

KENYATTA'S PARTY

A Full-Length Play in One Act
By Ivan Mosley

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THE FOLKS

AMIRI, a drug-addicted man, fifty-six.

AMINATTA, a high school student, a girl, sixteen.

GEORGETTE, a formerly drug-addicted woman, forty.

LAKEESE, a formerly gambling-addicted woman, forty.

CRIM, a businessman, thirty.

YELA BOI, his business partner, a man, thirty.

THE PROFESSOR, a drug-addicted man, sixty-three.

All characters are African-American and should be cast with African-American actors.

THE PLACE

Hampstead Homes, the last housing project in Obsidian, North Carolina.

THE TIME

Fall. The present.

NOTES ON ELEMENTS OF RHYTHM

Ellipsis (...) = an intake of breath

A beat = 2-3 seconds

A chill = 10-15 seconds

A hot minute = 20-30 seconds

A forward slash (/) in the dialogue indicates the start of the next speaker's line, so they will overlap.

SCENE 1

Fall. Night.

Amiri's porch: A door, steps, two chairs, windows, a roof, brick fronting and the suggestion of other apartments. The concrete steps are broken, so it's easy to fall. A few shingles off the roof are missing. Besides that, the place looks fine.

Amiri, 56, and the Professor, 63, sit on the front porch. The Professor is drinking.

THE PROFESSOR

She said he talked her into the car. People keep asking what the man could've said to her.

AMIRI

That's a fool-ass question to ask in the first place. I hear people talking about why did she stay in the car? What kept her there? Why didn't she run away? I'm wondering what was in the car. Anybody and they momma could talk you in to a car. See, the talk is just a part of it. Talk excites the mind. But you got to get that body, too. At some point the mind gon' tell the body to get the hell out, you being with a stranger and all. But if the body feels at ease, you got a conflict. If you smart, you take advantage of the conflict. So: How was the seats? Was they hard or was they soft? What was the fabric? Was there air conditioning? How did the headrest feel? Was the windows tinted or was they clear? Did he have a Jesus piece hanging from that mirror? More importantly, how did the car smell? When you ask the wrong questions, you don't need no answers 'cause they gon' be wrong, too. You let me have ten minutes with that girl, I'd get you everything you need.

The Professor starts laughing.

That ain't funny worth a damn.

THE PROFESSOR

You only know how to get the information cause you was the man in the car at one point. Figuratively speaking.

AMIRI

I'm not like that anymore.

THE PROFESSOR

So you know ain't nobody gon' let you near they little girl.

AMIRI

I'm changin'.

THE PROFESSOR

Too late for that now, innit?

He offers Amiri the bottle.

AMIRI

I don't feel like it.

THE PROFESSOR

Might as well. All "the family" left and gone. Ain't nobody left but you.

AMIRI

But you came back.

THE PROFESSOR

Don't forget, I'm just visiting. Why face sadness when you ain't got to?

AMIRI

All right. I'll take a swig, but you got to take back what you said.

THE PROFESSOR

I don't know about all that. It helps to know who you are. So you don't lie to yourself.

AMIRI

That's what you think I'm doin'?

THE PROFESSOR

If ain't nobody see it, do the change even count?

AMIRI

I'm doing it for me.

THE PROFESSOR

Can I put that in a cup? Can I hold it in my hands? Can I hear it from over yonder? Can I smell it on you and it brings a smile to my face?

A beat.

Quiet as it's kept, the day they announced Hampstead Homes was closing for good, all the mothers through a party.

AMIRI

That's not true. I wasn't invited.

THE PROFESSOR

Exactly. They brought cakes, fried fish and made some macaroni and cheese and all sorts of vegetables. They probably ain't gon' have too much money to pay the bills, but when you happy, you happy. And you celebrate. Some of the best cookin' I ever had.

AMIRI

So you went.

THE PROFESSOR

What you expect? I ain't never do nobody wrong. My Daddy taught me that. Let people say what they want about ya, but if they can say you ain't never did right by them, then you got to look at yourself. It's gotten me this far.

They set a little fire and put pictures of you in it. Danced them a hearty jig around it.

The ladies were talking about how they felt safer and they knew they would have to worry for the future, but they were glad they wouldn't have to worry about you. They talked about all their plans for the future, that they could keep their children from drugs and get them into college.

AMIRI

College ain't for everyone.

THE PROFESSOR

Everybody needs an escape, my man. Ain't I taught you nothin'?

(offering the bottle)

Now you wanna split this or what?

Amiri looks at the bottle, then at the professor and looks ahead.

Well, you ain't gotta be stank about it. I don't see why you so glum. Kenyatta getting out tomorrow.

Amiri lights up.

AMIRI

What did you say?

THE PROFESSOR

You heard me. Kenyatta gettin' out tomorrow.

AMIRI

Of course he would tell you first. I guess he wanted to surprise me.

THE PROFESSOR

I don't know that I would say that.

AMIRI

For an occasion like this, I gotta get the family back together. Can't nothin' attract a family like a party.

Amiri goes to the Professor and kisses him.

Now you can come with me or you can stay here.

THE PROFESSOR

I think I wanna see you try.

Amiri goes back inside the house.

The Professor picks the bottle, looks at it and puts it back down. He leaves. Lights fade.

SCENE 2

The next day. Noon. There is a banner by the door. Aminatta, 16, enters onto the porch from the street offstage. She looks around. Before she can come to the porch, Amiri steps outside to stop her.

AMIRI

Ain't you supposed to be in the library somewhere?

AMINATTA

All work and no play makes Natta a dull girl.

AMIRI

Ain't that PSAT coming up?

AMINATTA

Don't remind me.

AMIRI

If my math right, it looks like you got a week.

AMINATTA

And in a week, I'll be ready.

AMIRI

Stay ready so you ain't got to get ready. Some people take a lifetime to learn that.

AMINATTA

Can't a girl come by one last time?

AMIRI

For what?

AMINATTA

To say goodbye, of course.

AMIRI

Goodbye is worth a house made of paper in a storm. You could have stayed at the library for that.

AMINATTA

I wasn't at the library.

AMIRI

Well, wherever you was.

AMINATTA

You seem different today.

AMIRI

How?

AMINATTA

Like you have grey hairs growin' out your ears or something.

AMIRI

Stop playing girl.

AMINATTA

Playing daddy when you ain't got to gon' have you bent over with a cane soon.

AMIRI

I clare whether you want 'em or not, you can't get these little bastard-asses off of you.

AMINATTA

Awww, you still care.

AMIRI

I think I heard "goodbye." You can put one foot in front of the other now.

AMINATTA

Any other time you would let me stay.

AMIRI

This ain't any other day.

AMINATTA

What you got planned?

AMIRI

My lips sealed like an air lock.

AMINATTA

Tell me.

AMIRI

Ha!

AMINATTA

Please?

AMIRI

No.

AMINATTA

Why?

AMIRI

I ain't givin' you no more reason to stay than you already got.

AMINATTA

What harm can I do?

AMIRI

This is something for grown folk. And I'm not getting paid to baby-sit. It was enough taking care of my own.

AMINATTA

Well, I could earn my way in, can't I?

AMIRI

Look, baby girl, I like you. You got a bright future ahead of you if you apply yourself, no one sees that more than me and you should see it for yourself. Us grown folk got so many regrets and burdens we just need to lay down but you free to make your own path, as easy and light as you want. I'd be a fool to keep you from that, even for a day.

AMINATTA

I've been cooped up in the house for two weeks, just studying. I did what I'm supposed to do. I need a release. Come on, help me.

AMIRI

But you told me you needed to make a high score on that test when we last spoke. Said you was gon' be away awhile to get yourself ready, that you'd see me again after the test.

AMINATTA

I didn't think they'd shut down Hampstead Homes. I thought you'd still be here.

AMIRI

And I still will. It's gon' take much more than some city men to get rid of me. I been here before them and I'll be here after them. Lay your worries down by the side and go on home.

AMINATTA

Amiri, you consider me family, right?

AMIRI

That's why I'm tryna push you to do your best.

AMINATTA

Can't you also relax with family?

AMIRI

Not today...

AMINATTA

What changed?

AMIRI

People act like I have to stay the same because I always have. I ain't the weather, don't predict me.

AMINATTA

I mean...you know *us*. I just wanna figure out why the great Amiri of Hampstead Homes is doing things differently now. This is my spot. You told me I could always come here when I needed to get away, but now you don't want me here. It feels like you're turning on me.

AMIRI

You havin' problems with ya momma again?

AMINATTA

What can I say? You know me better than anybody else.

AMIRI

My son is getting out today. I just want to bring the older folks together so they can lay eyes on him. More than anything I want to be with him. It's been so long since I seen him outside of the walls of Sid Penn. It'll be like I'm meeting him for the first time again. And I don't want to have anybody here who can get him right back in jail again.

AMINATTA

I didn't tell him to get two girls half his age pregnant.

AMIRI

They were twelve. Technically, that was two-thirds his age at the time, smart-ass, but ok. See, you never knew my boy, baby girl, so you don't belong here.

AMINATTA

Maybe we could change that. I always wanted to meet the man, the myth, the legend Kenyatta, son of the great Amiri of Hampstead Homes.

AMIRI

I'm being serious. Everybody who's coming knew my boy from when he could barely fit his arm around my knee, some of them even grew up with him. They got a connection to him. You don't. After the time he's had in Sid Penn, he needs to come back to a place where he knows he belongs. You just a distraction to him.

AMINATTA

Well, what are you doing to set up? I know I can help with that.

She notices the banner.

What's this?

She steps onto the porch to put the look inside the banner, but her foot gets caught in one of the cracks in the concrete. She almost falls, but Amiri catches her.

AMIRI

Watch yourself now. All the pain stored up in that concrete makes it harder when your face hits. I wouldn't want you to break all your teeth.

AMINATTA

Thanks.

AMIRI

If you wanna know that bad, it's a banner. I wanted my son to know I'ma go all out for him. It ain't got nothin' on it yet.

AMINATTA

You know you could've called me if you needed something done right.

AMIRI

I wasn't planning to involve you in any of it.

AMINATTA

You know anybody else with the skills I got?

AMIRI

No.

AMINATTA

You gon' pay somebody?

AMIRI

Naw.

AMINATTA

What? You were planning to do it? You ain't got no type of talent for that. What did you want it to say?

AMIRI

"Welcome Home, Kenyatta."

AMINATTA

With you doin' it? People gon' think they're reading ancient Hebrew or some shit. They ain't gon' know whether to come on in or start praying for you. Look, I'll do the banner for free. Think of it as my present to you, for the party.

AMIRI

But it's gon' come with strings, knowin' you.

AMINATTA

And you know me so well. So let's get to it.

AMIRI

If you get that side, I can take the other side and we can roll it out.

They do so.

Amiri goes back inside. He comes out with several paint tubes and a cup of paint brushes. He gives everything to Aminatta.

Okay, you can stay--for a little while, any way. But as soon as Kenyatta get here, you need to get to steppin' and fast like you running through hot coals.

AMINATTA

You're not being fun.

AMIRI

Take it or leave it, baby girl.

She begins to paint on the banner.

When I was younger, I used to slash signs like this with a box cutter, especially the ones at Jack and Jill downtown. In fact, me and the fellas used to go down there sometimes and tear up the signs and sprinkle it on the lawn or blow it in their faces. You should've seen those folks. There ain't nothin' like the sight of high-seditty Negroes in all they finery covered in dust. And don't let it be in the middle of a storm. They'd look like mud monsters. Makes them seem like one of us--if just for a moment. But now I'm puttin' signs like this up for Kenyatta's party. Makes you think.

Aminatta puts on the finishing touches.

Shit, that looks nice. You really got a talent. You sure you don't want to major in art or something when you go to college?

