will you two just listen? In the program we talk about living life on life's terms. Acceptance. *Kindness*. You should try it sometime. God knows I'm trying to. I don't like a damn bit of this. It's fucking with my serenity.

CYNTHIA

What about *my* “serenity”? What should I *accept*, Artie? Doesn’t any of this bother you? You have a stake in this too and you’re just sitting on your ass.

SHENEQUIA

(to ARTHUR)

Recovery is your responsibility.

CYNTHIA

Stay out of our business!

ARTHUR

(to SHENEQUIA)

Not now.

(to CYNTHIA)

God damn I get sick of you. Ordering me around. Accusing me of doing nothing. You know nothing of the issues I’m facing. Recovery is goddamn hard. Trying to keep my head straight while my body is telling me go get an eight-ball.

SHENEQUIA

Arthur—

ARTHUR

Live in my shoes for while! Mom—*my* Mom—fighting with Dad all the time. I never had a say in that. Christ, I’m sweating. Why can’t you both just be reasonable? Instead of... tearing at each other. People should get along, goddamnit! I... I... Why don’t you just fucking leave me alone?

He strides angrily to retrieve his jacket and his backpack.

ARTHUR

You act like I don’t exist.

CYNTHIA

I’m sorry, Artie. I didn’t mean to get you upset.

SHENEQUIA

You have a choice.

ARTHUR

Don’t talk to me about choices!

He crumples his can, hurls it in the direction of the trash can, and gets up. SHENEQUIA shows no surprise.

CYNTHIA

Where are you going?

ARTHUR slings on his backpack.

ARTHUR

Somewhere not here.

CYNTHIA

Are you going to get high?

ARTHUR

Who gives a shit?

He opens the door, strides out, slams it shut. CYNTHIA and SHENEQUIA stare at each other.

FAST FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 4

CYNTHIA's apartment. Two years earlier. CYNTHIA is on the couch asleep. A copy of the National Enquirer is in her lap. Snore snore. The doorbell rings. She wakes.

Wha...?

CYNTHIA

She looks around, disoriented. The doorbell rings again.

Hold your damn horses! Christ almighty.

CYNTHIA

She stumbles up to the peephole.

Son of a bitch.

CYNTHIA
(surprised)

She opens the door. Standing there is PAUL MORNINGSIDE.

Did I come at a bad time?

PAUL
(ironically)

Is there a good one?

CYNTHIA

I haven't seen you in a while.

PAUL

I'm not sure you should come in. Might get ugly.

CYNTHIA

I'll do my best to be civil.

PAUL

Ten minutes. Maybe twenty if you keep your voice down.

CYNTHIA

Do the same.

PAUL

CYNTHIA opens the door wide. He steps in.

CYNTHIA

Have you been drinking?

PAUL

Not enough to affect me.

CYNTHIA

We'll see... Come sit.

He does so, spotting the Enquirer.

PAUL

I see your taste in literature hasn't changed.

He picks it up.

PAUL

I can't believe the crap you read... Kanye's Big Plans for 2019.

CYNTHIA

How embarrassing! The professor's daughter who reads the tabloids. There goes your reputation.

PAUL

I worked hard for it.

CYNTHIA

Is that all you care about?

PAUL

I didn't come over here to fight you.

CYNTHIA

Then why did you?

PAUL

Because the world cracked open. Because three months ago I was on the brink of death from a disease I'd never heard of. Because six weeks ago I went back to the same empty house I left. The one where I'd hear a noise and turn around and expect to see my wife.

PAUL (Cont'd)

Wearing her Carolina sweatshirt and holding a plate of brownies fresh from the oven. Putting her arm around me as I graded papers. You don't know what it's like... The house is so full of Adele's things. Her loom, her wall hangings—your mother was one hell of an artist.

CYNTHIA

My mother's name is Diane.

PAUL

Your first mother's name was Diane. You hated her guts, but Adele loved you fiercely.

CYNTHIA

You couldn't tell it by her.

PAUL

You didn't give her a chance.

CYNTHIA

She called the cops on me.

PAUL

You were drunk on your ass and screaming obscenities. I had to save you from yourself.

CYNTHIA

That was fifteen years ago.

PAUL

After you vomited on the kitchen floor and passed out on the couch, she sobbed for half and hour. She begged me to tell her how she'd failed. She was never the same after that. She'd get this... haunted look. Wake up in the middle of the night asking me why. She did her level best for ten years, trying to straighten you out.

CYNTHIA

While you were out getting smashed.

PAUL

I did what I had to do.

CYNTHIA

How many did you have before you came over?

PAUL

One, damn it! I'm handling it.

She walks to him.

CYNTHIA

Breathe on me.

PAUL

If that's what it takes.

He exhales in her face.

CYNTHIA

I'll be damned. Not a whiff of booze.

PAUL

I'm drinking in moderation now.

CYNTHIA

You had onions, though.

PAUL

I'm single now. No one to complain.

CYNTHIA

How are you feeling these days?

PAUL

Pretty good.

CYNTHIA

You're barely out of the hospital.

PAUL

Look, I'm not going to run a marathon, but I feel pretty good. I'm avoiding the things that upset my copper level, like shellfish and chocolate—that's a tough one to give up—but my energy's okay. Dr. Marshall is impressed with my recovery. I'm getting active again.

CYNTHIA

I sure hope so. You're quite the sonofabitch, but I still want you around.

PAUL

You're so kind.

CYNTHIA

I wish you'd stay put. You move around so much. We've never lived in the same place more than three years. It's like you keep pulling up your roots whenever we've settled down. Like you're running from something.

PAUL

Maybe I am.

CYNTHIA

Maybe I am too... I've also got memories. The week in the hospital it got really bad. That day your vitals kept crashing. Nurses running in and out of the room. That constant beeping. I thought I'd have to call a priest. Scared the shit out of me. Add to that I couldn't find Arthur.

PAUL

Have we ever been able to find Arthur? Get him away from what he's chasing?

CYNTHIA

Maybe one day... When you finally stabilized. I just sat next to you and stared. You didn't recognize me. It was like you were... frozen in lucite. I kept wanting to break through somehow. It fucking hurt.

PAUL

A lot of things happened there. Not all of them bad.

CYNTHIA

What does that mean?

PAUL

That's private.

CYNTHIA

Private is your middle name. So be it.

PAUL

You have to take people as they are.

CYNTHIA

You always have an answer. An I-have-to. Have-to, have-to. Like I'm six.

PAUL

You were wayward and lost.

CYNTHIA

I wasn't lost. I was *looking*.

PAUL

You were flying without a compass.

CYNTHIA

Maybe so. But I always knew I was going somewhere.

PAUL

By the time I was your—

CYNTHIA

Don't say it. Don't you dare say it. I was going somewhere! I could see a light through the fog. I didn't know where I was but I knew—*knew*, damn it—that something was waiting for me out there. Maybe even something good. Something I could hang on to... Something that would finally make you proud of me.

PAUL

Look... In many ways, I've been a poor father. And a damn poor husband to your mother. The day I signed the divorce papers was one of the worst of my life.

CYNTHIA

Your life?!

PAUL

I know my leaving hurt you. Not a day goes by that I don't feel bad. But Diane and I... Something happened. Some... shifting of the ground beneath us. Pulling us apart. We started looking at the world through different eyes. We asked too much of each other, more than anyone should. You've had breakups. You should understand. Good intentions aren't always enough. Diane and I... lost each other in the... maze of living... By the time we realized it, it was too late.

CYNTHIA

I guess she was... trying.

