

In the Book Of: Ruth Retranslated

John Walch

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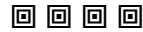
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“Kindness builds the world.”

—David, Psalm 89:3

“A new broom sweeps clean.”

—Proverbs



CHARACTERS:

LIEUTENANT NAOMI WATKINS – early 30’s going on 80, African-American

ANISAH – Afghan translator, 20’s

GAIL – Naomi’s sister-in-law, Eddie’s sister, 40’s, white

BO SR. – a former contractor, Gail’s husband, 40’s, white

BO – Gail and Bo’s son, 20’s, white

EDDIE – Naomi’s husband and Gail’s brother, a soldier, mid 30’s, white

Additional Roles (double as necessary):

GUESTS

VOICES #1, #2

SOLDIERS #1, #2, #3

MCDONALD’S SPEAKER

ANCHORS #1, #2, #3

CALLERS #1, #2

HOST/JESSE – a local talk radio host

SENATOR / CONGRESSMAN / GOVERNOR

CUSTOMER

A NOTE ON THE CHORUS:

The chorus is comprised of all members of the cast. The passages marked CHORUS have individual character names assigned to them, but until the last choral passage at the end of the play, the performers should not play the choral passages in character.

Place:

- A military base in Afghanistan.
- Broxton, Mississippi—a fictional city, often referred to as Jackson’s “poorer cousin.” Population: 135,568; Elevation: 259 feet.

Time:

When “people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.” (Judges 17:6)

EDDIE

And that you did. As most of you know, me and Naomi start a new tour soon, and so we're grateful to those who came from so far on such short notice. For those new to the party, yes it's fairly common for a couple to deploy together. We'll be stationed in different camps, but at least we will be on the same soil. And yes, she sailed through OCS, so she's no longer an enlisted stiff, and oh yeah, you bet she makes me call her, sir.

(Laughter from the GUESTS.)

NAOMI

That is so untrue!

...Okay, okay, it's *kind of* true.

GAIL

Good for you, Naomi! Remind these boys who's really in charge!

EDDIE

Seriously. Help me raise a glass to my bride, Naomi, the love of my life. And, I, um, I wrote this little poem...

(An "aww" from the GUESTS. EDDIE reads a poem, overtly earnest:)

Naomi. We are young

Heartache to heartache we stand

No promises, no demands

Love is a battlefield.

NAOMI

Pat Benatar at our wedding? You are so gonna get it! And we are not that young!

EDDIE

Sorry, honey, but when two soldiers get married, *Love is a Battlefield* is just gonna happen. So, I thought, let's make it ours. Set it to our own beat. Take control of our destiny. Guys, help me out here.

(A surprisingly lyrical version of the song begins. Maybe a couple of acoustic guitars, or a guitar and a fiddle. Nothing lush: spare, simple. No lyrics.)

Naomi, I love you, please, may I have this dance?

(The two begin to slow dance, images of them dancing appear again, echoing and amplifying the scene in the room. As the song continues, the sound distorts and static from an Army field radio begins to bleed through. The sound of sniper fire, confusion, as VOICES stab through the static:)

VOICES #1, #2

1: Man down!

2: We have an expectant!

1: MAN DOWN! MAN DOWN!

(More static, confusion, gunfire, all building and drowning out the song. The CHORUS is gone, EDDIE exits, leaving NAOMI alone, holding nothing.)

NAOMI

He's not dead.

Yes, he is.

No, he's not.

He's not, he's not, he's not!

(...)

Yes, he is.

(ANISAH enters, disrupting the memory, and startling NAOMI.)

ANISAH

Lieutenant?

NAOMI

—Anisah. (—)

ANISAH

I apologize, Lieutenant, you sent for me.

NAOMI

Yes. I've...

ANISAH

Lieutenant, you are not well?

NAOMI

I got three boys killed.

ANISAH

Yes, terrible tragedy, but eh, thankfully, you were not wounded.

NAOMI

Not on the outside, but apparently, I'm not fit enough to serve— I'm being discharged, "honorably."

ANISAH

Translate, please.

NAOMI

Patting me on the head with one hand, pushing me out with the other. You too. Your service is no longer required.

ANISAH

Lieutenant—have I not translated well?

NAOMI

You have. It's just— I'm being sent home.

ANISAH

You say like you do not want this.

NAOMI

It's not a matter of what I want, it's a matter of being effective and ever since I lost Eddie. . . well, just ask those three boys how effective I've been. My instincts are jammed, my head elsewhere.

ANISAH

Your head is here; your heart is elsewhere. I know this feeling.

NAOMI

I know. Malik was a good man, good translator.

ANISAH

Yes. (. . .) They assign me somewhere new?

NAOMI

No. They're terminating your contract. Whole division is being moved. Tactical re-org—

ANISAH

I go where they need me.

NAOMI

No, Anisah. No! They've terminated your contract. I need your credentials—your badge, ID.

ANISAH

No, I cannot, where will I go?

NAOMI

I'm going home; you go home.

ANISAH

Home?

NAOMI

You know what home is.

ANISAH

I know I will die if I go home. They will kill me like they did Malik. Slaughter me in my sleep like they did his mother and father. This is where you want to send me?

NAOMI

Go to your parents.

ANISAH

My parents are afraid and will not have me back. My brother says this is what happens when you permit a love marriage, and I have brought shame on our family. You are Military Police, you know what they will do to me and you say: *go home*. Is this why you've come here?

NAOMI

I'm here to serve my country, to help.

ANISAH

Then help me! Do not send me home. Help me, please. You have been kind to me, bringing me on after what happened to Malik. Keeping me safe. And I feel, yes, I have helped you, eh, after Edward. The nights we sat together and prayed.

NAOMI

I pretended to pray.

ANISAH

I also pretended.

NAOMI

No, you were praying.

ANISAH

How can I pray when inside I am so full of this— this— this— I don't know what this is, so, we pretended together, grateful for the silence, for not being asked: "how do you feel?" But you knew this.

NAOMI

Maybe, I guess, on some level.

ANISAH

Help me, Lieutenant, Naomi, please.

NAOMI

I don't know what you think I can do.

ANISAH

Take me with you, to your home.

NAOMI

What?

ANISAH

Where you go, I will go. Where you live, I will live.

NAOMI

In Mississippi?

ANISAH

Yes! Mississippi.

NAOMI

That's crazy.

ANISAH

M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I. Malik, he taught me. I like very much the sound: Mississippi.

NAOMI

I ship out of Kabul. I could arrange for your transport there.

ANISAH

I am a woman, a widow, a woman alone, unprotected, not with family, not with child even. No, this is not good.

NAOMI

I can help you get a job, I know someone at the Embassy.

ANISAH

Again, working for Westerners, diplomats. This is what put me here.

NAOMI

I can't take you to Mississippi! You don't have a visa.

ANISAH

My husband applied for special visa for translator, we are on a waiting list

NAOMI

You're husband is dead.

ANISAH

Yes, I know this.

NAOMI

But do they?

ANISAH

Naomi, please, we have lost much together.

NAOMI

I can get you to Kabul; I can't promise anything after that.

ANISAH

Can you promise to try? (. . .)

NAOMI

If somehow I got you there, be prepared— some people will hate you.

ANISAH

No, I think not in a place as happy sounding as Mississippi.

NAOMI

It can be small-minded, my home. You know: narrow, intolerant, ass-holish.

ANISAH

Oh! Asshole, yes. My home too, has these.

NAOMI

Fair enough. So, I need those credentials.

ANISAH

You promise to try?

NAOMI

I'll do what I can.

(ANISAH gives her the badge and ID card. Lights shift, isolating NAOMI.)

1.2: Direct Re-dress

Military drums. THREE SOLDIERS appear and line up behind NAOMI.

SOLDIER #1
Lieutenant Watkins.

SOLDIER #2
Lieutenant Watkins.

SOLDIER #3
Lieutenant Watkins.

(NAOMI slowly removes her uniform, item by item. As she does so, the SOLDIERS step forward, retrieve the item, and neatly fold it.

Cap. Jacket. Name-tapes and rank. Belt. Boots. Pants.