AMINATTA

I can do this on the side. I got to make change in Obsidian, so the same thing that's happening to you and Hampstead Homes doesn't happen to somebody else.

Now you've got to let this dry for an hour.

AMIRI

Can you help me hang this when it does?

AMINATTA

Where?

AMIRI

Right above these windows, sorta on the roof.

AMINATTA

Okay. I feel that. What else do you want me to do?

AMIRI

I might as well put you to work while you're here. Come on inside.

Amiri goes inside. Aminatta follows him, making sure to step over the crack in the concrete porch. Lights fade.

SCENE 3

Later. The banner has been hung.

The sound of vacuuming.

Amiri comes outside holding a box and sits down. He takes medallions out of the box one by one to inspect them.

The Professor arrives. He looks at the banner.

THE PROFESSOR

So you still gon' go through with it.

AMIRI

Why wouldn't I?

The Professor remains silent.

Amiri holds up a medallion.

Remember this?

THE PROFESSOR

That's the last prize Kenyatta won. I thought you would've pawned all those by now.

AMIRI

That's cold as winter in Vermont.

A beat.

THE PROFESSOR

The boy had a way with words.

AMIRI

Just like his daddy. When he convinced me to let him stay up with me to watch Richard Pryor after I told him no a bunch of times, I knew he had something.

THE PROFESSOR

Who you foolin'? That wasn't you, it was me. *I'm* the one that told *you* about it. Is that what you tell people?

AMIRI

(continuing as if he hadn't been interrupted)

Nobody was prouder than me when he joined the debate team in middle school and high school. If they didn't win first place, they won second. All because of him. Then the big one came. His team was up against all these other teams from around the county. They won this medal right here. He even won a scholarship to go to any college in Obsidian he wanted. But then shit went bad real quick.

I think I'm going to put this on the door to his room.

THE PROFESSOR

Are you sure you should be throwing a party today?

AMIRI

I ain't crazy.

THE PROFESSOR

Never meant that, just misguided, is all. I mean, should you even be focusing on a party today? Monday, the city coming to tear this place down, with or without you in it. I wouldn't wanna catch my death under a pile of brick.

AMIRI

Negro, take that pot of foolishness and cook it somewhere else. I know what I'm doing. The city been saying they gon' tear this place down since Kenyatta went to prison. They ain't gon' do nothin'.

THE PROFESSOR

The city passed a vote. Police were escortin' people out all through the week.

AMIRI

But did the po-lice stick around to make sure anybody was left? They always do things halfway when it come to Hampstead Homes. That's how I know ain't nobody con' catch me.

THE PROFESSOR

But you drawin' unnecessary eyes to yasef. That banner might as well say "Here I am! *Take me to jail!*"

AMIRI

It's Friday and everybody else gone. Police ain't got no reason to come up in here. But if you so concerned, you can stay and play the lookout.

THE PROFESSOR

I'm just saying Kenyatta don't need all these eyes on him. How do you even know what he want? Did you ever take the time to ask him what he would've wanted when he got out?

AMIRI

Who gon' know what's best for Kenyatta besides his own Daddy? He always loved to party before he got locked up and it ain't no different now. The only thing that's changed is the year. Now the best thing you can do is look for the police and keep an eye out for him when he get here so he don't end up back in jail. That'd be a loss for me and you-- again.

THE PROFESSOR

Amiri...

AMIRI

I tell you what. What if I give you one of his medallions? Not this one I got right now-- that means more to me than anything--but one of the other ones. You remember you begged me for them when my boy got sent to Sid Penn?

THE PROFESSOR

I deserve them. I went to all his debates, then I would tell you about them. You only came to his last one. When I wanted his medallions, didn't you say that they had too much value to your heart or something like that?

AMIRI

You'll just have one. I'll have many more. This offer ain't gon' be around forever.

THE PROFESSOR

I don't need that.

AMIRI

Why the change of heart?

THE PROFESSOR

I gotta make sure you know all the potential problems that you got ahead if you really gon' commit to this thing at this point. I owe that to you.

AMIRI

You ain't gotta worry about me.

THE PROFESSOR

If you wanna throw the party, I'm behind you all the way. I'll even help you. You don't need to give me anything for that.

AMIRI

Thanks, you ole leather-faced bastard.

THE PROFESSOR

Knowing you, it'll probably be a success anyway.

AMIRI

Now let's discuss your other duties.

Amiri picks up the box and goes inside. The Professor follows him. Lights fade.

SCENE 4

Georgette and LaKeese, both 40, arrive. Georgette wears a long-sleeve shirt and jeans. LaKeese wears a pink tank top, hoop earrings, bracelets and colorful form-fitting pants.

GEORGETTE

It's still the same.

LAKEESE

It's just been two years.

GEORGETTE

You could be a little more understanding.

LAKEESE

Ha!

GEORGETTE

I just can't believe they are going to tear Hampstead down. After sixty years. It just feels like an institution at this point. They should make it a landmark at this point.

LAKEESE

It wasn't meant to last that long in the first place.

GEORGETTE

Just seeing it now makes my heart feel like it's full of rocks.

LAKEESE

Are you strong enough for this?

GEORGETTE

I'm not as fragile as you think.

LAKEESE

I'm not saying that. We were lucky to make it out of here for even a little while. And now we've come back. I came here for you. Any time you want to go, baby, I'm right behind you.

LaKeese holds Georgette and kisses her.

GEORGETTE

Thank you, but--

Before she can finish her thought, Aminatta comes out the door, holding two heavy trash bags.

AMINATTA

Hey.

GEORGETTE
(awkwardly)
Hi.

LAKEESE
Well, I'll be damned.

AMINATTA
You here for the party?

GEORGETTE
I don't see any other reason to be here.

LAKEESE
Speak for yourself.

GEORGETTE
We used to live here. We moved two years ago. Better circumstances.

AMINATTA
Like what?

GEORGETTE
Just better circumstances.

LAKEESE
You sure ask a lot of questions. Does your momma know you're here?

AMINATTA
I thought grown folks were supposed to mind their own business?

LAKEESE
Oh! So you can't get all up in our business, but we can't get in yours? Where they do that at?

AMINATTA
I'm just saying you ain't got no right to look down on me.

LAKEESE
Little lady, that's not what I'm doing.

GEORGETTE
Now, we don't have to get into all that. We're glad to see you. It's always nice to see a new face around here.

LAKEESE

(under her breath)

Even if everyone else with sense has left by now.

GEORGETTE

I'm Georgette, but you can call me Georgy. This is my girlfriend, LaKeese--

LAKEESE

And that's just what I'd like to be called.

GEORGETTE

We're old friends of Amiri.

They extend their hands to be shaken. Aminatta complies.

AMINATTA

I'm Aminatta. I'm helping Amiri get the party together. Everything'll be ready in a minute.

LAKEESE

(to herself, almost)

He'll always find a reason to keep a young girl around.

AMINATTA

What was that?

LAKEESE

I'm sure he appreciates having a young, strappin' girl like you around to help.

GEORGETTE

Is Amiri inside?

LAKEESE

(to Aminatta)

Aren't those bags a little heavy for you? Don't you need help?

AMINATTA

I mean...

LAKEESE

Good. I can take one and Georgette can take the other.

GEORGETTE

I don't recall volunteering, just yet.

LAKEESE

We're here. We might as well help.

GEORGETTE

She looks like she has it. And I don't recall her asking either.

LAKEESE

Don't you see her standing there, like a deer that just realized it didn't know where it was going? Now we're Amiri's guests. We got to help out a little, too.

LaKeese takes one bag away from Aminatta.
Georgette takes the other.

AMINATTA

Thanks.

LAKEESE

Now stay right there. We'd like for you to tell us about yourself.

Georgette and LaKeese go off. Aminatta goes back
in the house.

Georgette and LaKeese return.

Now why can't some people follow directions?

GEORGETTE

What was that for?

LAKEESE

We were just being helpful.

GEORGETTE

You know what I'm talking about.

LAKEESE

I think everything will go smoother if we try our best to stay out of direct contact with Amiri until we get our money.

GEORGETTE

I just wanted to say hi.

LAKEESE

I know you think that, but your heart knows better.

GEORGETTE

He invited us. You got a text just like I did.

LAKEESE

But he specifically sent *you* a text saying he'd pay you all your money back while we were here. And we need that money to pay our rent.

GEORGETTE

He said he just wanted to get everybody from the old days together to see Kenyatta when he gets here. Good, clean fun. Just some fried fish, drinks, cards, music and dancing. He's never done that before.

LAKEESE

Good, clean fun? With Lil' Mama 2.0 in there? And with Kenyatta comin' back? Father *and* son gon' be doin' lines off her titties.

GEORGETTE

I know. And the sad thing is Kenyatta will go right back to prison if word gets out they caught him with another underage girl.

LAKEESE

So we've got to brace ourselves for trouble. It's always something with that man and his son. Thinking about it now, I just want to stay long enough to get the money and go.

GEORGETTE

But look: I've got you, right?

She takes LaKeese's hand.

LAKEESE

You know I couldn't leave you here.

Georgette kisses her.

GEORGETTE

So you don't have to worry. We'll make it out of here together.

LAKEESE

And now that I think about it, we can't leave that girl here either.

GEORGETTE

Good point.

LAKEESE

We've gotta look out for her while we're here.

GEORGETTE

So we're going to stay as long as we can, then when we go, she goes.

LAKEESE

Okay.

Georgette holds LaKeese and kisses her.

GEORGETTE

So I'm going to say hi.

She begins to walk on the porch.

AMIRI

(offstage)

Is that you, Cutie?

GEORGETTE

Don't call me that!

(to LaKeese)

When is he going to learn that?

LAKEESE

When you get serious about it and stop playing with him.

GEORGETTE

You sound like you could tear him a part.

LAKEESE

If you only knew.

Amiri comes outside to meet them.

GEORGETTE

Hey.

AMIRI

Hey there, yourself. It's been a minute. How's time treatin' you?

GEORGETTE

I can't complain.

LAKEESE

Time's been my friend, too.

AMIRI

Oh hey, Keese.

LAKEESE

Hey. How've you been?

AMIRI

Ain't a drop of water touch me that ain't bounce off me like I was rubber. What you doin' here?

LAKEESE

You texted me, too.

AMIRI

Just bein' nice. I thought you was gon' stay home.

LAKEESE

(shady, in the style of Celie from *The Color Purple*)

Well, you know Georgy like the honey and I be the bee.

AMIRI

Well, you here now. Might as well stay a spell.

GEORGETTE

(playful)

I can do a lot more than she can.

LAKEESE

Oh, *now* you want to be all helpful.

AMIRI

I'm not gon' stop you.

He goes inside the apartment. Georgette is about to follow when LaKeese stops her.

LAKEESE

Watch yourself. Don't get drawn in by him.

GEORGETTE

I told you don't have to worry about me.

They head inside the apartment. Lights fade.

SCENE 5

Amiri stands on the porch with Crim and Yela Boi, both 30. Crim wears a jersey, baggy shorts and a pair of Timberland boots. Yela Boi wears an A-shirt, a backwards hat and Nike Air Jordans. His shorts are sagging.

CRIM

Now where the cash at?

YELA BOI

Come on, man.

CRIM

Naw, man.

YELA BOI

We can do him one favor. Considerin' the circumstances.

CRIM

I would, but he always tryna miss me with the money.

YELA BOI

I'm sure we could work somethin' out. Just this once.

AMIRI

Kenyatta's coming back today.

CRIM

Don't change nothin'.

YELA BOI

You ain't always gotta be so hard.

CRIM

And you don't gotta be so soft.

YELA BOI

Don't call me that.

CRIM

Well, what do you call this?

YELA BOI

We just bein' a lil' gracious, is all.

AMIRI

I sho' would appreciate it.

