

**ROAR**  
**By Betty Shamieh**

**Scene 1**

*The setting: A living room in Detroit. This is the home of the Yacoub family. The living room and the doors of the kitchen, bathroom, and two bedrooms are visible. The bedroom doors are on opposite sides of the stage. The home has been converted out of the space above a small, but lucrative party store that they own. A party store is a liquor store that also sells some food items and there is one on practically every corner of downtown Detroit.*

*A neon sign "Ahmed's Liquor and Snacks" and an arrow pointing downward should be visible.*

*In the living room, there is an odd mix of European furniture covered in plastic and Middle Eastern embroidered tapestries.*

*Karema sits at a table, methodically counting large stacks of money. There is plate heaping with peeled and sliced fruit on the table. She stops counting when first Irene, then Ahmed enter through the front door.*

IRENE

Mom, I can sing! You should have heard me tonight. I was hotter than hot.

KAREMA

People who are that great don't have to brag about it.

*Pause. Irene locks eyes with her mother who returns her stare innocently.*

IRENE

You know, Mom...sometimes...forget it. *(heads towards her room)*

KAREMA

You must be hungry. Have some fruit. *(blocks Irene's way, and offers her the plate of fruit)*

IRENE

No.

AHMED

I'll take some.

*Ahmed takes the plate from Karema and sits down to eat.*

IRENE

For your information, I wasn't bragging, Mom. I was just trying to tell you about something important that happened tonight. That was a mistake. *(tries to step past Karema)*

KAREMA

*(blocking her way)* Tell me.

AHMED

Tell her, Irene. You know, Karema, these figs are dry. *(continues to chew with a sour expression on his face)*

KAREMA

I knew they weren't ripe. If that grocer doesn't give me back my money, I'll dump them on his- *(Irene tries to slip past her mother and head towards her room)* Irene, don't go. I want to hear about your concert.

IRENE

It was an open-mike night. How many times have I explained to you that I perform at-

KAREMA

*(at the same time)*

IRENE

You know what I mean.

-open mike nights and-

IRENE

-that I don't have concerts?

AHMED

Yet.

IRENE

Yet. Right, Dad. Thank God someone supports me around here.

KAREMA

You know I love to hear you sing.

AHMED

*(while chewing)* A producer [seemed to be]-

IRENE

Don't tell her. Nothing happened, Mom. Nothing at all.

KAREMA

Why are you angry at me?

IRENE

I'm not angry. You know why? Because not even you can make me angry tonight.

KAREMA

Good. You know what I always say. No one can make you angry unless you-

IRENE

*(obviously furious now)* Not even you!

*Irene run into her bedroom and slams the door.*

KAREMA

*(calling after her)* -let them.

*Music blares from Irene's room.*

AHMED

She wasn't that great.

*Karema taps her ear - a "be quiet" gesture - and motions towards Irene's door. Ahmed makes a "she can't hear me in there" gesture.*

AHMED

*(as loud as before)* But she wasn't bad either. I can make something out [of her]-

*Karema grabs his arm.*

KAREMA

*(softly)* Be quieter.

AHMED

She can't hear us.

KAREMA

Yes, she can.

AHMED

What's the big deal?

KAREMA

I don't want you to hurt her feelings.

AHMED

You're the one who said she was bad. (*picks up a fig*)  
Here's a ripe one. You take it.

KAREMA

No, you take it. (*Ahmed eats it*) All I said was that she should be more modest. What is it that she won't tell me, Ahmed?

AHMED

She did better than she normally does and a producer showed some interest in her. You should have come. You told Irene you would.

KAREMA

I told her I might. But you know that, if you go, I can't very well leave the store.

AHMED

We have workers-

KAREMA

If I let you run things, we'd be in the poorhouse.

AHMED

The poorhouse would be an improvement on this dump.

KAREMA

I know exactly why you want to live in those apartments of ours.

AHMED

Karema, I'm not going to explain myself about that anymore. I went by to check on that tenant's pipes.

KAREMA

(*stops counting to face him*) She didn't even like you, Ahmed. That fat assed fake blond didn't even like you.

AHMED

I didn't like her either.

KAREMA

Well, that's not what she thought. (*mimics an outraged but whiny Mid-Western voice*) 'Tell your husband not to drop by anymore. Tell him-

AHMED (at the same time)  
American women think all  
Arab men are dirty.

KAREMA  
I have a boyfriend  
and he's big...

KAREMA

And the way you behave certainly dispels that stereotype.

AHMED

I checked on all the other tenants' pipes too. Call up and ask them. (*picks up phone and tries to hand it to her.*)  
Call up all our tenants right now and ask them.

*Karema takes the phone from him and puts it down.*

KAREMA

It is after midnight.

*She sits down and starts to count the money angrily but methodically.*

AHMED

(*hovering over her*) Why are you so suspicious of me?

KAREMA

Because I keep finding things like this in your pants pocket. (*picks up a piece of paper under a stack of money and waves it in his face*)

AHMED

Why were you [going through my]-

KAREMA

I was doing the laundry. (*picks up program and rips it in half Ahmed shakes his head wearily*) Why does it say that she's Egyptian? What if someone we know [sees]-

AHMED

No one we know shows up at open mike nights.

IRENE

*(off-stage)* Mom, it's none of your business.

KAREMA

*(walking over to Irene's bedroom door)* Oh, so your life is none of my business now, is it?

*Karema opens the door of Irene's room. Irene appears in the doorway, blocking her mother from entering.*

IRENE

Don't come into my room.

KAREMA

I don't want to come into your room. If you want to be a part of this conversation, come out here. I will not have you sit in your room and yell.

*Irene's response is to slam the door in her mother's face.*

AHMED

Karema, Irene sings the blues and that's an African-American thing. Egypt is part of Africa, Palestine is technically-

AHMED

Part of Asia.

*(at the same time)*

KAREMA

I know where I'm from.

AHMED

You look more legitimate...it is more strategic to package one's self that way.

KAREMA

The only problem is she's not.

AHMED

A blues singer with roots in the continent of Africa is an easy package to sell. Come on, Karema. Who in America has ever heard of a Palestinian blues singer?

KAREMA

Who in America has ever heard of a Palestinian anything?

AHMED

Why should Irene suffer on account of politics she knows nothing about? I'm right about this and you know it. Don't you see? Abe might now be willing to help Irene's career along-

KAREMA

Don't speak your brother's name in this house.

AHMED

Fine. I'm glad I did what I did, and you will be too. I only want what's best for Irene. (*gently pulls her towards him*) Trust me, Karema.

KAREMA

(*resists his embrace, but relents and allows herself to relax in his arms*) Why didn't you discuss this with me first?

AHMED

There's nothing to discuss. Something good might actually happen with this producer we met tonight, Karema. He said he remembered Irene from Star Search. His name is Dan Goldman. (*Pause. Their eyes lock.*) Goldman said he'd call soon and, when he does, you let him talk to me.

*The phone rings. Irene reenters and runs towards the phone. Karema and Ahmed both reach for it, but Karema grabs it first.*

KAREMA

Hello.

*Karema speaks in Arabic into the phone.*

IRENE

What is she saying? What's happening?

AHMED

Your aunt is coming.

## Scene 2

*Hala, Karema, and Irene enter. Irene carries Hala's luggage.*

HALA

Oh, by the way, an American man asked me to marry him on the plane.

IRENE

What did you say?

HALA

No, of course. But it's nice to know that American men appreciate my charms as much as Arabs.

KAREMA

The appeal of a loose woman is universal, Hala. I could have told you that.

HALA

You should have. You would have saved me the long trip over here I had to take to find out.

KAREMA

You act as if you have somewhere else to go, Hala.

IRENE

Mom!

HALA

Don't worry, your mother and I like to tease one another. She doesn't really mean to imply that I am a loose woman. Not that loose women have it any worse than tight ones, right, Irene?

IRENE

You're funny, Aunty. And you're even prettier in real life than you are in the pictures. The one time my dad took me to meet my uncle Abe-

KAREMA

He's dead to us.

HALA

Is that crazy man still passing himself off as a Moroccan Jew? After all these years-



IRENE

An Egyptian Jew, actually.

KAREMA

I don't want his name mentioned in my house!

IRENE

As I was saying, my dad wants me to pretend to be Egyptian in case it might make it easier for my uncle to help me in my career. Uncle Abe told me that I look a little like you. Is it true that a super rich prince fell in love with you and you moved to Kuwait to be with him?

HALA (at the same time)  
Maybe.

KAREMA  
Hardly.

KAREMA

He was no prince. *(a police siren blares outside so Karema has to speak up)* That's for sure.

*Karema gets up and gathers a few bags of parsley. The sound of the siren fades away.*

IRENE

Tell me about him.

HALA

There's nothing to tell. *Habibtey*, I actually moved to Kuwait to be a music teacher. A quiet, unassuming music teacher. That's me. When is Ahmed coming up?

KAREMA

In another hour. Sorry he was so short with you. When it gets busy like that-

HALA

He wasn't short with me.

IRENE

I'm sure you had a lot of *(pause)*, you know, wild times in Kuwait, Aunty. Tell me everything.

KAREMA

If we're staying up, make yourselves useful.

*Karema empties a huge pile of parsley on the coffee table in front of them and starts picking the leaves off their stems, arranging them in piles. Irene also does so.*

KAREMA

Well, join in, Hala. Do you need an invitation?

HALA

I'm tired from the flight.

KAREMA

Well, you're going to be hungry too, if I don't have this done today. Unless, of course, you - Hala - plan on taking care of dinner tomorrow by yourself while I'm at the store?

*Hala picks up a stem and starts lazily picking off the leaves at a much slower rate than Irene or Karema.*

KAREMA

I didn't think so.

IRENE

So how come you never married, Aunty?

HALA

Because I could not be held responsible for the consequences. If I chose one man over another - world wars, destruction, mayhem would ensue. I love my fellow men too much to be the cause of all that suffering.

KAREMA

We know about how you love your fellow men.

IRENE

It's so getting old, Mom. I would not want to get with a Kuwaiti guy. They're darker than we are. Weird-looking, too. Why do they wear those dresses and scarf thing-ys on their heads?

KAREMA

Because they're proud-

HALA

Because they're ignorant.

KAREMA

They are proud of their-

HALA  
Ignorance.

(at the same time)

KAREMA  
Heritage.

KAREMA  
Well, anyway, you shouldn't judge a man by how he's dressed.

HALA  
Judge him by how quickly he is ready to get undressed and, when you use that as your standard, you'll find that men are the same no matter where you go. Unless you can make men fall in love with you the way they fall in love with me.

KAREMA  
But they couldn't have loved you that much, Hala. If they did, they would have let you stay, don't you think? Your ass was kicked out.