PAUL

She was... Listen, I was a bastard. You have every right to hate me. But even so... When things were at their worst, when I was sure I'd die... I could tell you were there. You and your anger at the world, at me... I could feel your... power. It gave me something to come back to.

CYNTHIA

Really?

Really. PAUL

Oh, Daddy... CYNTHIA

The reason I came tonight... The real reason was not to get mad at you. PAUL

No? CYNTHIA

No. PAUL

Don't hold out on me. CYNTHIA

I don't want to spend the rest of my days with you angry at me. PAUL

Pause

Get up. CYNTHIA

What? PAUL

Just do it. CYNTHIA

Okay... PAUL

He stands. CYNTHIA steps to him and hugs him tightly. PAUL is a statue.

You've never hugged me till now. PAUL

It's long overdue. CYNTHIA

He hesitates, slowly puts his arms around her.

CYNTHIA

Stay in my life.

She starts to hum “You Are My Sunshine”.

CYNTHIA

Let me love you.

She gently rocks him back and forth and keeps humming as he melts into her arms.

SLOW FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 5

CYNTHIA's apartment. One week later. She is seated in the couch. ARTHUR and PAUL stand on either side of her. ARTHUR is pacing. Palpable tension.

CYNTHIA

Christ, can we be any more wrought up? Just relax. I asked you boys over here to talk, not to solve the world's problems.

PAUL

I appreciate the effort, sweetie. But I have to say...

(To ARTHUR)

This conversation can't continue unless you're sober.

ARTHUR

Questions, questions.

PAUL

Arthur.

ARTHUR

I haven't used since day before yesterday.

PAUL

I'd hoped for longer.

ARTHUR

's what I got. Take it or leave it.

CYNTHIA

How about I fix you boys some nice ice tea? Extra sweet, the way you like it.

PAUL

That would be most welcome.

ARTHUR nods his approval.

CYNTHIA

Sweet tea coming up.

She exits, with a final look back.

ARTHUR

Look. Dad. I know you want the best. But with all that's gone between us, I'm not sure that's possible.

PAUL

I want it to be.

ARTHUR

I'll try. No promises.

PAUL

None asked. I thought we could each say our piece, then talk.

ARTHUR

Well... who goes first?

PAUL

I don't know.

ARTHUR

If we can't agree on that...

PAUL thinks a moment, then calls out to CYNTHIA.

PAUL

Cynthia!

CYNTHIA

(offstage)

Hold your horses! I just started the tea to boiling.

PAUL

It's not that. We need you to mediate something.

CYNTHIA sighs, enters.

CYNTHIA

Already a problem?

PAUL

We're going to take turns saying what we think.

We can't decide who goes first.

ARTHUR

Oh, for God's sake. I'm not playing favorites.

CYNTHIA

Just go at random.

ARTHUR

Okay. Eenie meenie miney mo. Catch a n— Tiger by the toe. If he hollers, let him go. Eenie meenie miney mo.

CYNTHIA

Her finger is pointing toward ARTHUR.

You're the lucky winner.

CYNTHIA

As she exits:

Men!

CYNTHIA

We may as well sit.

ARTHUR

They do.

I'm all ears.

PAUL

In the program, we say that addiction is a disease. Not a moral deficiency.

ARTHUR

Some of your behavior has been—

PAUL

Let me talk a while, okay?

ARTHUR

Sorry.

PAUL

ARTHUR

That's it in a nutshell. You do the talking. You always go first. I don't like that.

PAUL

I'm sorry I—

ARTHUR

Dad! Please... Just give me a chance. Let me be my own man. Like the time... back in high school. Senior year. We were playing North Central. The score was tied. Two minutes to go in the last quarter. I'd been throwing interceptions all night. It was a miracle we were still in the game. I looked around. It felt like everyone in the whole stadium was looking at me. Thinking, our star quarterback's not such hot shit. Coach called time out. As we were discussing plays, I saw you out of the corner of my eye, in the stands. You had this... look. Like I was some piece of gum you were picking off your shoe. That was bad enough, but what made it worse... I'd seen it before. When I brought home the report card, with all those D's and F's. When I failed my first driver's license test. When I... whenever I just wasn't smart enough to be Professor Morningside's kid. It burned into me. Always the look. Always the... disdain. I had to bottle up my feelings... So... when I started partying and took cocaine for the first time... All that went away. I was on top of the world. I wasn't the kid who lost the big game. I was someone. Someone who mattered. That old song, you used to play. Walk a mile in my shoes. You never did that. I wanted you to. I wanted you to... understand. But you didn't. But you didn't... You don't.

CYNTHIA

(offstage)

Who wants tea?

PAUL

Give us a minute.

ARTHUR

No. I said my piece. For now. Come on in, sis.

CYNTHIA enters bravely, carrying a tray, a pitcher, and two glasses.

CYNTHIA

It won't win at the State Fair, but it'll do.

The men each take a glass and return to their positions. CYNTHIA sets the pitcher on the table.

PAUL

I don't know what I can tell you that I haven't said before. All my life I've tried to teach you. Show you a better way.

ARTHUR

By drinking yourself silly?

PAUL

There's a difference.

ARTHUR

Uh-huh.

PAUL

I gave you the chance to speak uninterrupted. Do the same.

ARTHUR

Why should I?

PAUL

We made an agreement.

ARTHUR

That's the funny thing about detoxing. It makes you very impatient.

PAUL

No one in the Morningside family ever did drugs.

ARTHUR

Horseshit.

PAUL

No one. Sure, we all tiddled, but we kept ourselves within the limits of society. Not like your junkie friends.

ARTHUR

I never used needles.

PAUL

Why not? You've done everything else.

ARTHUR

Here it comes. Reefer Madness. Gateway drugs.

PAUL

Why?

ARTHUR

They make me feel good. Is that so hard to understand?

PAUL

There's more to life than feeling good. You're letting down the family. You barely graduated from State. You've held down a series of dead-end jobs. Half my disposable income goes to paying your bills.

ARTHUR

Same old shit. Why don't you get some new material?

PAUL

Okay. New material. When I was in the hospital. Hooked up to a monitor, not sure when I'd breathe my last. I waited for you to visit.

ARTHUR

Dad, I—

PAUL

I waited! Every time I heard footsteps in that hall I thought, that's him. That's my boy. Maybe he gives a damn about me after all. Then that sinking feeling when it turned out to be someone else. I saved a place on my table, in case you at least sent a card. The nurses asked me how many kids I had. I felt like saying, one. You've met her. It bothered Cynthia, too, more than she's letting on. Shit. You were... absent. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and whisper your name. You let me down. After all the years my wives and I cared for you, poured out our lives for you... you were absent. You let us down... You want new? There it is.

ARTHUR

I don't know what to say.

PAUL

Forgiveness has always been difficult for me. Especially now.

ARTHUR

It's not that I don't love you... The drugs... take over. Make me... serve them.

He starts to cry.

ARTHUR

What I wouldn't give to do it all over.

PAUL reaches over and touches him.

PAUL

I have an idea. Maybe it will set things right.

ARTHUR

Oh?

PAUL

I'll give you a thousand dollars if you stay straight.

ARTHUR

You're kidding.

PAUL

I've never been more serious.

ARTHUR

One thousand dollars.

PAUL

Show me a clean test in one year. One thousand cash if you pass.

ARTHUR

In the program it's a day at a time. I can't make a promise like that.

PAUL

Six months then. And another thousand six months later.

CYNTHIA opens the door and looks in.

ARTHUR

Smoke another one.

CYNTHIA

That's a first.

She steps back outside.

ARTHUR

I need time to think about it.

PAUL

Now. I know you. If you just “think about it”, you’ll get high. And so on and so on. Ad infinitum. Ad nauseam.

