

Swagger Like This

A full-length play

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“Swagger Like This”

Characters

| | |
|------------|---|
| Jonah..... | 8 th grade boy.* He has a physical handicap, as well as a speech impediment.** He wants to be a rapper, and will do it. |
| Mark..... | Man. He is Jonah’s father, and is recently separated from his wife, Kathy. He is a self-admitted ‘bad father’, and tries everything that he can do to make Jonah ‘better’. |
| Kathy..... | Woman. She is Jonah’s mother, and is recently separated from her husband, Mark. She is torn between wanting to protect Jonah, and wanting him to do what he loves. |

Setting

The play takes-place in Kathy’s House, Mark’s apartment, and the talent show at Jonah’s school. The house and apartment should be simple settings, but one should be distinct from the other.

Slugline

A boy with a speech impediment wants to be a rapper while his recently separated parents who are trying to figure out the meaning of the term ‘amicable’.

Synopsis

Jonah is an 8th grader with a speech impediment, a physical handicap, and a burning need to rap in his school’s talent show. Yet, his greatest obstacles to rap-stardom don’t come from his newly-formed ‘crew’ or from his disability, but rather from his parents who desperately want him to succeed.

Other Notes

Two-Acts.

Jonah raps all words which are in *italics*.

*Jonah is an 8th grader, but he could of course be played by an any-age actor, as Jonah’s maturity and grade-level are conveyed by the text.

** Jonah has a problem with moving the right side of his body, and a speech impediment (not a stutter, but a problem with pronouncing letters ‘correctly’). The name of ‘MARK’ is chosen with the intention of making a soft ‘r’ sound, (making ‘Mark’ sound like ‘Mahk’) but it is, of course, up to those working on the script.

“Swagger Like This”

SCENE 01 : JONAH’S BEDROOM

JONAH is in his bedroom rapping gangster-lyrics over a loud beat.

JONAH

*They say God's a forgivin' man, I hope he forgive
Thirty shells I let off don't curse my kid.*

JONAH stops, turns-down the music.

JONAH

Pathetic.

JONAH turns the music back up.

JONAH (CONT'D)

*There once was some n-words that tried to murk me
I hit em up, put em in plastic surgery.
(Pause)
Sticks and stones may break bones and the shells may hurt me
But I take it like a man, you beg for mercy.*

JONAH turns-down the music.

JONAH

Good. That's hard-core-gangster.

JONAH turns the music back up.

JONAH sits down on his bed.

MARK enters, and knocks on JONAH's door.

JONAH gets-up to turn-off the music.

MARK

You don't need to get up, Jonah.

JONAH gets up anyway, limps over to the stereo, turns it off, and limps back.

MARK

I could have gotten that for you.

JONAH

I have a custom-made bed, why waste it?

MARK

Jonah.

JONAH

I mean, that's why you cut the legs-off, right? So I could turn-off my own music?

MARK

We made the bed so that you could get in and out of it easier.

JONAH

You didn't *make* this bed. You took a normal bed, and called it done after you cut it's legs-off. You didn't make anything, you butchered it.

MARK

I offered to turn off your CD player, Jonah, because I was the one who had a problem with it.

JONAH

The CD player was too loud, Mark. Which was caused by me. And, instead of telling me to turn it down, like would be normal, you offered to turn it off. By offering, it became my problem. A problem with me.

MARK

Jonah, don't make it into that.

JONAH

And that's what you always say, right? Don't run-away from your problems, stand and face them because you'll be with them forever?

MARK

I don't want to talk about that right now. What were you listening to, anyway? Sounded like a war-zone.

JONAH

Rap.

MARK

Wap?

JONAH

(Pause) Hip-hop.

MARK

Rap, of course. *(Pause)* Sorry. I thought you said-- I didn't know what you said. *(Pause, to lighten the mood)* So you like that better than real music, Jonah?

JONAH

It is real music.

MARK

Come on, real music doesn't have words, Jonah. I thought I raised you better than that. Coltrane, Davis.

JONAH

I like rap.

MARK

Rap is the opposite of real music.

JONAH

I'm a rapper.

MARK

You're not a rapper.

JONAH

I have a rap-name, too: JStor.

MARK

You can't say stuff like that, Jonah.

JONAH

Don't make fun of how I talk. Just because I can't say it right-

MARK

Don't play that card, Jonah. This isn't about the way you talk. You know that. *(Pause)* I didn't come up here to tell you about rap.

JONAH

You can't tell me anything about rap. I know everything, I'm going to be a gangster.

MARK

Ok, and now we have to deal with this. I'm going to go on a tangent now, but that's because it's important, and then I'll get to why your mother sent me up here. You don't want to let other people know that you're a rapper, or want to be a gangster, Jonah.

JONAH

You said I can do whatever I-

MARK

And don't sound pitiful. I didn't hurt your feelings. I'm not your mother, I'm not going to roll-over and apologize. As long as I'm your father, you need to understand this: rap may be fine, but, telling anyone, telling Mike and John in the lab, the lab that you want to work at this summer, who you have an interview with at the end of the week, that you listen to rap, that you want to be a gangster, then you will go, in their eyes, from a smart kid that they want to work with, to a favor. To a favor to me. And as a favor, you will weigh them down.

JONAH

Am I a favor?

MARK

If you tell them that you listen to rap. You won't be special Jonah. You'll be just like every 8th grader to them.

JONAH

But you work with them.

MARK

Because I told them you were different, Jonah. You're a kid that stands-apart from everyone else at school.

JONAH

I am aware of that.

MARK

No, wait. And what sets you apart isn't your body or your voice, it's here. Your head. Do you understand? And listening to that music, it puts you at a disadvantage.

JONAH

I can't do the interview on Friday.

MARK

We already set it up.

JONAH

There's a talent-show at school. There'll be rappers there. I want to see it.

MARK

No.

JONAH

Excuse me?

MARK

This is what I'm talking about. You, you want to see every single one of those jerks from school with their pants around their knees, making threats over some obnoxious and repetitive snare-drum and gun-cock? That's not what scientists do, that's not what doctors do, Jonah.

JONAH

I don't want to be a doctor.

MARK

That's not what gifted people do. That's not where they go. That's not who they talk to. You have an interview.

JONAH

Then reschedule it for next week.

MARK

No. This is about responsibility.

JONAH

Why are you so against this?

MARK

Against what?

JONAH

I told you that I like hip-hop, but you hate it. I told you that I want to see it, but you say it's not for me. Why are you against this?

MARK

It's about responsibility. It's about you putting your best foot forward.

JONAH

Which is the left-foot. Right?

MARK

This is not a conversation about that Jonah.

JONAH

About what?

MARK

About your-

JONAH

About me being special.

MARK

You're bending my words. That's not what I mean, and you know it. I don't want you to be put at a disadvantage.

JONAH

What if I want to be?

MARK

Want to-

JONAH

Be at a disadvantage.

MARK

That's ridiculous, you're a special kid, Jonah.

JONAH

JStor. And what if I don't want to be-

MARK

Jonah, be quiet. You're not making any sense. You will always be special to me. No matter what happens, you always have that. Your mother sent me up here, to come get you. I said that you were a man, and sometimes men like to be left alone. But she insisted that I come up. Are you a man, Jonah? Do you just want to be left alone? You left dinner pretty quickly tonight. Did you miss your, your war-zone in here? (*No response*) Did you want to get back to your 'war zone', Jonah?

JStor. JONAH

I'm not calling you that. MARK

Why not? JONAH

Because your mother and I *gave* you the name, Jonah. MARK

And I'm JStor. JONAH

Jonah is my son's name. MARK

Well isn't that weird. JONAH

It hasn't changed for 12 years. MARK

It's weird because I don't have a father. JONAH

Excuse me? Who am I? MARK

Mark. JONAH

No, Jonah. I'm *dad*. MARK

You don't want to be. JONAH

Nothing at dinner tonight came as a surprise. MARK

JONAH

You're not my father.

MARK

Your mother and I have been talking about it for months.

JONAH

You're not my father.

MARK

This is what's called an amicable separation.

JONAH

You're not my father!

MARK

You were there, too. We all talked about-

JONAH

No! No! You *told* me your plans!

MARK

We talked to you about it, Jonah. You've been such a strong man, so grown up, don't give up now. We need you to stay strong. Don't let today be different, Jonah.

JONAH

Today is different.

MARK

We're not going anywhere. We're just moving to separate places.

JONAH

I was ok when you were first telling me about your plans.

MARK

No one can be 'ok' with it at first, Jonah.

JONAH

I was. I analyzed it: I weighed the benefits and costs, and I knew who I'd be staying with. I was going to stay with Kathy.

MARK

Your mother. But we're doing a joint-custody. This isn't about you. We still love you.

JONAH

But today.

MARK

We shouldn't have made the final announcement at dinner.

JONAH

But today I heard you and mom laughing at me.

MARK

We would never laugh at you.

JONAH

Talking about my first words. How I had a hard time getting them out.

MARK

That's not what we were laughing at, Jonah.

JONAH

And about how, when you first picked me up from day-care. I would stagger to you shouting, 'Hey Mark, I'm here!'.

MARK

Jonah...