HALA  
I wasn't kicked out. I've never been kicked out of anywhere in my life.

KAREMA  
Did you suddenly stop being Palestinian? Even Ted Koppel said every Palestinian in Kuwait had to-

HALA  
I don't want to talk about politics right now. I just got here, having recently survived the traumas of war. If you bring this up now, I might start having flashbacks.

KAREMA  
When Iraq first invaded Kuwait, I think it was a mistake on [our part to]-

HALA  
You don't change! I said shut up.

KAREMA  
Don't ever talk to me that way.

HALA  
I've had a rough day.

KAREMA  
It's going to get rougher if you don't apologize. Remember you're in my house.

HALA

Okay, okay. I'm sorry. (to Irene) You know why people like your mother get obsessed with politics, Irene? Because it's easier to get yourself all worked up about stuff you can't change than to deal with the things in your own life that you actually can.

IRENE

But, whose side were you on, Auntie? The Kuwaitis or the Iraqis?

HALA

Where did you get this kid from, Karema?

*Karema shrugs.*

HALA

Irene, where your mother and I come from, you are born into one side or the other. The only choice you make is whether or not to keep breathing.

KAREMA

That's a bit of an exaggeration-

HALA

Not for those who play by the rules. But, then, there are those who are naughty, naughty, naughty little Christian girls like your mother who run off and marry a Muslim-

IRENE

It must have caused the hugest scandal when my mom and dad hooked up.

KAREMA

Irene, there is something you need to know about your aunt. She has a problem with the truth. She never tells it.

HALA

If you are so honest, how could you deceive our poor sweet parents like that, Karema? (pause) But, we won't go into all that. I'm sure your mother has told you the details plenty of times.

IRENE

My mom won't discuss it with me.

KAREMA

*(picking up a piece of parsley)* Hala, look at this! You left half the stem on!

HALA

Relax.

IRENE

She always changes the subject.

HALA

I wonder why. The kid wants to hear the story, Karema, and I'm going to tell it. Either now or later. We are sharing a room, aren't we, Irene? *(Irene nods)* *Habibtey*, you are wrong about one thing. There was no scandal when your parents got married. Scandal is climbing on a top of a table at a wedding and shaking your breasts in the face of the groom.

KAREMA

Things you were famous for.

HALA

Among others. It's true. When I go to weddings, I can't see a bride next to her groom without thinking to myself "If I cornered your husband in a bathroom tonight, I wonder how long it would be before he broke his newly sworn vows."

KAREMA

And most people just go to weddings to be happy for the couple.

HALA

Most people are idiots.

IRENE

I'm sure she wasn't the first Christian girl to run off and marry a Muslim guy.

HALA

Perhaps not. But it was a very bold thing to do. Even revolutionary. Wasn't it, my sweet sister?

KAREMA

I was young.

HALA

Not that young. Certainly old enough to get the itch. In fact, I think she was about your age, Irene.

IRENE

I'm seventeen.

HALA

She was exactly your age. Right, Karema?

*Pause. Karema continues to pick the grape leaves off their stems, ignoring them.*

IRENE

You must have really loved Dad to do that, Mom.

HALA

Irene, I can't believe she didn't tell you how she would drag me to see your father's boring concerts, where she would sit, stuck to her seat, and I do mean stuck-

KAREMA

Hala!

HALA

Anyway, she liked your dad more than the nice Christian boy our parents picked out for her. What was his name again? We always called him the tallest man in the universe.

IRENE

Why didn't you like that guy, Mom?

KAREMA

Because he was shorter than I was.

IRENE

But didn't you say he was-

HALA

He wasn't an inch over five feet. You see, back home we call people by their opposites. So you can never take anything that's said for face value. That's what makes our homeland such a lovely, lovely place.

KAREMA

As usual, you miss the point, Hala. We never talk of the good qualities people possess to protect them from the evil

eye. Disparage what you love and you can keep it. No one will know its value or take it away.

HALA

Anyway, Karema, you should be ashamed of yourself. I can't believe I've been in this house, working so long, and no one even offered me a drink.

IRENE

I'm sorry. I didn't know you were thirsty.

HALA

You actually expect me to tell you?! You want to make your aunt beg?! We are a desert people, Irene. We know a guest could be dying of thirst, expiring in your living room because they're too embarrassed to ask for a drink.

IRENE

But we just came from the restaurant.

HALA

It doesn't matter! You look like an Arab. You've got to live like one. So, I expect that you'll follow our ancient custom of letting anyone into your home and not asking your guest to do anything - not even to tell you where they came from or who they are - for three whole days. Now get me a cup of tea.

*Irene exits.*

KAREMA

Are the rumours true? *(pause)* Tell me.

HALA

Karema, you know I get three days in which you can ask me no questions.

KAREMA

You're going to get one foot which you cannot dislodge from your asshole if you don't start talking. Our ancient custom! Please! Don't confuse the girl. The Bedouins don't even follow those rules anymore. Now, are the rumours true? We heard the Kuwaiti men threw all the Palestinian women out into the streets where-

HALA

No, of course not. It was a really boring takeover. At first, I thought there was going to be some action! You know I've always had a thing for Iraqi men. Now, Jordanians are another story. (Pause.) You should have seen the one at the American embassy I had to fuck to get to get a visa to come here.

KAREMA

So, that's how you got one?

HALA

How else? Jesus, he must have been four hundred pounds. I told myself 'Hala, just imagine you're making love to two thin gorgeous men who are overwhelming you with their love and this won't feel so bad. Imagine that and you will enjoy this.'

KAREMA

Did you?

HALA

No, but I didn't care. I had to get out.

KAREMA

I couldn't stay there either.

HALA

You'd stay. You wouldn't fuck anyone to get out of anything. Of course, I didn't have to leave Kuwait. But, I was not staying there after they kicked out the rest of the Palestinians. No way. Not me.

KAREMA

Liar.

HALA

Okay. Muhammed dumped me. It was considered unpatriotic to have a Palestinian piece of ass so I had to go.

KAREMA

He never offered to marry you?

HALA

Begged me at first. Unlike some people, I remember that my family can trace our Christian roots back to the time of Christ and that my ancestor was probably Mary Magdalene herself. So, I don't marry Muslims.



KAREMA

But you're a kept woman for them.

HALA

Many women share one husband with others and, even those that think they don't, really do. Now you tell me who is kept and who isn't. Irene!

*Irene reenters.*

IRENE

Yes, Aunty?

HALA

I like fresh mint in my tea. Do you happen to grow your own mint?

KAREMA

Yes, which I'm sure you saw on the stoop downstairs.

IRENE

You want me to run downstairs and grab you a few leaves?

HALA

If you wouldn't mind.

IRENE

Of course not. (*heads towards the door*)

KAREMA

It's late. I'll get it.

IRENE

No, Mom. I'm already up.

KAREMA

I said, I'll get it.

IRENE

I'll be fine. Dad's downstairs. He can see the stoop from the cash register.

HALA

You act like you're afraid to let the kid outside.

KAREMA

There are drunks who hang around.

IRENE

Because they know we sell liquor after hours.

KAREMA

Put on your coat. I'll watch you from the window.

*Irene leaves out the front door without putting on her coat. Karema stands by the window and looks out of it.*

HALA

So, the kid really knows nothing about our life?

KAREMA

No.

HALA

And you want to keep it that way. Fine. Don't worry. I'll be gone sooner than you know it.

KAREMA

You're welcome here, Hala. You're welcome anywhere I am.

HALA

I'm not staying long. But, while I'm here, Karema, let's get one thing straight. I'm not going to talk about things I don't want to talk about. You don't really want to know what went on in Kuwait. You think you do, but you don't. Because talking-

KAREMA (at the same time) HALA

I didn't mean to upset you- -never does a damn thing.

*Karema and Hala stop speaking abruptly when Irene enters with mint leaves in her hand.*

HALA

You know your mother never changes, Irene.

IRENE

No, she doesn't.

*Irene exits into the kitchen.*

HALA

I bet you still hide your money under your mattress.

KAREMA

Now I keep a gun next to it.

HALA

I'm not going to take your money. I've never stolen a thing in my life. Well, except for things that get up and follow me on their own two legs.

*Irene reenters carrying a tray of nuts, various Middle Eastern dips, and sliced vegetables.*

IRENE

I thought you might like a little something, Aunty.

HALA

Oh, that's so sweet of you to want to feed your aunt. But I've got to watch my figure. Soon, I'm going to pay an old friend a visit.

KAREMA

If you're talking about Abe-

HALA

I have a lot of old friends. Where's the tea, Irene?

IRENE

The water hasn't boiled. Do you want sugar in it?

HALA

Never. Remember that.

IRENE

Of course. After you have your tea, I would love to hear you sing.

HALA

You're like your mother. I ask for one cup of tea and you want to make me work for it.

IRENE

I've heard so much about the midnight concerts you gave in Jerusalem that even the Jews attended.

KAREMA

I've got an idea. While you're here, Hala, you can make yourself useful. You can teach Irene how to sing the *mow'alla'at*.♦

IRENE

What's that?

KAREMA

Traditional Arabic songs. For every day you spend here, Hala, you will spend one hour teaching Irene. Starting tomorrow. Understood?

HALA

Ask like a normal person. Say 'Hey, Sis. I need help. I need your help. Teach my daughter some music.' And I'd gladly do it.

IRENE

Nice of you both to decide upon on my life, but I'm way too busy to learn Arabic music.

HALA

That was quite a plane ride. It took so long to get here I thought I never would. Don't worry about the tea, Irene. I've got to get to bed. (*gets up and walks towards the master bedroom*)

IRENE

You're going the wrong way, Aunty. That's my mom and dad's room. (*Irene points to her bedroom*)

*Hala changes direction and exits into Irene's room.*

KAREMA

Irene, your aunt is-

IRENE

Is what?

KAREMA

Just don't believe everything she says. She lies a lot. For no reason. About silly things. Don't believe everything she says.

IRENE

---

♦ Type of traditional Arabic song.

I don't believe everything anyone says.

KAREMA

Good. Get to bed, Irene. I want you rested for school tomorrow. Good-night.

IRENE

Good-night.

*After Irene exits into her bedroom, Karema walks over to the door and attempts to eavesdrop as the lights fade.*

### Scene 3

*Irene knocks on her parents' bedroom door.*

IRENE

Get up! Mom's going to kill you.

*Hala enters from Irene's room.*

AHMED

*(offstage)* Leave me alone, Irene.

IRENE

Get downstairs and help Mom with the morning rush.

HALA

Can't a person get some sleep around here?