ARTHUR

You think you can just... buy me off. You and your money. You’re a bastard.

He walks out. After a while, CYNTHIA returns.

CYNTHIA

Well, did you make him the offer?

PAUL

I doubled it.

CYNTHIA

And?

PAUL

He said no. He’s probably on his way to the dealer’s.

He hangs his head.

PAUL

I thought it would work.

CYNTHIA

So did I.

They share a hug.

FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 6

A parking lot outside an NA meeting after it has concluded, April 2021. SHENEQUIA has just finished giving a speech about her addiction recovery.

She stands under a parking light. She waves goodbye to the other members as they leave, ad-libbing her thanks for their listening.

A shaken ARTHUR is speaking to her.

ARTHUR

I really enjoyed your speech.

SHENEQUIA

It wasn't a speech. Just me telling why it was and how I got out of it.

ARTHUR

Can I talk to you a few moments?

SHENEQUIA

Sure.

ARTHUR

When you talked about losing your mother... It brought back a lot of memories.

SHENEQUIA

It was a very hard time for me. Seeing her in the hospital. She was nothing but skin and bones.

ARTHUR

My father was in the hospital three years ago.

SHENEQUIA

Serious?

ARTHUR

He nearly died. The thing is... the thing is... I wasn't there. My sister visited him regularly, but I didn't make it.

SHENEQUIA

Because you were using?

ARTHUR

I was in the shooting gallery night and day. Nursing that pipe... When I should have been nursing him... I wanted to go. I planned to go. But I didn't have a car and I was out of touch with my sister...

SHENEQUIA

The life of an addict.

ARTHUR

I was out of touch with everyone.

SHENEQUIA

Including yourself.

ARTHUR

Yes... I wanted to help him. I know he needed me. He did so much for me... Put me through college... paid my bills... paid for my treatment... He paid for everything... And I gave him... I gave him... nothing... Once I stole the family silver and sold it for a bag of dope...

SHENEQUIA

I stole from moms too.

ARTHUR

I've done so much damage... I want to get off the roller coaster. Stop hurting myself. And the damn thing is... I still want to get high. I want to feel good again. I want to feel... nothing. Recovery is too much fucking work... I want to disappear. Vanish into thin air so no one would remember what I did.

SHENEQUIA

What you did to yourself.

ARTHUR

I'm tired of feeling my feelings, tired of hearing people talk about having years clean when I have 25 days... Please. Say anything.

SHENEQUIA

Take out your phone.

ARTHUR

Huh?

SHENEQUIA

Take out your phone.

ARTHUR

Why should I—

SHENEQUIA

Take it out. You need to find out what you're made of.

ARTHUR does so.

SHENEQUIA

Call the dope man.

ARTHUR

What?

SHENEQUIA

Call the dope man. He's in your contacts, right?

ARTHUR

I'm not supposed to call people I used with, much less—

SHENEQUIA

You asked for help. This is it. Call the dope man.

ARTHUR begins to shake.

ARTHUR

Okay.

He finds the number, hesitates.

SHENEQUIA

Hold it to your head so he can hear you.

ARTHUR

This is insane.

SHENEQUIA

Don't tell help how to help you. Just do it.

ARTHUR, numbly, presses the call button.

SHENEQUIA

Ask him where the shit is.

ARTHUR

What Step am I working?

SHENEQUIA

Step Zero...

A voice at the other end of the line.

SHENEQUIA

He just answered. What are you going to do?

ARTHUR

Dan? It's... me.

SHENEQUIA

Talk to him.

ARTHUR

Dan I—

SHENEQUIA

How much money's on you?

ARTHUR

It's... I want... I want...

He looks desperately at SHENEQUIA.

ARTHUR

Don't make me... NO!

He pushes the red button, covers his face, still holding the phone, and starts crying.

ARTHUR

Why did you make me do that? What kind of person are you?

SHENEQUIA

What kind are you?

ARTHUR

You're fucking sick.

We're all sick. Sick and tired.

SHENEQUIA

That was horrible.

ARTHUR

When you started talking to me. I saw a little bit of willingness, but a lot of wanna-get-high. You need to find out which one's in charge.

SHENEQUIA

What if I'd gone through with it?

ARTHUR

You'd have gotten high.

SHENEQUIA

Wouldn't you have stopped me?

ARTHUR

Recovery is your responsibility.

SHENEQUIA
(gently)

This is hellish.

ARTHUR

Will you use tonight?

SHENEQUIA

I want to.

ARTHUR

Will you?

SHENEQUIA

No.

ARTHUR

His phone rings. They look at each other. It rings a couple of more times. Then he silences the phone.

SHENEQUIA

Don't put it away yet.

She motions him to hand it over. He does.
She enters a number.

ARTHUR

What's this?

SHENEQUIA

My number. Call me when you get home.

ARTHUR

I thought men weren't supposed to get women's numbers.

SHENEQUIA

I'm not starting anything. This is one addict helping another. Just call. I'll give you the number of a guy who might sponsor you. Cedric.

ARTHUR

Okay... Thank you.

SHENEQUIA

No need. Just be here tomorrow night at eight.

ARTHUR

I can do that.

SHENEQUIA

I've been in your shoes. We all have. But you know what?

ARTHUR

What?

SHENEQUIA

You can train those shoes to walk you to better places.

ARTHUR

That works... Can I give you a hug?

SHENEQUIA

No need to ask.

They share a gentle hug.

ARTHUR

My sister would shit a brick if she saw me hugging a black woman.

SHENEQUIA

Maybe one day she'll understand.

ARTHUR

Don't bet on it.

SHENEQUIA

You have a future here.

ARTHUR

Thanks again.

SHENEQUIA

Thank *you*.

He heads off to his car.

SHENEQUIA

Call!

Final waves to each other.

FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 7

A hospital room in Arlington, Virginia, September 2018. Morning light streams in. PAUL is lying in bed, looking at TV. He clicks the remote.

PAUL

Nothing but crap... Game shows from the Seventies... Ugh, soccer... A commercial for some expensive new drug... A commercial for an expensive new drug... Another commercial for an even more expensive new drug... They need a show called the worst of 2018.

SHENEQUIA enters, dressed in nursing attire.

SHENEQUIA

Good morning... You must be Mr. Morningside.

PAUL looks at her and pulls himself higher up in the bed and straightens his hair.

PAUL

No, I must be Mr. Lucky.

SHENEQUIA

Mr. Lucky?

PAUL

'cause you're the prettiest girl I've seen in a long time.

SHENEQUIA

They said you were a flatterer.

PAUL

It's an honest assessment.

She looks at his chart.

SHENEQUIA

How are you feeling today? Aside from lucky.

PAUL

I'm in a hospital. How should I feel?

SHENEQUIA

How's your energy today?

PAUL

I feel more tired than yesterday. My stomach hurts like hell and they're looking at a liver transplant. Considering I could die, I can't say I'm surprised.

SHENEQUIA

Well, let's assume they find a treatment that works.

PAUL

The doctors don't know what to do with me. They keep telling me I'm an outlier. Shit, that's been true my whole life... Here I am talking and I don't know your name. What is it?

SHENEQUIA

She-ne-quah.

PAUL

Shenequia. I like it.

SHENEQUIA

You got it right. That's a good sign. I think I'm gonna like you.

CROSS-FADE TO NEXT SCENE

SCENE 8

Same location, at night, October. PAUL is in bed. SHENEQUIA is giving him a sponge bath.

PAUL
(lost in memory)

I remember my first wife.

SHENEQUIA

Adele?

PAUL

No, it was... Dana. Diana. Diane. We took turns bathing our firstborn.