JONAH

And you kept on bringing up these old stories. And Kathy kept on laughing. I was ok when we were first talking, because I knew what choice I would make. I was going to live with Kathy-

MARK

Mom.

JONAH

I thought Kathy loved me.

MARK

Stop saying that!

JONAH

But then I heard you two laughing at me. You thought I was working upstairs, but I can move quietly if I like. I sat on the top of the stairs and heard you. Kathy doesn't love me either.

MARK

Jonah, you're being ridiculous.

JONAH

It's not love. When you see me limping, and you remember it so that you can joke about it later, when I'm not around. That's not love.

MARK

It is love. If you had heard us crying, if you had heard us talking about how you work, how you act, our memories of you, and cried. Then we wouldn't have loved you. We would have loved a son that didn't exist.

JONAH

How can I even believe you? You're just trying to protect yourself. Shit, I'm saying a lot of 'r's. You can use them for ammunition.

MARK

Jonah!

JONAH

You laugh together, but you're still leaving. When I'm not around, you can laugh, but you're still leaving.

MARK

Jonah, it's more complicated than that.

JONAH

No! I sat down, eating dinner, and heard you talking about what the future held for me, and how you were both going your separate ways, but I will be a success, You were both smiling and acted like you cared. Anything you say, I know that you just want to protect yourself. You can leave now.

Pause.

MARK

You were, and are a blessing that your mother and I are thankful for every day. When we look back and laugh, it's not at you. It's at us, and not knowing what to do. Not knowing if we are helping you at all and just hoping that we can set an example, and be good parents to you... I mean, there's no book, no past data we're going-off of. I'm sorry that you had to overhear your mother and I. Please believe me, it wasn't what it sounded like. Come downstairs, Jonah. Your mother will be happy.

JONAH

No.

MARK

Jonah. Your mother only laughed to make me comfortable. I started all the stories.

JONAH

...Mom wants me downstairs?

MARK

Yes. It would make her night special.

JONAH

Mark, I don't know what being special looks like to you. I know that it's me, you tell me that I'm special. Is that being a scientist, is that being smarter than everyone?

MARK

No.

JONAH

Is it a bed with cut-off legs and something to laugh-about with your friends? Is special someone who you can ignore when they say 'I want a loft-bed', and instead give them one that Dr. Raymond approves of, that you think is right. Is a 'favor' what you see of as special?

MARK

Jonah, you're not listening to me!

JONAH

I'm a gangster, and I do what I want. And what I want is to not be your scientist. And I don't want to go to the talent show. I want to enter it. And I'm going to be there, onstage, with all of the other jerks from school, and I won't be a doctor, I won't be a scientist, I won't be special. I'm going to be a gangster, and you're going to realize that I won't need your help with anything. And when I win, I'm going to be the best nobody you will never see. I'll tell mom I'm entering, she'll be happy for me. And I'll go down when I feel like it.

JONAH limps over to his stereo, and blasts his rap music.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 02: KITCHEN AT KATHY'S HOUSE

KATHY and JONAH are at the kitchen table. There is an untouched bowl of cereal in front of JONAH.

KATHY

You haven't touched your breakfast.

JONAH

I'm not going to school today.

KATHY

Did you get enough sleep last night?

JONAH

I was fine. My leg hurts. My leg hurts so much I can't go to school.

KATHY

Do you know what going bald feels like? Every morning, I wake up and touch my hair. And this morning... I think I'm going bald, Jonah. Normally it's full, and my fingers get snagged in it, and there are these knots that I have to force my hand through, it drove me crazy, but I'd always run my hands through it, my fingers acting like a comb. But when you wake up, and watch it slowly leave... Before I opened my eyes this morning, I could still feel your father in the bed next to me. His shoulders were the easiest to trace. And I think tomorrow, or tonight when I get back into bed, there's not going to be any trace of him. It will be for the best, Jonah. But... I wish he had left his shoulders... I fell asleep last night, tracing them on the sheets... But now I'm downstairs, and I have breakfast in front of me, and I'm going to start my day. *(KATHY eats her breakfast)* Eat your cereal Jonah.

JONAH

JStor.

KATHY

I'm saying that your father would still want you go to school.

JONAH

I don't care what Mark wants.

KATHY

What is this about?

JONAH

The talent show on Friday! I'm going to do it, and I'm going to win. I have to sign-up on the board to get a registration sheet.

KATHY

You need to go to school to do that.

JONAH

But once I sign my name on the board, everyone will see it, and laugh at me. They won't after I spit on Friday, but before... I don't want anymore bruises, mom.

KATHY

I'm going to call the principle-

JONAH

You calling the principle is why I eat lunch in the library.

KATHY

She was supposed to keep everything confidential.

JONAH

Who else would have told the kids not to pick on me? Everyone hates me at recess.

KATHY

Then I'll talk to their parents.

JONAH

Mom, I don't need you to try and stop it, I just am going to avoid it until I get onstage. And once I'm onstage, I'll get it.

KATHY

Get what?

JONAH

I'll win, I'll get the trophy. I want the trophy. I want to spit onstage and have everyone in the audience: my teachers who pity me, the kids at school who trip me, and other rappers who think they're amazing say: you are the best rapper I have ever heard. Not, 'you overcame so much', or, 'I didn't even notice that you couldn't-' I want to be so good that they won't think anything but what I spit.

KATHY

Spit...

JONAH

Rap! You have to get with my language!

KATHY

Jonah...

JONAH

JStor.

KATHY

Jonah.

JONAH

JStor.

KATHY

...JStor... You have to go to school, eat your breakfast so I can take you.

JONAH

I refuse to go. If you were to pick me up, put me in the car, and throw me out the door as you drove by, I would yell as loud as I could until an ambulance would pick me up.

KATHY

Then they'd take you to my hospital, and I would drive your grounded-butt back to school.

JONAH

You don't want me to rap. You want me to go to the interview that Mark setup for me at Bigelow labs. And I'd be surrounded by people who ignore how I look in favor of what I say.

KATHY

Focusing on what you say? Isn't that the same as spitting? Listen, JStor. If you want to be a hard-core rapper, you have to go to school, all hard-core rappers went to school.

JONAH

No! They all dropped-out!

KATHY

Which ones?

JONAH

Jay-Z dropped-out of school!

KATHY

What did he do when he left?

JONAH

Sold birds on the street.

KATHY

Birds?

JONAH

Cocaine.

KATHY

You don't know how to sell cocaine.

JONAH

It's not that hard.

KATHY

You can't eat breakfast, but you can sell cocaine

JONAH

Yeah! Once I get a crew and they sell it for me.

KATHY

Jonah, you are never going to sell cocaine.

JONAH

I'd never do that. But I will spit about it, compete, and I'm going to win.

KATHY

Then go to school and sign up!

JONAH

They'll tease me!

KATHY

So get a crew to back you up.

JONAH

No winning-rappers have crews. Jay-Z never had a crew.

KATHY

What about that one I got you the t-shirt for?

JONAH

G-Unit?

KATHY

They're pretty big.

JONAH

Yeah, but 50 Cent was part of them first.

KATHY

So a crew had a famous spitter in it?

JONAH

I guess..

KATHY

And isn't Wu-Tang part of a clan?

JONAH

Wu-Tang IS a clan. But it's also made-up of Ghostface-

KATHY

But it's a group?

JONAH

Yeah.

KATHY

So start a group.

JONAH

It would only work if I was their leader.

KATHY

You'd have to spit some really hot rhymes.

JONAH

I'm great at talking about the hard-core lifestyle: drivebys, selling birds... I'd be the best in the crew.

KATHY

Sounds like a plan.

JONAH

Where am I staying tonight?

KATHY

With me. I don't have to work tonight.

JONAH eats his breakfast.

JONAH

It's soggy.

END OF SCENE

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SCENE 03: KITCHEN AT KATHY'S HOUSE

KATHY and JONAH in their house. JONAH has a ball-cap on sideways.

KATHY is giving JONAH a big hug.

JONAH

Hey! You're hurting my brand!

KATHY

Oh my god, I'm sorry. Are you ok?

JONAH

No, not me. My brand.

KATHY

Brand? Your brand? You're not branded.

JONAH

No! My clothes! See this hat? They gave it to me. I'm a gangster now, mom.

KATHY

A gangster?

JONAH

Fo-real Mom, you gotta let me go!

KATHY

You did it!

JONAH

Of course I did. I'm a gangster, I do what I want to do.

KATHY

Well don't look so sad.

JONAH

Mom, I gotta go and practice.

KATHY

No, you stay right here and you tell me about it. Do you really have a crew, Jonah?

JStor. JONAH

How did it happen? KATHY

If I tell you, I'll lose valuable spitting time. JONAH

You're not even going to tell your mother what happened? KATHY

It doesn't matter. JONAH

Your mother who delivered you and made you breakfast this morning? KATHY

Mom... JONAH

No, go! Go on! Go and practice while I sit here alone in the kitchen, slaving over your dinner. KATHY

Mom, I don't want to go over this with you. JONAH

You don't? KATHY

Mom. JONAH

Did you eat your lunch today? KATHY

...Yeah... JONAH

And you liked it? KATHY

JONAH

Yeah...