NAOMI stands at attention in t-shirt and boxers. One of the SOLDIERS offers NAOMI her uniform back, in a neatly folded bundle. NAOMI removes her dog-tags and throws them to the ground. The SOLDIERS put the bundle at her feet, salute, and exit.

DRUMS OUT. Silence. ANISAH enters carrying a change of civilian clothes. She picks up the dog-tags, holds them out to NAOMI, who refuses to take them back. ANISAH helps NAOMI dress. This is difficult and takes several minutes. As this happens, GAIL appears. She holds a broom.)

GAIL

So there I am, at the McDonalds. The McDonalds mind you, not the Taco Bell, the McDonalds, just trying to order. And no, I'm not doing the drive-thru, hate the drive-thru—whole other story—but leave it at: I'm at the counter trying to order *in person* what I order every Wednesday: Quarter Pounder (no cheese, double pickles), fries, and a large Dr. Pepper with extra-ice. But this isn't just any Wednesday. This is Wednesday after finding out I lost my baby brother, Eddie, over in Afghanistan. And I'm raw. But you do like you do, you got to go about your life. I'm not going to let some jihad take my life too. So I'm at McDonalds just trying to order: Quarter Pounder (no cheese, double pickles), fries, and a large Dr. Pepper with extra-ice. And the woman behind the counter is looking at me with this grin. She doesn't understand me, what I'm saying. But there she is grinning at me, not saying anything, just grinning.

I stop, compose myself, and say real politely: "Is there a problem?" To that, she giggles. Tiny squeak. Like a puppy with a little chew toy. *Squeak*. Okay, I'm starting to lose my temper. Mind you, I came in raw, now I'm hungry, my blood sugar is dropping like a sinner at church, and I am getting nowhere with this giggling girl.

GAIL (*cont'd*)

So I say: “May I see your manager?” To this, she turns around, and starts speaking Mexican to the others in the back. Talking real fast saying something I sure as heck don’t understand. But apparently, it’s funny, cause now they all start giggling, laughing, keeping their caps pulled low, so I don’t see who they are, but they are definitely laughing at me. At the way I look, at the way I talk, at what I order—I don’t have the foggiest *what*, but I know they’re laughing at me.

Now I am yelling, screaming:

WHAT THE HELL IS SO FUNNY?

I GREW UP IN BROXTON, THIS IS MY TOWN!

PEOPLE LIKE YOU ARE RUINING MY HOME!

RUINING OUR ECONOMY! RUINING THIS COUNTRY!

RUINING MY MCDONALDS!

GIVE ME A BROOM AND I’LL SWEEP ALL YOU ILLEGAL MEXICANS AND MUSLIM INVADERS OUT!

I’m not sure when I got up on the counter. And me kicking the napkin dispenser across the room really was an accident—the reports of me throwing it are exaggerations. No charges were pressed, and it’s no wonder, cause boy did I see Joses hauling butt out the back door. Half of them are illegals, no doubt. Should of pinned a medal on me.

And when I got done saying my say, darn it if I didn’t hear applause behind me. Sure, a couple babies were crying their heads off too, but there it was: applause. Slow at first, shy like, but little by little, louder and louder, my fellow Americans, my fellow Broxtonites, they feel like me. Frustrated. Tired of waking up and not recognizing their home anymore. Tired of feeling like foreigners in their own town.

And I knew right then and there—standing on that counter in McDonalds on that particular Wednesday—that it was my time to stand up. All my life I’ve been living in Broxton, watching the town I love die. Thinking I’m just “Bo The Contractor’s Wife.”

My husband Bo *was* a contractor, and I *was* his bookkeeper.

(A light rises on BO. SR. somewhere in the audience. He waves sheepishly.)

We employed legal American tradesmen, all proud members of IUPAT Local 1321. But times being what times are, business fell off, other contractors started using more day-laborers, we got behind on our debt. Now the man is managing the damn Super Hero’s Submarine Sandwich Shop, worrying about when the regional weasel’s going to ambush him next, surprise inspect to make sure that there’s no more than two ounces of baloney on an American Cold-Cut Classic. I’m not making this up, this kid from corporate took out a scale and everything, wrote up a report, kept my Bo from getting his 1.1% raise. Two ounces of baloney on an American Cold Cut Classic. This is what we’ve been reduced to.

And I bore witness to it all. Year after year, I watched Broxton fall into disrepair, watched the slices of baloney get thinner and thinner, all along thinking: “what can I do? I can’t clean up the mess down at city hall.” But you know what? I am a woman from the South.

GAIL (*cont'd*)

And I might not be a career politician like the sitting Mayor, and I might have what my opponent on the left calls a “shocking lack of sensitivity.” Sure, that all may be true, but I am a woman from the South, and I know how to clean house. I know what this town needs. We’ll start with local ordinances that ban businesses from hiring illegals, bar landlords from renting to them, and make it a crime to transport them in the city limits.

Give me a broom and give me your signature to get on the ballot, and I will clean house!

(Lights shift.)

1.3: Signs of Arrival

The front porch of NAOMI's home. It's modest, somewhat unkempt, but clear someone has tried to do a quick freshening up: there's a couple brazen flowering plants picked up from Home Depot with the barcodes still on them, a new bench, or furniture, etc.

BO and BO SR. hang a banner that says Welcome Home! On the banner is a picture of a stork delivering a bassinet.

BO SR.

Got your room ready. (. . .) Mom had taken it over as her campaign office, but I set her up in the basement, and got your bed back in there. (. . .) Kind of funny, only comforter we could find to fit the twin was that Ole Miss blanket. Remember that? How you used to love Ole Miss football. (. . .) Anyway, it's all ready, your room.

BO

Hand me an eye-hook.

(. . .)

BO SR.

You mow out back like your mom asked?

BO

Weeds thigh high. Took all morning.

BO SR.

You supposed to be taking care of this place, Bo, looking after it for your Aunt Naomi.

BO

Last thing I want to do when I get home is mow more grass. Or weed the walk, or trim the hedges. Besides, I like the wild look.

BO SR.

Bo, you're a landscaper, need to keep a decent yard, take some pride in your work.

BO

I got pride, Pop, but I'm whipped. Just got this job up on Obed's Hill—

BO SR.

One of the grand old houses?

BO

Yeah, couple guys from Atlanta moved down, turning it into a fancy B&B for wedding receptions and such. I'm re-doing the entire grounds.

BO SR.

Two guys?

BO

Give your eyebrows a rest, Pop, you know there's gay folks in Broxton. And who cares? They're good clients, and have already booked weddings for the fall, so I'm way behind.

BO SR.

Hire some help.

BO

Funny, Pop: *hire some help*. I had a tight crew till Mom started waving that broom of hers around. Now they run when I pull my truck up.

BO SR.

Not your mother's fault if you are hiring illegals.

BO

They're hard-working, just trying to make a go of it.

BO SR.

They're day laborers, hanging out behind the Waffle House.

BO

They're gleaners, Pop, picking up jobs that my friends sure as hell don't want.

BO SR.

Gleaners? More like parasites on our economy, ruined my business.

BO

"Do not gather the fallen grapes from your vineyard; leave them for the needy and for the stranger to glean." The *stranger*, Pop. This has been going on forever.

BO SR.

Haven't heard you quote Bible for some time.

BO

(...)

BO SR.

How about Charlie, Jasper? They could sure use the work.

BO

Charlie always promises to come, but never shows, and Jasper just comes and smokes out. Lies there doing “snow angels” in the pea-gravel. (. . .) You know, I’m putting in an irrigation system that hooks up to the rain barrels, could sure use a skilled hand like yours, Pop.

BO SR.

You’re good with your hands, I taught you well.

BO

Pop, come work with me.

BO SR.

You offering health and dental?

BO

I’m offering to get you out of Super Hero’s—

BO SR.

I was the one building a business, Bo! Sign was supposed to read: Portman and Sons. Not Portman and Father.

BO

That’s just pride, Pop.

BO SR.

Damn right it is, sides, what do I know about zeroscaping?

BO

Xeriscaping, Pop. You know what it is.

BO SR.