SHENEQUIA

Cynthia.

PAUL

Is that her name?

SHENEQUIA

You showed me her picture. Pretty girl.

PAUL

Cynthia... When she was little we could bathe her in the kitchen sink.

SHENEQUIA

In dishwasher detergent?

PAUL

Soap and water.

SHENEQUIA

My little girl peed when I did that.

PAUL

Your little girl?

SHENEQUIA

Tameka.

I though her name was Sandy.

You're thinking of nurse Sandy.

You're not Sandy?

I'm Shenequia.

The Black one.

Since birth.

The one I love.

We all need someone to love.

Do you love me?

We all need someone to love.

PAUL
(gripping her hand with surprising strength)
I'm asking... Look. I don't know if I'm going to get any better. I need something to hang on to. Adele died in a place like this. I thought it would at least be a while before I ended up here.

SHENEQUIA wipes his forehead.

I don't want you to die.

SHENEQUIA
She puts down the washcloth.

SHENEQUIA

I've been looking. Maybe there's a better way.

BLACKOUT

END ACT I

ACT II

SCENE 1

The next night. PAUL is sitting up on the bed. SHENEQUIA is preparing his meds.

PAUL

I don't remember much of last night.

SHENEQUIA

You were drifting in and out.

PAUL

I remember the word "love".

SHENEQUIA

We talked about it. How much you loved Cynthia.

PAUL

Yes... You're so good to me.

SHENEQUIA

Well, I'm supposed to be.

PAUL

Above and beyond the call of duty.

She looks around.

SHENEQUIA

I have a confession.

PAUL

(laughs)

Are we in church?

SHENEQUIA

I'm drawn to you.

PAUL

Does that bother you?

SHENEQUIA

Some, yes. Nurses and patients aren't supposed to fraternize.

PAUL

Such a cold word.

SHENEQUIA

I think about you a lot. And when I leave here, I feel... lighter.

PAUL

That's ironic, considering I have a heavy disease.

SHENEQUIA

Your spirit is alive, Paul. I've never met anyone like you. You're smart, but you don't flaunt it.

PAUL

Not that smart. I've made a lot of mistakes. My kids... I've kept them at a distance. I was a bastard to Diane. And Adele... I should have paid more attention to her health.

SHENEQUIA

I believe God forgives.

PAUL

That would be nice.

SHENEQUIA

's how I get by every day.

PAUL

You don't put on those Christian airs. Holier than thou.

SHENEQUIA

I am who I am. Let's take your pills.

PAUL

More? I had seven this morning.

SHENEQUIA

Only two for now.

PAUL

That's better.

She offers him a pill and water.

SHENEQUIA

Lots of water now.

He takes the first pill and gags.

PAUL

That one's a toughie.

SHENEQUIA

It's the biggest one. I'll wait for the second. Let you recover.

She makes an entry on her keypad.

PAUL

I have a lot of regrets, Neeka.

SHENEQUIA

Cynthia?

PAUL

I love her, but sometimes I can't recognize her as my own.

SHENEQUIA

Why not?

PAUL

I raised her to value learning. To respect people from different backgrounds. Her racism really grates on my nerves.

SHENEQUIA

I'm surprised. I've never seen that in you.

PAUL

Well, my first wife had some backward views.

SHENEQUIA

Why didn't you?

PAUL

Our high school football team was mixed. The Black kids practiced as hard as we did, got beat up same as we did. I had a wide receiver from the other side of town... hands of gold.

SHENEQUIA

Wish he'd been on our team. Our guys couldn't even win the coin toss.

He laughs.

SHENEQUIA

One more pill.

She gives him the second one; he swallows and drinks.

PAUL

That went down easy, but it tastes awful. What's it for?

SHENEQUIA looks at her pad.

SHENEQUIA

To balance your electrolytes.

PAUL

Got to watch the electrolytes.

SHENEQUIA

(flirting)

I've got to watch you, with your compliments. Roll on your side. I need to look at your liver.

He rolls on his side and lifts his gown.

SHENEQUIA

Still some jaundice, but it's less than yesterday. You're doing better than you think.

PAUL

That's good to hear after Friday. I thought I was a goner.

SHENEQUIA

I'm kind of glad I wasn't her to see it. It's hard watching you suffer.

PAUL

Suffering isn't noble.

SHENEQUIA

How well I know.

PAUL

I hope I can make it up to Cynthia when I go back. I've treated her badly.

She makes more notes on her pad.

SHENEQUIA

I hear she was there all day when you had your crisis.

PAUL

Sometimes I wonder if she and I will ever get along.

She takes his hand.

SHENEQUIA

I'll pray for it.

PAUL

Thanks, doll. Say one for Arthur, too.

SHENEQUIA

Of course.

PAUL

I just wish he'd get help. When Adele died, he went into a tailspin.

SHENEQUIA

I used to work in the ER. Kids overdosing every night. It's not for the faint of heart.

PAUL

I want to help him.

SHENEQUIA

He has to want to be helped. The best thing you can do for him is tough love. I had to have all of my consequences before I quit. That and the help of God. As I understand Him...

(chuckles)

Or misunderstand Him.

PAUL

That's admirable.

SHENEQUIA

Don't make me out to be a role model. There's plenty you don't know about me.

PAUL

I know I like what I see... I do believe you're helping me get better.

SHENEQUIA

I have to keep you alive and kicking, in case we make plans.

He smiles.

CROSS-FADE TO NEXT SCENE

SCENE 2

Transition to daylight afternoon, late November. SHENEQUIA is reading his vitals.

SHENEQUIA

It's really getting cold out there. 2019's going to be a hard winter.

PAUL

All I see out the window is the parking deck, which is pretty low in entertainment value.

SHENEQUIA

If it weren't for me and the TV, you'd have no entertainment at all.

He takes her free hand and kisses it. She nuzzles his balding hair.

PAUL

Not much to play with, is there?

SHENEQUIA

I make do. Open up.

She inserts a digital thermometer in his mouth.

PAUL

Mmm-mm. Mff. Mff-mff.

SHENEQUIA

You are so impatient. Vitals first, conversation second.

The thermometer beeps and she pulls it out.

PAUL

I was saying, you're the prettiest woman on the floor.

SHENEQUIA

Tonight you'll say the same thing to Maria, and tomorrow morning, Gina. That looks good. 99.7.

PAUL

The first time you walked in, I thought my oh my there's a woman to write home about.

No one writes letters any more.

SHENEQUIA

She takes out the dose oximeter and places it on his forefinger.

I can stop with the flattery.

PAUL

She looks around, kisses his lips.

Don't you dare.

SHENEQUIA

I love you, dear, but maybe we should go easy on the lips. My body can't cash the checks I'd like to write any more.

PAUL

Sorry. I'm so attracted to your energy and spirit, it's hard for a girl to resist.

SHENEQUIA

Now who's flirting?

PAUL

It keeps things fresh.

SHENEQUIA

I didn't feel so fresh last night. That pain in my liver was back and I felt a lot older than 63.

PAUL

Does it hurt now?

SHENEQUIA

It's a little better. I kept having these dreams. People were coming and going in and out of the room, only the room kept... changing. It turned from a hospital room to a... police station. Then a morgue. Everyone pointed at me and laughed.

PAUL

It's just a side effect, baby.

SHENEQUIA

PAUL

I'm old, Shenequia. People used to tell me I looked young for my age, but now I feel it. Dreams like that make me feel like everything is slipping away. I'm becoming a burden to others. I thought I had another couple of decades left, but now I wonder. I wonder about everything.

SHENEQUIA

I'm here.