IRENE

Sorry. *(bangs on the door again)* Dad, the tea's on the stove. Bye, Aunty. *(as she gathers her book-bag)* We have this thing called a whistling tea kettle. When the water gets hot, the whistle [will blow]-

HALA

We have whistling tea kettles in Kuwait.

IRENE

Sorry. I didn't know. It seems kind of Third World to me.

HALA

I had finer things than you can imagine in Kuwait. If you visited me, you would have been so jealous, it would have made you want to tear your eyes out.

*Pause.*

IRENE

I guess it's a good thing I didn't visit then. *(She smiles, Hala doesn't smile back).*

HALA

Irene, your mother wants me to begin your Arabic music lessons today. What time will you [be home]-

IRENE

Nice of you to offer, but I can't. You see, this really important music producer is interested in my work and he's going to call any day now.

HALA

But, until he calls, why not-

IRENE

Until he calls, I've got to spend every minute preparing to rock his world, so he agrees to make a demo. Gotta go. I'm late for school.

*Irene kisses Hala and exits. Then Ahmed enters from his bedroom, looking exhausted and messily dressed. He sees Hala lounging on the couch in her nightgown and stops in his tracks.*

HALA

Good morning.

AHMED

*(still standing in the same spot)* Good morning.

HALA

Did you sleep well?

AHMED

*(sits down next to her on the couch but keeping a distance)* Yes, but too briefly. Karema likes to open the store at the crack of dawn so we can make money off the kids going to school.

HALA

Karema is...industrious.

AHMED

Insane is more like it. I should go help her.

HALA

Stay a moment, Ahmed. The water's on the stove. A man should at least have a cup of tea before he starts his day.

AHMED

You're right.

HALA

Of course I am. Um, Ahmed. I have a huge favor to ask.

AHMED

What?

HALA

Do you think that you could - at some point today - give me a ride? I have an old friend I need to visit.

AHMED

*(awkwardly)* I'm sure if you ask Karema, she'll take you.

HALA

Yeah, of course. I just didn't want to bother her.

AHMED

Karema'd be happy to do it, I'm sure. While you're here, Hala, you got to drag her out of that store once in a while. All those hours she makes us put into it is starting to dull our brains. But, I shouldn't complain. Karema's got us where we are today.

*Hala looks around, non-plussed.*

HALA

She did, did she?

AHMED

You wouldn't know it by how we live, but we're doing really well. Karema saves every penny to buy property and property always goes up. I tell Karema, if we moved to Jordan, we could live like royalty just off the rent we get from our apartments alone. Hell, we could even live like royalty off that rent here if we wanted to.

HALA

Karema would never live in Jordan.

AHMED

I know. She hates it. All because of the, you know, little mistreatment of your family during Black September.

HALA

There was more than a little mistreatment.

AHMED

Still, that was a long time ago. *(getting more comfortable and animated)* Times are better now. I would love to live



there, but Karema likes it in America. She says here no one tries to pretend we belong. Is that why you left?

HALA

Kind of.

AHMED

I went back last year. Alone. It's been twenty years and everyone there still recognizes me from the concerts I gave in Amman. Can you believe it?

HALA

That doesn't surprise me at all. You were really something. I bet if you went back today and starting holding concerts, people would come out in droves.

AHMED

Do you really think so?

HALA

I do. You should think about trying it.

AHMED

It would be so nice to perform our music again. But, I can't leave Karema alone in the store that long.

HALA

That's a shame. Everyone loved your concerts.

AHMED

Yeah. Even Karema. Not anymore. I have to go to the basement of the some apartments we own to practice. Don't mention it to Karema but, whenever I go to fix some pipe or toilet, I give myself an hour or two to play. Karema thinks I'm the slowest handyman around. I go there because she won't let me play my *tubleh* in the house. She says she hates the sound of it. I don't understand. She used to come to every concert I held.

HALA

She never went for the music. She would go just to hear you say the little speech you made every time you finished playing. What was it that you used to say...

AHMED

*(stands up and performs the next lines like a terrible actor who unfortunately doesn't know he's terrible)* 'I

hope this music caught your heart off guard and held it, so that your mind could wander to a place where you could love anyone, whether Muslim, Jew, or Christian, in this land that belongs to us all and that one day soon we will learn to share.'

*Pause. Hala bursts into laughter.*

HALA

You were always great at bullshiting.

AHMED

*(a little miffed)* You know the funny thing is, I used to believe it.

HALA

I'm sorry. Of course you did.

AHMED

Remember that time there was fighting near the border and the power went out?

HALA

Which time?

AHMED

The time we stayed and held our concert in the dark. I can't believe you don't remember! Abe and Karema wanted to go with the people that were going, and you wanted to stay with me and the others who wouldn't leave.

HALA

Oh, yeah, that night! Of course.

AHMED

No one could forget it. It was me who struck up the first notes of *Biktub Ismik*. Soon enough, it was clear none of us were leaving. That was my favorite concert actually - with the mics gone, the lights gone, each singer in one corner and what was left of the band wading through the crowd in the dark. I could hear your voice the loudest. I remember trying to time my beat to sound of your voice.

HALA

Really?

AHMED

Yeah. I would not have given up playing that concert if it cost my life, and it damn near might have. Then, the finale! When we put down our instruments and everyone, audience and performers, stood up and sang in the dark. *(sings)* Biktub ismuck ya habibi alla' hawr a-teek. •

HALA and AHMED

*(sings)* Tiktub ismey ya habibi alla' rumlel tarik. *(Hala gets up and begins to bellydance and Ahmed stands up and claps in time. They sing the next part louder and stronger - it's the chorus of the song.)* Wa bookra lema itsheety, ismeeme biyimha'aa...

*Irene enters from the front door to see Hala and Ahmed dancing and singing. Hala goes over to Irene and raises Irene's arms in the air, making Irene sway with her.*

HALA

Dance with me.

IRENE

*(trying to pull her arms free)* I don't dance, Aunty.

HALA

*(still maintaining her grasp on Irene's hands and keeping them in the air as she sways her hips)* Shake your hips. *(singing)* Ismeeme biyimha'aa. *(Hala stops singing and lets Irene's arms go)* How are you going to catch a man if you can't dance?

*Irene shrugs.*

AHMED

Why aren't you at school?

IRENE

*(not realizing she is wearing her coat)* I, uh, came back because I forgot my coat.

AHMED

You are wearing your coat.

---

• The translation of the lyrics are: I carve your name in the wood of old trees/ You write my name in the sand in the street / Tomorrow when it rains, yours will remain, but my name will be erased, obliterated, gone, forgotten.

IRENE

Okay, Dad. Don't tell Mom, but I don't want to miss Goldman's call.

AHMED

Irene, we've got an answering machine. I can't believe you're cutting school again.

HALA

Oh, let her stay. It's my first day here.

AHMED

She's on academic probation.

IRENE

Come on, Dad. Don't rat on me to Mom. She'll guilt-trip me about how her family couldn't afford her [to keep her in school]-

AHMED

Irene, I'm not going to lie to Mom.

IRENE

You're supposed to be in the store, right? I won't tell her I saw you and you don't tell her that you saw me.

AHMED

All right, but go straight back to school, Irene.

IRENE

Thanks, Dad. Bye, Aunty.

*Irene exits.*

AHMED

I don't know what I'm going to do with that kid. She's flunking out, she doesn't know how to make friends. I thought it was just awkward for her with Americans. So I started taking her to the mosque though it bores me to tears so, you know, she has a community of some sort, but she doesn't talk to the kids there either.

HALA

She'll be fine. Worse comes to worse, you can marry her off.

AHMED

To whom? I've encouraged her to pursue music. I think I can make a singer out of her. But, she doesn't listen to me, she gets nervous on-stage.

HALA

You will make something out of her.

AHMED

Why do you say that?

HALA

Because she's your daughter. And I remember what kind of musician you were. You have brought her here, where she will have chances that you didn't.

AHMED

That's the only reason I came here. The only reason I let Karema convince me to stay.

HALA

She will succeed. I believe that with all my heart. You have nothing to worry about, Ahmed.

AHMED

Thanks, Hala. It's good to have you around. You remind me of the old times.

HALA

If your wife had her way, I'd already be gone.

AHMED

What do you mean?

HALA

I know how cheap your wife is. She begrudges me the food I eat.

AHMED

You're her sister. She's not that cheap.

HALA

Even if she isn't, I'd rather live on the streets than live off of her. I've got to see Abe. You know Karema won't take me. Can you drive me to see him?

AHMED

Have you been in touch with him since...

HALA

Since I left him waiting at the airport? No.

AHMED

I'm not sure that it's a good idea...

HALA

What? Do you actually think he still hates me?

AHMED

Can you blame him?

HALA

Of course. You can always blame someone, whether or not they deserve it is another question entirely. He loved me.

AHMED

But you broke his heart.

HALA

So, I know exactly what part needs fixing. I hurt his pride, so I'll give up mine. I'll beg for him. Don't tell him I'm here, don't tell him a thing, just take me to him. Please, Ahmed. Right now!

AHMED

I would, but Karema won't let me off work and you know how she feels about him...I know! At noon today I'm supposed to go to the apartment building to fix a toilet. I'll tell Karema I'm taking care of that and we can go to his office.

HALA

Thank you, Ahmed. Oh, my God! What am I going to wear? Look at me, Ahmed. Do I look older to you?

AHMED

You look amazing. Abe will take you back. I know it.

HALA

You think so?

AHMED

I know so.

HALA

Really? How?

AHMED

I don't think any man could resist you.

*The tea kettle whistles loudly.*

AHMED

*(speaking over the noise as he heads towards the kitchen)*  
Irene leaves the kettle on to make sure I get up. I'll be right back.

*Ahmed exits through the door to the kitchen. The whistle is silenced. While he is gone, Hala exits into Irene's room. Ahmed returns with two tea cups. He looks around the room for a second, places a cup down gently on a table near Irene's door, and takes his cup with him out the front door.*

#### Scene 4

*Irene is sitting in from on the phone with a card in her hand. She dials, but hangs up before speaking. Pause. She dials again.*

IRENE

*(speaking nervously, trying to sound sexy but her voice has a squeaky edge to it)* Hi. May I speak to Dan Goldman please? *(pause)* Irene Yacoub. He gave me his card. *(pause)* Yes, well, can you tell him when he gets off the other line that another company, Right On Records, is really interested in me and before I commit to them, I'd like to talk to Mr. Goldman. You know, I think it's only fair since he did approach me first and all. Yes. *(pause)* Um, uh, when do you think he'll call me back? Uh, just so I can give my answer to Abe and the folks at Right On Records? Do you know the folks at Right On? *(pause)* Yes, most people have heard of them. *(Hala enters from Irene's bedroom. Irene brings her finger to her lips, making a "be quiet, I'm on the phone" gesture wildly and repeatedly. Hala smiles wryly and steps closer to Irene, not hiding her attempt to listen)* If you ask around, I'm sure they'll tell you that it's an important company. But, you know, I do want to be fair to Dan, so I'm letting him know that he should call me. *(pause)* Please do. And thank you. Yeah, my number is 242-1948. He probably has it, but just in case. Thank you.