CRIM

Damn, dude, don't you know when to be quiet?

(to Yela Boi)

We can't be out here givin' people free shit.

YELA BOI

It's not like we need the money bad or nothin'.

CRIM

But it's the principle: we setting a precedent. Soon, everybody up in here gon' be wanting free samples and discounts and clearance and we ain't Wal-Mart, ya feel me?

YELA BOI

“Up in here?” Bruh, who’s left?

CRIM

You know what I mean. Obsidian’s growin’, but word still gets around fast.

YELA BOI

Crim!

CRIM

Bruh, just because you more yellow than cornbread doesn’t mean you gotta be softer than talcum powder. Don’t be a stereotype.

AMIRI

You want me to have a clean party? Kenyatta can’t come home to this.

CRIM

That ain’t our problem.

AMIRI

Kenyatta needs to take his mind off things.

CRIM

All he’s got to do is find a job.

AMIRI

Yeah, but they made him register as a sex offender, and that’s going to follow him for the rest of his life. He ain’t never gon’ get a good job, so he ain’t never gon’ get a leg up. You know what knowin’ somethin’ like that can do to a man?

CRIM

It looks like you need us more than we need you.

AMIRI

I’m just tryna make things easy for him.

CRIM

Seems like you make things easy for yourself and make the money appear.

AMIRI

Look: I been knowin' y'all since y'all was little. I also knew you when you was coming up in the game. All those times I hid you away when the police was looking for y'all. Have they found you yet? You should be in Sid Penn, too--but are you?

YELA BOI

You right.

AMIRI

Now I just want something to help me bond with my son. Yeah, I do a little protestin' at first with the payment, but y'all always get ya money, somehow, some way. It may not always come from me, but you get ya money. But this one time, I just need y'all to help me and you can't do it? All right. I gotcha, but see if'n when the police come after you the next time if my door ain't closed.

YELA BOI

We really 'preciate what you did for us, Amiri.

CRIM

All right. I guess we can give you a taste. Yela, supply the man.

Yela Boi reaches into his sling bag and takes out a very small packet.

Don't ever tell nobody we didn't do anything for you.

Yela Boi gives the packet to Amiri.

AMIRI

This ain't enough.

CRIM

Exactly. You gon' want more. And *that* ain't free.

AMIRI

One of these days I'm gon' take my business elsewhere.

CRIM

I was being nice before, but you can take that lil piece then I want to see you find a bridge you ain't burned faster than paper.

AMIRI

You know I was just playin'. Why you gotta go bring that up?

YELA BOI

You know when Kenyatta's comin'?

AMIRI

I'm not sure but I think he should be here by nightfall. Y'all are welcome to stay if you want to. It's the least I could do.

YELA BOI

'Preciate it.

CRIM

Uh-huh.

Amiri heads inside.

I could bust him upside his head sometimes.

(to Yela Boi)

"When's Kenyatta comin'?" Bruh, you need a sip?

YELA BOI

It was just a question--

CRIM

(to complete his thought for him)

--That shows you're thirstier than a man three days gone in the desert.

Aminatta comes outside.

AMINATTA

Now, boys, Amiri might not have the money but if you could supply a sista with somethin' to ease her nerves--you know, just to start her off--she would pay you kindly. Looks like it's about to get tense.

CRIM

What you lookin' for?

AMINATTA

A brownie.

CRIM

Money first.

She pulls out the cash--

AMIRI (O.S.)

Aminatta, if you don't get in here where I can see you!

AMINATTA

Shit. I'll have to catch y'all later.

She heads back inside.

AMIRI (O.S.)

So, you wanna get out of my sights, huh? I got somethin' for you to do.

Crim and Yela Boi laugh.

Georgette comes out of the apartment.

YELA BOI

Hey, Georgy. It's good to see you back around again. How you been?

GEORGETTE

What can y'all tell me about this Aminatta?

YELA BOI

She can't replace you, Georgy. I wouldn't worry about her.

GEORGETTE

Thanks for being nice, Yela. I want the information.

Yela Boi opens his mouth, but Crim blocks him.

CRIM

She might be the only girl Amiri done had around here for awhile.

GEORGETTE

You can't just tell me something like that. What's she like?

CRIM

That's a question that might be worth something.

Georgette offers him money.

Twenty dollars? I thought you were more serious than that.

GEORGETTE

That's all I got.

Crim takes the money.

CRIM

She a real arty type. She like to paint.

GEORGETTE

What? That's useless!

CRIM

So is this twenty dollars. But I'm making do with what I got. I suggest you do the same.

GEORGETTE

Just don't tell Keese about this, okay?

CRIM

You can't afford to make extra requests.

Crim pockets the money. Georgette heads back inside. Lights fade.

SCENE 6

The Professor sweeps off the porch. Amiri comes out of the apartment.

THE PROFESSOR

Amiri, the party's coming together nicely.

AMIRI

Ay, can I get a lil' cash? I just need to buy a few things for the party.

THE PROFESSOR

Like what?

AMIRI

I got some business I need to take care of with Crim and Yela Boi.

THE PROFESSOR

I'm sorry, Amiri. I ain't got nothing on me.

AMIRI

Don't try that on me, Negro. You always come through with some money. You do business with Crim and Yela Boi just like me. Hell, you even bought a lil' taste for me a few times.

THE PROFESSOR

And you never paid me back. I learned then not to give you anything ever again.

AMIRI

You said you'd help me get the party together, right? This party is supposed to bring Kenyatta back into the family. And I can't do that without a lil' somethin' somethin'.

THE PROFESSOR

Amiri, I never bought drugs for Kenyatta before and I'm not gon' start now.

AMIRI

What you bought for me in the past, I shared that with Kenyatta.

THE PROFESSOR

That's another reason I'm not gon' give you any money.

AMIRI

Kenyatta took his first steps here. You would set him on the porch and let him push a basket while you swept.

THE PROFESSOR

You remember that?

AMIRI

I was worried when I didn't see Amiri in the house.

THE PROFESSOR

You were paranoid. You shouldn't've been smoking in the house. You should have been doing that down the street somewhere.

AMIRI

It's my place. I can do what I want. And besides, you had Kenyatta, so I knew I could light up in peace. You were a godsend to me as a young father.

THE PROFESSOR

It didn't matter because as soon as you saw him outside, you snatched him up and brought him back inside in your room. I had to sneak him out and take him to my house. I guess you want to forget that part, huh?

AMIRI

But the main thing is you always did what you thought was best for Kenyatta.

THE PROFESSOR

Where is this going?

AMIRI

The best thing for Kenyatta right now is to have something that puts him at ease and makes him a part of the family. You should know better than anybody. You were as much a father to him as I was.

THE PROFESSOR

I must admit you almost got me walking me down memory lane. But I haven't known you this long to completely fall for your shit. I'll help you do whatever else you need to get the party together, but I'm not giving you any money.

Amiri heads inside. The Professor continues to sweep. Lights fade.

SCENE 7

Aminatta, Georgette and LaKeese exit out of the house with decorations, heading to the exterior windows. They begin to decorate them.

LAKKEESE

I hope these are the last ones.

GEORGETTE

Who knows?

LAKEESE

You had to say the windows would look better with some trim. You should've been asking him for your money.

GEORGETTE

He asked my opinion.

LAKEESE

You could've said anything but this!

GEORGETTE

I'm trying to help Amiri out. The money will come later.

LAKEESE

Do you want me to ask for you?

GEORGETTE

I'll ask when the time is right.

AMINATTA

What money?

GEORGETTE

Nothing. Let's put these up and maybe we'll be done with this.

AMINATTA

Amiri was just looking for something to keep me busy. He never does this for his regular parties.

GEORGETTE

That's because I wasn't here. I used to decorate the house every time Amiri had a little get-together. He would always say I made this place look like the best thing in Obsidian. And I used to cook all the food for the parties, too. My specialty was tilapia. Amiri used to say the taste of my fish would make him smack his momma if she wasn't already dead. No offense, but you young girls just don't have those skills.

AMINATTA

(oblivious)

I'm definitely not tryna gain 'em.

LAKEESE

My baby doesn't need Amiri to know she got talent.

GEORGETTE

(to change the subject)

How long have you been coming to Amiri's parties?

AMINATTA

A few months now.

GEORGETTE

They seem fun, don't they? I am glad to get out of that house. It's so cramped in there now. It felt like a whole world was in that house when we partied here. I don't know what happened.

LAKEESE

So many people were packed in there. You didn't know where you began and another person ended.

GEORGETTE

You remember when you almost cut Ray Ray?

LAKEESE

When he stepped on my shoes? Ray Ray should have known better.

GEORGETTE

He was drunk!

LAKEESE

Fool could've disappeared in the crowd. But he standin' there like he in purgatory waiting for the judgement.

GEORGETTE

He was waiting for that left hook. Oh, it was mean! Knocked him onto the sofa. And everybody all emptied out here because didn't nobody want to get hit! You dragged him out behind us. Threw him out on the ground. Said you had to make an example. Said this was the last time someone was going to step on your shoe. Only thing that saved him was his woman comin' forward, sayin' his children needed him. They all made room for you after that. It didn't matter how packed in we was.

AMINATTA

You did all that?

GEORGETTE

Hampstead is a rough place. For some people, it was be the one who gets or be the one who gets got. I thought you would know that.

AMINATTA

I do. I'm just kinda surprised--

LAKEESE

What? That it was a woman who did it to him? Well, one of us had to stand up. Some men love to pick on women until they meet they match. I can't afford to take no shit.

GEORGETTE

I can't believe you haven't heard of that. Even five-year-olds know who Keese is.

LAKEESE

You from round here?

AMINATTA

Is it that obvious?

GEORGETTE

Oh, I see now.

LAKEESE

Well, well, well.

LAKEESE

What side of town you stay on?

AMINATTA

It's not like I'm from Newton Park.

LAKEESE

I didn't ask that.

AMINATTA

I don't think I should say.

LAKEESE

We won't think any less of you.

Aminatta still hesitates.

AMINATTA

Hymill Court.

LAKEESE

Oh, you mean the Negroes who think they in the suburbs, but everybody know they a fancier version of Hampstead Homes?

AMINATTA

I knew I shouldn't've told you.

LAKEESE

Oh girl, g'on and take that plastic silver spoon out ya mouth.

Both Georgette and LaKeese laugh.

AMINATTA

It's not the projects.

LAKEESE

How much ya momma pay for rent?

Aminatta remains silent.

(fake English accent)

What is the square footage?

Aminatta remains silent.

So I guess you just wanted to see how the other side lives. So whaddaya think?

Aminatta remains silent.

GEORGETTE

She's just playin'.

LAKEESE

She should know that.

Amiri comes to the screen door to check on the progress of everthing, but stands still, listening, unnoticed.

But y'all got that nice white brick wall surrounding the houses. We didn't have that when I was growing up around here.

AMINATTA

It doesn't even have a gate. Anybody can come in and go out.

LAKEESE

(to Georgette)

Oh, she wants a gate now?

AMINATTA

You askin' me all these questions like you think you better than me.

LAKEESE

So you a sheltered little lady? Okay I'm done.

GEORGETTE

We've got a harder skin because we used to play the dozens when we were younger.

AMINATTA

I got a tough skin. It might not be as thick and crusty as yours but I've got it.

LAKEESE

She doesn't just have teeth. She's got bite.

GEORGETTE

We just want you to watch out for yourself.

AMINATTA

I'm doing just fine, thank you.

LAKEESE

If you need anything--anything--you let us know.

AMINATTA

So after you clown me, now you wanna be my mommas?

LAKEESE

We didn't say all that.

AMINATTA

Well, I don't need anything and I don't want you to ask. I can handle myself.

She turns to go in the house, but freezes when she sees Amiri.

Amiri comes out.

AMIRI

I know you ain't gon' leave things like that, is you?