PAUL

Are you sure... Are you sure you shouldn't find a man your own age? Someone with a future?

SHENEQUIA

I don't believe in

(air quotes)

the future. Just the now happening over and over and over. The future's always on the way, but never arriving.

SHENEQUIA removes the oximeter.

SHENEQUIA

When I met my ex, I thought I had found the future. There'd be him and me and three kids and a dog and we'd live forever happy. Then life happened, and Demetrius and Tameka happened, and my man got swayed to some other side chick who promised him a lot of responsibility-free sex, and that was that. Along the way I stopped living in the what's-gonna-happen and started living in the what's-in-front-of me. Easier that way.

PAUL

Am I really worth all the fuss?

SHENEQUIA

Is the sky really that blue?

PAUL

You could snap your finger and a fine man would come running.

SHENEQUIA

I want someone who wouldn't come running on the first snap.

PAUL

I guess I can live with that... Aren't you needed elsewhere?

SHENEQUIA

The other girls know the situation and cover for me when they can. The floor is nearly empty today. I've got my ear out.

PAUL

What do they think?

SHENEQUIA

Some disapprove. Others think people should be happy.

PAUL

I don't deserve you.

SHENEQUIA

Tough shit. You got me... I feel like telling them, if you can name me one commandment I'm breaking, I'll stop.

PAUL

Well, we're all sinners, aren't we?

SHENEQUIA

I'm okay. I've been washed in the Blood.

She looks at her watch.

SHENEQUIA

Gotta go on break soon. Call the kids.

PAUL

Before you go. I want you to have something.

SHENEQUIA

You don't have to shower me with gifts.

PAUL

I want to.

He reaches on the other side of the bed and pulls out a small object wrapped in toilet paper.

PAUL

The wrapping's not much. Close your eyes.

SHENEQUIA

How can I do my job with my eyes closed?

PAUL

Just for a moment.

SHENEQUIA

They're shut.

He takes out a small music box, the kind you buy as a souvenir. He winds the tiny handle. Out comes "You Are My Sunshine". He puts it in her hand. She opens her eyes.

SHENEQUIA

It's lovely.

PAUL

I gave it to Cynthia when she was a child. She lost it but it turned up years later in some boxes when we moving. She and I weren't seeing eye to eye back then so I kept it. I carry it with me as a sort of good luck charm.

SHENEQUIA

(blinking back tears)

I love that song.

She holds it close to her ear and listens.

SHENEQUIA

But I feel bad taking your little girl's memories.

PAUL

Life is in the giving. You've given me an extended life. It's a fair trade.

She hugs him gently.

SHENEQUIA

Never mention that.

PAUL

Show it to Demetrius. I think he'll like it.

SHENEQUIA

He'll love it because it's from you.

PAUL

He is a good little feller.

SHENEQUIA

He has his moments. Yesterday he was really acting out.

PAUL

I'll take care of you and your kids. When my time comes.

SHENEQUIA

You don't have to do that. I'm fine on my own.

PAUL

Kids on the autism spectrum need a lot of extra care. And you keep telling me how bright Tameka is. She needs a nest egg for college.

SHENEQUIA

We aren't destitute.

PAUL

By the time she's college age who knows how high tuition will be? You'll be taken care of.

SHENEQUIA

You have two kids with their own needs. It's not my place to stand in the way.

PAUL

I'm not destitute either. There's plenty to go around.

SHENEQUIA

Easy. Think how they'd react.

PAUL

I raised them to think for themselves.

SHENEQUIA

Paul—

PAUL

Life is for the giving.

He starts coughing, hunching over.
SHENEQUIA tends to him and he tries to brush her off but lacks the strength.

SHENEQUIA

You're getting too stressed. We'll talk about it later.

PAUL

(weakly)

My mind's made up.

SHENEQUIA

Lie back. Nurse's orders.

He lies down meekly. She regards him tenderly. She takes her keypad.

SHENEQUIA

I'll tell the kids you said hello. Maria will be here in a minute. Sweet dreams.

She bends over, kisses his brow, and exits.

PAUL

The life you give me.

FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 3

Cynthia's apartment, September 2021. Late at night. CYNTHIA is on the phone.

CYNTHIA

Artie...? Artie? Pick up the damn phone! Just pick up!!... Oh for God's sake, voicemail again. He hates voicemail.

She angrily hangs up.

CYNTHIA

He's never been away this long. Damn.

She takes a drink. Looks at the stack of bills on the table.

CYNTHIA

I'm behind as usual.

She calls again.

CYNTHIA

Artie! Pick up, dammit... What the fuck, maybe by some miracle he'll check his voicemail... It worked! Artie! Call me! We need you here. The trial is starting in three weeks and Jane needs you on the witness stand. Just clean up and get your ass down here. Where the hell are you, anyway? You just, head off to parts unknown without leaving a trace. I even went to a meeting, looking for you. Come on... You damn fool... It gets lonely here. I'll clean all the booze out of the house if you'll just come home. Call me!

Dejected, she hangs up. Takes another drink.

CYNTHIA

If you weren't family, I swear to God...

FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 4

Several weeks later. SHENEQUIA is seated beside PAUL. He looks healthy and is sitting up.

SHENEQUIA

I've been dreading this moment.

PAUL

I know, dear. But I have to be discharged sometime.

SHENEQUIA

You better finish getting dressed. You want to look good for the world.

PAUL

The world. It's almost like I've forgotten it.

SHENEQUIA

It's still out there. Waiting for a good man.

PAUL

So... what happens next?

SHENEQUIA

We'll still see each other... right?

PAUL

Is there... I mean... Are we building something that will last?

SHENEQUIA

That's what I want. But you sound... hesitant.

PAUL

You hear about these hospital romances. They don't always last.

SHENEQUIA

Think of what we've shared. Our stories. The days we wanted to give up. The good times.

PAUL

My rotten jokes.

SHENEQUIA

I've told you things I've never told another man.

PAUL

Your trust honors me.

SHENEQUIA

I honor you.

PAUL

I honor your kindness. The way you squeeze my hand. The stories you tell about Demetrius and Tameka. Your smile... The way you stood by me on the worst days.

SHENEQUIA

God gave me the gift of giving.

PAUL

He gave me you. Late at night, when I worry. I think of you. I think of... who you are. And I fall right to sleep. I honor that. I honor the comfort I feel with you.

SHENEQUIA

Let's keep going, then. Now that you're healthy, you can be with me in... every way. I'd like that very much.

PAUL

Ooh. Now would be a good time to give me your number.

SHENEQUIA

I thought you'd never ask.

She takes out her pad, writes her number, places it in his hand.

PAUL

I know some good restaurants.

SHENEQUIA

I could introduce you to soul food.

PAUL

(smugly)

I'm already acquainted.

SHENEQUIA

Have you ever had New Orleans gumbo? With oxtails and pig's feet?

PAUL

(deflated)

Can't say I have.

SHENEQUIA

That's our first date, then. Getting you some *real* soul food.

PAUL

Agreed.

SHENEQUIA

The only way to find out if we have something to build on is to build it. One day at a time.

PAUL

Yes.

SHENEQUIA

Have you thought telling your children about us?

PAUL

I lead my own life.

SHENEQUIA

So do I. But Cynthia needs to know.

PAUL

No, she doesn't.

SHENEQUIA

Daughters need to know what their fathers are up to. Sons, too.

PAUL

There is no way she'd understand. Artie would, I think, but I can't even find him.

SHENEQUIA

She needs to know.

PAUL

My dear, it's my decision.

My dear, it's our life.

SHENEQUIA

We'll talk about it over gumbo.

PAUL

Don't ghost me.