HALA

What was that about?

IRENE

You have to promise not to tell my mom or dad, especially not my dad.

HALA

I promise.

IRENE

I just called this important producer. I think if he thinks that other producers are interested in me, he'll sign me.

HALA

Have you talked to Abe about this?



IRENE

No. Uncle Abe won't help me, I'm just saying that so that this producer gets a move on.

HALA

I understand, but don't you think this man is going to think it's a little strange when he figures out that you and Abe have the same last name?

IRENE

You're right. Oh, shit. That was really dumb.

HALA

*Habibtey*, if you're going to lie, I must teach you how to be better at it. Never mind. I'm sure that this producer will be so excited to sign you that he won't look into details like that. You know, this man you just called might be really impressed if he knew you knew Arabic music.

IRENE

I don't have time to think about that right now, Aunty.

*Irene heads towards her bedroom.*

HALA

What if this man can't help you, Irene?

IRENE

He's a big-time producer. Of course he can help me. And he will. He was really interested in me, even my dad says so.

HALA

Becoming a singer is a hard thing to try to do.

IRENE

I'm not trying to do anything. I am a singer, Aunty.

HALA

I know, but-

IRENE

But I might not be any good? I might not make it? Is that what you were going to say?

HALA

I was going to say that I wish you luck, Irene. I hope you get further than I did, because I once wanted to be a singer and I wanted it as badly as you do. You know, I have a secret too.

IRENE

What?

HALA

I'm not going to be here much longer. Don't tell your mom, but I saw Abe earlier today. I think him and I are going to get back together.

IRENE

Really?

HALA

He said he needed some time to think, but it's going to work out. I'm going to make damn sure it does.

IRENE

Are you going to convert to Judaism too?

HALA

Don't be silly. Abe hasn't really converted. Like I said, we're taking it slow, but I think he's planning to get me my own apartment soon. At least, that's what I suggested.

IRENE

Really?

HALA

If that happens, I might help make the lie you told about Abe wanting to work with you come true. But in the meanwhile, your mom wants me to teach you about Arabic music. She says I can't stay here, she won't feed me, unless I teach you some songs, give you a foundation-

IRENE

She doesn't really mean that. She just likes to...

HALA

Make people miserable? Yes, that she does. But would you mind doing me a favor, can we just pretend I'm teaching you stuff? She'll never know till it's too late and I'm already gone. Sound like a deal?

IRENE

Okay.

HALA

Great. Less work for me. So how are things, Irene? Any boyfriends?

IRENE

*(defensive)* No. I'm focused on music right now.

HALA

Well, if you have to give up men in order to be a singer, it's no wonder I didn't make it. *(beat)* I know you plan to be a singer, you're always talking about it, but why?

IRENE

Why what?

HALA

Why do you want to be a singer? You obviously want it as much as I did. Why do you want it so bad?

IRENE

It's hard to explain.

HALA

When did you decide you wanted to be a singer?

IRENE

When I was very young.

HALA

How young?

IRENE

I don't remember. Six or seven.

HALA

Six or seven?

IRENE

I don't know. For as long as I can remember-

HALA

I'm interested in how the idea to be a singer first came into your head. Was it when you heard someone else sing?

Were you knocked off your feet by the sound of another human voice?

IRENE

A homeless woman used to sing Billie Holliday for change on our corner. I'd run home after school to sit in that window and listen - Mom didn't let me play outside. Her voice made me want to live on the streets. In my mind, I connected being homeless with being able to sing like that.

HALA

Do you know a song about that experience?

IRENE

What experience? What are you talking about?

HALA

A song about the experience of hearing another sing, which moves you to try and sing yourself. Do you know a song like that?

IRENE

No.

HALA

I do. And I can teach it to you.

*Pause.*

IRENE

Well, if it's a song about singing, then I guess I wouldn't mind learning it. I thought you wanted to teach me some political mumbo-jumbo songs.

HALA

No. You're going to have to prove yourself worthy, you're going to have to beg me to teach you political mumbo-jumbo songs. The song about singing is called "*Junnelee wa Kudoo Aynaya.*"

IRENE

You have to translate it.

HALA

I will. The title literally means sing a note and take my eyes in exchange. (*sings*) "*Junnelee wa Kudoo Aynaya.*" Now you try, Irene.

IRENE

Take my eyes in exchange? How stupid.

HALA

There are very few things I respect in this world, Irene. Arabic music is one of them. So please-

IRENE

Arabic sounds so ugly. I never speak it in public. It sounds like spitting. (*she makes spitting sounds*) I'm going to take your eyeballs and spit on you.

HALA

I feel like slapping you across your face.

IRENE

What?

HALA

As I was saying, what the title really means is take what is integral, necessary to my existence, in exchange. Sing me one note and take my eyes, I will not need them. When I want to see, I know you'll let me look through yours. That is how you have to be struck by music in order to want to create it. Do you agree?

IRENE

Yes.

HALA

Then the singer, who starts out as the listener begging to exchange her eyes for a few more notes, begins to sing herself. These are the words she sings:

She says I'm going to sing and sing and sing."

IRENE

(*non-plussed*) Sing and sing and sing? Okay.

HALA

But the connotation is...when you translate it, it's more like (*pauses for a moment and speaks haltingly as she chooses her words carefully*) I'm going to hum and sing and roar (*to herself*) That's it. I'm going to hum and sing and roar, make my listeners drunk on sound. Now, in Arabic-

IRENE

Just teach me the translation, Aunty. I want to sing it in English.

HALA

God forbid. You can't sing this in English.

IRENE

Why not? I'll even dedicate it you, Aunty. You're coming to my open mike later tonight, right?

HALA

Not if you plan on butchering the *mow'alla'at*. I will not let you sing this song in English. It will sound like shit in English.

IRENE

It won't sound like shit.

HALA

It will in comparison. In Arabic, it sounds like perfection, like a combination of words that existed before humans were here to make up words. Learn it in Arabic or don't learn it at all. But I'm telling you, Irene, if you learn to sing this song, then you can sing just about anything.

IRENE

Well, then, let me learn it.

*Hala picks up the 'oud' (Middle Eastern guitar) and plays the tune.*

HALA

We can try. But I don't know if I really can teach you. I mean, Arabic music isn't so easy to learn.

IRENE

I can handle it, Aunty.

HALA

I guess we'll see. (*stops and starts the tune from the beginning*) You know a song is good when you hear the first note, and it makes you want to stick around to listen to the last. This is the intro.

IRENE

That sounds cool. Like a guitar.

HALA

*(stops playing abruptly and hugs the 'oud close to her chest)* A guitar? Do not insult my 'oud.

IRENE

Okay, okay. *(Hala resumes playing)* Let me try playing it.

HALA

One thing at a time, kid. You can do anything you want as long as you remember to tackle one thing at a time.

*Ahmed and Karema enter and sit down to listen. Hala continues playing.*

KAREMA

I love this song. *(begins to sing)* Juneelee sh-wayaya, sh-wayaya.

*The phone rings. Everyone rushes for it.*

IRENE

I've got it! I've got it!

*Karema answers the phone.*

KAREMA

Hello? *(pause)* Oh, hello, Mrs. Rivington. *(her tone is suddenly obsequious)* How is your cat? *(pause)* Yes, he is. *(she glances at Ahmed)* Of course, I'll get him right away, Mrs. Rivington.

*Karema hands Ahmed the phone.*

IRENE

Come on, Aunty. Let's work in my room.

*Hala plays as she walks to Irene's room. Irene follows her. Off-stage is the sound of Hala playing the 'oud.*

AHMED

Hi, Mrs. Rivington. *(pause)* I know. I'm sorry, but we had a major problem in another apartment I had to take care of. *(pause)* I understand. *(pause)* I understand. All I can say is I'm sorry. *(pause)* No, please don't complain to

the owner. Please. It will never happen again. Tomorrow I'll fix it and do anything else you need done in the apartment. What time is best for you? *(pause)* Tomorrow at ten, it is. *(pause)* No, I won't be late. Bye, now.

KAREMA

Why didn't you fix the lady's toilet?

AHMED

I have to get ready for Irene's open-mike night.

KAREMA

I'm asking you a question.

AHMED

By the time I changed the hinges on the laundry door, I had to get back to help you with the after-school rush.

KAREMA

Why did you tell me you had fixed it?

AHMED

I didn't want to deal with you saying I work too slow. We should just hire a plumber anyway. I can't do everything around here!

KAREMA

Lower your voice. You hardly do everything.

AHMED

Let's put it this way. I do everything you want me to do. You tell me when to get up, work, breathe, and shit - and I do it. But I'm sick of you putting me in a position where I have to kiss the ass of some old white bitch-

*Karema follow Ahmed as he walks towards the bedroom.*

KAREMA

What would we do if Mrs. Rivington wanted to follow up and complain to the owner?!

AHMED

It would be your fault for making me pretend to be the super in the first place. Why you're so sure people wouldn't rent the apartments if they think Arabs own them, I'll never know! *(exits into the bathroom and slams the door)*



*Pause. The music from the oud off-stage stops suddenly after the slam.*

KAREMA

Keep playing.

*The sound of the 'oud picks up where it left off.*

**Scene 5**

*Ahmed is on stage, adjusting a very stylish hat on his head. Karema enters through the front door.*

KAREMA

Look at you. Dressed up like a teenager. Are you so eager to see your brother?

AHMED

Abe said he might even be able to get us backstage passes to meet Prince.

KAREMA

Since when did he start giving us backstage passes? He's only doing it so he can see Hala.

AHMED

Can you blame him? I mean, since he loved her all those years. Besides, we've got to be nice to Abe. That guy Goldman hasn't called yet. Abe said he would think about getting Irene's career started.

KAREMA

What's there to think about? Abe owns the damn record company. If he wants to help her, he can. How did Irene do at her concert?

*Irene enters from the front door in time to hear the word "concert".*

IRENE

Open-mike night.

AHMED

Hi, Irene.

IRENE

*(ignoring her father's greeting)* Hi, Mom.

AHMED

Irene, stop this silliness now.

KAREMA

What's the problem here?

IRENE

No problem. I'm just not speaking to Dad ever again.

KAREMA

What happened?

IRENE

What happened is my father and your sister were supposed to hear me sing last night. Instead, they somehow managed to disappear when it was time for my slot.