KATHY

And you'd maybe like to eat another meal I make in this house?

JONAH

I got the 'nod'.

KATHY

What's a nod?

JONAH

It's when you cross your arms, and lean-back, and tilt your head, like this.

JONAH crosses his arms, tilts back, and nods.

KATHY

So who did you 'nod' to?

JONAH

I didn't nod to anyone, mom. I'm not high enough in my crew, yet. They nodded to me.

KATHY

I'm confused. What happened?

JONAH

I know where some of the kids spit. And they're already in their crews. But, at the wall by the monkeybars is where the ones without a crew just cipher.

KATHY

Cipher. Codes, right?

JONAH

No, it's a bunch of gangsters in a circle, and the one whose turn it is to spit stands in the middle.

KATHY

Right.

JONAH

So I have to walk around the school the long-way. So after that, I end-up right nearby where they're spitting.

KATHY

Why do you have to walk-around-

JONAH

...Because it's a shortcut.

KATHY

Jonah.

JONAH

Because I'll get made-fun of when they all see me limp through the playground! I have to just *appear*, and when I spit I know they won't be laughing at me.

KATHY

I'm going to call Mrs. Summers.

JONAH

You can't call the principle!

KATHY

They are going to stop if I have to call everyone of their parents.

JONAH

Then they'll kick me out of their crew!

KATHY

Those kids are in your crew?

JONAH

They all are.

KATHY

Jonah. I don't like this.

JONAH

Two of them, MC and Beefy, see me, and I yell out 'what kind of homo-ass-faggot calls that spitting? It sounds like mother-goose getting mouth-fucked with my glock.'

Silence.

KATHY

You didn't.

JONAH

That's how gangsters talk, mom.

KATHY

Not in my house. Give me your hat.

JONAH

Mom!

KATHY

There will be no gangsters in my house that talk like that.

JONAH

Mom, you don't understand.

KATHY

I don't think you understand. Give me your hat, Jonah.

JONAH gives KATHY his hat.

JONAH

My name's JStor.

KATHY

Do you understand me? That language is NOT tolerated from your lips! I can't believe you said that!

JONAH

I'm gangster, mom, I can say and do whatever I want.

KATHY

Now you not only say it, but you want to do it?

JONAH

No.

KATHY

You threatened another student with a *gun*. You don't have a gun, do you?

JONAH

You're not listening.

KATHY

Students get expelled from school for that, Jonah. Expelled!

JONAH

Mom, I don't own a gun. Do you think I'm fucking stupid?

KATHY

Stop. Right there. Before you say another word. Jonah, I want you to think. I want you to say what you want to say, and I want you to do what you want to do. But I want you to know that there are some things that you *never* want to say or do. Ever. And if I *ever* catch you 'popping' something that even *resembles* a glock, you will be in even more trouble than 2Pac.

JONAH

Mom.

KATHY

He got shot. That's not going to happen to you. Do you understand me?

JONAH

...Yes, mom. I'm sorry. Can I please have my hat back?

KATHY

Do you use anymore of that language?

JONAH

No, of course not! We don't use that when we talk *normally*, it's a ritual when we meet someone new for the first time. It establishes boundaries. That's it.

KATHY

Boundaries...

JONAH

That's all.

KATHY gives JONAH back the hat. JONAH puts it back on his head.

KATHY

I'm listening...

JONAH

So then they started crowding around me, calling me names.

KATHY

Names?

JONAH

Yeah. Telling me that they liked my swagger.

KATHY

Swagger?

JONAH

It's the way I walk.

KATHY

That's horrible!

JONAH

No, it's good! It also means how you hold yourself. How you build yourself to be viewed by everyone else. And they circled around me, calling me names, teasing me. And I knew that it was time, mom. So I signalled to Sigmund, he doesn't have a rap-name yet, and he started to beatbox.

KATHY

Beatbox.

JONAH

Yeah. And when he made his mouth sound like a machine-gun, I spit some serious gangster-sh... gangster-stuff. They were stunned. '75', who is this freshman from the high school, who hangs-out with us sometimes, nudged his friend in the ribs and nodded at me. And when '75' nods at you, mom. You're in. And I was in. So I told them that we should enter as a crew, together, in the talent-show on Friday.

KATHY

And they said 'yes' and voted you in?

JONAH

Gangsters don't *vote*, and they never 'say yes', that's too incriminating, in case the cops roll-by with the narc's. '75' just leaned-back, and nodded.

KATHY

And he's in high school.

JONAH

Yeah.

KATHY

Why is he at your middle school?

JONAH

He failed a class last year, so he has to come back for a period.

KATHY

What class?

JONAH

Science. I like him.

KATHY

I don't trust him.

JONAH

You don't know him.

KATHY

Mother's intuition.

JONAH

He's passing now.

KATHY

Why?

JONAH

I've been helping him.

KATHY

For how long?

JONAH

A couple of weeks.

KATHY

Jonah-

JONAH

I know what you're going to say. I know that 75 let me in because I've been helping him, I know that he doesn't care how I sound, and I know that these are the same kids that tease me. I'm not stupid.

But this is the only way I can get the crew and I need the crew to practice with, and the crew is how I can win. And once my crew hears me spit, they'll know I deserve to be there. Ok. Are we done now?

KATHY

Hear you? You were lying You didn't get a nod? Was that a lie, too? Did you even *spit* in your *cipher*?

JONAH

I got the nod, mom! But I didn't spit. I will. That's why I need to go to my room and practice, that's the only way I can stay on top.

KATHY

You have to leave that group.

JONAH

You don't understand! I'm playing a game I can't lose!

KATHY

No, Jonah, you can. Look at me. You don't need to prove anything. To me, or your father-

JONAH

This isn't about Mark.

KATHY

You don't need to win this-

JONAH

You don't think I can do it.

KATHY

I don't think they'll listen to you.

JONAH

And they will if I was in a lab? In a lab, they'll tell me what to do. And if I do what they tell me, if I shuffle the slides, if I make copies for them, I'm going to succeed.

KATHY

You can do that.

JONAH

Then what? Then I wait until they tell me what to do next? The next slide, the next copy? And if I finish early, I'll sit there. Useless.

Waiting to do something, to contribute but not being able to. Waiting for them to come back. No one tells a gangster what to do. They decide whether or not they succeed. They decide what they're going to do.

KATHY

But you haven't even spit! What can you contribute?

JONAH

Gangsters rhyme with words, and you can tell a tight rhyme by the words they can rhyme with each other. Mom, I can rhyme just about anything together I want! I'm the only person that can rhyme 'crack', with 'dark'.

KATHY

But Jonah-

JONAH

I can say anything I want while I spit.

KATHY

But I don't know what you just said!

JONAH

That's why I need to practice. The rhyming is what makes spitting spitting. I have to focus on all the words before it, to put the rhyming words in context.

KATHY

They're not going to listen to you!

JONAH

They already did! When I introduced myself, and they asked what I could do, I told them I could blend words together.

KATHY

You're teaching them how to have a speech impediment?

JONAH

All rappers spit like they have one. And the swagger is a simulation of concealing a weapon or drugs. You have to adjust your center-of-balance. I've never walked like anyone else. I start with a limp that everyone already tries to emulate. My crew sees that.

KATHY

(the crew raps, Jonah! You're not rapping!)

You're teaching, Jonah, you're not rapping.

JONAH

Have you heard me spit in my room?

KATHY

No.

JONAH

Were you there after school?

KATHY

No.

JONAH

Did you see everyone patting me on the back, and welcoming me into the- Do you think they just *gave* me this hat? I showed-up, and they handed it to me? The same ones who would laugh at me when I speak in class, or poke at the glass when I sit in the library for lunch. I taught, and they listened. They needed me. I swaggered, and they cheered. When was the last time I talked about anyone at school? Mom, when I was leaving the circle, I tripped, and I felt five hands grab me. They lifted me up. And they gave me my brand.

KATHY

I hear what you're saying, Jonah. But I still don't like it.

JONAH

This is only impossible because you don't believe that I can be a gangster. They can. The idea of me being a gangster, it isn't impossible to them.

KATHY

I don't trust them, Jonah.

JONAH

JStor. And they're not me. They need my swagger, they need my rhyming.

KATHY

And what happens when they have all that they need from you?

JONAH

By then my crew will *want* me to be there.

KATHY

You'll spit with them tomorrow?

JONAH

Of course. But I need to practice before then.

JONAH goes to leave.

KATHY

Jonah.

JONAH

I'm doing this, mom.

KATHY

Do you need help?

JONAH

I don't need anything.

KATHY

Do you *want* help?

JONAH

I want someone to listen to me spitting. Tell me if I'm on the right track.

KATHY

The right track?

JONAH

I need to be scary, and violent, and street.

KATHY

I don't like that.

JONAH

This isn't anything that I'm going to *do*. I was raised right. But the gangsters that live in the ghettos. This is the life that they know. I have to spit their life. That's what my crew does.

KATHY

But you won't *do* any of it?

JONAH

I promise.

KATHY

So whenever I'm scared.

JONAH

But it has to be about stuff gangsters do, like stealing, robbing, shooting people, selling work to fiends, hoes-

KATHY

Ok. So, go.