AMINATTA

Like what?

AMIRI

You act like I wasn't just standing there. I might not have heard everything, but I heard enough.

LAKEESE

Why you listenin' to the womenfolk? Don't you know when to leave something be?

AMIRI

Y'all seem like ya needed a bit of help.

LAKEESE

Well, this is a bit of an unwelcomed surprise..

AMIRI

It's a happy day for all of us. I can't allow for any discord. Kenyatta wouldn't want to see us like that.

LAKEESE

The old Amiri would have encouraged us to fight--

Amiri covers Aminatta's ears.

--and took money on the side as to who would win. Oh, you don't want her to hear that?

AMIRI

Damn, do we need to go over every sin? I wouldn't have invited you here if I was going to allow all that. I'm trying to get away from all that. I'm fun now.

LAKEESE

You were “fun” before.

AMIRI

I just want to bring everybody together. Are you going to stand in the way of that?

He takes his hand off Aminatta’s ears.

AMINATTA

I heard some of that.

AMIRI

I don’t care. You need to apologize to these ladies.

AMINATTA

They started with me first.

AMIRI

Sometimes we gotta put shit aside for the greater good.

AMINATTA

So you’re taking their side?

AMIRI

I’m not saying that.

AMINATTA

Then why are you comin’ down on me, then?

AMIRI

Let’s just say you started off on the wrong foot. Just wipe it from your mind and put a good one forward.

AMINATTA

You used to be fun.

LAKEESE

She just smellin’ herself. I know how to handle that.

AMIRI

These ladies don't mean you no harm. And besides, the sooner you do it, the sooner you can be done.

AMINATTA

I'm sorry.

AMIRI

(to Georgette and LaKeese)

Y'all done yet?

AMINATTA

I am.

She heads back into the apartment.

LAKEESE

What the--

AMIRI

Sorry, she stubborn sometimes.

GEORGETTE

Well, you tried. That's what counts. You're doing good with her. We're not even close to done.

AMIRI

I bet I could get her to come back out.

LAKEESE

No, I think you've done enough. We'll just give her a minute and we'll makeup then.

AMIRI

Well, not too long. This needs to get done before Kenyatta arrives.

GEORGETTE

I don't really need her. She was slowing me down any way. I used to have this place ready for your parties quicker than you could snap your fingers.

AMIRI

No, she'll help you.

GEORGETTE

If you insist.

LaKeese elbows Georgette.

What?

LaKeese covertly slides her thumb back and forth under her fingers.

I don't know what you're talking about.

LAKEESE

I'm tryna give you a chance like you wanted. Ask him.

Georgette still looks dumbfounded.

I knew I'd have to do this. In the meantime, Amiri, when you gon' pay Georgy the money you owe her?

AMIRI

What money?

LAKEESE

Oh, now you wanna be brand new? The money you borrowed from her over the past seven years every time you didn't have enough to buy some rocks or pills or when you needed food. You texted Georgy that you would pay her back.

AMIRI

I don't remember saying that.

LAKEESE

Georgy, show him.

GEORGETTE

There's no need for that right now. Kenyatta's coming home. Amiri's doing his best to get the house ready. He's got a lot on his mind right now.

LAKEESE

That's really the only reason we came.

AMIRI

And here I thought you really wanted to welcome Kenyatta with open arms like I did. That really breaks my heart that you'd think of money at a time like this.

GEORGETTE

I think it would be best if everyone took a break and came back shortly.

Amiri organizes the decorations on the porch and goes inside.

LAKEESE

What is wrong with you?

GEORGETTE

I told you I would ask him when the time is right. Don't do that again.

LAKEESE

But you had proof, so he can't deny it.

GEORGETTE

I know what I'm doing. If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't be in this position, so just back off.

Georgette and LaKeese head inside. Lights fade.

SCENE 8

Crim and Yela Boi stand outside, shooting the shit. Aminatta bursts out of the apartment.

AMINATTA

I can't stand this shit.

CRIM

You back again, little lady?

AMINATTA

I didn't think I would have to take this at Amiri's, I thought it'd be easy.

YELA BOI

He just on edge today cause he want everything perfect. Think about if you couldn't see your momma for a long time. And then you could. God forbid some shit like that happen, but what if it did? Wouldn't you want everything to be right?

AMINATTA

My momma ain't speaking to me right now. And I like it that way.

YELA BOI

What happened?

AMINATTA

Are you my therapist?

YELA BOI

I just thought you wanted to talk.

AMINATTA

I'm just tired of Amiri. I never thought I'd say that.

YELA BOI

He'll chill once he get a lil' somethin' in his system. You just gotta wait a minute.

CRIM

We ain't forgot. Still need somethin' to take the edge off? We got you.

AMINATTA

Damn, thanks.

Amiri comes outside.

AMIRI

Girl.

AMINATTA

Shit.

AMIRI

(to Crim and Yela Boi)

Y'all can't sell to her.

CRIM

If she want a taste and she got the money, who are you to tell us how to run our business?

AMIRI

She sixteen.

AMINATTA

I'll be seventeen later this month.

CRIM

(to Amiri)

Oh, you all high and mighty now. She got a brain and mouth. Why don't you let her use it then?

AMINATTA

And you was just out here tryna get some ice earlier.

AMIRI

But I know what's in this. I tried it before, many times in fact. I don't deal with these two before. They went to high school with Kenyatta. When he was a senior, they were sophomores. We got a rapport.

CRIM

But we always welcome a new customer.

AMIRI

Crim, you'd sell the clothes off ya Momma's back, steal them back and resell them at a higher price. Yela Boi, you should know better.

YELA BOI

I ain't do nothin'!

AMINATTA

So I guess Amiri's daddy to all of us!

She hurries back in the house, followed by Amiri.
Lights fade.

SCENE 9

Amiri and the Professor come outside. Amiri decorates the door with flowers while the Professor sits down to craft a wreath.

AMIRI

I don't know what's wrong with these kids now. Aminatta ain't usually like this.

THE PROFESSOR

She come from Hymill Court. You know they got those fully furnished apartments and you know it ain't just poor folks livin' together, it's that new mixed income housing they been talking about doing for years. You know those kind of young folks ain't used to struggle, so when they run into the slightest hint of trouble they don't know how to act.

AMIRI

Not you, too.

THE PROFESSOR

You know I had to get one in, too. We make fun of her, but everybody from Hamstead tried to get those last few appointments for an apartment in Hymill. Remember they had to have a lottery six weeks ago?

AMIRI

That's all people were talking about, how they were going to get a fresh start, build something new. If you couldn't do something good here, how the hell you gon' do something better there?

THE PROFESSOR

At least they tryna find something better.

AMIRI

(to change the subject)

Kenyatta's going to jump out of his skin when he sees all this. He gon' have to take a moment from himself. Then he'll hug me for the longest time. Jump in my arms like a little kid.

THE PROFESSOR

If only you did this when he was eight, he would love you even more. I think he'd hug you anyway, but that's more out of respect. The Bible says, "Honor thy mother and thy Father that thy days shall be longer on the Earth."

AMIRI

We ain't never read no Bible when he was growing up. He should know more country sayings than Bible verses. What you talkin' about?

THE PROFESSOR

If you don't know, ain't no need in puttin' the information on you now. No wonder you throwin' a party.

AMIRI

Is that supposed to be a riddle or something? Sometimes I swear you ain't nothing but foolishness.

THE PROFESSOR

I noticed you ain't decorated his room yet.

AMIRI

I'ma get to it when I get to it. I ain't been in there since he was eight.

THE PROFESSOR

I get it. I don't care how much air you give it or alcohol you put on it, some things never go away. Next time you look, it might even spread.

AMIRI

I never let Kenyatta sleep in there. He always slept with me, easy as cream.

THE PROFESSOR

He slept easier at my house. It would probably be better if you didn't decorate the room and kept the door locked. I would make sure Kenyatta never went upstairs.

AMIRI

I got a good mind to steal that idea.

THE PROFESSOR

After this, you should focus on movin' yourself outta here and on to some place better and less crowded with memories. This place has got to feel like a mountain sometimes. When you gon' come over it? Picture yourself settin' down feet in a new place where the air is fresh and the space is free and new. Lotta people will shoot someone's face clean off for that.

AMIRI

Fool, and where I'ma go? Besides I'm Goliath and I got a handle on every thing around me, especially this place.

THE PROFESSOR

But don't you ever think what life would be like if you lived somewhere else?

AMIRI

That's an idea that's just fit enough for me to wipe my ass with.

THE PROFESSOR

But we both know this place wasn't meant to last. Hell, it was only supposed to house us until they built the cigarette plant in the sixties.

AMIRI

Is that why you left?

THE PROFESSOR

But I always come back.

AMIRI

But you always say you're just visiting.

THE PROFESSOR

I guess I just wanted the freedom. To come and go as I please. Nothin' chaining me to this place like a slave.

AMIRI

What you tryna say?

THE PROFESSOR

I said what I said.

Amiri finishes decorating the door. The Professor finishes the wreath. He puts it on the door. Amiri takes two small dolls out of his pocket and pins them to the wreath.

THE PROFESSOR

Oh, you got the little decorative dolls from when we lived in the country.

AMIRI

I'm just bringing these out for Kenyatta. Wouldn't use them any other day when people was still livin' in Hamstead. They might have run off with them and sold them. You know people always want old things for some reason. These the only two I got.

THE PROFESSOR

Please promise me you'll leave when the party's over.

AMIRI

Just when you starting to get back on my good side. Now you done put me in a bad mood all over again.

Amiri heads in the house, leaving the Professor alone. Lights fade.

SCENE 9

The Professor is gone.

Yela Boi heads outside to take a phone call, trying to get a signal. It's getting louder inside.

Amiri comes outside.

AMIRI

I been tryna get a moment alone with you for a minute.

YELA BOI

Pause. It's a little late for life changes like that.

AMIRI

You funny. No, it's just you always with Crim.

YELA BOI

For a reason.

AMIRI

Yeah, but I just need to speak with you.

YELA BOI

There's only one reason you need to talk to me. You didn't have to prove Crim right that fast.

AMIRI

He set up a trap he knew I couldn't stay away from. All I can do is compliment the man.

YELA BOI

But you heard what Crim said.

AMIRI

But you know what I'm tryna do. So I think you'd be more amenable to the cause.

YELA BOI

I'm not tryna get on Crim bad side

AMIRI

He don't have to know.

YELA BOI

Let it be, Amiri. That's not how the business works and you know that. Just find someone with the money. How hard is that?

AMIRI

You know I'd always considered you family.

YELA BOI

You did?

AMIRI

I watched you boys grow up and as much as you would hang around Kenyatta, you were practically my son-in-law.

YELA BOI

Yeah, those were good times.

AMIRI

You were always holding him with your face hanging over his shoulder. I used to think to myself, if there's anyone I'd be comfortable leaving my son with, it'd be you. I know you want to see him.

YELA BOI

I mean...

AMIRI

Don't lie to me or yourself.

YELA BOI

We always talked about moving in together after he graduated from college. To Atlanta. He'd get an internship at a television station, then he'd become a reporter. I'd get a manufacturing job. I can't trap forever. I mean we knew it would be hard, and it might take a long time, but I knew I'd be okay if I could lay my head on his chest, you feel me.

AMIRI

Sounds like a plan. I believe it would've happened if he hadn't gotten locked up.

YELA BOI

Sad how shit changes. Does he ever ask about me?

AMIRI

I can't get him to stop. You linger on his mind like the dew on grass. It's not natural to stand in the way of love. I'll make sure that you get your time in with him when he gets here, but you know what I need first.

YELA BOI

Why do you need it so bad?

AMIRI

It'll truly make us a family.

YELA BOI

How?