SHENEQUIA

I would never.

PAUL

She looks at her watch.

SHENEQUIA

On that note... I have two kids who'll need help with their homework.

She rises, goes to him.

PAUL

You are so beautiful.

SHENEQUIA

Flattering me. Just like you did when I first saw you.

PAUL

I'm going to close my eyes a moment... I don't think I can stand seeing you walk out.

SHENEQUIA

Stay warm. Nurse's orders.

She waits a moment, smiles, and exits.

FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 5

The parking lot outside a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, October 2021. SHENEQUIA waves goodbye to members offstage. ARTHUR enters, tired and dirty, wearing a backpack and carrying a white recovery keytag. SHENEQUIA spots him, hesitates, then goes to him and hugs him.

SHENEQUIA

Congratulations, my friend. I didn't plan on seeing you here.

ARTHUR

Thanks... but should you be talking to me? My sister was planning to sue you.

SHENEQUIA

Just because she's suing doesn't mean I can't treat you like anyone else in recovery. Actually, the trial started yesterday. I can talk to you as another addict but I can't mention any details. I can tell you we heard testimony and it's gone to the jury... The reason I'm here is to say it took courage for you to admit you relapsed.

ARTHUR

Aren't you angry at us?

SHENEQUIA

I have... strong opinions about her behavior. But I believe in putting personal feelings aside when I'm in a recovery atmosphere. I've been doubling down on my Serenity Prayer... If it gets too much for either of us, we can walk away from the conversation. What's important now is we missed you. What happened? Five months is a long time.

ARTHUR

I stopped going to meetings.

SHENEQUIA

There's more to it than that.

ARTHUR

I met a girl at the Tuesday night group. Another newcomer. We started a relationship.

SHENEQUIA

Familiar story.

ARTHUR

When I was around her, I didn't feel like I needed anything else. Everything was right with the world. Then one night she brought home an eight ball... I thought I could resist. But I hadn't been to a meeting for three weeks, hadn't called anyone, hadn't done any step work. I felt invincible.

SHENEQUIA

That's a dangerous place to be.

ARTHUR

Maybe liking danger is my problem.

SHENEQUIA

A little chaos to fuck up a good life.

ARTHUR

Living clean was becoming a good life... I had a few good days put together, and then... The next morning, she was gone. I had that empty place inside... That hole in your gut. I got out my phone and called the dope man. The same guy you had me call that night. I was back where I started.

SHENEQUIA

How'd it feel?

ARTHUR

Euphoric... then terrible. I thought of Dad and how disappointed he would be in me. I thought of Cynthia worrying about me... I thought how disappointed my sponsor would be... I thought if I went far away I could leave all that behind.

SHENEQUIA

I tried that too. Didn't work.

ARTHUR

I went all up and down the East Coast. Looking for something, someone to make me feel better. Stop feeling like a ghost. My money ran out. I had to beg. Hitting up strangers. It's not that easy. Trading sex for dope. You do what it takes. Eventually I wound up next to the James River in Richmond. Next to a dumpster. I could barely stand up, but something told me to look up... The Moon was out. A cloudy night. Chilly. I could see my breath. I looked closely at one of the clouds... I could see this... smudge of darkness, even darker than the night, spreading out like spilled ink. The Moon was so bright and the cloud was so close, it cast a shadow... I had never seen that before. I felt I was in the presence of something. Greater than myself. Somehow... I felt it was meant for me. That I mattered.

ARTHUR (Cont'd)

I hadn't felt that way in a long time. Suddenly my head was clear. Time to stop running. Return to a world that had such beauty. Time to be... guided. I said goodbye to my buddies. Got directions to a truck stop. A tough old driver agreed to give me a lift. Irene Harrison... I guess I owe her my life...

It's time for me to go home. So here I am. Talking to the one who said recovery is my responsibility. Shit, I'm just trying not to die...

SHENEQUIA

Hard lesson, ain't it?

ARTHUR

Yes.

SHENEQUIA

Funny you should mention family. I'm going over to see Cynthia in a few minutes. Ask her to dismiss the case.

ARTHUR

I thought the judge said you couldn't do that.

SHENEQUIA

Yes, but I can tell he's not too happy about adjudicating a family dispute. I realize I'm going out on a limb, but I think he'd appreciate us settling out of court and sending everyone home early.

ARTHUR

Oh. I was going to go over there and ask her if I can stay there a few days until I can get into a facility.

SHENEQUIA

This is awkward.

ARTHUR

I don't want a scene. The homeless shelter's not far. I guess I can stand one more night.

SHENEQUIA

I don't want that for you. Let's go to Cynthia's.

ARTHUR

You don't have to.

SHENEQUIA

Everyone else has gone home to bed. I know that shelter. It's a bad idea for you to be there any longer than you have to.

ARTHUR

Aren't you scared?

SHENEQUIA

Fuck yes. But sometimes we need to get the hard stuff over with. Trust that Higher Power we talk about.

ARTHUR

I don't know...

SHENEQUIA

You had the guts to pick up that white keytag. You'll have the guts for this.

ARTHUR

Okay. But give me a few minutes alone before you come in.

SHENEQUIA

Let's do this.

They exit. Car-doors open, shut. Car starts.

FADE TO BLACK

SCENE 6

CYNTHIA's apartment, about nine o'clock that night. CYNTHIA is in her chair, looking at the Enquirer, nursing a drink. She looks at the picture of PAUL.

God damn.

CYNTHIA

The doorbell rings.

Who the hell can that be at this hour?

CYNTHIA

She goes to the peephole.

Oh my sweet Jesus.

CYNTHIA

She opens the door. ARTHUR is there.

Remember me?

ARTHUR

You're alive!

CYNTHIA

Apparently.

ARTHUR

I thought I'd never see you. Come in, come in.

CYNTHIA

Not much to look at, I'm afraid.

ARTHUR

Who cares? Here, give me your knapsack. Sit down. Can I get you something? Water? Aspirin?

CYNTHIA

I don't have a headache.

ARTHUR
(smiling)

CYNTHIA leads him to the couch. Her arms never leave him as she kisses and hugs him.

CYNTHIA

Oh my. Oh my.

ARTHUR

I've missed you so much.

CYNTHIA

Where were you?

ARTHUR

Everywhere. Kentucky. New Jersey. Mostly Virginia and Maryland. A trucker dropped me off at meeting two days ago.

CYNTHIA

Two days ago? Why didn't you call?

ARTHUR

I couldn't. You've seen me relapse so many times...

CYNTHIA

I'm just glad you're safe... It's been hell without you. I have to ask... are you sober now?

ARTHUR

Three days... I know I put you through hell. I guess you could say my conscience kicked in... I don't suppose I could stay the night?

CYNTHIA

Of course.

(teasing)

Since you showed up with all your belongings.

ARTHUR

Thanks... I need to get checked into treatment tomorrow though. I may have to wait a few days... A lot happened to me... things people shouldn't see.

CYNTHIA starts crying again.

ARTHUR

It's okay, Sis. It's okay. I'm gonna get help.

CYNTHIA

Oh I wish I could undo what happened.

ARTHUR

Well, what have I missed, aside from football?

CYNTHIA

Well, your timing is amazing. The trial with Shenequia started yesterday.

ARTHUR

God, sis, I'm so sorry I wasn't— I've failed you in so many ways.

CYNTHIA

You recovery people love to beat yourselves up. You were surviving. Jane's our lawyer and she's doing just fine. She asked her tough questions and made a great summation. That woman was squirming... The jury's still deliberating. Maybe we'll know tomorrow. I think it'll go our way, but it's not a lead-pipe cinch. It all comes down to whether they'll think Daddy was subjected to undue influence.