JONAH

Right now?

KATHY

Yeah. Spit for me. Make it scary. Let me get my notepad.

KATHY brings out her notepad.

JONAH

I have to put on a beat.

KATHY

I can drum on the table.

JONAH

No.

JONAH gets a CD out of his bag.

JONAH

'75' gave me this CD. Said I should study the beats on it. We'll start with this.

JONAH puts the CD in the player. A large explosion starts it, with gun-cocks as the beat.

JONAH

Ok.... Shout-outs to Brooklyn... Chi-town.. Compton..
I'm from where the guns love to introduce theysself
Reduce your health,
little bulletproofs get felt
Blow your top with the glock,
that's my favorite kill

*Blaze your crib with like thirty shots
Blow a hole through your ribs just for runnin your lips-*

KATHY's phone rings.

KATHY

Jonah, stop. (*KATHY answers the phone*) This is Dr. Grandy. I'm at home. How long has she been in labor? And you're calling me *now*? (*To JONAH*) Give me a pen. (*JONAH gives her a pen, and she writes on her notepad*) No. No no no. Don't do that. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Fifteen. No problem.

JONAH

Mom...

KATHY

Jonah- JStor. You're going to be staying with Mark tonight, ok?

JONAH

But my rhymes.

KATHY

I'll talk to your father about it. You'll get to spit.

JONAH

But I was going to spit for you.

KATHY

You can still spit them for me. Spit them to Mark, but do it *for* me. It'll be our secret that you're doing it for me.

JONAH

He doesn't want to hear them.

KATHY

He does. He loves you and cares about you very much, and if rapping is what you want to do, he is behind you one-hundred percent.

JONAH

I'm going to stay here tonight.

KATHY

No, you won't.

JONAH

He's not going to let me spit!

KATHY

So?

JONAH

Don't you care?

KATHY

JStor. You walked through the playground, faced those thugs, made them part of your crew, and taught them how to spit. You want my help with your father?

JONAH

No.

KATHY

Good. Now get some clothes, because tomorrow night is his night too. And when you get there, spit for me.

JONAH

Gangsters spit for themselves.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 04: OUTSIDE MARK'S APARTMENT/LIVING ROOM

JONAH and KATHY are standing on one-side of the door,
MARK on the other.

ACTORS: Don't forget your inside-fight VS normal voices.

MARK

I'm glad you called, extra-night with Jonah!

JONAH

JStor.

MARK

Is that a new hat?

JONAH

It's a brand.

MARK

And you can take-off your brand while you're inside my house, Jonah.

JONAH

It's an apartment, Mark.

KATHY

(behave)

JStor-

JONAH

Where's your CD player? I need to get setup.

MARK

Setup for homework?

JONAH

Spitting.

MARK

(is he still doing this?)

Kathy.

KATHY

I think I see it in the living room.

JONAH crosses into the house.

MARK

Looks like you have control.

KATHY

You have to be supportive of him.

MARK

Excuse me?

KATHY

This talent-show at the end of the week is very important for him.

MARK

I know.

KATHY

It doesn't make him mediocre, Mark.

MARK

What did he say?

KATHY

And he's already made friends who are entering with him.

MARK

Friends?

KATHY

Yes.

MARK

Shit, Kathy. A *team*?

KATHY

A crew. They gave him that hat.

MARK

A team? You really *believe* him?

KATHY

I do. And if you talked to him about it, you would, too.

MARK

I'm not talking to him about his new 'lifestyle choice'.

JONAH

Is this hooked-up? The disc isn't playing?

MARK

Maybe it's broken. No music tonight.

KATHY

If he's going to compete, then he needs to practice.

MARK

Bullshit, Kat.

KATHY

If you want to see Jonah again, you have to support him.

MARK

If I want to see him again?

KATHY

This separation, Mark? Amicable. But if every time he comes-over, you don't listen, help, or encourage him, it won't be amicable. And I'll be calling my lawyer.

JONAH

Ok! The CD is playing! But nothing is coming out.

KATHY

Do you understand me, Mark? If he wants to spit tonight, then you need to support him.

MARK

Don't you have to report to the hospital?

KATHY

Do you understand me?

JONAH

I hope all of the babies you deliver tonight are healthy.

Pause. They won't try to hide what they're saying anymore.

KATHY

Jonah. Call me if there are any problems.

MARK

Goodnight Kathy. Unless you want to talk some more. Then you might want to call your work, tell them you'll be late. If that's something you can do.

JONAH

I can't figure your speakers out, Mark.

MARK

Duty calls.

MARK goes to JONAH. KATHY exits.

MARK

Jonah! You ready for some fun tonight?

JONAH

Are these plugged-in?

MARK

Why do you need to use them?

JONAH

To play my music.

MARK

To work to?

JONAH

Yes.

MARK

What work?

JONAH

Spitting

MARK

Do you need my help with it?

JONAH

I don't need anything.

MARK

I have to go through internship applications for the lab. In my office.

JONAH

You mean your kitchen?

MARK

I use it as my office. Tell me if you need anything.

JONAH

How can I work the speaker?

MARK turns-on the speaker and a rap beat blares.

MARK

What the hell?

JONAH turns it down.

JONAH

I'm sorry. I had turned-up the volume too high. I was trying to hear something.

MARK

What was that?

JONAH

That's my beat.

MARK

Felt like one.

JONAH

That's not funny.

MARK

Oh, come on-

JONAH

That's what I need to rap over.

MARK

Where did you get this? It sounds horrible. I'm not listening to this in my house.

JONAH

I have to practice.

MARK

You can practice without it, Jonah.

JONAH

I have to hear the beat, and then rap to it.

MARK

How did they rap before a beat? This is a better way, Jonah. Give me the CD. You'll be able to adapt to any setting. The other acts you'll be competing against might switch things up, they could cut the power.

JONAH

If I don't listen to it, I can't practice.

MARK

You have to get over your insecurities Jonah.

JONAH

What am I going to say to '75'?

MARK

Who's '75'?

JONAH

He's a student that I'm tutoring. Mr. Reynolds, my science teacher, referred him to me.

MARK

'75'?

JONAH

He's in my crew. But he needs help, so I teach him science.

MARK

How is he doing?

JONAH
He's passing now.

MARK
And this '75' gave you this CD?

JONAH
Yeah.

MARK
And he wants you to listen to it?

JONAH
It means a lot to him. I don't know if he trusts me too much, the teacher-student relationship, he wanted me to tell him what I thought about it.

MARK
Not too loud, alright?

JONAH plays the CD, and lowers the volume.

JONAH
Like that?

MARK
Fine.

JONAH
Are you going to stand there?

MARK
I just want to hear. Will that be a problem? Do you need me to leave to *rap*?

JONAH
Do whatever you want. I just need to test the beats.

MARK
Jonah, I think we should talk.

JONAH
About you and mom?

MARK

Or whatever you want. We, I, left the conversation not very well last night. And we should probably talk about that.

JONAH

While I'm practicing?

MARK

You're a gangster, you can do anything, right?

JONAH

Are you mocking me?

MARK

No! No. I'm just trying to.. Nevermind. Spit away.

JONAH

Ok... Shout-outs to Queensbridge... Detroit.. My boys in the pen..

MARK

Your boys in the pen?

JONAH

This is the ritual that starts every rap.

MARK

Like when you ritually insult your other crew members?

JONAH

I'm doing an equipment checklist. This rap is my experiment. I need to check-out my equipment. But all the best equipment is in Queensbridge, Detroit, Compton. Where all the best scientists are. So I have to shout-out to them and to use their instruments.

MARK

Experiment?

JONAH

I'm spitting now. Testing. Testing. JStor on the mic.

*Now tell me have you ever looked up in the distance
And seen a mac aimin' at your head man*

Before you know it, life is flashin', reminiscing

and your body it's dripping full of lead man

JONAH turns down the music.

MARK

What was that?

JONAH

Are you scared?

MARK

...That's violent. Is that something that you want to do?

JONAH

I'm a gangster, I'll do what I want.

MARK

Why are you rapping about that?

JONAH

I'm *spitting* it, dad, because that's what it takes to win.

MARK

Is this what you say to other rappers?

JONAH

Other crews. My crew.

MARK

And this is what you want to do.

JONAH

I told you! I'm not going to do shoot anyone!

MARK

You're not listening to me, Jonah. This is how you want to win? With, with threats?

JONAH

If they're strong enough, my crew will listen to me.

MARK

If you have to threaten someone to make them listen to you-

JONAH

But that's how we talk. It's like normal-talking, they're not threats.

MARK

If you have to threaten someone, then they don't care about you in the first place, Jonah.

JONAH

Why did you hook-up these speakers, Mark?

MARK

Don't spit anymore tonight, Jonah.

JONAH

I heard Kathy threaten you-

MARK

Please don't spit anymore tonight Jonah.

JONAH

And what else would we do, Mark? What would be more important to me than my crew?
Than winning my trophy?

MARK

Us talking.

JONAH

Because you listen to me.

MARK

I have. And I do. And I will.

JONAH

Because I believe you.