AMIRI

This lets you be who you really are. And what's family if it ain't a bunch of people who you can really be yourself with?

YELA BOI

I feel that.

AMIRI

See, Crim don't understand nothing about family. He too focused on his money. Can you share with *him* the story you just told *me*?

Suddenly, Crim comes out.

CRIM

(to Yela Boi)

I been looking for you. This is the exact reason why we stick together.

(to Amiri)

If you want anything else, you go through me. Elsewise, I'll break your legs.

Amiri goes back inside.

A beat.

The Professor comes out.

THE PROFESSOR

I hear Amiri was just tryna make a purchase.

CRIM

No, he wasn't tryna purchase anything. He was looking for a giveaway. He always try to exploit every connection he got, but never to the right ends.

YELA BOI

We were just talking.

CRIM

And a gorilla pushed me out her cooch yesterday.

THE PROFESSOR

If he ain't got the money, I do. So let's talk shop.

CRIM

You gon' pay for Amiri. I thought you didn't like him like that.

THE PROFESSOR

I didn't say I was paying for Amiri. I think I've been generous enough through the years. I'm talking about buying your whole inventory right now. Amiri don't need to get his hands on any of that.

CRIM

Why you so interested in him getting a taste?

THE PROFESSOR

The most important thing for Amiri is the drugs and the food. Without that, the party fall apart. And when that happens, maybe he'll learn his lesson.

CRIM

You a cold muh'fucka, but I like it.

THE PROFESSOR

Now can we do business or what?

CRIM

You got that kind of money?

THE PROFESSOR

You don't know what I got. How much does it cost?

Crim whispers into his ear.

Oh, I *don't* have that. But Amiri won't get the cash anyway to buy somethin' from y'all.

CRIM

But you never know. He crafty.

THE PROFESSOR

But who gon' lend him some money? I ain't gon' give him nothin'. And LaKeese sho' ain't gon' give him nothin'. And he can't con her into playin' cards with him. Course she had her troubles with that before, but I believe she cut that gamblin' loose. And she gon' let Georgette give him some cash when there ain't an ember left in hell.

CRIM

So what you wanna do then?

THE PROFESSOR

I'll have a little somethin' for myself then.

CRIM

Of course. You know what it is. Cash first.

The Professor pays him. Crim signals Yela Boi.
Yela Boi gives him a small packet.

If you got more money, we can give you a little more. We can't give you everything, but we can work with you.

THE PROFESSOR

This is good for now.

CRIM

Now we can give you our inventory when you come up with the money. Don't be like Amiri and try to separate us. I'll smack fire out ya ass.

THE PROFESSOR

Wouldn't think of it.

CRIM

One more thing: Ain't our silence worth something? You wouldn't want Amiri to find out.

THE PROFESSOR

You Negroes.

He pays Crim a little extra. Crim and Yela Boi head inside the apartment. The Professor is left alone, eyeing the packet. Lights fade.

SCENE 11

The Professor takes out a glass pipe and a lighter. Aminatta comes out the door. She notices him. He notices her.

THE PROFESSOR

I thought Amiri was keeping you busy.

AMINATTA

Ay, let me get in on that.

THE PROFESSOR

Not today.

He puts up his utensils.

AMINATTA

It's not like I don't know what you're doing.

THE PROFESSOR

Doesn't matter. I don't do this in front of the kids. Even if they know about me. Sorry, it's just my personal code.

AMINATTA

Dammit.

THE PROFESSOR

Ain't you supposed to be throwing that trash away?

AMINATTA

Everybody always got something for me to do! Ain't never a moment of rest. Ain't this supposed to be a party?

THE PROFESSOR

Moments like this is why you constantly doing chores.

AMINATTA

I ain't home. I came here to get away from home.

The Professor laughs.

THE PROFESSOR

You remind me of Amiri when he was your age.

AMINATTA

I do?

THE PROFESSOR

When he was your age, Amiri was running around thinking his shit smelled like cologne. His parents thought it'd be a good idea for him to live with me here in Hamstead Homes.

One day Amiri caught me lighting up on my day off. His eyes lit up and he grinned. He asked if he could smoke a little bit with me. I looked at him funny, then I gave him some. We lit up together after that for some time. After a while, he started to get his supply outside of me.

I straightened up a lil' bit and thought I'd do the same for him.

I went to go see him hanging in that apartment over yonder. He was laid out on a dingy couch. I gave him the choice of straightening up or leaving my place for good. He refused. I went away, packed his shit, came back and dropped it on his chest as he lay in that same spot on the couch.

I thought that would make him get his shit together. Well, I thought.

A few years later, I left Hampstead. Amiri didn't.

Sometimes I think about what would have happened if I made the choice not to share that first hit with Amiri, if I hadn't failed in givin' him a lesson the day I found him on that couch...

But I'm not gon' make the same mistake with any of you youngins.

AMINATTA

You know you long winded, right?

THE PROFESSOR

Well, let me be to the point: Throw that trash away and get your little ass in that house.

She does. The Professor follows her inside. Lights fade.

SCENE 12

Georgette struggles to put up the rest of the decorations on the porch while LaKeese sits in a chair.

GEORGETTE

I'd greatly appreciate the help.

LAKEESE

I thought you told Amiri you got this. You said you use to have it up "quicker than you could snap your fingers," as I recall.

GEORGETTE

Those decorations were simpler. While we were inside, I made more sophisticated trimmings to fit the occasion that I thought you would help me with.

LAKEESE

I suspect you also did it for a certain someone. I'm not in the mood.

GEORGETTE

I don't know what you're talking about. Well, this party can't come together if we don't put up these decorations.

LAKEESE

How about this: When Amiri gives us the money, I'll come to the rescue.

Georgette goes to LaKeese.

GEORGETTE

If you come to my rescue, I've got something extra special for you later.

She massages her leg. LaKeese jerks it away.

LAKEESE

Ha! Still no.

Georgette resumes decorating

Aminatta comes out to place paint brushes and utensils on the porch. Seeing LaKeese, she starts to head back inside, but Georgette catches her.

GEORGETTE

I'd hate to ask, but can you help me decorate?

AMINATTA

I thought she'd be gone by now, or just not where we are.

GEORGETTE

You know there's going to be a point when you can't come here any more, right?

AMINATTA

Don't remind me.

GEORGETTE

Whether you like it or not, Hampstead is going to be rubble beneath our feet next week. This might be the last time you can come here. You act like the place means so much to you, but you can't take this last chance to make it beautiful. I don't understand.

AMINATTA

It's not that. I just don't want to work with your girlfriend. She got a nasty attitude.

LAKEESE

If that ain't the pan of rotten fish callin' the pot of chitlin' juice stank!

GEORGETTE

All right, girls. Round one's over. Aminatta, we know you love this place and Amiri. Consider this one last favor to him. What do you say?

AMINATTA

(to LaKeese)

Okay. See, was that so hard? She knows how to talk to people. You could learn something.

LaKeese brushes her shoulder off to Aminatta.

Aminatta grabs the paint and utensils off the porch. She starts painting intricate patterns around the front door.

GEORGETTE

I didn't expect that. How long have you been painting?

AMINATTA

Since I was six, so like ten years.

GEORGETTE

You're good. It really shows. I wish I had talent like that when I was your age. It almost makes me want to take up some kind of art, but I couldn't imagine that now.

AMINATTA

It's not all you think it is. All my mom's friends want me to paint something for them. Their jewelry, their vases, lil' bit of the wall above their beds, you name it. You see that banner?

GEORGETTE
(looking up at the banner)

Yeah.

AMINATTA
I did that. It gets exhausting. When I go to college, I swear I'm just gon' paint in secret.

GEORGETTE
So you wanna go to college? Where do you want to go?

AMINATTA
Duke, Wake Forest, North Carolina State or UNC.

LAKEESE
Why not A&T, Winston-Salem State, Central or Livingstone?

AMINATTA
They're not known for what I wanna major in.

GEORGETTE
And what is that?

AMINATTA
Political Science.

LAKEESE
The mouth you got on you, I thought it would be Communications at least. But Political Science tracks, too.

GEORGETTE
But people from Obsidian have a strong history of getting into those universities.

AMINATTA
Well, I could break that history.

GEORGETTE
Why do you want to?

AMINATTA
It would just be nice to be in a different environment.

LAKEESE

I knew you were the type to pretend they wearing silk when they got on cotton just like the rest of us.

GEORGETTE

Stop teasing the girl, Keese. And let her get her thought out.

AMINATTA

I'm not tryna be better than anybody or nothin'. Don't you get tired of Obsidian sometimes?

LAKEESE

No, I'm proud to be here. Wouldn't be anywhere else. To me, Obsidian's the jewel of North Carolina.

AMINATTA

It's always the same faces here in Obsidian. And I thought we had the freedom to choose where we wanted to learn. I get sick and tired of people telling me where to go for college. It's like when people want to go outside of HBCUs, they ain't real. I think people think they gon' lose they smartest and brightest to the outside world, but that's not gon' happen with me. I'm coming back. I want to help people like us who ain't got advantages. That includes saving places like Hampstead. I know it's too late to save this place, but I don't want this to happen some place else like Hymill Court. Places like this are history to so many people. It's so sad what's happening to Amiri. We can't let the people on the high end of the scale take that history away from us just because they want to polish the city to look good. So even though I want to go away, that don't mean I don't carry Obsidian with me.

LAKEESE

Well, it looks like your mind is made up. Honestly, we're sorry we ever tried to change it. I like you a little better now.

AMINATTA

Honestly, this is the only place where nobody wants anything from me. Usually, I can come here, smoke a blunt with Amiri and let my problems go. That's what I wanted to do today. But he actin' all weird.

GEORGETTE

We used to come here for the same reasons. Amiri is a specialist at making you forget. What were you trying to get away from, if you don't mind my asking?

AMINATTA

You know when I said that my mom's friends want me to paint things for them. One friend wanted me to paint the side of her house.

LAKEESE

For free, right? We don't do that. I would've politely let her know my price and where she could send the money.

GEORGETTE

I think so, too. You should have told your mother.

AMINATTA

My mom told her I would do it. She ain't got no right to do that.

LAKEESE

How much does your mother make?

No response.

Sorry. It's just if I'm gon' make deals like that for my child, I'm gon' make sure they taken care of first. Don't you need money for college?

AMINATTA

That's what I told her, but she's talking about that's almost two years away and we'll have made enough money by then to take care of college.

LAKEESE

Does she know how much college costs? She talking like she been saving since you was born.

AMINATTA

We're on Section Eight. She's got a little money saved, but it's not going to be enough.

GEORGETTE

She should know better. She's being too nice.

AMINATTA

She said I was being disrespectful. Is it disrespectful to think about my future? She said we take care of our friends.

LAKEESE

How are they taking care of you? They cooking food for you? They comin' over and fixing up your house? Better yet, they putting some money toward your college?

AMINATTA

I just couldn't look at her. I was glad when she went to work, but that wasn't enough. I got my bookbag and I caught the bus over here.

GEORGETTE

What does she think you're going to do? Bury yourself in loans and hope someone digs you out before it's too late?

LAKEESE

That's enough to make you feel ain't a thing to get out of bed for in the morning.

GEORGETTE

But let's focus on solutions. Are there some scholarships available?

AMINATTA

I'm taking the PSAT. I'll get the chance to compete for the National Merit Scholarship Program if I score really high. Then I wouldn't have to worry about money. Since I can't make money off my art, it's the only thing that'll help me. But I didn't score so high on the last one. And I studied for months. And I'm not sure about this one, either. My head's been in practice tests since I got the scores awhile ago. It's depressing as fuck. I was trying to get away from that just for one night.

LAKEESE

Shit, that's sad. You got dreams and ain't even got the means to chase 'em.

GEORGETTE

Keese!

LAKEESE

My bad. We don't want you to give up on yourself. We'll help you study--if that's what you want.