Far as I can tell you just pour a bunch of damn rocks in someone’s front yard.

BO

It’s sustainable landscaping—

BO SR.

Once you dolled up the gardens up on Obed’s Hill, is it a sustainable business for the rest of us down slope?

BO

Everybody likes native plants, water reduction—

BO SR.

We don’t got a water problem, Bo! This is Mississippi, not Arizona.

BO
 (...)

BO SR.
 Now, come on, your mom wants this all done before the camera crew shows up.

BO
 Camera crew? At Naomi's party?

BO SR.
 Mom's in the public eye, where she goes, the camera follows.

BO
 You think what she's doing is right?

BO SR.
 Been a dark couple years, and what she's doing is making her happy, so that makes it all right by me.

BO
 But, Pop, immigration—

BO SR.
 Bo, I know you got your college thoughts and all on this, but fact is, something is really broken here, and I trust your mom more than anyone to fix what's broke.

(GAIL enters with her signature broom.)

GAIL
 Bo, what the heck is that?

BO SR.
 Banner, like you told me to get.

GAIL
 Why do I trust you with things?

BO SR.
 I went to four stores.

GAIL
 Four stores, Jesus, Bo, she fought in a war. Now here she is coming home, and we're greeting her with a goofy stork? Poor thing's going to be lost enough already—coming home to an empty house, childless—don't need to mock her with a goofball stork.

BO SR.

I bought a flag, thought we could paste it over the stork.

GAIL

Paste? On the flag? American flag is supposed to move, Bo. Flap in the wind: proud, free—that's its nature. Bosie, your side's sagging, pull it tighter.

BO

It's all right.

GAIL

It is not all right. Least we can do is put the thing up right. No point in adding sloppy execution to piss-poor design choices.

BO SR. (*to BO*)

We've been watching a lot of home improvement programs.

GAIL

I like the DIY mindset. Okay that's good. I'll figure out what about that stork. Spoke with Naomi, she's on the road over from Georgia, should be here right on schedule.

BO SR.

How's she sound?

GAIL

Unhinged. One second she's quiet—next real loud. Army doc told me to expect anything, but still it gave me the chills. Naomi's always been so solid.

BO

Why she's coming back here?

GAIL

It's her home, Bo.

BO

Sort of, more Eddie's home really, why doesn't she move closer to family?

GAIL

Military was her family. Now, we're all she's got, and we're getting her back on her feet.

BO SR.

There *were* them cousins up in Chicago, came all the way down for the wedding. Nice folks.

BO

Right, so why doesn't she move to Chicago?

GAIL

Chicago, what's Naomi know about Chicago?

BO

I just don't get why she would want to come back here.

GAIL

Of all people, I think you—Bo Travis Portman—would understand why someone would want to be close to home after losing someone they loved.

(GAIL's walkie-talkie squawks. She listens, then into walkie-talkie)

Copy that, John. Channel 5 in 45. We'll be ready, but we got a situation here. I need you to pop by Party City...

(GAIL exits.)

BO SR.

Your mom's "lack of sensitivity" is a well reported fact, but she means well.

BO

I know it. (. . .)

BO SR

Well, I got about 200 yards of subs that need cutting, then toothpicks. Could use a hand.

BO

Sure, but if the evening news is really coming, I should pull these dandelions out front.

(BO moves to the yard, starts pulling dandelions. He pulls one, but he snaps the taproot and only gets the flower.)

Dang it.

BO SR.

You sure you're all right, son?

BO

Fine, just trying to get the root.

(He works on a second, but again snaps the root.)

Pointless if you don't.

BO SR.

Wouldn't say pointless, just got to keep trying.

BO

I am trying, Pop.

(He tries a third, easing it out of the ground, working with gentle intensity.)

BO SR. (*watching him work*)

I know it, and I know you take pride in your work. So if xeriscaping makes you happy, you keep on xeriscaping.

BO

Not happy, but it gives me something to focus on.

(This time BO gets the entire taproot. The taproot is a taproot, but appears to BO as a knotted, gnarled Ole Miss blanket.)

BO SR.

There you go, third time's the charm. Come help me when you're done.

BO (*inspecting the taproot*)

Hey Pop?

BO SR.

Son?

BO

(...) That was Tim's, the Ole Miss blanket. Not mine, that was Tim's.

BO SR.

Good God, my memory's sprung some leaks. I'll swing into Walmart and pick-up a new one on the way home. You don't need to be sleeping in Tim's old blanket.

BO

I don't mind.

BO SR.

All right then. Come find me when you're ready.

(BO SR. exits. BO sits looking at the taproot.)

BO

Sorry, Tim. I'm so sorry. So, so sorry.

(Lights shift.)

1.4: In the Cracks

ANISAH and NAOMI in a car at a drive-thru. ANISAH stares out the window.

NAOMI

Anisah, stop staring and tell me what you want. If I know Gail she'll have a spread laid out, but I hate eating in front of strangers. Anisah, stop.

ANISAH

I am sorry, I cannot understand what they are doing.

NAOMI

They're making out, kissing.

ANISAH

Yes, I know kissing, I was a married woman...But this is, eh like in the movies, Americans they are kissing on the street, in the rain, in the shop, but I thought it was just movie, but no, here they are kissing in the parking place.

NAOMI

McDonalds's parking lot is like the town square. Kids park, throw an old blanket in the back of their trucks, and hang out.

ANISAH

And kiss, in front of everyone?

NAOMI

Public Display of Affection: PDA.

ANISAH

There is a name for this type of kissing?

NAOMI

And if you come back tonight, they'll be doing a lot more then kissing.

ANISAH

Outside? This is, eh curious, strange to me, this public show of love, PDA.

NAOMI

Love is a strange thing.

ANISAH

No, with Malik it was not strange, it was familiar. It was like this with you and Edward?

NAOMI

Look, I don't want to talk about Eddie, but every 50 miles you try and sneak something in about him. Stop trying to bring him up.

ANISAH

It is fitting to remember the people we have lost, no?

NAOMI

No. You don't like PDA, I don't like PDG.

ANISAH

PDG?

NAOMI

Public Display of Grief. Don't cross me on this, let it go.

(Static, the pop of a speaker, then an amplified voice.)

SPEAKER

Welcome to McDonalds, how may I help you?

NAOMI

Anisah, what do you— Where are you going? Anisah!

ANISAH *(gets out of car)*

I want some air.

NAOMI

Tell me what you want first!

ANISAH

First, I want air!

SPEAKER

Welcome to McDonalds, how may I help you?

NAOMI

Hold on! Anisah!?

SPEAKER

Can I take your order, please?

NAOMI

I said hold on! Anisah!

(Static, mortar fire, the voice on the speaker morphs into something darker.)

SPEAKER

Please pull out of line.

NAOMI

You're out of line, I said hold on, so hold on!

(Heavier mortar fire. Static.)

SPEAKER

Request to pull back. It's an ambush. Request to pull back! An ambush.

NAOMI

I said hold on, hold your position, Sergeant!

SPEAKER

Man down! Man down! Dammit, Lieutenant. It's an ambush! Request to pull back, Lieutenant! Lieutenant!? What do you want us to do? LIEUTENANT?!

*(More explosions mix with static and then: Clear. Breath.
ANISAH returns with a couple of dandelions.)*

ANISAH

Naomi, are you feeling okay?

NAOMI

Don't! (—) Don't leave me like that again.

ANISAH

(. . .) I picked these yellow flowers for you.

NAOMI

They're dandelions, weeds.

ANISAH

I think they are very pretty. And they were growing right there, in the cracks in the walk in the McDonalds in Mississippi.

SPEAKER

Welcome to McDonalds, how may I help you? Ma'am, can I take your order?

ANISAH

Are you wanting to order, the clown is asking?

NAOMI

The thought of eating right now makes me want to puke.

ANISAH

You are not well, you were hungry.

NAOMI

And now I'm not. You want something?

ANISAH (*into speaker*)

Eh, yes, the apple-pie, please.

NAOMI

Apple-pie? At McDonalds?

ANISAH

McDonalds, apple-pie. This is America.