AHMED

We didn't know they were going to switch the line-up. We had to go outside because Hala was coughing up a storm from the smoke.

KAREMA

You left Irene alone in a nightclub?

AHMED

It was just for a minute. I didn't want her coughing to disturb your performance.

IRENE

Tell the truth, Dad. The bartender told me you went upstairs to jam with the regulars and that's why you left.

AHMED

Okay, I played a song or two.

KAREMA

Are you crazy?

AHMED

I haven't had a chance to perform in years. She was with the other singers.

IRENE

I don't know them! When you didn't come back, I got nervous. I did awful.

KAREMA

I can't believe you, Ahmed.

IRENE

Mr. Goldman could have been in the audience.

AHMED

I checked. He wasn't.

IRENE

I know, but he could have been! You know what, Dad? I called Goldman yesterday and, when he signs me, I'm going to pretend I don't know you.

AHMED

You called Goldman?

IRENE

Yes.

AHMED

What did he say?

IRENE

I spoke to his assistant. I hinted that another music producer was interested in signing me.

AHMED

That's not true.

IRENE

I know that. *(pause)* I hinted that the music producer was Uncle Abe.

KAREMA

Maybe it's a good thing that she called, Ahmed. She won't have to wait by the phone [anymore]-

AHMED

Karema, stay out of this. Irene, what is this 'I hinted' shit? Either you said that or you didn't.

KAREMA

Ahmed, watch your language.

AHMED

I said, stay out of this.

IRENE

Don't worry. I didn't say he was my uncle, Dad.

AHMED

Goddamn it, Irene, you are one stupid little- *(begins to complete his sentence with the word "bitch")*

KAREMA

*(cutting him off)* Ahmed!

AHMED

It's our fault as much as yours that you're spoiled, Irene, but the world out there isn't going to let you get away with things like we do.

IRENE

I'm so spoiled. If people could see how great I've got it here, I'd be the envy of every girl in America.

AHMED

You are spoiled. Look at you. Do you ever even offer to help out in the store after school? Huh? Answer me. I said, answer me.

KAREMA

Ahmed, stop it.

IRENE

You never ask me to.

KAREMA

That's right, Ahmed. We never ask her to. We want her to have time for school.

AHMED

And still you barely manage to pass your classes.

IRENE

I'm focused on music.

AHMED

Your mother and I slave all day and half the night, so you can wear designer clothes and take private music lessons and bitch at me because I'm not doing everything you want all the time.

IRENE

You left me alone!

AHMED

You've been singing on-stage since you were six. You should be able to handle doing one goddamn open-mike night alone. I give up! I'll be honest, it's hard to get people

interested in you, but I do my best. The one time someone shows a slight indication that he thinks you're worth something, you go and fuck it up. Now you've gotten Abe involved and [he's going to be mad at me]- (*Hala enters, wearing very sexy clothing*) Hi, Hala.

HALA

Well, are we going or not?

AHMED

Yeah. Sorry to make you wait.

IRENE

God forbid her highness has to wait.

HALA

I already apologized for not hearing you sing. One mistake, one apology. That's how it goes, kid.

IRENE

Whatever, Aunty. Why don't you come with us to the concert, Mama?

KAREMA

I won't take anything from that man.

IRENE

You can't leave me alone with these two retards.

*Hala raises an eyebrow.*

AHMED

Talk to me like that again, Irene, and I'll slap you.

KAREMA

Watch yourself, Ahmed. Watch yourself.

AHMED

Tell your daughter to watch herself, Karema. She needs to learn some respect. In fact, for calling Goldman when I told you not to, Irene, you're going to be punished. You're staying home tonight.

IRENE

What?!

HALA

Ahmed, whatever Irene did, it can't be that bad. Irene goes or I don't go. And, Karema, you should come with us to the concert.

AHMED

She can't. She has to mind the store.

HALA

Fuck the store just this once, Karema.

KAREMA

Money from the store has been feeding your face for the past week. It's not always a good idea to fuck what feeds you.

HALA

It's a strategy that's worked pretty well for me, Sis.

KAREMA

Then why are you living off of us?

AHMED

We've got to go. She has to stay or I have to stay to mind the store. Everyone who wants to go, get in the car.

IRENE

Are you sure you can't come, Mom?

KAREMA

Yes, *habibtey*. Have fun with the prince.

*Irene, Ahmed, and Karema exit. Karema looks out the window and watches them go. Perhaps there is the sound of a car driving off. Karema goes into Irene's room and comes back with a card in her hand. She goes to the phone and dials.*

KAREMA

Hello. Is Mr. Goldman there? (*pause*) Okay, but can you please tell him that Karema Yacoub, Irene's mother, needs to talk to him. Can I ask you a question? You're the person my daughter spoke to earlier, right? (*pause*) Irene Yacoub, that's right. Mr. Goldman has not called my daughter back. I know what that means. There is a saying in Arabic - no answer is an answer. (*A siren blares outside - Karema has to speak up. The siren fades*). I'm calling because I want to see if he would be more interested in working with her if I paid for everything it cost for him

to help her. (pause) But things can work that way if he wants them to. (pause) No, I'm not joking. I'm not poor. How much can it cost to produce a record? (her jaw drops) I-I-I. Six hundred thousand! That's outrageous. No, don't hang up! I'll pay you. I'll sell my apartments and I'll pay you, but only three hundred thousand and not a penny more! (pause) Hello?

*She dials.*

KAREMA

Hello. I think we got cut off. (pause) I understand. You seem like a nice girl. Can you do me a favor? I have to tell my daughter your boss doesn't want to work with her. You tell people that all the time, so I was wondering if you could tell me - if you know - how to tell my daughter in a way that won't hurt her?



## Scene 6

*It is morning. Irene enters from her room and rushes around, gathering her things. There is a knock at the door. Irene opens it. Hala is wearing the clothes she wore last night and she looks like she slept in them.*

IRENE

Look what the cat dragged in.

HALA

What?

IRENE

Hi. Thanks so much for telling my dad to let me come last night. He got more mad than I thought he would [because I]-

HALA

Irene, aren't you late for school?

IRENE

No. Did Uncle Abe take you to an after-party? I heard there was [a big one]-

HALA

No.

IRENE

Are you okay, Aunty?

HALA

Run along, kid.

IRENE

Okay. *(Irene gathers her things, but leaves her coat and exits)*

*Hala settles down wearily on the couch. The tea kettle whistles sharply off-stage. She jumps up.*

HALA

Why don't they use a fucking alarm clock in this house?

*Ahmed enters, glances at Hala, and darts into the kitchen. The sound of the kettle is silenced. Ahmed returns with a cup of tea.*

AHMED

*(handing her the tea)* Are you okay?

HALA

*(taking it)* Your brother could learn a few lessons from you on how to be a gentleman.

AHMED

What did he say, Hala?

HALA

He told me I deserved to end up how I am - broke and alone. I said that I did. You see, when people try to insult you and you agree with them, it usually takes the wind out of their sails. So, when he said I was a lazy little whore who would go with any man who had two pennies to rub together-

AHMED

No!

HALA

-I said that I was. Then, he said he didn't have two pennies to rub together - that he'd be willing to give me, at any rate.

AHMED

He shouldn't talk to you like that!

HALA

He wouldn't even drive me back here. Or give me cab fare.

AHMED

What about the hundred dollars I gave you?

HALA

I wanted to give it back to you. If I didn't have it, I wouldn't have been able to get back here this morning. I don't have much of it left, except for this. *(takes out a few dollars from her purse and offers it to him)* Here, take it.

AHMED

Where did you spend that much...don't worry about it. Keep it. *(gently closes her hand around the bills and leaves his hand cupped around hers)*

HALA

*(slides her hand out from under his hand after a beat and puts the bills back in her purse)* I wanted to have a home with him. And children! Never wanted things like that before. Then, I did. All at once, so sharply, like a person born blind who figures out for the first time that others can see. But he said he never really loved me in the first place-

AHMED

He's stupid.

HALA

He told me about the coin toss.

AHMED

The coin toss?! He and I promised we'd never tell either of you. Karema's been right about him all along. He's a son of a bitch. He'd be lucky to have you. Any man would be lucky to have you.

HALA

Yeah, sure. One thing about me, Ahmed, is I always knew I'd know when I was washed up. I'm just a shadow of what I was-

AHMED

No! You're not.

HALA

Even that is just a shadow of what I should have been.

AHMED

You're beautiful and nice and can sing like an-

*Hala kisses him. Ahmed pulls away.*

HALA

I'm sorry.

*Ahmed kisses her. As the kiss gets more passionate, the door pops open. Irene sees their embrace.*

IRENE

*(as she exits quickly)* Hi.

*Ahmed and Hala jump away from one another and see the open door. Irene is already gone - making it unclear to them what she saw.*

Oh, my God!

AHMED

She didn't see anything.

HALA

Oh, my God!

AHMED

Ahmed, I'm telling you. She didn't see anything.

HALA

Are you sure?

AHMED

Yes, I'm sure.

HALA

I've got to get down to the store.

AHMED

*Ahmed exits out the front door. Hala is alone on-stage. Lights out.*

## Scene 7

*Irene sits alone writing in the dark. Ahmed tiptoes out of his room and heads towards Irene's room.*

IRENE

Hi, Dad.

AHMED

Irene, you scared me. What are you doing up?

IRENE

Making music.

AHMED

You can't sing. It's the middle of the night.

IRENE

*(continues to mark up the sheet she is working on and avoiding his gaze)* I'm composing.

*Hala enters from Irene's bedroom.*

HALA

Can't a person get to sleep around here?

AHMED

Sorry, Hala.

HALA

What are you two doing up?

AHMED

She thinks she is composing. Here, in the dark.

IRENE

The lights are off so I don't disturb Mama. She has seemed upset lately. Have either of you noticed?

*She looks up for a minute at her father, challenging.*

AHMED

No. *(Irene goes back to writing on her sheet, feigning that she is absorbed in her work but is clearly distracted)* Wouldn't it be better to compose in the daytime? At a piano?

IRENE

Did Beethoven, while he was deaf at the end of his life, need a piano to compose?

HALA

Aren't you taking yourself a little too seriously, Irene?

IRENE

*(puts down her pencil)* I have to take myself seriously, Aunty. If I didn't, I couldn't get out of bed in the morning.

AHMED

If you don't go to sleep, you also can't get out of bed in the morning. So, come on, Irene. Hit the sheets.

IRENE

Can't. I've got work to do. And I'm not bothering anyone as long as I stay in the dark. Why are you up, Dad?

AHMED

I...couldn't sleep. I thought a glass of tea might help.

IRENE

Tea keeps you up, Dad.

AHMED

You're right. Okay, you two. I'll see you in the morning. Good night.