AMINATTA

Thanks.

She's finished painting. She steps back to look at her work.

How does that look?

LAKEESE

(to Georgette, almost under her breath)

Sad the only people who'll see it is the people at this party, Kenyatta and the demolition crew.

Georgette elbows her.

Oh, I mean I wish more people could see it.

GEORGETTE

That's not what I wanted you to say.

She's finished with her own decorations. It looks equally impressive, but maybe a little overwhelming for the eye.

Which one do you think looks better?

LAKEESE

(to take her down a bit)

They both look nice to me, but I think Amiri's gon' like Aminatta's more.

AMINATTA

(laughing)

It's not a competition.

LAKEESE

Someone seems to think it is.

AMINATTA

Ay, thanks for letting me get that off my chest. I wanted to talk to Amiri about it, but he's so focused on getting everything right for Kenyatta and protecting me. It's like he's so focused on it, he doesn't have time to check in with me to see how I feel, you know what I'm talking about? Y'all ain't as bad as I thought you was.

GEORGETTE

Honestly, I thought you were just one of those kids who just parties with Amiri and leaves. They were so many of 'em, I didn't really bother getting to know them because as soon as you'd learn their names, they'd get too old to party with Amiri.

LAKEESE

That's Amiri's fault. And we the fools who hung around even after all those kids grew up. You ain't too bad yourself, Aminatta. Now you use a book or a tablet to study?

AMINATTA

A book. It's in my bookbag. I'll show you.

They follow her into the apartment. Lights fade.

SCENE 13

From inside the apartment:

LAKEESE (O.S.)

Hey, Georgy I need your phone. Mine died.

A beat.

Thanks.

LaKeese comes outside with Georgette's phone, searching it for a chill.

GEORGETTE

(coming to the door)

Hey, I need my phone back. I gotta--

(catching LaKeese)

What are you doing?

LAKEESE

Where's the text Amiri sent you?

GEORGETTE

So, your phone didn't die. You don't trust me.

LAKEESE

Not around Amiri. Where's the text?

GEORGETTE

I deleted it.

LAKEESE

Do you even want the money? Do you want things to go back to the way they were?

GEORGETTE

I just don't want to give you any more fuel to add to the fire you want to light under Amiri's ass. He knows what he owes me. You can't ambush him like you did. Who would blame him for forgetting?

LAKEESE

You're already decorating for him again. Now, you're making excuses for him. Soon, you'll be cooking tilapia. Then you won't get any money back because you'll be giving him more. And it's only a matter of time before you're taking a hit off the rock with him again just like when you two were together.

GEORGETTE

You didn't have to bring that up.

LAKEESE

He's a danger to you. And I want to protect my baby.

GEORGETTE

By gambling away your half of the rent money? That's how you protect me?

LAKEESE

You didn't have to bring *that* up. I was on a winning streak. I thought I was going to win more.

GEORGETTE

Your excuses are worth less than a fly's shit.

LAKEESE

I said I was sorry.

Georgette laughs.

GEORGETTE

Look, we didn't want to end up back here, but we have to deal with it. We don't have another choice. I'm going to get the money back.

LAKKEESE

How you gon' do that when you're competing with a teenager for Amiri's attention?

GEORGETTE

Just trust me.

Georgette reaches her hand out for her phone.
LaKeese returns it to her. She heads inside, leaving Georgette alone. Lights fade.

SCENE 14

Georgette is correcting one of the decorations. Amiri comes outside.

AMIRI

These look so nice. I've been meaning to tell you that.

GEORGETTE

Thanks. Which looks better, mine or Aminatta's?

AMIRI

I don't like to get between my girls. I love every thing you do.

GEORGETTE

If you had to choose, which one would you pick?

AMIRI

The main thing is you and the girls made this the best celebration I could give Kenyatta...

He pulls her close.

...but no one could ever outdo you. You know what would make this even better for me and you?

GEORGETTE

What?

AMIRI

If you let me hold a lil' cash to buy something off Crim and Yela Boi.

GEORGETTE

Amiri...

AMIRI

You want me to work for it? I know a little corner upstairs in the apartment, just be us two. Like it used to be.

GEORGETTE

(laughing)

The apartment's already cramped as it is. By the time you're finished, you'd be shaped like an acute angle.

AMIRI

Just name the place and I'll be there. Just slip me a few bills and we on our way.

GEORGETTE

Aminatta shouldn't have you all to herself.

AMIRI

It's always been me and you, girl. Ain't never been nobody else.

GEORGETTE

The lies you tell...

AMIRI

If they taste sweet on the tongue and feel soft on the ear, does it really matter? Yeah, there have been other girls, but nothing's going on with Aminatta.

GEORGETTE

I can't do this to LaKeese.

AMIRI

What's she need to know for? My lips are sealed if yours are. I'm not tryna hurt nobody. Are you?

GEORGETTE

I don't have any money, Amiri.

AMIRI

Come on, girl. I'm not the only one who can lie.

She breaks away from Amiri to pull her pockets inside out. Amiri distances himself from her.

Oh. Well, could you at least do one more thing for me and cook dinner, fry up some of that tilapia. That'll bring the house down.

GEORGETTE

Of course. Just show me what else you're working with in the kitchen.

AMIRI

All right. Follow me.

GEORGETTE

I'll meet you in there. Just give me one minute.

Amiri heads inside.

Once he is inside, Georgette tears off part of the decorations. She heads inside. Lights fade.

SCENE 15

Crim and Yela Boi hang outside to escape the heat inside.

Amiri comes out to meet them.

AMIRI

Can I get y'all to go to the store for me to buy some fish?

YELA BOI

(holding and shaking his head)

This dude here...

CRIM

Why you can't do it? You got a set each of working hands and legs. You really shouldn't need us for too much more.

AMIRI

I got a few more decorations to put up inside the house. Then the house will be perfect for Kenyatta. I'll just need the fish...and the rocks.

CRIM

That sounds like a "you" problem.

AMIRI

Come on, the men of the family usually buy the food.

CRIM

How you tryna hustle the guests into paying for our own food?

AMIRI

That hurts. You ain't my guests.

YELA BOI

Amiri, ain't we done enough favors for you today?

AMIRI

You call that lil' pebble a favor? Usually, when you come to a party, you bring something more substantial.

CRIM

You know what, I think it's time for us to go.

They begin to walk away--

AMIRI

All right. If you buy the fish, I'll get your money. Then you give me what I want. And I'm not gon' ask you for anything else.

CRIM

Now we talking. Whatcha want?

AMIRI

I think some tilapia will make everything all right. That's Kenyatta's favorite. I used to dip it in batter and put it in Nature's Seasons. It was the first solid food he ate and he's loved it ever since. Georgette makes it the same way. She's waiting on y'all with the fish. She's already frying up some potatoes and onions and then she gon' boil some tomatoes and corn.

YELA BOI

Wait a minute. That sound good. Can I have some? Just like a sample? You done turned my mouth into a river.

CRIM

Well, don't let the Mississippi spill out. If you that hungry, we can go down to Mei Wan's and get us a chow mein sandwich.

AMIRI

I didn't think nobody besides me ate there.

YELA BOI

Dude, if Amiri eat there you know it ain't good enough for us. Sorry, Amiri.

AMIRI

No offense taken.

CRIM

Sandwiches just fifty cents. It'll do if you in a hurry, hold you over until Georgy's through cooking.

YELA BOI

That shit gon' clean me out like a laxative.

He holds his stomach.

CRIM

You sure?

YELA BOI

Dude, we ain't broke. I'll wait.

CRIM

You good?

YELA BOI

I'ma stay posted like a telephone pole.

CRIM

That's what I thought. We'll see you shortly, Amiri.

Amiri heads back inside.

Crim and Yela Boi head out--

The Professor bursts out the door to stop them.

THE PROFESSOR

Hey, I'm glad I could get a hold of you two.

(quietly)

Follow me over to the side.

They do.

CRIM

You still thinkin' about that offer to buy everything?

THE PROFESSOR

No, I'm gon' use the money I got on me. Y'all goin' to buy Amiri some fish, right?

CRIM

Yeah. What? You want something, too? We ain't your Boy Fridays, you feel me.

THE PROFESSOR

No. In fact, you ain't got to do nothing. And you could make a little more money. Now, are you gon' pass that up?

CRIM

You got our ear. Besides, you the only one actually paying us for anything.

THE PROFESSOR

Instead of going to the store, how about you go around the corner, stay awhile and say you couldn't find any fish?

YELA BOI

Man, you fuckin' with our food. I can't have that. My stomach growlin' like one of the Clark Sisters, ya feel me.

THE PROFESSOR

With the money I'm going to give you, you can take some time to dine at some of the finest restaurants in Obsidian.

CRIM

Well, wait a minute, Yela. Let's hear the man out. How much you offerin'?

The Professor shows them the money.

THE PROFESSOR

And that's for each of you. So how does that sound? We got a deal or what?

CRIM

Just around the corner, you said? For that type of money, I can't argue with you.

YELA BOI

I'm going to miss them potatoes and fish, though.

CRIM

Oh hush, fool. How long you want us to be gone?

THE PROFESSOR

About an hour to an hour and a half.

CRIM

Shit, you ain't said nothing but a word. Cash first.

The Professor pays them.

Come on, Yela.

They leave. The Professor heads back inside. Lights fade.

SCENE 16

Georgette and LaKeese sit with Aminatta on the porch, helping her study for the PSAT. Aminatta holds a pencil and a scratch piece of paper.

LAKEESE

“If Y equals X-cubed plus 2X plus 5 and Z equals X-squared plus 7-X plus 1, what is 2Y plus Z in terms of X?”

A beat as Aminatta solves.

AMINATTA

2X-cubed plus X-squared plus 11X plus 11.

LAKEESE

All right. “If A-squared plus 14A equals 51 and A is greater than 0, what is the value of A plus 7?”

A beat as Aminatta solves.

AMINATTA

Three.

LAKEESE

Damn. I’m scared of you.

GEORGETTE

Do you wanna take a break?

AMINATTA

All right.

GEORGETTE

Let me turn the food off. It should be done now.

Georgette heads inside to turn the food off.

LaKeese scoffs. She heads inside as well.

They bring out a portable table and chairs. They set everything up. LaKeese takes out a small box of cards. Everybody sits down.

LAKEESE

The game is rummy, ladies.

She deals the cards. They begin to play.

GEORGETTE

Now, take it easy on me. I haven't played in a while.

LAKEESE

Oh, girl, hush. It ain't like we play in' for money or anything.

Amiri bursts out of the apartment.

AMIRI

Wait a minute ladies. Can I get in on this?

LAKEESE

Well, we already done started.

AMIRI

You ain't really got in the game good. Just deal me in.

GEORGETTE

What's it going to hurt?

LAKEESE

He want in on everything we do! We can't have one thing for ourselves.

AMIRI

Well, it is my place...

GEORGETTE

Come on, Keese. It'll be more fun. We already know his tell.

LAKEESE

All right. Pull up a chair.

He gets a seat out from the apartment.

AMIRI
(as he sits down)

I thank you kindly.

LaKeese deals cards to Amiri. They begin to play.

Lights shift.

Rummy, motherfuckers!

He lays down his cards. LaKeese reads them.

LAKEESE

You think you slick.

AMIRI

How?

LAKEESE

You got four Queens and a king, an ace and a two of hearts.

AMIRI

I don't see what's wrong with that?

LAKEESE

Aces can be high or low but not both.

AMIRI

Who says that?

LAKEESE

Them's the rules.

AMIRI

Naw, I don't know where you got them from. I'm right.

LAKEESE

See, this is how fights get started.

GEORGETTE

It doesn't need to come to that.

LAKEESE

No, he just can't take a loss, just like the old days. You remember?