NAOMI

McDonalds's apple-pie is not the real America. Real American apple-pie is like my mother used to make, baked in a hot kitchen, cooled on the back window-sill.

ANISAH

Did she leave eh, recipe? You can bake for me!

NAOMI

No, she got sick before I learned. So, I don't cook.

ANISAH (*to speaker*)

Then, one apple-pie, please, thank you.

NAOMI

You serious?

ANISAH

I have come all this way. I am serious about trying.

SPEAKER

Apple pie's on sale: buy one, get the second half off. Would you like to add to your order?

ANISAH

Naomi, my grandmother used to say: "the memory of something sweet is better than no memory at all."

NAOMI

I'm good.

SPEAKER

Okay, one Baked Apple Pie, please pull to the second window.

(Naomi drives forward, always forward. CHORUS members appear. Anisah is finishing her pie.)

CHORUS

BO: So the two women went on...
 EDDIE: Naomi returning to her home, with Anisah, her translator. In silence, they went on. . .
 BO SR: And on . . .
 BO: Anisah noticing the planters in the fields, the richness of the earth and wondering...
 EDDIE: "What must Naomi's life with Eddie been like here....before?"
 BO SR. But not daring to ask. Instead she finished her pie, and sighed.

ANISAH

(Sighs.)

NAOMI

How was it? The pie?

ANISAH

Not so good, sticky sweet, even too sweet for me.

NAOMI

Bunch of chemicals.

ANISAH

Not like your mothers?

NAOMI

Not in the least.

ANISAH

How old was she (. . .) When you lost her?

NAOMI

Anisah.

ANISAH

Right. No PDG.

(Pause. Naomi drives forward, always forward.)

ANISAH

(Sings lullaby "[Mazar \(Some-Day My Boy\)](#)" in Dari.)

NAOMI

What's that?

ANISAH

Something my mother would sing when I cried.

NAOMI

A lullaby... do you know it in English?

ANISAH

Yes, Malik, we were trying to translate.

NAOMI

Can you sing it?

ANISAH

It will not fit, eh the sound, the words we had to change, and still.

NAOMI

Try, for me?

ANISAH (*sings in English, broken at first*)

SOME DAY MY BOY WILL GROW UP BIG AND STRONG
 LIKE THE FLOWERS BLOOM IN EARLY DAYS OF JUNE
 SPRING IS COMING SOON, SPRING IS COMING SOON
 SOME DAY MY BOY...
 WILL PROTECT OUR LAND
 LIKE THE ROARING LION
 LITTLE BOY OF MINE
 WILL GUARD THE BORDERLINE
 SOME DAY MY BOY...

(Naomi fights back tears as she drives on in silence. Lights shift.)

1.5: The Snap Heard Around Broxton

A light rises on the Welcome Home banner. A silhouette of a saluting soldier, clearly cut and pasted on, now covers the stork. Silence. And then...the Chorus enters.

CHORUS

BO: An on they went until they reached Broxton
 BO SR: When they arrived, the town's citizens were unsettled because of them.
 EDDIE: Some whispered, gasped:
(Overlapping at /.)
 BO: Is this / really Naomi?
 BO SR: Is this / really Naomi?
 EDDIE: Is this really Naomi?

(Lights snap up on NAOMI and GAIL locked in an intense conversation. GAIL holds her broom.)

NAOMI

Gail, what is all this!?

GAIL

Just calm down, and tell me who that woman is?

NAOMI

Not until you tell me what the hell's going on? Why's the evening news here? You said you were inviting "a handful of people," not a mob.

GAIL

Wanted to welcome you home special, give you a kind of "move that bus" moment. Let you know this whole town is here for my sister, Lieutenant Naomi Watkins.

NAOMI

Don't call me "Lieutenant."

GAIL

You served in the armed forces, pulled yourself up through the ranks, fought multiple tours. You have earned the respect and honor of being called: Lieutenant Naomi—

NAOMI

They kicked me out—

GAIL

You were honorably discharged—

I went a soldier, a wife, I come home
 with nothing. So don't call me Lieutenant—

GAIL
Naomi—

NAOMI
Or Naomi, call me by my middle name, call me Kara.

GAIL
Naomi—

NAOMI
KARA!

GAIL
Naomi, I know you have been dealt a blow—and Lord knows, I know how dark it can be—
but you are not alone. I am here for you, Naomi, all these people are here for you—

NAOMI
Who are all these people?!

GAIL
Big-hearted Americans—

NAOMI
But why are they in my front-yard?

GAIL
I'm the one who should be asking: who is that woman and why's she in Eddie's front-yard?

NAOMI
She's a friend.

GAIL
A friend?

NAOMI
My Afghan translator—

GAIL
You studying the Koran now?

NAOMI
She was in danger, needed a new home—

GAIL
Wait, wait, she's going to live with you, in *Eddie's* house?

NAOMI

It's my house now, and she was kind to me after Eddie died.

GAIL

They all are, after her cousin or who have you slit Eddie's throat—

NAOMI

You don't got a clue what you're talking about, so SHUT-UP.

GAIL

He was my baby brother! I changed his diapers, and he wouldn't want the enemy living in his home.

NAOMI

The Afghan people aren't the enemy. She worked for us, her life was in danger, so I arranged to bring her state side.

GAIL

And all I want to know is how you arranged that?

NAOMI

She was my translator—

GAIL

Last I checked, it's real hard for a scarf-wearing Muslim to hop on a US Army transport—

NAOMI

It's her *hijab*, she chooses to— has the right to wear whatever she wants.

GAIL

And I have the right to wonder what's underneath it.

NAOMI

Gail, what's happened to you?

GAIL

What's happened to *me*, Lieutenant-Naomi-Kara-whatever-the-heck-your-name-is, what has happened to *me*?

NAOMI

You need to leave.

GAIL

Stuff her in a duffel bag or something?

NAOMI

I said LEAVE!

GAIL

I'm not leaving until I see her papers.

NAOMI

You're not seeing her papers, NOW GO!

GAIL

What am I to tell all these good Americans who turned out to welcome you home?

NAOMI

You invited them, that's on you.

GAIL (*points her broom at ANISAH*)

It sure is, cause you ambushed me with that woman—

NAOMI

Ambushed you? Are you mocking me?! Ambushed!? AMBUSH!?

(NAOMI grabs GAIL's broom and snaps it. SNAP! They freeze as lights fall on them, and sound rises on various clips from the evening local news programs. VOICES only.)

ANCHOR ONE (V.O.)

Broom-toting, third party, Mayoral Candidate Gail Portman made news again when a surprise guest from Afghanistan appeared at her sister-in-law's Welcome Home party—

ANCHOR TWO (V.O.)

Combative candidate Gail Portman's views on immigration got personal when—

ANCHOR THREE (V.O.)

—Portman bristled at the refugee and demanded to see the woman's visa—

ANCHORS AWAY (ALL V.O.)

—Then the Lieutenant —the soldier —the enraged war hero —grabbed the broom —wrestled the broom —smacked the broom out of the Candidate's hand —and as one spectator describes —“that soldier lady snapped that broom over her knee like a toothpick” —as an eyewitness on the scene reported —“she snapped it like a chicken's neck” —as the Candidate herself put it afterwards:

GAIL (*from darkness*)

It was the snap heard around Broxton.

(Lights remain only on the broken broom.)

END OF ACT ONE.

ACT TWO**2.1: Darkness**

Darkness. Dim lights up on NAOMI and BO. Split scene NAOMI wears a nightgown, BO is wrapped in an Ole Miss blanket. NAOMI screams. BO is quiet, but wide-awake, intensely examining the Ole Miss blanket. ANISAH and GAIL are with them, offering comfort. GAIL tries to take the blanket from BO, he holds it tight.