*Ahmed exits. Hala turns on the light.*

IRENE

Leave it off. The light will bother my mom.

HALA

She's already asleep. Can I see what you're doing?

IRENE

No. I don't think it would interest you.

HALA

I do know a thing or two about music, Irene.

IRENE

Don't you think you would have gotten further if you did?

HALA

Not everybody had the opportunities you had.

IRENE

Not everyone deserves them.

HALA

You think you deserve to be safe and comfortable and well-fed more than me? More than your mother?

IRENE

You're the last person to bring up what my mother deserves.

HALA

All I want to say is that the scores I saw in your room were quite good-

IRENE

Don't look at my stuff.

HALA

Don't keep it lying around.

IRENE

It's my room.

HALA

The point is I think you should show them to your uncle Abe.

IRENE

My mom would never let me speak to him.

HALA

I bet if your mother asked him to help you, he would. You know, they speak more than you think.

IRENE

Don't lie about my mom. Why don't you just go to bed, Aunty?

HALA

Do you want to talk?

IRENE

Talk about what?

HALA

So, you don't want to talk. Irene, people make mistakes and, in your lifetime, you will make your share.

IRENE

Not me. Not some mistakes. Don't act like mistakes are accidents. They're not. They're choices people make without caring about that there will be consequences.

HALA

Sometimes you know there will be consequences but you don't understand the full extent of them at the time. You miscalculate the cost of your choices. I made a mistake and it will never happen again.

IRENE

Whatever. You know, speaking of calculating costs, Aunty-

HALA

Yes?

IRENE

Well, I'm kind of embarrassed to bring this up, but my mother is really soft-hearted and doesn't want to turn you out or anything, but we are having a hard time making ends meet-

HALA

I see.

IRENE

And since my dad was a fairly well-known musician in his day, it seems to make sense that he should be the one to teach me Arabic music.

HALA

That does make sense.

IRENE

I'm glad you think so. So, has Uncle Abe offered to get you an apartment yet?

HALA

No.

IRENE



What a shame. He obviously doesn't find you as charming as we do.

HALA

Are you really trying to get me to go, kid? Think about it. Think about it really good.

IRENE

Of course it's not what I want. I'm just thinking of your best interests.

HALA

If I leave here, I have to go back to Jordan. That's the only country that will give me citizenship.

IRENE

I hear it's nice there.

HALA

Not from your mother. Or from me. Do you know why we hate it? Do you know what happened to us there?

IRENE

You know that I don't.

HALA

You come from a long line of people with delusions of grandeur. In other words, idiots. The biggest one of all was your grandfather. He thought he was a leader. My mother and your mother - and all of the people in our camp - adored him. But I could see through all that - he was a joke and I was the kid of someone who cared for lost causes and other people's children more than he cared for his own. I hated his guts for it. He should have known you don't flee the Israelis to Jordan, then try to fight the Israelis when they're both working together. To be fair, the poor bastard didn't know that Hussein - I won't call him king, I won't call any man king - would sent his soldiers to clean up the camps of revolutionaries. Scores had to be settled. We were living through a Black September but we didn't know it - we thought we were just having breakfast - and in they came and I see them hit and hit and hit my dad and my mom is crawling, then the man with the cigar says "get the little one" and the biggest one comes towards me. Karema is half-asleep-

IRENE

What? What did they do to my mother?

HALA

Nothing. They left her alone.

IRENE

Why would they do that? Why would they hurt everyone and leave her alone?

HALA

I don't know.

IRENE

Why are you telling me this, Aunty?

HALA

Because what happened to your mother and her sister affects you in a thousand ways that you yourself will never be able to explain.

IRENE

Am I supposed to feel sorry for you now, Aunty?

HALA

Kind of. But, I also thought you should know your own history. I thought you would want to.

IRENE

Too bad I don't know how much of what you told me is actually true.

HALA

Ask your mother.

IRENE

There are many things I'm not going to bother my mother with unless I have to. Regardless, I'm glad you agree that it's best that you go.

*Hala exits into Irene's bedroom, leaving Irene alone on-stage.*

**Scene 8**

*The next morning. Karema walks in and out of the door to the kitchen, wearing a robe and carrying small dishes of Middle Eastern food. She stops by Irene's door, hesitates, and then knocks softly.*

KAREMA

Irene.

*Hala exits from the bathroom, fully dressed.*

HALA

She's still in bed.

KAREMA

She never sleeps in. *(calling)* Irene, come help me set the table. *(begins setting it herself)*

HALA

She was up late last night composing. I'll set it. It's the least I can do. Actually, it's the most - you know how useless I am in the kitchen.

*Hala and Karema set the table. Ahmed saunters in, looking tired. Karema leaves Hala setting the table and goes to him.*

KAREMA

Ahmed, I have something to confess. Please don't be angry.

AHMED

What?

KAREMA

Don't be mad, okay? I thought it would be good to offer to pay Goldman to help Irene and they hung up on me-

AHMED

Oh.

KAREMA

You're not angry?

AHMED

No.

KAREMA

What are we going to tell Irene?

AHMED

Just don't tell her. She'll figure out sooner or later that no answer is an answer.

*The tea kettle whistles.*

KAREMA

I hate that sound.

*The whistling stops. Karema goes back into the kitchen.*

*Ahmed and Hala are alone. Their eyes lock and they step towards one another.*

*They step away from each other when Karema enters with a steaming tea kettle. Karema goes to Irene's door.*

KAREMA

Irene, your aunt has already set the table. Please join us. We miss you, *habibtey*. Get up, sunshine!

*Irene (also in pajamas) enters from her bedroom, looking tired.*

IRENE

I'm not hungry.

KAREMA

Well, come and sit with us.

IRENE

Why?

KAREMA

Irene, this is our only day off and I don't get to see you.

IRENE

Okay, okay!

*Irene sits down.*

HALA

Good morning.

IRENE

You're up early. And dressed too.

HALA

It happens.

*Karema pours tea for everyone and they pass plates around. Ahmed and Karema eat. Hala puts food in her plate but does not eat. Irene sits morosely.*

HALA

This is the first time we've all sat down together, isn't it?

*Ahmed nods.*

KAREMA

*(not paying attention to Hala) Irene, eat just a little of the eggs. Dad made it the way you like it. No paprika.*

IRENE

No thanks.

*Karema puts a big chunk of omelet in Irene's plate.*

IRENE

Don't do that.

KAREMA

You have to have something.

IRENE

What do you hear out of? I said I'm not hungry.

AHMED

Let the kid do what she wants, Karema.

KAREMA

She has to have something.

HALA

I'm going to be leaving soon.

*Ahmed looks stunned.*

KAREMA

What?

HALA

*(looking at Irene)* I'm going to go back to Jordan. Tomorrow, actually.

KAREMA

Why, Hala? You'd never choose to go back there.

IRENE

Maybe she likes Jordan, Mom.

KAREMA

No one likes Jordan. It's a place you end up, not a place you go. Where will you live, Hala? With what money?

AHMED

Uh...um...I can go with her. Help her get settled.

*Pause. Irene fixates her eyes on her father and begins to stare his down. Ahmed doesn't meet her gaze.*

KAREMA

*(looking confused for a moment)* Oh, Ahmed. Always looking for an excuse to go to Jordan. No one is going, including you, Hala. You'll stay here. At least till your visa runs out.

IRENE

Hello! I think it's Aunty's decision, Mom.

KAREMA

Have I not been a good host to you, Sister?

HALA

No, it's not that.

AHMED

*(speaking pleadingly to Hala)* We're going to move into one of our apartments soon. We'll have more space. You can have your own room, Hala.

KAREMA

What are you talking about? We're not moving and she's not leaving. *(to Hala)* Irene doesn't mind sharing a room with you.

HALA

Thank you for your hospitality. But, I'm leaving tomorrow.

KAREMA

No, you're not. If you're going, you'll go in a few weeks when Irene is off school. I've been wanting to take Irene to Palestine and we'll stop by Jordan first-

IRENE

Hell no.

AHMED

I want to go to Jordan!

KAREMA

Ahmed...

AHMED

We can all go. Let's all go.

KAREMA

What about the store? You went last time. It's me and Irene's turn.

IRENE

I can't leave and neither can you, Dad! Goldman is going to call any minute.

AHMED

It's probably a scam, Irene.

IRENE

A scam? What kind of scam?

AHMED

I bet he is one of those guys that you hear about that charges singers a fortune to make a demo tape.

HALA

Oh, Ahmed. If it was a scam, he would have called.

IRENE

That's right. He would have called, Dad. Not once, but ten times.

KAREMA

*(looking at Irene who is staring her father down).* Can we not discuss this now? Let's just eat our food.

AHMED

He's not the only producer in the world. I think it's important to be honest with ourselves, Irene, and acknowledge that maybe he just isn't interested.

IRENE

I think it's also important to be honest with others, Dad, and acknowledge when they are (*gets up and picks up a handful of the omelet in her plate and flings it at Ahmed*) dirty piece of shit assholes.

KAREMA

Irene!

AHMED

(*stands up*) That's it. Pick up this mess!

IRENE

You pick it up!

AHMED

You may not like what I have to say, but you better respect me. I'm your father.

KAREMA

Sit down, both of you!

IRENE

Some father you are!

AHMED

I won't be bullied in my own house. You got something on your mind, kid? Say it. Or else you'd better start acting normal.

IRENE

You act normal!

KAREMA

I said, sit down.

IRENE

If I had a father like Abe, he could help me [get somewhere]-

AHMED



If you had talent, you could help yourself.

*Irene gets up and heads towards her bedroom.*

KAREMA

Irene! He didn't mean it.

*Irene slams the door.*

KAREMA

That wasn't necessary, Ahmed. Go apologize.

*The sound of a very loud and vulgar Prince song bursts out.*

AHMED

Lower that shit. (pause) Lower it or I'm coming in there.

*The music is silenced.*

KAREMA

You go apologize right now.

*Ahmed heads towards the bedroom and slams the door. Karema sits at the table with Hala.*

KAREMA

I really wanted us to have a nice meal. I don't know what's gotten in to everyone in this house.

*Irene enters from her room with a bag and her scores in her hand. She heads straight to the door.*

KAREMA

Where are you going, Irene?

IRENE

Library.

KAREMA

Isn't it closed on Sundays? (*Irene slams the door.*) I'm worried about that girl.

HALA

I'm not.

KAREMA

I'm worried about you. So, what's the grand plan? The great scheme? Come on, fill me in. Why are you leaving?

HALA

I just don't like America.

KAREMA

But you hate Jordan.

HALA

I want to really try my music again.

KAREMA

Be a teacher?

HALA

No, a singer.

KAREMA

That's just not realistic, Hala.