MARK

Then don't believe me. I wouldn't trust you if you believed me right now. Think about it.
Think about it, while we put together your new bed.

MARK goes to get JONAH's bed kit.

JONAH

Another hack-job, like at home?

MARK

It's not like the one at your moms. I actually listened to you, Jonah. I took off of work, and got it from Ikea today. We'll make an honest trade. Give me your CD, and we can put together your bed. The bed that you want. Soak it in. Think about it. I'm going to get a drink.

MARK exits.

JONAH moves to his room, where the box is. He spends some time reading the box.

JONAH

No.. Mark... *(to himself)* Dad. *(To MARK)* Mark! Are you serious?

MARK (O.S.)

Yeah! I got some tools, too.

JONAH

A.. A loft-bed. I don't believe it.

MARK re-enters.

MARK

Do we have a deal?

JONAH gives MARK the CD. MARK gives JONAH the bed.

JONAH tries to open the box with one-arm. He ends up having to pin it, and pry-open the cardboard.

JONAH

We get to put this together?

JONAH limps over and hugs his father.

MARK

You like it?

JONAH

Of course! Can we start now?

MARK

Yeah, we have to follow all the directions, though, it could be tricky. Remember when we tried to put that fishing-pole together you got for Christmas last year?

JONAH

I found the directions.

MARK

Ok. Dump-out the pieces, and let's see what we need first. Give me the list, and you can start sorting the pieces.

JONAH hands MARK the list.

JONAH

It doesn't look like normal Ikea directions.

MARK

I fixed them up a little bit. For the alterations.

JONAH

(not listening)

So, even though I won't be spitting for a while, do you want to help me come up with a crew name? It has to be awesome I really don't know what I want to do. But, I'm sure that we can figure it out. I mean, it has to be truly gangster. Where do we start?

MARK

Give me that piece over there.

JONAH

So it has to be street. It has to show how we don't follow the mold, that we do whatever we want. But maybe it should reflect our personalities too. I don't know. What do you think, Mark? How tall does this get? Five feet?

MARK

(laughs)

Right.

JONAH

Taller?

MARK

(laughs)

No!

Four?
JONAH

...You're serious.
MARK

What do you mean?
JONAH

I got this on-sale at Ikea, Jonah.
MARK

Right.
JONAH

So I could alter it for you.
MARK

No..
JONAH

It's the specification's Dr. Raymond setup for you. So you can get out of bed easier. See?
MARK

Like the one I have at home?
JONAH

At your moms. But this one is better. Here, I'll bring you the master-plans. They're in my office-area, alright Jonah? You'll love it!
MARK

It's JStor, Mark.
JONAH

MARK exits.

JONAH stares at the bed-kit. He limps-over to the directions, and looks at it, then crumples it up and throws it across the room.

JONAH starts pushing the pieces that were laid out with his foot, and is starting to kick them as MARK enters with the plans.

MARK

Jonah! What are you doing to the pieces?

JONAH

Whatever I want to.

MARK

You're breaking it!

JONAH

I didn't break it. It fell. It was too high up. Give me back my CD.

MARK

Jonah.

JONAH

JStor.

MARK

I am not calling you that name.

JONAH

Ok, Mark.

MARK

Don't you want to see the plans, to see how it's better?

JONAH

No.

MARK

Do you want to sleep on the floor tonight?

JONAH

If I get my CD back.

MARK

But it's designed *for* you, Jonah! See? That's the best part!

JONAH

Designed?

MARK

I fucking *listened* to you! It's not a hack-job! You can get out of it easily, and it kind of dips down, and has hand-holds on the side. If you, if you need to push. And there's a table we can put on the left side of the bed. So when you sleep on your back-

JONAH

Like Dr. Raymond says.

MARK

-You'll have a place for your medicine and water. Look.

MARK takes-out the table-piece from the box.

MARK

I went crazy with this dremel tool, and it has holes for things that you use.

JONAH

Specially-made for me.

MARK

Yeah. It was my surprise for you. Come on, let's put it up together. *(Pause)* What is it, Jonah?

JONAH

I don't need a special bed.

MARK

It's not that you don't need-

JONAH

I don't want a special bed.

MARK

I built it-

JONAH

I want a normal bed! I don't want something that only I have! This arm, is an arm that only I have. This leg that doesn't move, Mark, is a leg that only I have. I'm only half-right!

MARK

And don't say anymore of that! I'm your father!

JONAH
What?

MARK
You're not fucking half-white. You're all mine!.

JONAH
No. Half-right, half-correct.

MARK
Half-right. I'm sorry, I thought- You're speech, it's getting better, Jonah. You can-

JONAH
I'm not something that can 'get better', Mark! I'm here! Accept that!

MARK
You're not making any sense!

JONAH
I'm not sleeping in *that*!

MARK
Yes, you are.

JONAH
And I'm not helping you make it!

MARK
I am still your father, Jonah.

JONAH
JStor! And no one tells gangsters what to do! I'm going to sleep on the couch.

JONAH is about to leave, but MARK grabs him by the collar.

MARK
On *my* couch?

JONAH
Hey!

MARK

Where's your crew, JStor?

MARK takes-off JONAH's hat.

JONAH

Give me my hat!

MARK

This is what it comes down to, JStor. You, without your crew, without people who say they are your friends. You, and the person you disagree with. And no one but you will be there. You could be surrounded, but you know in your heart that it's just you and him. And when that moment happens, JStor, you have to think. Do you hear me? Weigh everything. *(Pause)* What do you owe? What have your mother and I done for you? What doctors have we taken you too, what games did we coach so you could actually get the playing time you deserved? What soup did we make when you were sick, what books did we read to you, what diapers did we change, what ultrasound did we cry when we saw and framed in our bathroom? What did we ask from you?

JONAH

Not to spit.

MARK

I'm serious! What did we ask? Why did we do it?

JONAH

I didn't ask you too-

MARK

Nothing! We did it because we love you, and we want what we think is best. What we *think*. We could be wrong, you could be wrong. But what's never wrong, JStor. This is important. What's never wrong, are you listening? What's never wrong are the intentions behind what you do. Why did we do it.

MARK lets JONAH go.

MARK

We did it because we love you.

Silence.

MARK

And I would like your help with this bed. I'm asking you as your father. So, what's the first step, Jonah?

MARK picks up the directions and hands it to JONAH.

MARK

What's the first step, Jonah?

JONAH takes the paper.

JONAH

(starts making it a rap)

JStor.

Inventory.

Headboard, sideboard, footboard, yellow cord
left rail, right rail, back rail, or you'll fail.

Get the screws, ten in all

Get the backings, or it'll fall
apart

and smart

to anyone sitting atop

like pop

or mua

JStwa

the pistol-packing, ho-smacking, bird-stacking

King of yawl

Step One, just begun:

END OF ACT ONE

SCENE 05: LIVING ROOM OF MARK'S APARTMENT

MARK slams-open the door and stalks in, with JONAH following.

MARK

Sit down.

JONAH sits down.

MARK

I can't believe.. Do you know how worried I was? Do you have any idea?

JONAH

I forgot, I'm sorry.

MARK

You didn't come home on the bus, I called the school and they didn't know where you were. I thought you tried walking home, fell, I didn't know. We need to know where you are. I'm getting you a cellphone. And you are going to pick it up whenever you see I call. Do you understand me, Jonah?

JONAH

I'm not retarded.

MARK

And when I did find you, you call that *rehearsing*? Is that what your friends do when you sing after school?

JONAH

We were about to cipher.

MARK

I thought you were better than that. I told her about settling down here-

JONAH

No one was hurt.

MARK

Yeah? No one? How about the cats you were shooting at with your guns?

JONAH

One gun, we were sharing.

MARK
Shooting at-

JONAH
A pellet gun!

MARK
They were guns!

JONAH
It didn't hurt it.

MARK
You're calling a cat an 'it'? Why the hell would you even do that?

JONAH
I guess I wasn't raised right.

MARK
Who are you? You're becoming like those kids who stand-outside the supermarket. Will I be getting calls from the police, next? You said you were just doing this to win the competition, this crew thing.

JONAH
I was.

MARK
And you need to shoot cats to win a competition?

JONAH
I need to know how to hold a gun.

MARK
You never need to learn that.

JONAH
Will you let me explain?

MARK
First your language-

JONAH
What language?

MARK

Mother-goose?

JONAH

I told mom that it was an introduction. That's how all crews introduce themselves.

MARK

I told her that it was nothing to be worried about. But your language, shooting guns, what's next? I don't know what to make of this. I don't know how to deal- What's next, Jonah? Shooting it at other people? Trying to sell cigarettes out of your locker? Sneaking out at night? (*JONAH laughs*) I'm serious!

JONAH

I think if I tried to sneak out at night, Mark, you'd hear me. (*Pause*) You're not listening to me. We needed to practice how we held the gun. '75' had one that his dad bought him. Gangsters have to know how to hold their guns. I have my crew. And rapping is rapping about the lifestyle. The lives of gangsters. So we have to live it to be able to rap about it-

MARK

So you're going to sell drugs, next? Call women 'bitches'-

JONAH

Of course not! But we need to do something that gangsters do!

MARK

So you're copying gangsters.