<p>ANISAH</p> <p>Naomi...</p> <p>I am here.</p> <p>Shh. Peace. Go back to sleep.</p> <p><i>(ANISAH sings the lullaby in Dari.)</i></p>	<p>GAIL</p> <p>It's okay, Bosie....</p> <p>Mom is here.</p> <p>I got you, Bosie,</p> <p>I got you....</p> <p><i>(GAIL sings a lullaby)</i></p> <p>HUSHABYE, DON'T YOU CRY GO TO SLEEP, MY BOY BOSIE WHEN YOU WAKE, YOU SHALL HAVE ALL THE PRETTY LITTLE HORSES</p> <p>DAPPLES AND GREYS, PINTOS AND BAYS, ALL THE PRETTY LITTLE HORSES</p> <p>HUSHABYE, DON'T YOU CRY GO TO SLEEP, MY BOY BOSIE</p>
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(Lights fade as the two women continue singing.)

2.2: Getting a Handle On It

Monday morning. Lights up on BO SR. and GAIL at their kitchen table. Coffee is brewing. BO SR. is in his Super Hero's uniform taking some pills, while GAIL works on a laptop. A stack of newspapers sits next to her.

BO SR.

I wish you wouldn't bring that laptop to the kitchen table. It's out of place, like a, oh, heck I don't know, like a plunger on a windshield.

GAIL

You wake up on the poetic side of the bed this morning, Bo-Bo?

BO SR.

Guess I did.

GAIL

That's good, sugar. Maybe you should sign-up for another extension course at the college.

BO SR.

That was serving a purpose, get my feelings straightened out.

GAIL

Poems don't need a purpose—like a dog, they just are.

BO SR.

Bo gone already?

GAIL

Just missed him.

BO SR.

Good sign, he's out early. Must have slept some last night.

GAIL

Not a wink, Bo, what were you thinking letting him sleep in Tim's old blanket?

BO SR.

Clearly, I wasn't.

GAIL

I tried to throw it out, but he wouldn't have it, stuffed it in his bag and took it with him.

BO. SR.

I really thought he was clear of all this by now.

GAIL

Me too, sweets, but we got to stay on our toes, keep our eyes on him. Ok?

BO SR.

Yeah.

GAIL

Ok. Now, what's the rule when I'm checking the boards.

BO SR.

"Steer clear when she's in the Blog-o-sphere."

GAIL

All right, then. You have a good day at work, sugar.

(Split scene: lights rise on NAOMI and ANISAH on the front porch, taking down the banner. For the banner's next trick, someone has spray-painted over the words WELCOME HOME, turning the C into a G and taking a few other editorial liberties. The banner now reads: ~~WELCOME~~ HOME DYKES!)

ANISAH

What is, eh dykes?

NAOMI

Someone trying to scare us.

ANISAH

Oh, it is like when you get afraid? "Yikes!" GO HOME YIKES!

NAOMI

No, but it's got something to do with fear.

ANISAH

What then? I am trying to learn the, eh idioms, slang.

*(*** Emphasis shift to the kitchen.)*

BO SR.

They saying anything about Naomi?

GAIL

You going to be late for work.

BO SR.

I got to take my pills.

GAIL

Swallow them all at once.

BO SR.

Makes my stomach sour, and so does squabbling with Naomi. Weekend's long enough for you both to cool off, why don't you talk to her?

GAIL

I want to, Bo, you know I do, I just don't know what to say, it's all so confusing.

BO SR.

Say what's in your heart—

GAIL

I was just trying to throw her a party, welcome her back home, letting her know I'm here for her. Last time I seen her was Eddie's funeral and that was no picnic. But we bonded, got close. When she left to rejoin her unit, she wrote me that card. It's over on the fridge, grab it.

*(BO SR. exits to refrigerator; * * * emphasis shift back to front porch.)*

ANISAH

They really think this about us? That we are, eh intimate?

NAOMI

Not really.

ANISAH

They don't think this?

NAOMI

They don't *think*, that's what I'm saying.

ANISAH

Ah! The assholes!

NAOMI

Exactly.

(* * *)

GAIL

Bo, you're moving slow as molasses in winter this morning.

BO SR. *(off)*

It's some kind of archeological dig over here, magnets on magnets, going back half our lives.

GAIL

You don't need to dig that deep, it's the green card, right on top.

(to herself)

Green card, that's funny given the circumstances.

BO SR.

Okay, okay. Got it. Here we go...

(BO SR. re-enters with a note card.)

"Dear Gail, I wanted to write—"

GAIL

Skip all that; read the last part.

BO SR.

"I couldn't have made it through this without you. Thank you for being so kind to me. Much love, your sister, Naomi."

GAIL

I am kind, Bo, I am.

BO SR.

So go tell her all this, tell her how you're feeling, be honest.

GAIL

I was being honest, she wasn't. And now she's throwing mud on that memory. Only good to come out of all this was I gained a sister. A black sister at that. I never once cared about none of that, all I knew was Eddie loved her, and that was good enough for me. I am not a racist, Bo.

BO SR.

Who said anything about you being a racist?

GAIL

I'm getting hit from every which way, people saying the nastiest things: here, read this one by #Lefty251—

BO SR.

It's not healthy for you to be reading all that poison.

GAIL

Just read what old Lefty251 says about me.

(* * *)

ANISAH

Your sister, she is one of these assholes?

NAOMI

She's not my sister—

ANISAH

If she is your husband's sister, she is your sister.

NAOMI

Not by blood, I mean clearly.

ANISAH

But she is still your sister, yes?

NAOMI

What are we even talking about here?

ANISAH

Why is your sister saying such things about us?

NAOMI

Oh, she's not, she didn't do this, the paint job. She may think you're an illegal Muslim invader here to, I don't know, eat American babies, but she doesn't think you're a dyke.

ANISAH

I would so much rather her think me a dyke!

*(ANISAH and NAOMI finish taking down the banner. * * *)*

BO SR.

"In sum: Portman is nothing but a racist white-supremist witch with a broom and some weird colored lipstick."

GAIL

People trying to make this a race thing, when all I'm talking about is upholding the law.

BO SR.

Yeah, but you stir that old kettle, you don't know what kind of ugly you drag up.

GAIL

Bo, you know my heart, I'm not a white—argg—can't even say it.

BO SR.

I know your heart, baby, but I don't know all them others. Besides, look, what's Lefty251 know? He misspelled supremacist. Supremist, sounds like a Super Hero's sandwich.

GAIL

They are calling me names and you're cracking wise?

BO SR.

I'm trying to lighten the mood, take the sting out.

GAIL

What really stings is none of my people are hitting back. This post has been sitting since Saturday. And if I can't count on my base, well maybe it is time to throw in the towel.

BO SR.

Nobody expected you to last this long; I think folks would understand—

GAIL

Thanks for the vote of support.

BO SR.

Baby, you know I support you in whatever you want.

GAIL

Then help me find out the truth! If that Afghan woman is here legally and Naomi wants to live with a Muslim in my brother's home, I will respect that. Just show me the papers, and I'll shut up.

BO SR.

You can't go demanding to see people's papers—that's Homeland Security's job.

GAIL

What's Washington know about what's happening in Broxton? By the time this makes its way through all that red-tape she could, could—

BO SR.

What, what could she do? What are you so afraid of?

GAIL

Turn us into something we're not. Suddenly I'm the bad guy, the racist, the minority, when I'm just trying to uphold the law. Keep my town safe.

(BO has entered carrying a few brooms.)

BO

Safe for who?

GAIL

Bosie, thought you'd left already?

BO SR.

What you doing with those brooms?

BO

Either of you been outside this morning? If not, you might want to have a look...

*(GAIL and BO SR. exit; BO remains. * * *)*

ANISAH

I will go to her home.

NAOMI

Gail's?

ANISAH

Yes, and eh, straighten out this, make peace.

NAOMI

That's not a good idea.

ANISAH

I will be honest. Tell her I am here on special translator visa; applying for green card—

NAOMI

Don't do that.

ANISAH

But this is my plan, I will not hide from her, I will show her my papers.

NAOMI

No you won't.

ANISAH

Naomi, what? I am here legitimately, you gave me papers...

GAIL *(off)*

Lord, would you look at that!

NAOMI

And I took them back.

GAIL *(off)*

Must be a hundred brooms in our yard!

ANISAH

Naomi, please get my papers so I can see?

NAOMI

What papers?

ANISAH

I am sorry, I am confused, my papers...

NAOMI

I burned them.