*Ahmed enters from his bedroom with his tubleh in hand.*

KAREMA

Where are you going?

AHMED

To fix a toilet.

*He slams the door on his way out. Karema and Hala are alone again.*

KAREMA

Why did you go through all that trouble of getting a visa here if you're not even going to give it a try? We can try to get you granted asylum here-

HALA

No. I came because I thought it was going to work with Abe. But, he isn't how I remember. He used to lower his voice when he spoke to me - I don't think even he realized it. When it got bad in Kuwait, I began to think about him again - how someone once treated me like I would break...well, that's over. Look, I need to borrow your husband for a few weeks.

KAREMA

What? What do you mean "borrow my husband"?

HALA

I didn't tell you everything that happened in Jordan, but suffice it to say I don't know anyone who would rent me a room.

KAREMA

Hala, you can't ask a wife to let you borrow her husband. I can go with you.

HALA

Won't work. I need a man and I can find one quicker when I have one on my arm. He won't mind. He likes Jordan.

KAREMA

Hala!

HALA

It's not a big deal. I'm not going to do anything with him.

*Pause.*

KAREMA

Um...Uh...Um. Did you sleep with my husband?

HALA

No.

KAREMA

You're lying. The only time you answer a direct question directly is when you're lying. You can't do this in my house. Not here, Hala! Not here!

HALA

For a few weeks is all I'm asking.

KAREMA

You were born fucked up and there's no excuses for it! Stupid, stupid, stupid, and Irene is just like you. Just, I want, I want, I want and everyone around you has to give.

HALA

I need him, Karema. For a few weeks. He'll help me get set up and he'll come back.

KAREMA

If he goes, I can't have him back. Husbands are not like sisters, Hala. When it breaks, it's broken.

HALA

You have everything.

KAREMA

He can't have my husband. I never thought you would stoop this low, that you were this fucked up.

HALA

You're just as fucked up as I am. At least I don't go around acting like everything is fine.

KAREMA

He's my husband, Hala. This is my home. You're going to need my help again-

HALA

(at the same time) KAREMA

I won't need your damn help. -and I'll have to give-

KAREMA

-it to you, because you're my sister and only when you're dead will I be free.

HALA

You're free all right! You left! You abandoned me and you knew that you were the person I needed.

KAREMA

Did you expect me to stay in that place?

HALA

We could have figured a way to get out together. But, no, you weren't waiting for me. Married the first boy you found with a visa to America just like you said you would.

KAREMA

I was scared. I was so scared it would happen again.

HALA

So you leave me there alone? With our parents who couldn't even look at me? You took care of Karema first, you always take care of Karema, and that meant leaving me so you could forget-

KAREMA

I couldn't forget! I knew to keep my eyes down, Hala. You didn't.

HALA

You're blaming me?!

KAREMA

No, I'm blaming me. I was trying to tell you to keep your eyes down, Hala, do what I'm doing. They're beating Dad, keep your eyes down. They tearing Mom's clothes, keep your eyes down. I should have told you with real words, a little pinch, but I'm afraid to call attention to myself so I keep trying to tell you from my mind to yours - copy me like you always do - don't look at people who can't look at themselves. But it's too late.

*Karema exits into her room.*

**Scene 9**

*Ahmed enters with his tubleh in its case in his hand. Hala is sitting at the table and smoking. They look at one another.*

*Karema emerges from her room. Hala stands up and exits into Irene's bedroom.*

AHMED

Karema, I have to go.

*Karema ignores him and begins clearing the table.*

AHMED

Karema. I don't belong here. You know that. I always planned to go back. You know that.

*Irene enters. Ahmed turns and goes to her.*

AHMED

Irene. I'm sorry about what I said this morning-

IRENE

Whatever, Dad.

*Pause.*

IRENE

What's going on? Mom?

AHMED

You know I love you. You know I'd give my...life for you, but I can't...live my life for you. No one likes the music I can make here. You, of all people, should understand that.

IRENE

Dad? What are you saying? Are you going with her?

AHMED

Uh...I...

IRENE

No, please, Dad. She's just a lying whore.

AHMED

It's not about her.

IRENE

You were kissing her right here!

AHMED

Please, Irene. You have to understand. This is between your mother and I. It has nothing to do with you.

IRENE

It should have everything to do with me, you both should stay together because of me. Mom, do something!

AHMED

Irene, would you stay a place where you couldn't sing?

IRENE

Oh, come on. You just want to fuck Aunty Hala.

*Irene runs to her room and tries the door. It's locked.*

IRENE

She's here?! She's here. Get out of my room, you whore. Get out.

KAREMA

Stop it, Irene.

IRENE

Mom, tell him he can't go.

KAREMA

I can't stop him. *(to Ahmed)* If you're going to leave, leave now. Take this with you. *(she goes to the door and throws out the tubleh)*

AHMED

My father gave me that.

KAREMA

Fuck you and your father. Get out of this house.

*Ahmed gets the tubleh and reenters.*

AHMED

I built this goddamn house with my sweat and tears. You aren't kicking me out of it.

KAREMA

I said get out.

IRENE

Stop it, Mom.

AHMED

I gave up my music, my life, for you and all I wanted was to be more than the fucking handyman.

KAREMA

You'll come crawling back.

AHMED

I wouldn't come back if you were the last woman on earth. Because you're not a woman. I've been trying to love you as if you were one.

KAREMA

I did my duties as a wife.

AHMED

Duties?! You put more passion into cleaning up the vomit off the storefront window! For eighteen goddamn years, I obeyed you, even if what you were asking me to do was to cut off my own balls. You wouldn't let me play my instrument in my own house. My own fucking house!

KAREMA

It made me homesick, Ahmed!

AHMED

What?

KAREMA

I thought you knew that. I thought you understood.

AHMED

I don't care if it killed you. You know what my music meant to me.

IRENE

Dad, please stay.

AHMED

Your mother never loved me, Irene. Did you, Karema?



KAREMA

Why are you trying to humiliate me? Do you want me to beg?

IRENE

Be nicer to him, Mom. This is all your fault.

KAREMA

*(speaking to Irene and not looking at Ahmed)* I showed him in every way possible that he was the thing that I depended on.

AHMED

What ways?

IRENE

Talk to him like he's here, Mom.

KAREMA

He's already gone.

AHMED

What ways, Karema?

KAREMA

*(finally looking at him)* In every way I knew how.

AHMED

It wasn't enough. It wasn't even close!

*Irene screams at the top of her lungs. Hala emerges with her luggage and her oud.*

AHMED

Just a minute more, Hala. *(kisses Irene on the forehead)* Irene, I'm going to call every day.

IRENE

Whatever, Dad. *(to Hala)* and you, Aunty, I hope you-

HALA

You can't wish anything upon me that hasn't already been done. I'm leaving you my oud. A prince gave it to me.

IRENE

Stop lying! Just stop lying!

HALA

Okay, I stole it. But someone should have given it to me.

IRENE

I'll smash it.

HALA

You're too smart to do that. My head - you might smash - but not a perfectly good instrument.

*Hala goes over to Karema.*

KAREMA

This isn't good-bye for us.

HALA

It might be.

KAREMA

You'll come back broke and needing my help. This isn't good-bye. This isn't good-bye.

*The door shuts as Ahmed and Hala leave. Irene runs to the door to try to go after them, but Karema stops her. Karema cries.*

IRENE

What are we going to do now, Mom?

*Karema keeps crying and does not respond. Irene hugs her mother.*

IRENE

At least now I don't have to worry about whether my father is going to run off with my aunt, because my father has run off with my aunt.

*Karema keeps crying.*

IRENE

You know what? I think it's time to close the store for the night. We should let the workers go home.

*Karema shakes her head.*

IRENE

Please, Mom. Stop crying. Get up. You have to. For me.

KAREMA

You're not enough, Irene.

IRENE

Neither are you, but we're all we've got. Get up, Mom.  
I'll go with you. Please, Mom.

KAREMA

I'm afraid.

IRENE

I'm afraid too, Mom. But, we have to let the workers go  
home for the night.

KAREMA

Your Goldman isn't going to ever call you, Irene.

IRENE

I know. What's that Arabic saying you and Dad always say?  
No answers are the answer. Or is it? Every answer is the  
answer. (pause) Hello? I'm saying it wrong so you would  
correct me, Mother.

KAREMA

You know the saying by now, Irene.

IRENE

True. Come on, let's go.

KAREMA

I can't go down there. I can't, Irene.

IRENE

Fine. I'll do it for you.

*Irene exits and leaves Karema on the couch.*

## Scene 10

*During the transition, the tea kettle whistles. Irene enters from her bedroom and goes over to knock on her parents' bedroom door. She stops herself - remembering her father isn't there - and goes to the kitchen and turns off the kettle. Irene slips a smock over her clothes (which Karema wears in earlier scenes) and exits through the front door.*

*When Irene is gone, Karema enters from her bedroom and curls up on the couch.*

ABE

*(off-stage)* Hello?

KAREMA

*(jumping up)* Ahmed! *(she opens the door)*

ABE

No, but close.

KAREMA

Abe, what are you doing here?

ABE

*(puts his foot in the door)* I've been officially invited. Your daughter asked me to come. What for? I don't know. She said she needed a favor and wanted to ask in person.

KAREMA

Irene's in the store, Abe. The entrance is right downstairs.

ABE

Well, she asked me to meet her here. *(pause)* You're not going to make me wait outside, are you?

*Karema steps aside and Abe enters. Abe sits down. Karema remains standing.*

ABE

What is that wonderful smell? Fresh falafel! God, how I would like some fresh falafel if only someone would be kind enough to offer it to me.

*Long pause.*

KAREMA

Would you like some?

ABE

Can't. I'm a diet, but thanks for so kindly offering.  
(*putting his feet up on the coffee table.*) It's been a while since you actually let me through the front door of your home, Karema. How long has it been?

KAREMA

A while.

ABE

It's been ten years since you cursed me terribly, and threw me out of your home without letting me finish my dinner. Ten years. Time flies. Does it not, Karema?

*Pause.*

KAREMA

Abe, I don't know why my daughter would invite you here.

ABE

She's probably going to ask again for me to do something to support her singing career that my company can't afford. But I figured I'd hear the kid out. Where is Hala?

KAREMA

She isn't here.

ABE

And Ahmed?

KAREMA

He's not (*pause*) home.

ABE

So, here we are. All alone. You and I.

KAREMA

I'll call Irene-

ABE

Don't bother. I can wait. Hala hasn't dropped by or called in a few weeks. Any idea why?

KAREMA

Perhaps she's upset that you won't marry her.

ABE

*(getting ruffled for the first time)* She knows I can't do that.