ARTHUR

About that...

CYNTHIA

You're not changing your mind, are you?

ARTHUR

My ride... There's someone you need to see...

He gets up, looks out the door, and waves someone in. SHENEQUIA enters hesitantly.

CYNTHIA

You can't be here.

SHENEQUIA

Yet here I am.

CYNTHIA

What are you doing here? Have you put Artie up to something?

She glares at ARTHUR searchingly.

ARTHUR

She was at the meeting tonight. She's in recovery. She gave me a ride home.

Get out. CYNTHIA

I invited her in. She wants to talk. ARTHUR

What in God's name do you have to say? After that fairy tale on the stand? CYNTHIA

You once told me the Morningsides are known for their fairness. I'm hoping that's true. SHENEQUIA

I'm only half a Morningside. Get out. CYNTHIA

I want you to dismiss the case. SHENEQUIA

CYNTHIA rears back her hand to slap her.
ARTHUR grabs her arm.

Talk to her. ARTHUR

You switched sides on me. CYNTHIA

No I haven't. She deserves to be heard. ARTHUR

She's gotten to you. Just like she— CYNTHIA

She hasn't asked any favors! She could have.
(looks at SHENEQUIA)

But she didn't.

He releases CYNTHIA's arm.

Something got to you out there. CYNTHIA

Something called life.

ARTHUR

CYNTHIA sits in her chair, nods toward the sofa.

Talk.

CYNTHIA

SHENEQUIA sits on the couch. ARTHUR takes the other chair.

SHENEQUIA

I'd rather be at home saying goodnight to my kids. Preparing for tomorrow. But I can't look them in the eye and not fight for their rights.

How noble of you. How selfless.

CYNTHIA

They depend on me.

SHENEQUIA

CYNTHIA

If you think for one moment that you can just, waltz in here and la di da tell us you want me to dismiss at the last minute... Haven't you dragged us through enough?

SHENEQUIA

That's rich, coming from you. With all your arguments and your "family honor". You'd make a fine lawyer, Ms. Half-a-Morningside, with that demanding voice and pounding fist of yours. But you can't change the fact that your father put my name on a legal document of his own free will, being of sound mind and body.

His mind was not sound.

CYNTHIA

SHENEQUIA

You need to give him the benefit of the doubt.

CYNTHIA

Doubt is all you're good for. Don't try telling me he was all the time alert. He missed dates, times, and places. Sometimes he thought I was his first wife, sometimes his second. Sometimes he just thought he was in the hospital for a cold. One time he even thought I was Arthur.

He flinches.

CYNTHIA

I'm sorry, but he did. He misplaced things. Repeated himself. His... his mouth would... quiver... while he was trying to remember an old friend... he'd... look out the window and just stare... He had such a strong voice when he was a teacher. It filled the room... Sometimes in the bed... with all those tubes sticking out of him... he looked like a crumpled-up sheet of paper. And I had to... pretend it was all right. And be his only defender.

ARTHUR

Sis...

CYNTHIA

His only one!

SHENEQUIA

I saw it too... And it was hard to watch... But he got better. There were weeks when you couldn't visit him. He got better. His voice got strong again. He was alert. Talking about politics. Current events... There was a soul inside him, Cynthia. A real, vibrant human soul. A child of God... You saw Dr. Marshall testify to his intelligence and subtlety of thought. He was that, too. I'm sorry you saw him at his worst moments, but I hope you remember him at his best.

CYNTHIA

I knew him for 42 years. You knew him, what? Three months?

SHENEQUIA

When he first started talking about writing me into the will, I declined. I told him, the Massengills look after their own. We do, Cynthia, despite what you may think.

CYNTHIA

You're wearing out your welcome.

ARTHUR

(to CYNTHIA)

Too hard.

CYNTHIA

I'll be the judge of that.

SHENEQUIA reaches into her purse and shows CYNTHIA pictures of her kids.

SHENEQUIA

My girl Tameka. My light to the world. She's gifted. She's reading three grade levels above her classmates. She's doing algebra, and she's only eight. The school counselor says she's never met anyone like her. In a few years, she'll be university material. She has the seeds of greatness in her. But college... I can't carry a load like that alone. With the inheritance, I can.

CYNTHIA

There are other ways—

SHENEQUIA

Demetrius. My son. There's a... purity to his being I barely comprehend. But he's on the autism spectrum. He tries so very hard, we try so very hard, but he acts out. He can't help it. He gets frustrated and yells and throws things. Some help is available and he's making progress. He's a good boy. Loves God. But the kind of sustained support he'll need as he gets older is beyond my means. And my father. He's all alone now with huge debts and a falling down house... I'd rather leave you alone. But I have no choice. *Let them flourish.*

CYNTHIA hands back the pictures.

CYNTHIA

I'm very sorry to hear about your son. I see autistic kids and I wonder how they'll get by when they grow up. And little Tameka sounds like quite a young lady... But that still doesn't justify the amount of money you're asking me to surrender.

ARTHUR

Surrender is not a dirty word.

SHENEQUIA

No, it isn't.

(to CYNTHIA)

There's something else I need to tell you.

CYNTHIA

Well?

SHENEQUIA

When I realized I loved Paul—*loved*—I wanted to help him. He had so little life in him. I realized there was one thing I could do... I'm taking a chance telling you this, because it isn't the sort of thing we're supposed to do. When I worked in clinical trials at Paxton, I kept up with my friends. We'd talk about the latest projects. I thought there might be some sort of experimental treatment for Wilson's disease. I asked someone to look around... He found a new drug called rumfluxicor. It was still in beta test, but it

SHENEQUIA (Cont'd)

showed real promise for the worst symptoms. Restoring quality of life. Extending it. My friend found a way to create a false profile for Paul, despite the safeguards. He placed Paul's name near the top of the list. Paul got the meds, and responded. You know what happened then.

ARTHUR

Thank you.

CYNTHIA

Why didn't you say this on the stand?

SHENEQUIA

I committed an ethical violation, and possibly got someone to commit a felony.

CYNTHIA

Why shouldn't I turn you in?

SHENEQUIA

I'm hoping you won't turn in someone who extended your father's life.

CYNTHIA

Be that as it may. You broke the rules.

SHENEQUIA

For the greater good.

CYNTHIA

One day in school I'd been sent to the principal's office. I stole a book from a girl who teased me and threw it on her foot. The whole class saw it. The principal sat me down, looked into my eyes and said, you broke the rules. You may not like them, but without them we'd all be dogs scrapping over a bone. Rules are the basis of civilization... I came out of that office believing in the rules. You decided they didn't apply. If I dismiss, I'm saying to all the rule-breakers, go ahead. Do whatever your evil little heart desires. Rules are for chumps. That kind of lawlessness is a cancer in our country. If I say yes, the cancer spreads. Simple as that. The greater good? The rules *are* the greater good.

ARTHUR

Desperation tactics.

CYNTHIA

You're supposed to stand beside me. What the fuck is your problem?

ARTHUR

I'm looking at it.

CYNTHIA

It's obvious this woman has got you by the balls.

ARTHUR

What you're tying yourself in knots over: is it really worth it? There's something working inside you, Cindy, something... not good.

CYNTHIA

I'm just getting warmed up... It's time for you to go.

SHENEQUIA

Paul told me a lot about you. He said deep down you had a good heart. You loved Artie. You protected him from bullies, no questions asked. He felt bad you two were at odds for so long. I believe everyone has a spirit, a flame that doesn't die out, even when the body dies. He saw good in you. I'm having a hard time doing that, but he'd want me to honor your flame.