GAIL (*off*)

Never seen anything so beautiful! There's my people!

ANISAH

Naomi, the translator's visa, Malik applied, you burned—

NAOMI

Your husband died. His visa died with him, and you would have had to start again, *after* you'd worked long enough to even be eligible for one.

ANISAH

How then, how am I here?

NAOMI

I told you I had a contact at the Embassy—enough said.

ANISAH

Forged papers—

NAOMI

ENOUGH SAID.

ANISAH

—and only now you are telling me!

NAOMI

You would have been freaking out coming through, too risky.

ANISAH

Oh, Naomi!

(*** GAIL on her walkie-talkie, re-enters carrying several brooms.)

GAIL (*into walkie-talkie*)

John, John, I got a doozy of a story. / Get a camera crew down here and see what talk radio we can book. We got supporters! Over.

BO (*overlapping at /*)
 Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom, MOM, MOM, MOM!

GAIL
 What's wrong, Bo? I got supporters! The people are behind me.

BO
 Before you get too excited, read what some of these things say. Read the handle.

GAIL
 I don't follow.

BO
 On the broom handles, your "supporters" wrote messages. Here, Dad, read—

BO SR.
 What am I the designated reader this morning?

BO / GAIL
 Just read it!

BO SR. (*reads broom handle*)
 "Gail, beat them back to the borders with this! Or just beat them. ☺" Then there's a little smiley face.

(* * *)

NAOMI
 Drop the innocent act, you must have known. You think those visas just fall off trees? You think it was easy?

ANISAH
 Why did you do this to me?

NAOMI
 I stuck my neck out for you, put my reputation, not to mention my pension on the line.

ANISAH
 I did not ask you to—

NAOMI
 But you did—you said you needed protection. And I was sent to protect and defend, and they took that from me. Stripped me of my command. And yeah, I over-stepped, but that's what good soldiers do.

ANISAH
 But I cannot get a green card if I am not here legitimately! You have trapped me—

NAOMI

You wouldn't even be here if it weren't for me! Look, I would trade places if I could. Deport me, send me back, cause I'd rather be there, but they kicked me out. And now all I got left to defend is you.

ANISAH

I am not a country, Naomi!

BO SR. (*another broom*)

"Detain and Deport..."

ANISAH

You have put me at great risk.

NAOMI

More risk than if I had left you?

BO

Mom, I trust you, but you don't know where all this might lead.

(...)

Don't encourage this. Drop out.

ANISAH

I don't know.

GAIL

Drop out? Quit, like I did on college? I was 19 when I had you, 21 when I had Tim, you think I had opportunities outside of that?

BO SR.

Easy, Gail.

BO

You can't blame me for—

GAIL

Not blaming, just saying. You boys were my life, my joy. And I happily gave everything I had. But you think I wanted this? To bury one grown boy, and have the other sitting up all night holding an old security blanket like he was still sucking his thumb? Add a baby brother and a bankrupt business to the list, you think that's how I thought this was going to turn out? What I dreamed?

BO

I'll get a place of my own.

GAIL

I don't want you to move out, Bosie. I want my home to be *my home* again. And so far, whatever I've been doing has NOT been working. It's time for a change. I can't sit on my hands any more and keep losing. Losing everything that ever mattered—my kids, my brother, my home. I can't, I got to snap this.

*(GAIL exits, BO SR. goes after her. BO snaps one of the brooms and exits opposite. * * *)*

ANISAH

I did not come here to hide, I will still go to your sister.

NAOMI

I can't let you do that.

ANISAH

You cannot stop me.

NAOMI

Then I'm coming with you.

ANISAH

No!

NAOMI

You need help—

ANISAH

Look where your help has brought me.

NAOMI

It brought you here—

ANISAH

ILLEGALLY!

NAOMI

So put it all on me, blame me, I'll take the hit, I'll protect you.

ANISAH

You cannot protect me, help me, Naomi, until you have helped yourself.

NAOMI

But I can take the hit: shoot me, blow me up, lock me away, I don't care.

ANISAH

You need to start caring.

(Lights shift.)

2.3: Fair and Imbalanced

Later. Sound of a wood-chipper blends with the sound of static from a radio searching for a signal. It then lands on a talk-radio station, during the “Toe-to-Toe” call-in/shout-over segment. Lights rise on BO sorting through a pile of brooms, with the broom heads broken from the handles, and listening to a portable radio.

CALLER #1 (*voice only*)

I’m saying the immigration laws sweeping across the states are mean-spirited, discriminatory, and misguided—

CALLER #2 (*voice only*)

What’s misguided is Congress’s refusal to put on the big boy pants: enforce the laws that are already on the books, defend the rights of American citizens, and—

CALLER #1 (*voice only*)

“Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free—”

CALLER #2 (*voice only*)

Do NOT quote the Statue of Liberty! You people always quote the—

CALLER #1 (*voice only*)

Because it’s America’s clearest call for liberty and for compassion to those seeking asylum and amnesty—

CALLER #2 (*voice only*)

No AMNESTY, do NOT reward lawbreakers. Why do these people feel so entitled to be here? I say: arrest, detain, deport. Repeat as needed. And while we’re at it, let’s change the sign Lady Liberty holds, let’s give her a STOP SIGN!

HOST / JESSIE (*voice only*)

Okay, and that’s where we’ll have to leave today’s installment of “Toe-to-Toe”, thank you callers and thanks for your thoughts. And now I’m joined in the studio by someone on the frontlines of our topic for today.

(Lights on GAIL, on a stool wearing headphones. BO exits with the broom handles.)

GAIL

Thanks for having me, Jessie. Always a pleasure.

HOST / JESSIE (*voice only*)

My pleasure, Gail. So, what’s going on? Your name’s been mud since the Snap Heard Around Broxton. People saying you can’t even clean your own house, how can you clean this town? Half expected you came here to drop out, yet here you are with a bunch of brooms and a big smile on your face.

(Sound of a wood-chipper, off.)

GAIL

Well, I woke this morning to a sight, and I don't mean this in any blasphemous way, but it seemed like something out of the Old Testament. All over my yard were scattered corn brooms, like the heavens had rained down brooms on me.

HOST / JESSIE *(voice only)*

That's kind of weird, Gail, corn brooms all over your yard, huh?

(As GAIL speaks, she become more polished, more on message, more epigrammatic, more personal, more persuasive. She becomes.)

GAIL

That's right, Jessie. Simple, reliable, solid American corn brooms, with stiff bristles and hickory handles. Corn brooms delivered to me by my supporters in my time of need, to remind me now is not the time to back down. Now is the time to stand up and be counted! And to my supporters, my "Gail Force," I have heard your message, I will not back out.

(BO returns with a basket of woodchips. He picks up the broken broom heads and exits, leaving the radio, which continues to play. Light narrows on radio and intensifies on GAIL.)

And to those of you sitting on the fence, wondering if there's any choice between left and right, I say break out the brooms and help me clean house. From the cobwebs caught in the corners of our failing schools, to the grit on the thresholds of the boarded-up storefronts downtown, I say break out the brooms!

And about immigration, I got one thing to say: I will clean *my* house first. I will get to the bottom of this, respectfully find out who this Afghan woman is, and if she's here legally, I will open my arms like Americans have been doing since the beginning. But if she's not legal, then I will sweep her out! Sweep all of them out who have broken laws and climbed over fences to be here.

Keep the brooms coming, people, I'm counting on every last one of them. Sweep me in to office come election day, and we will sweep this city clean!

(Lights shift.)

2.4: Nickelback Defense

Later. The Portman's front walk and yard. Bare stage except for a dozen or so brooms. ANISAH off.

ANISAH (*off*)

Hello? Hello?

(ANISAH enters, a light scarf over her head.)

Hello?

(She looks back at the house, squints into the sun, trips over a broom.)

Malik, I could use help translating this. Brooms all over the yard. What would you say this means? How would you translate this, Malik? (*... she laughs*) Oh, I know you are not here, but still I like thinking what you might say about:

*(She speaks the following in Dari, *translation provided for clarity.)*

Jaarob balaay kabal haay e sabz. (*Brooms on the green grass.)