JONAH

We're being gangsters.

MARK

Who do whatever they want.

JONAH

Yeah.

MARK

And what you, as a gangster, want to do, is pretend to be them?

JONAH

Why can't you be happy for me?

MARK

Happy of what? That you have good aim?

JONAH

No-

MARK

I'm so proud of you! I'd offer you a drink, but I'm all out of Hennessy-

JONAH

Mark, I'm the crew's-leader now! Look, this paper says so! I'm their leader!

MARK looks at the paper.

MARK

It's just a school form, it's blank, Jonah.

JONAH

And the leader fills it out, and gives it to the secretary.

MARK

They *voted* on you? Had a general election?

JONAH

You never listen to me! They asked me to fill it out, there's a part that says 'leader', and I'm going to fill my name in! I'm the leader.

MARK

If it's not discussed, Jonah, then-

JONAH

Do you see this hat? Do you see me? Crew members wear this hat, Mark. I ciphered against Sigmund at lunch, he couldn't even start his round, he had to leave the cipher because he was crying. I spit gangster, Mark. But I couldn't just spit real gangster, the leader needs the swagger: and I looked heartless with '75's' gun. Then he told me to fire it. Said I had this choice. I could be the leader, or I could put down the gun. I could be branded the leader, or as nothing. I fired. And I earned my brand. I'm part of my crew. And I am going to spit in front of the entire school, and we're going to win. And I'll lead them there.

MARK

Jonah.

JStor. JONAH

You're not competing. MARK

Excuse me? JONAH

You are not going to leave either your mother or I's house unless you're at school. MARK

You don't tell a gangster what to do! JONAH

MARK takes out his cellphone.

Who are you calling? JONAH

Your mother. MARK

What's she going to do? JONAH

Tell you exactly what I'm telling you. MARK

I have to compete tomorrow. JONAH

You're not. MARK

I have to! That's what I've been doing everything- JONAH

Then you should have made better choices! MARK

You don't need to call her. JONAH

MARK

Really? You'll tell her?

JONAH

No. She's going to be here soon.

MARK

Tonight's my night.

JONAH

I e-mailed her today.

MARK hangs-up.

MARK

You what?

JONAH

She said she'd pick me up here after practice.

MARK

Why does she need you-

JONAH

I asked her.

MARK

What did you say?

JONAH

I don't talk to narc's, Mark.

MARK

What did you *say*?

JONAH

I am competing tomorrow. I'm going to be holding the gun.

MARK

Jonah, you're not competing, or spitting with your crew. I promise you that. You're not going to be taken-advantage of by your crew-

JONAH

They're not taking advantage of me.

MARK

How would you-

JONAH

Because they don't try to guilt me into doing things that I don't want to do-

JONAH runs-over MARKS next line.

MARK

Are you blind, too?

JONAH

-Because they don't listen to me say that all I want to do it be a rapper and tell me to go to science! Because what they want from me, is what I want to give them: and I spit like a camel, Mark, but you don't want to listen.

MARK

When else would you have fired that gun, Jonah? You weren't guilted into that?

There is a knock on the door.

KATHY enters.

MARK

Kathy...

JONAH goes to hug KATHY.

KATHY

Stop.

JONAH

You came.

KATHY

You shot at a cat?

JONAH

It was a pellet-

KATHY

You're grounded- (*overlapping with JONAH*)

JONAH

Mom! (*Overlapping with KATHY*)

KATHY

You're not seeing those thugs and you're not competing tomorrow.

JONAH

No!

KATHY

Excuse me?

JONAH

I am the leader of my crew. I am not going to abandon them.

KATHY

You are going to school tomorrow, and you are coming back on the first bus home. You will do your homework, you will clean your room, and you will help me in the kitchen with dinner. You will do this every day for the next month and I am being generous, generous because I am allowing you to keep your rap posters. But if you are late in coming home from school, your room is forfeit, do you understand me, Jonah?

JONAH

JStor.

KATHY

Jonah, do you understand me?

JONAH

Yes.

KATHY

Are you ready?

JONAH

Yes.

KATHY

Get your bag and wait for me in the car.

MARK

This is my night!

KATHY

I'll be out in a second. Go, Jonah.

MARK

Jonah! Stay!

KATHY

The school called. Said you were frantic, that you didn't know where Jonah was.

MARK

He was at the park, shooting at-

KATHY

I believe you heard my response to that-

MARK

It should have been *our* response-

KATHY

You gave that up today, Mark. I get a call from the school because you lost our son-

MARK

He wasn't lost!

JONAH

I need help with my bag!

KATHY

I get a call from my neighbor, Ruth, who watched a man in a car stop by the park, yell, and grab Jonah.

MARK

He was shooting at cats!

KATHY

If she didn't recognize you, it would have been the police that she called.

MARK

This is *my* night with him!

JONAH

Can we just go?

KATHY

And this morning, I got an e-mail.

MARK

What did he say?

KATHY

So I'm taking him for tonight.

MARK

What did he say?

JONAH

I'm in the room!

KATHY

And, though this is against my better judgement, you can pick him up and drive him into school tomorrow morning.

JONAH exits.

MARK

Kathy-

KATHY

You still don't understand? Alright. Scientific method. A hypothesis, Mark: This competition was his dream, and dreams are *never* wrong, no matter how much you think he owes you. Experiment: He's not competing tomorrow, so the memory that he is going to have is you telling him that he shouldn't do it every step of the way.

MARK

Don't be a bitch-

KATHY

You're the scientist, Mark. Does this experiment prove you're a good father?

END OF SCENE

SCENE 06: OUTSIDE OF KATHY'S HOUSE/ THE KITCHEN

MARK and KATHY are standing on opposite sides of KATHY's doorway.

MARK is outside.

MARK

Can I come in?

KATHY

I'm glad you're here.

KATHY grabs her purse and is about to leave.

MARK

Wait. Let me talk. I have a gift for JStor. On his big day.

KATHY

Another 'I'm sorry'? Mark, apologizing can't work, Jonah isn't stupid, and neither am I.

MARK

This bag isn't an apology. It's what I should have given him a long time ago. This bag is me being a father.

KATHY

Father? After thirteen years, right now you're a father?

MARK

Kat-wait.

KATHY

Am I hearing this wrong, Mark?

MARK

You're hearing it right.

KATHY

Then who have I been married to?

MARK

A caregiver.

KATHY

A what?

MARK

But I figured it out, I know how I can be what he-

KATHY

You figured it out?

MARK

I helped him walk, I helped him say his first words, I brought all my lab work home so I could be there.

KATHY

I'm not going to congratulate you Mark. You did your job.

MARK

A caregiver's job, Kat! I thought how I treated him at two got stretched-out to five years, he still needed help walking at five, and talking at seven. And I was going to stretch it out longer. To fifteen, to twenty. But no. I need to catch him when he falls, but I need to let him fall. Please let me in. I need to tell him.

KATHY

(I have to tell him that JONAH hasn't come home.)

Mark, wait.

MARK

I am his crew. Let me see him. I need to tell him that.

KATHY moves-aside as MARK comes in.

MARK

JStor!

MARK goes to JONAH's room, and re-enters.

MARK

Where is he?

KATHY

He didn't come home.

MARK

Kat-

KATHY

And I've been beside myself. I'm seeing double I'm so- And I'm glad that you're here, call me if he comes home. I'll go to the school and ground the *hell* out of him.

MARK

Stop.

KATHY

Call me, alright?

MARK

You can't go-

KATHY

Is the *caregiver* giving *me* instructions?

MARK

Don't do what's easy.

KATHY

Easy? Has it been *easy*, waiting here for thirty minutes as I saw the last round of buses go by?

MARK

It's easy versus acorn, Kat.

KATHY

This is a conversation that we are not having.

MARK

I found one outside.

MARK digs-around in his pocket.

KATHY

Every minute that Jonah is at school is a minute that he is not getting punished. That he is enjoying himself, Mark.

MARK throws an acorn to KATHY.

MARK

You caught the acorn.

KATHY

You go get him, then.

MARK

Catching it was easy, Kat! You didn't even think about it!

KATHY

Are you listening, Mark? Do you care about your son at all? Is this the caregiver's day-off? I'm sorry, am I sounded too-much like a *bitch*?

MARK

Do not pick him up!

KATHY

Or what?

MARK

What will happen? You'll pick him up, embarrass him in front of his friends, his friends who don't need to be given a reason for teasing him. He's not only going to suffer here, but at school, too? He needs a place where he can feel safe, Kat.

KATHY

Safe?

MARK

And as long as he's being punished here, he has to be with his friends.

KATHY

He was shooting at a cat, Mark!

MARK

And you yelled at me when I grabbed him-

KATHY

This is different-

MARK

It's the same, Kat. This is the same shit that we always go through. Exactly the same. He was eight, and he came to you with a panicked squirrel that he grabbed in the back yard, clutched in his left hand. But this time. Instead of covering Jonah's finger, we're going to let him hold onto his acorn.

KATHY

He learned patience, that day, Mark. And what not to do.

MARK

What did we learn, Kat?

KATHY

I learned not to let him play in the backyard! Those kids at school aren't squirrels he's trying to capture, Mark. He's playing with wolves!