GEORGETTE

When he would swipe all the cards off the table when he saw you were winning? That would make me laugh so hard.

AMIRI

I don't know what y'all talking about. I don't remember that.

Amiri swipes all the cards off the table. Only Aminatta jumps up from the table.

I bet you didn't expect that.

Georgette starts laughing.

LAKEESE

Same ole, same ole.

AMIRI

Aminatta, if you could pick those up, I'd be so grateful.

Aminatta begins to pick up the cards.

LAKEESE

No, Aminatta, get back up. You didn't throw those cards.

AMIRI

If anything, they're your cards.

LAKEESE

But I'm not a sore loser.

Aminatta returns back to her seat.

Amiri picks up the cards.

Now was that so hard?

AMIRI

Well, since I picked them up, I should have be able to change the game.

LAKEESE

That's not how that works. We gotta help Aminatta study.

AMIRI

That test's a week away. She got time.

LAKEESE

She doesn't need to be cramming. That's a surefire way to fail.

AMIRI

I'm not saying she has to cram. She can study on her own for a bit. *We* can still afford some fun. We don't need to be all serious. It's a party.

LAKEESE

Four people does not a party make.

AMIRI

Don't forget about Crim and Yela Boi.

LaKeese laughs. She puts her hands out .

LAKEESE

Sir, I'ma need my cards back.

AMIRI

Okay, how about this: We play a game of poker. I know you can't resist that.

LAKEESE

Can't I?

AMIRI

Two years ago, your ass was glued to the seat for a game of poker. Even though you kept losin'.

LAKEESE

Even though you kept cheatin'.

AMIRI

You used to have a forty on one side and a chicken sandwich on the other. With a sparkle in your eye and a bright face.

LAKEESE

You don't know me.

AMIRI

It looked like you were at your happiest. I think that was the real you. Don't you want that again?

LAKEESE

That's a betting game. I gave that up recently.

AMIRI

It's only been two years, that's a blink of God's eye.

LAKEESE

No, like the last month.

AMIRI

Then I know the feeling ain't left you that quick. You can see it on your face. It's drained of color, almost ashen. It's like someone threw flour on your face. We spend our whole lives running from ourselves. But we always gotta come back at some point, even if that's the part we don't want the world to see, the part we'd rather keep from ourselves. Maybe it's the ugliest part. But when we come back, hopefully, we know better than when we started running in the first place. Why not do something that makes you happy?

LAKEESE

Amiri, your version of happy ain't the same as everybody else's. I need my cards.

AMIRI

How about this? If you win, I won't ever bother y'all again. Y'all can be through with me for good. If I win, you got to stay to the end of the party. Think about it.

He presents the box of cards.

A beat as LaKeese considers.

LAKEESE

Don't forget the money you still owe us.

AMIRI

I was just playing. I wasn't about to forget about that. That goes without saying.

LAKEESE

All right.

GEORGETTE

I know you're not actually considering this.

LAKEESE

It's the chance to get him out of our life for good. No more calls, no more texts inviting us to shit.

GEORGETTE

All you have to do is walk away. Just put one foot in front of the other.

LAKEESE

We can get the money he owes us back and then some. We need this. I messed shit up for us. It's my fault that we're in this mess to begin with. Let me make this right. After this, I'm putting the cards down forever and for always. I promise you.

GEORGETTE

He owes us that money. If you play or you don't play, it's not going to make a hill of difference: he still has to pay us.

LAKEESE

I've got to beat him. You won't ask for your money. Shit, the man got you cooking. You know what's next. You won't let me knock him out and collect our money. So this is the only other way I know how to get what's owed to you.

GEORGETTE

I appreciate the gesture, but you know how dangerous this is for you. Save your skin and back away.

(extending her hand)

Take my hand and follow me.

LAKEESE

Baby, my mind's made up. I got to do what I got to do.

Georgette heads back inside

Aminatta and Amiri sit back down.

AMIRI

Aminatta, this ain't a game for you. Go in the apartment and finish studying.

AMINATTA

I know how to play.

LAKEESE

That doesn't matter. You got bigger fish to fry.

AMINATTA

I don't have that much money, so it's not like I'm going to lose anything serious.

LAKEESE

But you need all the money you can get, even if it's a little bit.

AMINATTA

Well--

LAKEESE

I'm not playing if you're here.

AMINATTA

That's a little overboard, ain't it?

AMIRI

And not me either. So you can watch us doing nothing or you can go in there and spend a time wisely, studying. The choice is yours.

Aminatta goes in the house.

LAKEESE

Okay, deal.

Amiri deals the cards. They start to play.

LaKeese puts down five dollars.

AMIRI

Five dollars? You can do better than that.

LAKEESE

I'm not going to be a fool. I know better now. What you got?

Amiri puts down a few dollars.

AMIRI

That's not all I got.

LAKEESE

It's probably close.

AMIRI

We gon' play or not?

Lights shift.

Both put up more money.

Lights shift.

Both put up more money.

Lights shift.

LaKeese puts up more money. Amiri puts up change.

LAKEESE

You know you could quit at any time.

AMIRI

I think I still got a bit of luck on my side.

LaKeese laughs.

Lights shift.

They present their cards.

LAKEESE

Looks like I'll be taking your money, Amiri.

AMIRI

I'm not out yet.

Amiri puts in more change, probably pennies.

LAKEESE

That's close to nothing. You might as well bow out now. A good player knows when to leave the game.

AMIRI

You might beat me, but I'm going to go down fighting.

LaKeese puts up more money.

LAKEESE

All right--all in.

Lights shift.

Amiri deals the cards.

AMIRI

Hey, LaKeese?

LAKEESE

What?

AMIRI

I wonder when you go down on Georgette, can you still taste me on her?

LAKEESE

I've had enough of your mouth. Read 'em and weep, sucker!

She throws down her cards.

AMIRI

Well, lookee here.

He gently places his cards on the table.

Looks like I win it all.

He takes the pot.

LAKEESE

We've got to play one more game.

AMIRI

I don't think you have any more money, do ya?

LAKEESE

But Amiri, that's the money me and Georgy need to get home. You can't do that to us.

AMIRI

I just wanted to show you how easily baited you is. An addict gon' be an addict. Damn, what'd Cutie see in you?

LAKEESE

So you were just playin' me the whole time?

AMIRI

I can't play you because you wanted the thrill. I gave you that. Wouldn't family do that for one another?

LAKEESE

Fuck you.

AMIRI

If you have to stay, you might as well enjoy yourself.

LAKEESE

That ain't right, Amiri. You owe us money.

AMIRI

There never was any money. I just said that to get Cutie here. I thought I could get money off of her if I really needed it. I just had to talk to her like she wanted, but she ain't got a coin on her. I didn't expect you. But you were so much easier. Thanks to you, I got a stash I can share with my son. It'll make him forget everything and it'll be like nothing ever happened between us.

LaKeese goes back inside. Amiri admires the pot he's won. Lights fade.

SCENE 17

Inside the apartment. A few moments later.
Georgette is helping Aminatta study for the PSAT.

GEORGETTE

“X-squared plus Y-squared minus 6X plus 8Y equals 144

The equation of a circle in the XY-plane is shown above. What is the diameter of the circle?”

AMINATTA

Twenty-six.

GEORGETTE

I don't know--

LaKeese comes storming in.

So it didn't go well. How bad was it?

LAKEESE

He's got everything, including the money we needed to get home.

AMINATTA

Can't you walk home?

GEORGETTE

We live on the other side of town. Like you.

AMINATTA

Isn't there somebody you could call?

GEORGETTE

All the friends we had were here. We tried to cut everybody off when we left here so we wouldn't fall back in the same old patterns.

LAKEESE

Yeah. I thought I could beat him.

GEORGETTE

I told you, but you wouldn't listen to me.

A beat.

Aminatta, go upstairs.

AMINATTA

It's not like that's going to make a difference. These walls might as well be paper.

LAKEESE

Go!

GEORGETTE

Good God!

AMINATTA

All right.

She goes halfway up the stairs and tries to pretend that she walked up the rest of the steps.

GEORGETTE

(yelling)

We know that trick! The top step creaks when you hit it.

The sound of the top step creaking and the sound of a door closing.

Thank you.

(to LaKeese)

Well, at least you learned your lesson. Well, at least we can still count on him for the money he owes us.

LAKEESE

No, we can't. He was lying. The text he sent us was just a ploy.

GEORGETTE

So we came here just for him to game us for money.

LAKEESE

I'm sorry. I should have seen through him.

GEORGETTE

A lot of good that's going to do us.

LAKEESE

Shit. It's just like something took over me.

Georgette turns away from her.

I couldn't help myself. The money was right there. The second it hit the table. A spark came. With each bet, the spark grew into a flame so big I couldn't stop it until he took everything. Amiri snuffed it out. I saw him smile. At that point I didn't even feel like fighting. I just had to leave and come in here.

GEORGETTE

I don't want to hear that. You could've stopped yourself. You could have walked away. A good player knows how to do that. Isn't that what you used to tell me? That's what I was doing. You and Amiri can never play together. It's like if he's moving the rock up the mountain, you got to move a bigger rock.

LAKEESE

Now you wanna act the saint.

GEORGETTE

What's that supposed to mean?

LAKEESE

You were practically begging me to play with him.

GEORGETTE

So he would leave us alone. You knew he wasn't going to stop until we let him play with us.

LAKEESE

We can say no. This isn't like the old days when you were high out of our minds and you would just let him have his way.

GEORGETTE

You know how he is.

LAKEESE

Then you should have stood up for me. As much as I try to protect you, you should have my back too.

GEORGETTE

You were talking about how you had to keep me from him. So busy being my armor, you forgot to be your own.

LAKEESE

Sometimes, I shouldn't have to be.

GEORGETTE

I'm sorry. I don't have any shield or sword to use against him. I don't even have something as simple as rocks. I'm naked as a fresh baby with Amiri.

LAKEESE

The money didn't matter. You wanted an excuse to come here. Why else would you "just want to say hi" when we got here? Why did you tell him how good he was doing with Aminatta? And then you begged me to let him to play with us!

GEORGETTE

That's stupid.

LAKEESE

You say you're naked with him. I think there's a reason for that.

GEORGETTE

And what's that?

LAKEESE

You're still in love with him! Admit it!

GEORGETTE

You're being insecure!

LAKEESE

How can I not be? Amiri said he came to you for money. Why you ain't send him away?

GEORGETTE

I didn't have any money, so he left me alone.

LAKEESE

He said he was able to sweet-talk you.

GEORGETTE

Nothing happened!

LAKEESE

Don't play that with me. This is you and Amiri.

GEORGETTE

He pulled me close, that's all.

LAKEESE

When he comes into the room, I see your face light up like a full moon, like he's transformed you or something. I know we ain't got what you two had, but do you have to rub it in my face?

A chill.

Georgette walks over to LaKeese to hold her.

GEORGETTE

I don't know why I'm even mad at you. I think I'm mad at myself more than anything. I should've known he was up to no good from the start. I wanted to be taken in by him, just to see if there was something still between us. Time has a way of making things sweeter. And when we got here and I saw Aminatta...

LAKEESE

You're an adult-ass woman. Did you forget you're supposed to be helping that girl? Can I depend on you to help me do that?

GEORGETTE

I'm not even threatened by her anymore. I don't know what I was thinking.

LAKEESE

Do you want him or me?

GEORGETTE

There's something between me and Amiri, but I don't think it's love anymore. I love *you*. I knew who you were when I met you. These past five years just made me love you more. You've got some work to do and I've got work to do, but we can't do that here. I think we've been here long enough. It's time for us to go. First, let's get our money.

LAKEESE

Where's yours?

GEORGETTE

Crim.