Nomayesh aama e eshq dar parking motar haa. (*Public display of love in a parking lot.)

Apple-pie e haqiqi. (*Real apple-pie.)

Mississippi.

(She laughs, then in English.)

Yes, Malik, M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I. I Mississippi you.

(She plucks a dandelion from under the brooms. In Dari, again.)

Malik, chegoona dar jaaey ke een gul e zard e maqbool ra giyaah e harza fikir mekonand, metawanam solh daryaabam? (*Malik, how can I find peace in a place where this pretty yellow flower is thought a weed?)

(BO has entered and watches ANISAH.)

BO

Um, you okay?

ANISAH

Oh! I am not aware someone was here. I am embarrassed. It is eh, I miss, speaking my own language.

BO

I'm Bo.

ANISAH

Bo, yes, Naomi has told me, I saw you at the Welcome Home party before, before...

BO

The shit hit the fan.

ANISAH (*jots a note in a journal*)

Yes! I will add this shit to the book of my idioms.

BO

So what were you saying, I mean if it's not too private?

ANISAH

I, eh, was wondering about these brooms.

BO

You're not alone in that.

ANISAH

Also about this flower—

BO

The dandelion.

ANISAH

Yes, the dandelion. Why is it you here call it a weed?

BO

Cause that's what it is, or least what I was taught. My mom and dad used to give me and my brother a nickel for every dandelion we pulled. But the deal was, we had to get the whole root; dandelions have a taproot like a knotted carrot, you break it off, dandelion grows back twice as strong. Hard to get rid of, guess that's why they call it a weed. Try it.

ANISAH

A nickel to pull dandelions? Naomi told me she used to get paid one penny for catching, eh fireflies.

BO

If you're gonna live in the South, you better learn how to catch a firefly, pull a dandelion, spit watermelon seeds, swing on a rope swing, climb a magnolia—

ANISAH

Okay, okay. I will try.

(ANISAH starts to pull a dandelion.)

BO

Easy...loosen the soil, it's been a few days since our last rain.

ANISAH

You know much about this. You are a farmer?

BO

No, I'm, well yeah, a farmer in a suburban setting. I'm a xeri... a landscaper.

ANISAH

You shape the land?

BO

Sort of, but truth be told, I pull an awful lot of weeds.

ANISAH

You and your brother?

BO

No, that was a long time ago. (. . .)

(ANISAH pulls up the dandelion, root and all.)

ANISAH

Look! Just like you said, a knotted carrot, then loose, and out it came!

BO

Beginner's luck.

ANISAH

No, I had a good teacher.

BO

I owe you a nickel.

ANISAH

I would pull more weeds for a nickel. (. . .) Why do you laugh?

BO

You know how much a nickel is?

ANISAH

Money is not all. Naomi, she has a, eh pension, "enough to get by," she says. But there has to be more than getting by. There has to be a reason, work, which may seem dull to you who have caught fireflies and pulled dandelions for all their lives, but to those who have not, these activities are welcome, give rhythm, structure.

BO

Still, a nickel is next to nothing.

ANISAH

Next to nothing is something.

(WHOOOP! Blare of horns, sound of an approaching truck. Then a couple of brooms sail onto the stage like spears. BO covers ANISAH.)

BO
LOOK OUT!

VOICES (*off*)
SWEEP HER IN!
WE LOVE YOU, GAIL! SWEEP HER IN!

BO (*stands, yells back.*)
CAREFUL! NEARLY HIT US!

(Truck sounds speeding off. BO helps ANISAH up.)

BO
Come on, by sundown there'll be brooms flying all over this yard.

ANISAH
I came to see your mother, to gain her favor.

VOICES (*off*)
THAT'S HER! TURN AROUND! TURN AROUND!

(WHOOOP! Sound of brakes, truck turning around.)

BO
Shit, they're coming back. It's not safe here. Do you want to work?

ANISAH
Very much, yes.

VOICES (*off*)
GO HOME! GO HOME!

BO
Then come with me.

ANISAH
But your mother?

BO
It's lucky you saw me first. Come on!

VOICES (*off*)
GO HOME! GO HOME!

(They exit as another broom flies in. Chants of GO HOME! continue, lights shift.)

2.5: Threshold Me

Later. The chants of GO HOME end with a crash. Lights on NAOMI, on her front porch, looking at a pile of ash someone has dumped there.

NAOMI

Assholes.

(She goes inside, comes back with a decorated broom and sweeps the ash off her porch. She hums Love is a Battlefield, as Eddie sweeps into her memory. EDDIE appears, again in his tux and NAOMI takes the broom and ceremoniously places it across the threshold.)

NAOMI (*cont'd.*)

Eddie...it's time. You sure you're ready to do this?

EDDIE

I was born ready to jump that broom with you. Besides, I already did it at the reception.

NAOMI

That was just for show, this time it's for real. For us.

EDDIE

Sounds like this is your last chance to turn back.

NAOMI

Oh, I don't scare that easy, soldier.

EDDIE

Till death do us part could be a very long time.

NAOMI

I'm counting on it, Eddie.

EDDIE

Me too . . . but what if it's not?

NAOMI

Sweetheart, we can't worry about that.

EDDIE

I can't help it, Naomi, given what we do, what happened with Tim. What if it's not a long time? What if all we have is here and now?

NAOMI

Then we better be damn sure we make the most of it, live each day full as we can—that's the soldier's way. Now I don't know exactly what's on the other side of that broom, Eddie, but I know you'll be there, and where ever you are is where I want to be.

EDDIE

Me too, baby, me too...

(The memory starts to evaporate, ANISAH enters.)

NAOMI

So take my hand and let's do this.

EDDIE

Make it official:

NAOMI *(holding out her hand)*

Mr.

EDDIE *(taking her hand)*

And Mrs.

NAOMI and EDDIE

One. Two. Three!

(EDDIE jumps the broom and disappears. NAOMI picks up the broom, sweeps.)

ANISAH

That is a very pretty broom you sweep with.

NAOMI

It's something I had, a keepsake.

ANISAH

Keepsake, I do not know this.

NAOMI

Something with personal meaning.

ANISAH

Something from your mother?

NAOMI

No, from my wedding.

ANISAH

What is it about brooms and Mississippi?

NAOMI

It's a custom, jumping the broom. During slavery, owners wouldn't allow a legal marriage, so to make it official, the couple would jump over a broom into their new life.

ANISAH

And now you use this broom to *clean* with?

NAOMI

Some asshole dumped ash from their grill all over the porch, and I needed a broom.

ANISAH

Then go pick one from your sister's yard, do not use your keepsake broom.

NAOMI

What's it matter, might as well get some use out of it.

ANISAH

It matters, Naomi, you know it does.

(NAOMI stops sweeping.)

NAOMI

You're right. (...)

ANISAH

Why would they do this?

NAOMI

Make a point by making trouble for us.

ANISAH

Naomi, I do not want to put you in trouble's way.

NAOMI

I don't scare easy, so don't worry about me. You on the other hand, you got be careful out there, people are pretty riled up. Where have you been? I was getting worried.

ANISAH

I was working.

NAOMI

Working? Like a job?

ANISAH

Yes, I am helping Bo with his landscaping.

NAOMI

My nephew, Bo? Gail's son, Bo?

ANISAH

Yes.

NAOMI

Are you trying to give the woman more reasons to hate you? You went there to make peace!

ANISAH

She was not home, but he was. We were chased off by flying brooms, he was kind, took me to Obed's Hill, where I pulled weeds, and was feeling complete for the first time since I arrived, and why is this wrong?

NAOMI

You're not supposed to work. That's why they're dumping trash on my porch, that's what this is all about—you taking our jobs.

ANISAH

He says none of his friends want this job.

NAOMI

Doesn't matter. You're not legal. Lay low, till this election blows over—

ANISAH

This is months from now. And he is coming for me in the morning.

NAOMI

Don't work for him.

ANISAH

But I like him.

NAOMI

Oh dear god.

ANISAH (*showing jar of nickels*)

He is funny, he pays me today in nickels, see?