MARK

All he wanted was a squirrel, Kat, and he was in the back yard. They ran away when they saw him, but to get it, he swung his right leg forward, slowly, never letting it touch the ground. And after it landed, he waited. And then moved his good leg slowly forward. Then he did his right leg again. What did you say he looked like?

KATHY

You called him a pirate, too.

MARK

He forgot that you were watching him- he always knew-, and he focused on that squirrel. Step, swing. Step, swing. It took him ten minutes you said, right? Ten minutes-

KATHY

And he pounced!

MARK

You screamed!

KATHY

And then *he* screamed.

MARK

Because it bit him!

KATHY

The poor animal finally came to its senses, it bit his hand, his finger, and just bolted-up the tree.

MARK

He tried to cover it. I came home, and he was sitting on the ground. He was crying. You made him think he had rabies-

KATHY

It was a wild animal!

MARK

What did we learn, Kat? Think about it. If you got bit, and you see this blood coming out of your only good hand. Your finger is bleeding, and your instinct is to cover it. To stop the blood. But Jonah couldn't. It wasn't easy, and it was beyond hard. All he could do, is just watch it, and mash his good hand, his left hand, into the ground as you were trying to grab it and wrap this gauze around it.

KATHY

He put up quite a fight.

MARK

He wanted to fix it himself, Kat.

KATHY

He couldn't.

MARK

It was the worst possible time, Kat. He knew that, and he grabbed what you have. An acorn. He grabbed it in his right hand. He could have let you take care of him, he could have limped-away. That would have been easy. This is the same thing, Kat. You couldn't stop him from grabbing the squirrel, and you can hold his hand, but what he really wants- He's at school right now, clutching that squirrel. He is not picking the easiest path, Kat. And, make no mistake, we are going to ground the shit out of him when he gets home. But we have to let him get home.

KATHY

(he's right. And he's grown.)

A caregiver wouldn't say that, Mark.

MARK

I'm part of his crew, now.

KATHY

(you can't push your way into his life)

Only if he lets you in, Mark.

MARK

(joking)

They don't vote.

KATHY

(finally relaxed and at ease)

No, they just nod.

Silence.

MARK

We argue, Kat. We yell. But we did good with Jonah, right? We, we didn't have a book, there was nothing definite that we knew how to follow. We did good.

KATHY holds MARK's hand.

KATHY

We did good.

MARK

Kat.

KATHY

Yes?

MARK

Am I a good father?

KATHY

(Pause) you're not a caregiver anymore.

KATHY hands MARK the acorn.

MARK

But a father... Where can I find it? What's the definition?

KATHY

It's defined by what he needs, Mark.

MARK

Jonah is lucky to have you.

KATHY

Thank you.

JONAH enters, no hat.

MARK

JStor!

KATHY lets go of MARK's hand.

KATHY

Jonah! You get to your room right now, do you hear me? Jonah?

MARK

JStor?

KATHY

You had me worried sick. You are grounded, and I will pick you up from school every day in the most embarrassing way possible-

MARK

Kat-

KATHY

What?

MARK

Look at him. JStor?

KATHY

Do you understand me?

MARK

Where's your brand?

JONAH

It's called a hat.

MARK

JStor?

Jonah. JONAH

What happened? MARK

They voted me out. They all voted me out. JONAH

Gangsters don't vote. MARK

Do you need a few minutes alone? KATHY

JONAH is walking to his room.

Kathy- MARK

No, he probably needs some alone time. To think. Do you want some alone time, Jonah? Then you can come out, and we'll do everything to make this right. KATHY

Jonah, wait. MARK

JONAH stops and turns to MARK.

I'm going to my room. JONAH

Jonah, if you come back here, and tell us, I promise that it stays here, in your family. MARK

What are you talking about? KATHY

Do you understand me, Jonah? If it was unfair, I'm not going to give you a speech. If they teased you, I'm not going to call the principle, unless you tell me to. If they tricked you, I'm not going to call their parents, unless you ask. Do you understand what I'm saying? MARK

KATHY

Go to your room, and take some time to figure out what *you* want. Then, when you come out later, we can all talk about it, and figure out what you want to do, and Mark and I will help you in every way that we can.

MARK

So, sit down and we'll listen, or go in your room if you want us to help you do something.

JONAH sits down.

MARK

Do you agree to those terms, Kathy?

KATHY

I know you're experimenting with being a father, but don't do it on our son.

MARK

He needs to cover his own finger, Kathy.

KATHY

And if I decide that I want to help him right now?

MARK

Then I will ask you to leave-

KATHY

My own house?

MARK

Our house. I'm just asking for five minutes. I'm sure that you want to call Principle Summers, anyway. Come in when you're done.

KATHY

He is my son.

MARK

He is right there. And Jonah did not go to his room. So you have to either listen to him, or come back and help him when he's done here.

KATHY sits.

JONAH

I started the group, I came-up with their name, I grew with them, and they voted me out. '75' was part of the crew. He wanted me to be in there. We shot his gun together. We were going to win.

MARK

What changed?

JONAH

All I did was talk to Mr. Reynolds after class. I asked him about tomorrow's assignment. (Pause) But he's a teacher. And '75' saw me and said that gangsters don't talk to narc's. I said I needed help on the assignment. He said 'crew takes care of crew'. I said 'do you know biology?'. He laughed and patted my back. I showed the form to '75'. He said I should submit it without a name at first, said we needed to vote at the cipher after school. He said I was already the leader, I just have to go through one more step, a ritual. I gotta be a gangster and spit the most-hard-core cipher. I wanted to earn the gun. The leader gets to hold it. Because he has power over the other crew members. (Pause) I really wanted that. In a group of people who do whatever *they* want, I still wanted to be its leader. Stupid.

KATHY

That's not stupid.

JONAH

'75' said we had to do some ciphery, to warm-up. I'd be in the middle of the circle. They were all cheering when I got into the circle. Sigmund started beat-boxing, and everyone got silent, you know? I started by doing shout-outs to Brooklyn, Queensbridge, and Compton. And there was this stupid hornet buzzing around my head. I could see it out of the corner of my eye, but I had to focus, you know? I got at the end of my shout-outs, and was stung on my hand. I saw it too. But I'm tough, you know? I kept going, and I felt another one, on the back of my neck. But I was in the zone. I brushed my neck, and caught it before it could fly-off. I was changing-up my cipher about how I squash rappers in beefs like this hornet, and I opened my palm, and it was a white, plastic, pellet. Sigmund was still beat-boxing, and I turned and saw '75' handing his gun to another part of the crew. He met my eyes, and said 'you have five votes against you, JSnitch.'. You didn't feel a few because they hit you on your wrong side. I stopped ciphery, but they kept shooting. Lil-K fired, '75' took the gun, and gave it to John-Boy, and said 'aim anywhere you like'. I spit with John-Boy, Mark.

MARK

I know.

JONAH

I tried to walk-out. Save dignity. But they pushed me back in. They laughed and said that my cipher was tight, but my swagger needed work. Said I should keep rolling. But they said rolling like I say it. Said that they kill all rats, everyone who talks to narc's (Pause) I covered all my skin in my sweatshirt, but I could feel every one of their votes against my shoes, or jeans, or hoody. Beefy, and MC, and... They were done in ten minutes, and I heard '75' tell them to meet on the other-side of the playground for practice (Pause) Before they walked-away, '75' took my hat, Mark.

MARK

Jonah, I'm.. I'm sorry.

JONAH

I voted them out. (Pause) They were still talking about their competition, and how they were going to pop all the other talent show kids. I got up and walked to the secretary's office, and asked for my crew's sheet. I threw it out on the way home. I'm not going to win. But, they're not going to either.

MARK

Couldn't you still compete?

JONAH

No crew will take me so late. They merge like families. And all families vote-out.

KATHY

Your crew is the only family that voted you out, Jonah.

JONAH

You just voted yourselves-out.

MARK

That's not what we did.

JONAH

It's the same. I'm like an ugly ball you got as a gift, that you throw back and forth. I burn you.

KATHY

That's ridiculous.

JONAH

Like dad said: I owe you a lot and I haven't paid anything back.

MARK

I didn't mean it like that, Jonah.

JONAH

You voted yourself out, mom.

KATHY

You're repulsive.

JONAH

..What?

KATHY

You're repulsive. You're the ugly gift. That's what you think?

JONAH

That's what I know.

KATHY

I'm repulsive. Your father is repulsive. We voted each other out Jonah, because we were the stupid people with your ball, and we wanted two things: get away from each other, and keep the ball. We don't want each other Jonah, we want you.

JONAH

As I could be. After my surgery, if I could walk, if I could talk right.

KATHY

No, we want *you*.

JONAH

I don't believe you.

MARK

You are competing today, Jonah.

JONAH

Didn't you listen-

MARK

You will compete solo tonight.

JONAH

Mark-

MARK

Yes. I listened to you now, and I listened to you last night.

MARK takes a piece of paper out of the bag he brought in.

MARK

I went to the school today, and I entered you into the talent show.

JONAH

Dad.

KATHY

But he was grounded, Mark.

MARK

Because of how he acted with his crew. Now he's not with them.