CYNTHIA

What the hell does that mean?

ARTHUR

I think you know.

SHENEQUIA reaches into her purse and pulls out the music box.

SHENEQUIA

Paul gave this to me. He said you used to have it but it had been lost and only recently turned up. He's had it all this time... It plays a little tune. I'm sure you know it. I want to give it back to you. Play it. And think of him.

CYNTHIA stands, takes the toy. Winds it. It plays "You Are My Sunshine". She looks down at it, at SHENEQUIA, whom she regards with disgust. She thrusts the toy back into her hand.

CYNTHIA

You little shit-fake turd. You come to me at the last minute and try to clear, clear your name, rob me and my family blind, with this? How dare you? How dare you take a toy my father gave me when he was poor and without prospect. Something I listened to day

CYNTHIA (Cont'd)

and night in the dark times and the sad times and the argue times? You take something I cherish and wave it in my face and use it to score points with me? You haven't earned the right. You sit there and play the victim, and try to make me feel sorry, sorry for you because you're Black and oppressed? My decision stands! I won't give in to your Jesus pleadings and your pathetic attempts to blackmail my judgment all because your girl can read fancy books. I'm sorry she can't advance but I can't advance either! Look at my bills. Look at the jobs I've lost to you people. Where's *my* reparations? Where's *my* sympathy? I guess to get ahead in this world I need to puke up some sob story about my little pickaninny kid who reads books!

At the word "pickaninny" SHENEQUIA is out of her chair. The music box falls to the floor.

SHENEQUIA

WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY? WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY? YOU WANNA FIGHT? SAY ONE MORE THING AND YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO FIGHT ME!!

ARTHUR rushes in between them.

ARTHUR

Stop it!

The two women rush each other. He pushes them apart.

SHENEQUIA

YOU KEEP MY DAUGHTER'S NAME OUT YOUR MM— MOUTH!!

ARTHUR

SIT DOWN. NOW. BOTH OF YOU.

(to SHENEQUIA)

You need to work your program. Remember?

SHENEQUIA

You need to get your sister! She's had this coming a long time!

CYNTHIA

Kiss my ass! I don't care about your damn kids.

SHENEQUIA starts to remove her earrings and shoes. The women grapple for each other with ARTHUR between them.

SHENEQUIA

Oh, I'm about to whup your ass.

CYNTHIA

Try me!

ARTHUR

GODDAMNIT. Stop it now.

(to CYNTHIA)

What the fuck is wrong with you?

He holds them at arm's length with his body
in the middle.

CYNTHIA

She's robbing us! Get her out of here!

ARTHUR

Take it down!

CYNTHIA

She's an interloper, trying to run off with our... our treasure. Our legacy. Can't you see? Can't you stop her, coming at me over and over. She's trying to take over our family. Our Daddy is gone. He's in the ground, and he's cold, and dead, and nothing can bring him back. I need to protect him. I need to be there for him, like he was for me, like when we poor and hurting, and the bad things came in the night. When I couldn't see the break of day, he sat by my bed, and he kissed me, and he made everything all right. In the hospital, he was so, so frail and old, like the Devil was after him. And *she* came. She came in and said sweet things, she made him forget me, and she, she *seduced* him. Turned his head inside out. He was my Daddy, and our Daddy, and she took him away. She took him away! She stole him, she stole our name till we can't hold our heads up. All she wants is, is our money! Can't you see she needs to be stopped? Help me, Artie, please, just help me. Help me.

Spent, she sits down.

ARTHUR

It's okay, Sis. It's okay. I'm here. No one's going to hurt you. I'll protect you. We'll watch over Dad.

CYNTHIA

She'll hurt him. She'll hurt our daddy and nothing will be right any more... Why can't she just leave? Please? Just leave?

SHENEQUIA

Cynthia... in the program... when we meet... share our strength... we say a prayer. I'll teach it to you. Arthur... God...

ARTHUR

(catching on immediately)

God...

SHENEQUIA

Say it after us, Cynthia.

CYNTHIA

What good will that do?

ARTHUR

Just try.

SHENEQUIA

God...

CYNTHIA

God...

SHENEQUIA

Grant me...

ARTHUR

Grant me...

CYNTHIA

Grant me.

SHENEQUIA and ARTHUR

The serenity...

CYNTHIA

What...?

SHENEQUIA

The sweet serenity...

ARTHUR

To accept...

CYNTHIA
(laughs)

To accept...

SHENEQUIA and ARTHUR

To accept the things.

CYNTHIA

The things.

SHENEQUIA
I cannot change.

ARTHUR
We cannot change.

CYNTHIA
Not my idea.

SHENEQUIA and ARTHUR

The courage...

CYNTHIA
Courage?

ARTHUR

Yes, courage.

SHENEQUIA and ARTHUR
To change the things we can. And the wisdom...

CYNTHIA
(laughs)

Wisdom.

SHENEQUIA

Wisdom.

ARTHUR

To know...

SHENEQUIA and ARTHUR

To know the difference.

SHENEQUIA
Amen.

ARTHUR
Just for today.

The two of them are crying by now.
ARTHUR kneels down to her and holds her.

ARTHUR

Little sister.

CYNTHIA pulls herself up, aided by her brother. SHENEQUIA wipes her tears.

SHENEQUIA

Cynthia... No one can replace your daddy. And no one can take away all you did for him... No matter what you decide... I'll tell you everything he told me. Every word, every gesture, every silly joke. I'll do my best to make him... alive again for you. He loved you so much... This court thing has us all tied in knots. I can try to be family for you, but if that's not okay, I'll still be here. As a friend who also loved him.

CYNTHIA

I'm having a hard time believing that...

SHENEQUIA

I know. But he's gone. And the world is mighty cold.

ARTHUR

Just listen to her.

SHENEQUIA

I gave him his life back.

CYNTHIA

This is all so... mixed up. Can we just... move past...?

ARTHUR

Cindy, for once, listen. Dad treated his Black students and white students all the same. Doesn't that make a difference?

CYNTHIA

Everybody wants a piece of the pie.

ARTHUR

For Christ's sake. Tell you what. When we get the money, I'll write you a check. Get you up to one half.

SHENEQUIA

(to ARTHUR)

I fight my own battles.

ARTHUR

All right. Sorry... I see your point. Shenequia is not family. But she's not completely outside it, either... A few months ago, I was this close to relapse. But she intervened. Showed me some very tough love. That night, I stayed clean.

CYNTHIA

I thought—

ARTHUR

Yes, I got high again. But it wasn't for her not trying.

CYNTHIA

I didn't know—

ARTHUR

She gave me back to you. She gave Dad back to *us*. If that isn't family, what is?

SHENEQUIA

It says in the Good Book... what profiteth a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul.

ARTHUR

Yes.

SHENEQUIA

Look in your soul, dear.

CYNTHIA

I'll say this. You've got guts. You've taken everything I've thrown at you and given it back. With interest.

ARTHUR

How long can you do this?

CYNTHIA gets up, slowly. Picks up PAUL's picture.

CYNTHIA

Daddy. How can I be your best little girl?

She looks around. SHENEQUIA looks around, picks up the music box. It still plays. She blesses it, hands it again to CYNTHIA.

You've always been his best little girl.

SHENEQUIA

She takes it, listens, hums along. Thinks.

Your kids better study their asses off.

CYNTHIA

ARTHUR begins to smile.

They will.

SHENEQUIA

Make sure they say their ma'ams and sirs.

CYNTHIA

They already do.

SHENEQUIA

See to it... One third is still a lot...

CYNTHIA

FADE TO BLACK

END OF PLAY