NAOMI

I don't even want to know what that means, just stay away. Gail's protective, doesn't want him going off the deep end again.

ANISAH

Translate please.

NAOMI

Bo's damaged. He tried to kill himself.

ANISAH

But he seems, eh so normal.

NAOMI

He's good at covering, and he's gotten some help, but still.

ANISAH

What has made him this way, damaged?

NAOMI

He killed his brother.

ANISAH

No, I do not believe this.

NAOMI

It was an accident, they were screwing around, like brothers do. It was the summer, Tim was a sophomore at Ole Miss, Bo had just graduated and was set to get married that fall. Anyway, it was just brothers horse-playing, Tim was on the hood of the car, Bo was driving him around the block, it was late, they'd had a couple of beers. Bo swerved, going all of 15 miles an hour, but Tim lost his grip, hit his head just so. And he died.

ANISAH

This is tragedy.

NAOMI

Yeah. And Bo, I didn't know him all that well before, but Eddie says he was one of those great kids—big-heart, born teacher. For their honeymoon, he and his wife were going to South America to work with Teachers Without Borders, but this just ripped him in half.

ANISAH

And the wedding?

NAOMI

Broke it off, and broke the girl's heart. Then he couldn't forgive himself. It's why me and Eddie got married so quick. We saw how uncertain it can be, and his family sure needed something to smile about that year.

ANISAH

That was kind of you, to give them that gift.

NAOMI

Bo refused to come. Told Eddie he had “renounced happiness” and would ruin our wedding.

ANISAH

Renounced is eh, forsaken, yes?

NAOMI

Yeah. And a couple months later he tried to kill himself.

ANISAH

But this was some years ago, he is better.

NAOMI

Better, sure, but Gail keeps close tabs on him, worried sick she’s going to lose one more. You start working for him and you will fully understand *when the shit hits the fan*.

ANISAH

How does weeding his gardens hurt anything?

NAOMI

Just lay low, let this all blow over.

(GAIL and BO SR. enter carrying a casserole.)

GAIL

Good evening, ladies, let what blow over?

NAOMI

Gail.

GAIL

Stand down, soldier, didn’t come spoiling for a fight, came to open a civilized dialogue. King Ranch Casserole, brought your favorite, Naomi.

BO SR. *(handing over casserole)*

Evening Naomi, miss. . . Careful, that’s still hot to the touch.

NAOMI *(taking casserole)*

I got it, thank you. So, you all just dropping by?

GAIL

We wanted to be properly introduced to your Afghan friend.

BO SR.

Off camera this time, family like.

GAIL

So...are you going to introduce us, or just stand there with a burning casserole?

NAOMI

Anisah, this is my sister- and brother-in-law. Gail and Bo, this is Anisah.

ANISAH

You do me a kindness to visit, it is my honor to make your acquaintance.

GAIL

Well, that's sweet of you Anisah, do you have a last name?

BO SR.

Gail, you promised not to probe.

GAIL

Just being polite, what if I want to drop Anisah here a note, thanking her, or inviting her out for an ice-tea, who would I address it to?

ANISAH (*to Naomi*)

Last name is eh, surname, yes?

GAIL

That's right, what's the surname on your papers?

NAOMI

Anisah, take this inside.

ANISAH

No, Naomi, I will not hide inside. I have come here to live, and want to do so in the open, without fear or harassment.

GAIL

Harassment, big word for a foreigner.

ANISAH

Regrettably, it is one I am too acquainted with. I do not know why I have found disfavor in your eyes, I am only trying to build a home.

GAIL

That's all well and good if you're here legally.

NAOMI

What's her status have to do with building a home?

GAIL

Cause she's trying to do it in my back yard. And then, just like our Southern neighbors, soon enough her cousins, her whole village will start coming and building mosques.

ANISAH

I am not from a village, and I assure you my family, they will not come.

GAIL

Cause they're too busy fighting our boys over there.

ANISAH

This is not entirely untrue.

GAIL

Thank you, Anisah. See? She does have a little jihad blood in her.

NAOMI

Gail—

BO SR.

You promised—

GAIL (*to Anisah*)

I'm just trying to get to know our new friend, where she's from, who's her people, and how they're fighting our boys.

ANISAH

They are not, eh, hand-to-hand, but yes, I have a brother, he became more, traditional after the Americans came. Where I was enjoying some freedom, he was starting to close down. Not at first. My parents brought us up sensible, and he thought, we all thought, things would get better. But year after year, he got harder in his beliefs as promises were broken, and violence continued. Gail, this is one path you can go when you believe your home is under attack—to close off. My brother is on this path, and it was painful what it did to my family, but there is another path.

GAIL

Are you implying that I'm a terrorist like your brother?

BO SR.

Oh, for mercy's sake, Gail.

ANISAH

My brother is not a terrorist.

GAIL

And neither am I.

ANISAH

Yet you seek to terrorize me.

GAIL

Why don't you just tell me who I should address that note too, Anisah?

NAOMI

Anisah, the more you tell her, the more she can check on—

GAIL

Let the woman speak for herself, Naomi.

ANISAH

Surnames are, eh not so common in my culture, so it is complicated. I think if you send it to Anisah Anisah it will find me.

GAIL

Well. I'll be sure and do that, Anisah *Anisah*.

NAOMI (*stifling a nervous laugh*)

Holy shit.

GAIL

Don't laugh at me, Naomi, my own sister.

NAOMI

I'm sorry, but you deserved that—

GAIL

How dare you make fun of me.

ANISAH

I am not making fun.

GAIL

Mock me in front of my family, under my brother's roof.

ANISAH

I do not mock, I just do not believe my surname, or my people are the questions you came to ask. Ask me the question you came to ask.

BO SR.

Gail we ought to shove, *Homewreckers* is on in a half hour. It was nice meeting you, Miss Anisah Anisah.

GAIL

You go on, Bo. I'm bored with that show—they knock everything down, somehow it all turns out all peachy and puppies 72 hours later, but that's not life. Sides, we're just starting to make friends here, isn't that right, Anisah Anisah?

ANISAH

I will not hide from you, if you do not hide from me. Ask me what you came to ask.

GAIL

Fine. Are you in the United States of America legally?

NAOMI

Anisah.

GAIL

Answer my question.

ANISAH

(. . .) Regrettably, no. I am not here legally.

GAIL

I knew it! How'd you get in?

ANISAH

This is not a concern.

NAOMI

GAIL

Anisah—

Cause she helped you!

ANISAH

No! Naomi is a good soldier, she had nothing to do with it. I arranged it on my own. But how I came here is not what matters. What matters is that I am now here, and I am not, eh dirt to be swept aside. I am a human being.

GAIL

I never called you dirt. Dirt is what it is, it's everywhere. I'm not out sweeping the back yard free from dirt. My issue is only when dirt gets in my house, on my kitchen floor. And when it does, you can be darn sure, I will SWEEP IT OUT.

(GAIL exits, BO SR. follows.)

NAOMI

Go with him, tomorrow, and pull weeds on Obed's Hill.

ANISAH

With Bo?

NAOMI

You need allies.

ANISAH

But you said not to go.

NAOMI

That was before you waged war.

ANISAH

I was trying to wage peace.

NAOMI

You got a funny way of doing that.

ANISAH

Many say the same of this country.

NAOMI

DON'T!— Don't make me question bringing you here.

ANISAH

Naomi, you know I came seeking life, not destruction, but that does not mean I cannot question, be critical. This is what makes this country strong.

NAOMI

Shh.

ANISAH

Do not shh me.

NAOMI

Shh. There's someone out there, watching us.

ANISAH

(. . .) I do not hear.

NAOMI

There. Out there on the road. Listen.

ANISAH

It is the wind.

NAOMI

No (. . .) It's someone sweeping.

ANISAH

Sweeping?

NAOMI

Yeah, look, there. Someone watching us...and sweeping.

(Barely audible, the sound of a single broom sweeping. Lights ghost up on a single broom. The solitary broom stands on end, vigilant, on guard, at the ready. The two women listen, the sound remains barely audible, but now that it has been named, it is painfully clear. Blackout.)

END OF ACT TWO.

(Intermission.)