KATHY

But you didn't know that when you entered him.

JONAH

Dad.

MARK

Forget everyone else, Jonah. Forget what has happened. Be a gangster, right? Do whatever you want to do, and don't worry about what anyone else says, or expects. Do you understand me? That's what I want in exchange. You can take this form, if you promise to do that.

JONAH takes the form.

JONAH

Never. Ever. Tell a gangster what to do again.

MARK and JONAH hug.

MARK

Could you please give us a second, Kat?

KATHY

For what?

MARK

Because I need to talk to him.

JONAH

For what?

MARK

Acorn, Kat.

JONAH

Dad-

MARK

I'm sorry, I'm right here.

KATHY stares at MARK. *Is he going to make that leap?*

KATHY

Fine. I'll be ready in ten minutes.

KATHY exits.

MARK

What are you going to wear? To spit. Tell me what you need.

JONAH

I have it all. I have my brands on the bed. Clothes. Jersey, baggy jeans, diamond earrings, silver-cross with canary-yellow diamonds

MARK

Jewelry.

JONAH

Yeah. The Game said that "he puts canary-yellow diamonds on his Jesus-Piece". I have both. I'm going to get all of that on, get equipped, get some black gloves, so I don't leave fingerprints, and then we can roll-out. They're on the bed.

MARK

I have them right here.

JONAH

I could have gotten it.

MARK reaches in the bag, and takes all but jewelry out.

MARK

I wasn't able to take the price-tags off yet.

JONAH

This isn't my jersey.

MARK

You had a New Jersey Devil jersey.

JONAH

And this says 'Roka-Fella'.

MARK

I did some research on rapping- spitting. No one watches the New Jersey Devils play anymore.

JONAH

You did research?

MARK

Jay-Z is a big rapper. And he had his own clothing-line.

JONAH

This is huge.

MARK

It's triple-extra large.

JONAH

I can't fit into this.

MARK

They have big clothes to hide their rocks and glocks, JStor.

JONAH

Rocks and glocks?

MARK

Cocaine and guns.

JONAH

I don't have any.

MARK

But they *think* you will. Gangsterism is all about fronting.

JONAH

Fronting?

MARK

Posing, Jonah. You don't have to have what you have. You just have to have what everyone else *thinks* you have. Young Buck raps about that. You know Young-

JONAH

I know Young Buck, dad.

MARK

Well he split-off from his crew, too. That was G-Unit-

JONAH

I know!

MARK

Well he raps about pretending to have more than you do: fronting. I've been reading about this subculture-

JONAH

I'm not going to be fronting, dad.

MARK

Don't you want to be a gangster? Don't you want to compete tonight?

JONAH

Yeah, and I know what a gangster looks like.

MARK

JStor, I did research. *This* is what gangsters look like. You got the jeans right, though.

JONAH

That's why you didn't replace them?

MARK

Did I do something wrong? Isn't this-

JONAH

Where are my diamonds?

MARK

Your clip-on earrings?

JONAH

My diamonds, dad. Yeah. It shows that-

MARK

That you're balling. I know. Well, I have something better.

JONAH

I just want my diamonds.

MARK

Wait a second.

JONAH

Dad!

MARK

JStor?

JONAH

Let me be a gangster.

MARK

What do you think I'm doing?

JONAH

Give me my old brands and let me be my gangster.

MARK

But you're going to be the best gangster ever.

Pause.

JONAH

I'm *going* to be.

MARK

Yes.

JONAH

With your help.

MARK

If that's alright. What?

JONAH

You told me that you would listen. You sat across from me, ten minutes ago, and promised to me that you would sit and listen to me.

MARK

And I did.

JONAH

And I thought you were listening because you cared. But you listened because you figured out a way to change everything about me. To change who I am.

MARK

Who you are can't change, Jonah.

JONAH

Who I am is JStor. And you are doing everything that you can to change him.

MARK

Do you think this is the only thing I researched? These clothes? Rappers? No, I've seen the violence, the threats, the misogyny. When you compete tonight, are you going to shoot a *glock* in someone's face?

JONAH

We spit gangster, we don't become them!

MARK

You just threaten them, make them cry. Like that kid. Sigmund?

JONAH

You just didn't know I was that tight.

MARK

You said you made him cry! He couldn't even start his rap!

JONAH

He didn't know how to spit, Mark.

MARK

And you're going to out-gangster the whole talent show? Spitting about hoes, birds, and killing people- I didn't raise you like that, Jonah.

JONAH

You raised me Jonah. I raised JStor.

MARK

You did. And I've seen who that is. I saw it on my computer last night, that's what I'm going to see tonight. I'm going to see your mother and I watch you. I'm going to see you say words that I haven't taught you, JStor. I'm going to see you succeed without anything that I did. In spite of everything that I did. You're going to be a winner, JStor.

JONAH

I'm not special, Mark.

MARK

You are. You are so special. You're going to win tonight.

JONAH

I'm not a cripple.

MARK

I know.

JONAH

I'm not a cripple, I'm not retarded, I'm not a freak.

MARK

I know you're going to win, JStor. And I don't want to see you take-apart your school to do it! I saw your competition on the playground when I went to sign you up. And tonight you are going to tear them apart. And I know, that I'm going to see you, JStor, win. But, but I wish to hell that it would be Jonah. You're going to walk-out to that beat, and I'm not going to see the kid who I taught science to, who saw everything that exists beyond his desk. I'm going to see a gangster. Just like every kid I saw on the playground, today. You are the best, most violent, and scariest gangster, JStor. And if I go there tonight, I'm going to see you kill the competition, but I'm afraid that I'm going to see you Jonah, too. (Pause) But like I told you before, JStor. I'm not strong. I'm not a good father. I can't see your last step. I can't see you kill my son. You're a gangster, JStor, but I wish you weren't.

JONAH

I'm your son! You still don't understand this! I don't want to be a scientist, or a winner, or a gangster! I want to be your son! I thought I- But I'm still not that, right?

Because you don't see that. (Pause) So I'm a gangster. I can live with that. I can live with you seeing me as something I created, over something you thought I needed to be to succeed.

Silence.

MARK

Rap for me.

JONAH

Excuse me?

MARK

If this is how I need to see you... Could you please spit for me?

JONAH

I've been trying to spit for you all week.

MARK

I know.

JONAH

I've been telling you who I was all week.

MARK

I know.

JONAH

And you want me to let you in again. You want me to try one last time, to fuckin' cure you, to get you to walk. You've failed again and again, and you want me to help you one more time. I'm your son.

MARK

I know.

JONAH

And at the beginning of the week, you walked-out on someone who can't walk away! What the hell kind of father does that make you?

MARK

(Pause) Please, be a better father than me, Jonah.

JONAH

JStor. And hard-core-gangsters, they don't forgive, Mark.

END OF SCENE

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SCENE 07: THE GYM-NATORIUM OF JONAH'S MIDDLE-SCHOOL

MARK and KATHY are sitting in chairs next to each other.

KATHY

Are you going to tell me what's-

MARK

I can't stay for this.

KATHY

Are you leaving?

MARK

I have to go back-

KATHY

You sat through a girl playing *spoons*, but you're not going to wait for your own son?

MARK

I'm leaving so I can still have my own son.

KATHY

He's coming. Do you see him? He's coming now. Wait until he is over, Mark.

JONAH enters. A beat drops with explosions and gun-cocks in it.

JONAH

Yo! Yo! A shout-out to my homies in Compton, The D, Area Code 207, and my dudes in the pen! Hit me up when you get out! Yo.. Yo...

MARK

I can't do it. I can't watch this.

KATHY

Sit back down.

MARK stands-up.

JONAH nods at MARK, and points back to his chair.

MARK sits back down.

JONAH

Drop that fresh shit!

The music stops, and a new beat is dropped.

It's the MIA / TI beat for "Swagger Like Us". It starts with the chorus: "No one on the corner has a swagger like us.."

After the chorus is over and the beat starts, JONAH starts.

JONAH

*This swagger is my life,
I ain't never had a choice
My leg's not developed but y'all can hear my voice
my words may not be clear,
but my actions speak loudly
see me up standing
spittin' at you proudly*

*see me swagger through the hall
see me make you nervous
my body is my home,
but y'all are struggling for purpose.*

*you see me now
and you know i am so excellent
i spit yah'll are drowning in the intellect*

*you know that i'm a gangster
i do what i want to do
what that means is chem-math and the physics too*

*what that means is i'm the kinda guy that you want to be
I'm an action figure
see? I don't bend at-the knee*

*With a brain as big as mine shit needs to slow down
I don't talk funny, ya'll have just slowed down*

*I've been shot, by my friends, I can prove it
I got scars I'll show all of them that do it*

*but I don't give a care,
I couldn't even give a fuck
cause who I am ain't my shirt
ain't my walk
ain't my pair of chucks*

*who I am is fuck you
who I am is look at me*

*I'm invisible to those of you that try to be
those of you that look ahead
those of you that look away
cause you don't see yourself in the mirror
crying every day*

*hell-yeah I gotta a daddy
and I got a mother, too
I'm the new gangster what the hell are you gonna do?*

END OF PLAY