LAKEESE

You're talking about me going back to my old ways, but you--

GEORGETTE

It's not like you think. I...I just wanted some dirt on Aminatta.

LAKEESE

Can I really trust you?

LAKEESE

I would be in Amiri's arms by now if you couldn't.

LAKEESE

Can I knock him out now?

GEORGETTE

You have my full permission.

Lights fade.

SCENE 18

Outside the apartment. Crim and Yela Boi return.

AMIRI

I've been waiting for you. What took you so long? I sent you to the store two hours ago.

CRIM

We went all over town. We couldn't find any tilapia.

AMIRI

You couldn't! I know there's got to be some somewhere. You didn't look everywhere.

CRIM

You gotta trust us. We've been all over. Do you expect us to go to the next town?

AMIRI

You know how important this is to me. You could go on the outskirts of town at least.

CRIM

You askin' a lot and you ain't givin' us no money.

AMIRI

Well, young bucks, times have changed. I have your money right here.

Amiri takes out the money.

CRIM

That's what I like to see, but that don't change nothing. We still ain't got no tilapia for you. And it's gon' take more than that to convince us to go further to look for some fish.

AMIRI

Shit. That's gon' disappoint Kenyatta, but this is worth more, so I guess we can forget the fish.

CRIM

I thought you'd see things differently. Now the money.

Amiri gives him the money.

Yela Boi gives him a brownie and is getting ready to give him more drugs when--

Georgette and LaKeese come out.

LAKEESE

Amiri, I want my money. I'm not playing.

AMIRI

I beat you for it fair and square. Don't be a sore loser. As easy as that was, you let go of that money. And now I done given it to Crim, so it's too late.

CRIM

I don't give refunds. Y'all know that.

LAKEESE

You gonna *today*. Crim, I don't think you want it with me. These the same hands that smacked the shit out of Ray Ray for stepping on my shoes. If I have to use them, I'm not just going to take *my* money, I'm taking all the money you got. Shit, I been looking for a reason to return to my old ways. I just need the slightest.

Crim gives her back the money.

She balls up her fist.

And Georgy's money too.

Crim complies.

CRIM

Come on, Yela. We made enough money anyways.

YELA BOI

Never thought I'd hear you say that. Professor, ladies, I hope we see you around.

They leave.

AMIRI

(to LaKeese)

You can't do that. That's my money now. I need that for my son.

LAKEESE

You gon' have to get it from somewhere else. I'm done playing with you, Amiri.

AMIRI

Cutie, talk some sense into your girl.

GEORGETTE

Do you want some sympathy?

AMIRI

I thought we were family.

GEORGETTE

I've got a family with LaKeese now. And it's different from yours. You need to accept that.

LAKEESE

We can't be that family anymore. That family was only meant to last as long as our addiction did. I don't know about Kenyatta, but it's not good for us.

AMIRI

You're still an addict. Always gon' be one. You need this. You really think I got you here because of some lil' bit of money I told you I was gon' repay? Keep tellin' yourself that.

GEORGETTE

You're so sad, Amiri. Still hanging on to the old days. That why you can't leave Hampstead. I bet you don't have a place to stay when they put you out. You probably didn't look.

AMIRI

I don't know what anybody else told you, but I am Hampstead!

LAKEESE

Don't tell him nothing else. If they don't throw him out, maybe we'll hear about the rubble crushing him. That's the only way he gon' get out of Hampstead. *We* leaving and we ain't coming back.

AMIRI

Well, go.

GEORGETTE

And Aminatta's coming with us. Aminatta!

Aminatta comes out of the apartment, bookbag on and ready to go.

AMIRI

You, too?

AMINATTA

I can't believe you. You were so worried about keeping me away from the drugs, but you never said I had to worry about you. Here I was thinking you was a good dude, but you just a hypocrite.

AMIRI

You wanted to be here.

AMINATTA

Save that. You gotta protect me, but you can scam Georgette and LaKeese? What kind of sense does that make?

AMIRI

I couldn't look out for you all the time, and do what I needed to do for the party. I'm not a bad man, baby girl.

AMINATTA

I thought I had someone I could really count on, but you showed me differently.

AMIRI

I did what I could to protect you because you wanted to go to college, you was going somewhere.

AMINATTA

(re: Georgette and LaKeese)

And they weren't?

AMIRI

They stuck like sticks in the mud. You should know that by now.

AMINATTA

All those times we smoked together.

AMIRI

I wasn't going to turn on you. Never was. All those times I listened to your problems with your momma, your frets about college. And all you can do is judge me like I'm some nigga off the street the second you find out something bad about me?

AMINATTA

I can't trust you.

The Professor comes out of the apartment.

Amiri offers her the brownie.

AMIRI

Isn't this what you wanted in the first place? I got it just for you. Get you right before you get to college.

AMINATTA

Now you want me to have it.

AMIRI

I was always going to get you one. I just didn't want you to get fucked up until after the party was over. I didn't want anyone to take advantage of you. As close as we is, I wouldn't let that happen to you. I'm gon' take care of you the best way I know how.

AMINATTA

No, you can keep it. It's too late for that now.

AMIRI

All right. I'm a bastard. I'm not right. But you were just like my son. And I didn't want you to go down the same path. If I could keep things right with you, maybe there was a chance I could make things right with him.

AMINATTA

But you're buying drugs for *him*!

THE PROFESSOR

About that...

Amiri only hears Aminatta.

AMIRI

What's right for you ain't the same as what's right for him.

THE PROFESSOR

Amiri...

AMIRI

I'm talking to Aminatta.

The Professor tears the banner down.

THE PROFESSOR

Dammit Amiri, you gon' listen to me now?

AMIRI

Why the fuck you do that?

THE PROFESSOR

I tore it down because you don't need it. I tried to tell you earlier. You shouldn't be having this party. It wasn't even supposed to get this far.

AMIRI

Now you got a problem with me, too. You just want to kill my buzz. Well, that's too bad. My son coming back and I got the right to throw the biggest party for him.

LAKEESE

The party's over, Amiri.

The ladies turn to leave, but the Professor stops them.

THE PROFESSOR

I'm sorry y'all wasted your time, ladies. I heard y'all was having money troubles.

He takes a check out of his pocket and gives it to Georgette.

Part of this is my fault. I told Amiri Kenyatta was coming. I hope this check makes up for some of it.

Georgette looks at the check.

GEORGETTE

I think we're good.

The ladies leave.

THE PROFESSOR

There's no reason to celebrate. Kenyatta's not coming.

AMIRI

What? You're lying. You're just jealous that he wants to come to his Pops' place instead of yours.

THE PROFESSOR

No, I'm telling the truth. Who do you think would bring him here? Why do you think you never knew the time when he was coming or who was bringing him?

AMIRI

So all this...was for nothing?

THE PROFESSOR

You weren't supposed to get the money for the drugs. The party was supposed to fall apart long before this. It would have cushioned the blow.

AMIRI

I thought I was going to get a second chance with my son. I could kill you.

THE PROFESSOR

The second chance boat done sailed and capsized. That's what you were supposed to learn. You thought you could bond with Kenyatta over a little crack. Ain't that what got you in this mess with your boy in the first place?

AMIRI

We used to get high together before he got locked up. All he went through in prison, I thought he was still getting high. When he got here it wasn't going to be any different. Anyway, it was supposed to make him forget.

THE PROFESSOR

You pimped Kenyatta out for drugs. You let your previous dealer rape that boy in his room while you got high. For years.

AMIRI

I always shared a line of coke with him after the man was done, just to soften the blow. Every time. Doesn't that make a difference?

THE PROFESSOR

It's hard to forget that, no matter how many drugs you take. That's why Kenyatta stopped doing drugs in prison. Did you know that?

No response.

You would know that if you visited him.

AMIRI

It's just too much for me. My boy had dreams. He wanted to be a reporter. He could have been if I it wasn't for me. Every time I would go, his face would just remind me of that.

THE PROFESSOR

You can't be near him and he can't forget what you did. Why did you think he'd come here?

AMIRI

There's no place in the city for people like him. I was hoping he would have to come here and we would be forced to be together. Then we could get through some shit. And everything would fall into place. Why did you do this to me?

THE PROFESSOR

I failed you. Before I gave you a hit, you were in school, had a part time job and was even helping me pay some of the bills. You were doing better with me than in the country with your parents. All that went away when I got you hooked. And when I found you in that apartment with the wrong folks, I shouldn't have left you on that couch. I should have tried harder than anything to get you off it and get you back to prosperin'. Since I failed you, you failed Kenyatta, so I feel like I let two people down. The lesson I hoped you was gon' learn was my way of starting to make up for that.

(to change the subject, sort of)

Kenyatta's a Christian, now. Did you know that?

AMIRI

Oh shit.

THE PROFESSOR

He's always throwing Bible verses at me when I visit him. I never would have thought that watching him growing up.

AMIRI

What else changed?

THE PROFESSOR

He's going to therapy. He smiles a lot more now. He looks healthier, put on a little weight.

AMIRI

It sounds like he did better in prison than he did out here.

THE PROFESSOR

Does anybody do good in there? He just got access to things he needed. He knows the road up ahead is tough, but he just wants to walk it as quietly as he can with some peace of mind.

AMIRI

Are you going to tell me where he is?

THE PROFESSOR

I think I've done enough damage today.

AMIRI

But I've got to make things right with my boy.

THE PROFESSOR

I don't think that's a good idea. You don't have to be apologize to be accountable to somebody.

AMIRI

I don't get it.

THE PROFESSOR

To some people, you always gon' be the person who caused them pain, no matter how many times you apologize or how many drugs you give them. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stay away. That can speak louder than any apology.

AMIRI

How long do I have to do that?

THE PROFESSOR

For the next few months, years. It all depends on how Kenyatta feels. He might never want to see you again.

AMIRI

That sound like some foolishness. It's been fourteen years. He shouldn't need more time than that.

THE PROFESSOR

He doesn't want to see you. And I'm not gon' tell you where he is.

AMIRI

What do I have to give you?

THE PROFESSOR

I don't want anything from you. Your boy means more than that to me.

AMIRI

He's *my* son. I deserve to see him.

THE PROFESSOR

He's an adult. You don't have any more right to him than I do.

AMIRI

But he still keeps in touch with you. Ain't that some shit?

A beat. Amiri sits in the chair on the porch.

Do you ever wonder what would have happened if I let Kenyatta stay with you for good when he was little?

The Professor sits in the other chair.

THE PROFESSOR

Every now and then. I don't know if I would have been any better. I wouldn't've made the same bargain with my dealer, but that don't mean I would have done the boy some good.

AMIRI

He's been on your knee more times than mine. You taught him how to read and walk. You went to all his debate competitions. You did that while you kept up a habit.

THE PROFESSOR

But that's just it: I still kept up the habit. Even though I gave him a lot, I couldn't give him my all.

AMIRI

You gave him more than me. That reminds me.

Amiri goes in the apartment. He comes back out with the box of medallions. He offers it to the Professor.

You can have the rest of his medallions. You put in the work for 'em.

THE PROFESSOR

Thanks, man.

AMIRI

If he wants me to stay away, I can stay away.

THE PROFESSOR

I was also hoping all this would make you leave Hampstead.

AMIRI

Mission accomplished.

THE PROFESSOR

Where you gon' go when they shut Hampstead down?

AMIRI

You offerin' a place to stay? I didn't know you had warmed up to me that much.

Both men laugh.

THE PROFESSOR

Negro please. We tried that already.

AMIRI

Then I don't know where I'm gon' go. But I know one thing: Ain't no need for these decorations no more. Can you help me take 'em down?

THE PROFESSOR

They look so nice. And they took so much effort. Are you gon' put 'em in a box somewhere?

AMIRI

That's the last thing I need.

He stands and starts tearing down the decorations.
The Professor joins him. Lights fade to black.

END OF PLAY