KAREMA

*(with just a hint of sarcasm)* She doesn't exactly fit into your new lifestyle now, does she?

ABE

Don't start.

KAREMA

Okay.

ABE

Well, that was easy. You know me better than that. I don't enjoy hollow victories. Come on. Let's see you shriek about how by aping another race, I'm admitting that I think I am no better than an ape.

KAREMA

You aren't.

ABE

I know. So, come on, tell me how I will die surrounded by strangers, cursing myself in my mother tongue. That - in particular - I was looking forward to the entire ride over here.

KAREMA

I'm not all that bad.

ABE

You're worse. Come on. Give it to me.

KAREMA

What do you want me to say?

ABE

What you always say.

KAREMA

What for, Abe?

ABE

So I can respond the way I always respond, which is it costs me more than it ever gave me to deny who I am. I'm sorry that I lied about my background when I was young and scared and had just been abandoned by a woman I intended to marry for a man with a little more money-

KAREMA

A lot more.

ABE

Okay. A lot more. Though I soon changed that. It's not like I converted or anything. I know it was stupid to lie. I thought it was the only way I could make it here. I never told you the story about how I started pretending to be a Jew. Aren't you even a little curious? Why won't you ever hear me out?

KAREMA

Okay.

ABE

What did you just say? Okay?! This is so unexpected, I almost don't know how to respond. Good thing that over the years I've given a thought or two to what I'd say if I had the chance to actually talk to you. *(Pause.)* Now, picture this. You walk into a job interview, someone mispronounces your name, makes a false assumption. You don't correct them-

KAREMA

(at the same time) ABE

I would correct them!

You get the job,

ABE

*(ignoring Karema's outburst and continuing without a break)*  
it becomes too late to correct them.

KAREMA

It's a deliberate [lie]-

ABE

It wasn't deliberate, Karema. I mean, it didn't start out that way. The guy who interviewed me, Ben, was a nice guy. He died recently. You would have liked him, Karema.

KAREMA

I don't think so.

ABE

I do. It was my first interview to be an assistant in the music industry. He asked me where I came from and I told him Egypt.

KAREMA

First lie right there.

ABE

But it wasn't really. I had lived in Egypt for six months before coming to the States. Egypt had just made peace with Israel. And I thought if I flat out told him I was a Palestinian, I'd never get the job. Then, he said, "there were lots of Jews in Egypt before all the troubles" and I said "yes, there were a lot of Jews living in Egypt." So what if I somehow failed to mention that I wasn't one of them?

KAREMA

What do you mean 'so what'?

ABE

I don't lie anymore. I keep to myself and I don't answer questions about my personal life. That's what I say now when people ask me anything. I don't answer questions. Do you know how much money I give to our people?

KAREMA

It won't correct it.

ABE

And how much of your income do you donate?

KAREMA

I..uh...

ABE

Zilch. That's what I thought. Where is Irene? I'm sick of you already. I can't believe I was a coin toss away from being your husband. Imagine! If I had married you, I would have to spend every night fighting with you like this.

*Pause.*

KAREMA



*(furious)* Married me?! Have you gone crazy?

ABE

Ah, there's the Karema that I've been missing. You would have fallen for me. I couldn't play music and make fancy speeches like Ahmed could, but you would have fallen hard just the same. But I lost the coin toss-

KAREMA

You'd better explain before I toss a coin [down your throat]-

ABE

And every time I see the fury in your face I thank God for the force of gravity and motion He put in place that made that coin in that corner of our universe face the way it did that day. You really don't know what I'm talking about, do you?

KAREMA

No idea. Why don't you meet my daughter downstairs?  
*(walks towards the door and opens in an inch)*

ABE

*(walks to the door, perhaps a little nearer than he needs to be to Karema and leans on door so it shuts)* So Ahmed never told you? After all these years! You see, he and I liked you and Hala. We used to call you two the Hurricane and the Quiet Storm. We both couldn't decide which sister liked better.

KAREMA

Well, I know I never would have-

ABE

Let me finish my story. We agreed to flip a coin and stay away from the woman the winner chose. We saw that in an American movie somewhere, flipping a coin for a woman. Ahmed picked heads, I picked tails. Ahmed flipped and, because God is great, it was heads.

KAREMA

I never would have stomached you for a minute. You are part of our race like vomit is part of a human body. It's a relief to be rid of you.

ABE

I lost. Thank God. Because if I had won, there's a possibility I might have chosen you.

IRENE

*(entering and dressed in Karema's smock)* Hi, Uncle. I'm so sorry to keep you waiting.

ABE

No problem. I was just having a friendly little chat with your mom. Isn't it a bit late to be working?

IRENE

I had to wait for our last delivery.

KAREMA

Why did you invite him here?

IRENE

Have you told him about Aunty Hala and Dad?

KAREMA

It's none of his business.

ABE

What about Hala and Ahmed?

IRENE

A few weeks ago, my father and Aunty Hala ran off together.

ABE

What do you mean 'ran off'?

KAREMA

What do you think it means?

IRENE

Mom, just be quiet. We know they've gone to Jordan together. *(getting choked up)* They haven't contacted us yet. It feels like they never will.

ABE

Oh, my God. That woman...left me again...with my pain in the ass brother! And for Ahmed to leave you two...alone...

IRENE

We don't know what to do. I have been staying home from school since they left because my mom...well, she hasn't

been able to work. I know this isn't your problem. I wouldn't turn to you if I didn't have to. You know that I wanted to be a singer.

ABE

I know. And, like I said, when you visited me with your father, college is much more practical.

IRENE

I realize that. Singing is such a long shot. But I want to do the next best thing - which is to go into the music business and help other artists realize their dreams. So would it be possible for me to work for you? As an assistant, perhaps?

KAREMA

Over my dead body.

IRENE

If that's what it takes.

ABE

Irene!

IRENE

(to Abe) Don't worry, Uncle. My mother and I just like to tease one another. I will take the GED test and go to college at night. That's the only way I can feasibly go at all. Then, we can close the store and I can take care of my mother. Of course, I will be discreet about our relationship. I was planning on changing my last name anyway to something easier to pronounce.

ABE

No! Don't do that. It's not necessary. If you make people money, trust me, they learn to pronounce your name. Don't try to mask who you are, because, if you do, nothing you achieve will be worth a damn. Also, it's extremely stressful. Do you know how much Yiddish I had to pretend to understand over the years?

IRENE

Okay, I just didn't want people thinking I got a job because I'm your niece.

ABE

Irene, I have a very small office and I'm really [not able to]-

KAREMA

We need help. We need your help

*Pause.*

ABE

Well, there might be something I can do. But, as you know so well, Karema, nothing in this life is free. I miss Arabic food. Invite me over for dinner every Sunday, and I can probably get Irene a job.

KAREMA

What?

IRENE

You're welcome to eat here every day, Uncle. Our house is your house.

KAREMA

I'll poison you.

IRENE

I'll taste the food beforehand to make sure she doesn't.

ABE

I'll hold you to that promise, kid. What do you say, Karema? I'm giving your daughter a full-time job, entry-level, of course.

IRENE

Of course.

ABE

In exchange, you give me a simple meal once a week. Maybe when I taste how good your food is, it'll give me strength. To do the things I should do.

*Pause.*

IRENE

Come on, Mom.

KAREMA

All right, all right. Since you give me no choice.

ABE

Fabulous. Irene, get to my office tomorrow by eight.

IRENE

That's earlier than school!

ABE

Is there a problem with that?

IRENE

No. Not at all.

ABE

Good. I won't be there. My assistant will tell you what to do.

IRENE

I'm very grateful.

ABE

*(looking at Karema)* Is everyone here grateful?

*Karema glares at him.*

ABE

I take it that means yes. Until Sunday.

*Abe steps towards the door, but turns around to grab a falafel that is on a plate on the table.*

*Abe takes a bite then exits. Irene runs to the window to watch him go and the sound of a car pulling away can be heard.*

IRENE

*(doing a little victory dance)* He's giving me a job! He actually bought that whole I-want-to-help-other-artists bullshit.

KAREMA

I told you he wasn't very bright.

IRENE

Or maybe he's just a nice man and wanted to give me a job.

KAREMA

Nice men don't lie about who they are.

IRENE

Oh, Mom. Nice men do a lot worse than that. Thanks for letting him in.

KAREMA

I said I would. But, Abe came early and I (*pause*) thought it was your father.

*Pause.*

IRENE

Oh. (*pause*) I miss Dad, Mom. Do you think he'll call us again?

KAREMA

I know he will. He's burning through his credit cards.

IRENE

So?

KAREMA

So that means Hala won't stay with him long.

IRENE

Even if she leaves him, he'll stay in Jordan. He loves it there.

KAREMA

Don't worry about your father. You'll always have me hanging around your neck like a dead weight. That you can count on.

IRENE

You know it seems Uncle Abe had a crush on you. We've spent all week planning what I should say to him and it turns out all along that all you had to do was bat your big brown eyes.

KAREMA

You're not too old to be hit, Irene.

IRENE

And apparently you're not too old to be hit on, Mom. I overheard what he said.

KAREMA

How dare you eavesdrop!

IRENE

It's a small house, Mom. You can't help but hear what goes on in it whether or not you want to.

KAREMA

Well, to hear what was going on from outside, it's pretty clear that you had to want to. You should appreciate that I'm doing all this for you. You should be grateful. He's forcing me to-

IRENE

Yeah, right. I believe that.

KAREMA

If I'm being civil to Abe, I'm doing it for you and for our people. I'm going to convince him that he cannot go on pretending to be a Jew.

IRENE

I have a feeling you can convince Uncle Abe of anything.

KAREMA

You're probably getting all the price tags mixed up. I should go downstairs.

IRENE

No. I meant what I said about us closing the store.

KAREMA

We can't afford-

IRENE

How many apartments do we have, Mom?

KAREMA

Not so many and they're in a run down neighborhood.

IRENE

Bloomfield Hills in the richest district in the entire Detroit area.

KAREMA

That isn't saying much.

IRENE

I want to know how many we have. I can find out without you. All I have to do is [call up]-

KAREMA

Twenty.

IRENE

Twenty?! We are collecting rent on twenty apartments! Well, it's going to be nineteen. Because we are kicking someone out and moving into one of them tomorrow.

KAREMA

We can't afford to-

IRENE

Yes, we can. I've got a job now too. It'll be boring, dull, repetitive, but maybe my uncle will let me use the recording studio after hours. Then, maybe he'll listen to my songs and maybe he'll like them. Because maybe - out of the millions of songs I'll make - there will be one or two that is the kind of song that, when you hear the first note, you know you have to stick around to hear the last. Do you think it will work, Mom? Do you think I can make it work?

KAREMA

Maybe.

***End of play.***