

CLIFFORD GOLDSTEIN



SHADOW MEN

— A PLAY —

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Archie (69691)

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Larry, Jason's Brother

Stokes, Prison Guard

Carlita, Jason's Lawyer

Preacher Mike

Detective Frank Spinolo

Richard Stern, Archie's Lawyer

Warden Ivan

Assorted Prison Guards

Act One

Two sterile prison cells divided by a wall. Prisoners, one in each cell. The cells are somewhat backlit so the prisoners' shadows fall forward into the corridor in front of the cells.

Archie, pacing, glances at the clock in the corridor outside his cell. The clock is counting down, in digital red, and at the beginning of this scene reads "17:00". In the next cell, Jason sits calmly on his bed. Archie walks to the bars, grabs two and, pressing his head between them, calls out.

ARCHIE: What are you doing?

JASON: Nothing.

ARCHIE: Nothing? With only 17 hours left?

JASON: What should someone with only 17 hours left be doing?

ARCHIE: Anything but nothing!

JASON: Nothing is something.

ARCHIE: No, nothing is nothing!

JASON: Whatever you say, Archie.

ARCHIE: How can you be so peaceful?

JASON: My conscience is clear.

ARCHIE: You shot a 19 year old in the back of the neck while sipping a chocolate milkshake—and your conscience is clear?

JASON: He was sipping the milkshake, not me. And it wasn't chocolate. It wasn't even a milkshake.

ARCHIE: Stop playing games.

JASON: You have three months, I have 17 hours. Who should be telling whom what to do?

ARCHIE: OK, OK . . . Look, maybe this is selfish, but if you could spare five minutes of your remaining 17 hours to explain the secret of your serenity, I would appreciate it. Even though I used to be a philosophy professor and all that, in the five years

we have been next to each other I have never understood it and
...

The lights flicker. Jason gets up and walks to the bars. Both men look upward.

ARCHIE: 22667?

JASON: No, 44568. 22667 was yesterday.

ARCHIE: Oh, yeah, that's right.

JASON: Was like this the last election year, remember?

ARCHIE: Of course. That's why I don't think they'll do those DNA tests my lawyer has been pushing for. The masses want blood. *(He eases his face from the bars but still clutches them in his hands.)* Can I ask you a question?

JASON: You're more capable of answering that than I am.

ARCHIE: Aren't you scared?

JASON: Scared?

ARCHIE: Yeah, scared? I mean you're about to be strapped into an electric chair and fried with 2000 volts. Isn't that frightening?

JASON: I wouldn't know.

ARCHIE: The thought, isn't the thought scary?

JASON: I suppose.

ARCHIE: You suppose?

JASON: Yeah.

ARCHIE: How can you be so calm?

Jason, assuming a smug silence, seems to float onto his bed.

JASON: I can't explain any more, except what I've always said.

ARCHIE: I know, I know. *(Archie imitates him.)* The purpose of life is to love and to give some of yourself for others. Once you do that, you'll have peace and blah, blah, blah.

JASON: You have the words down, anyway.

ARCHIE: OK, so you live for others, right?

JASON: Right.

ARCHIE: And?

JASON: And what, Archie?

ARCHIE: (*Emphatically.*) You love and give of yourself for others—and then what?

JASON: (*A big smile splits his chin from the rest of his face.*) Nothing.

ARCHIE: Nothing?

JASON: Nothing.

ARCHIE: (*He hisses in disgust.*) Ridiculous.

JASON: I said you wouldn't understand.

ARCHIE: Fine, just fine, so I don't understand . . . And maybe you're not scared, but I am.

JASON: Try not to think about it.

ARCHIE: Try not to think about it? That's rich, man, that's rich. Three months away from the chair—and I'm not supposed to think about it? I'm going to remember that one for a long time. (*He lets out a bitter laugh.*) Or at least for three months.

JASON: Relax.

ARCHIE: Yeah, sure. Let's just chill out. Maybe we can ask Warden Ivan to get us a Swedish masseuse, someone to work out that crick in my neck. And maybe I can get liposuction. Don't want my belly ruining the aesthetics of the chair, eh? And a hair implant, too. Who wants a bald, fat electrocuted corpse with a crick in its neck?

JASON: You don't get it.

ARCHIE: No, I don't. (*He almost starts to cry.*) It just doesn't seem right. It just doesn't seem like this is how it should end.

JASON: How should it end, Archie?

ARCHIE: Not like this.

JASON: Not like what? We all wind up dead, so what's the difference?

ARCHIE: I don't understand you.

JASON: I'm going to be dead in less than a day. Why do you need to?

ARCHIE: You can be so frustrating.

JASON: You won't have to put up with it much longer.

ARCHIE: I give up. (*He stretches against the bars, restless, agitated,*

and waits a few seconds before speaking again.) Jason?

JASON: Yes.

ARCHIE: Can I ask you a question?

JASON: I believe you are capable.

ARCHIE: It's going to sound a little strange.

JASON: At this point, what does it matter?

ARCHIE: Can I?

JASON: Go ahead.

ARCHIE: May I touch you?

JASON: What?

ARCHIE: I want to touch you.

JASON: What are you . . .

ARCHIE: I mean, all the years in these cells and I've never even shaken your hand. I don't think I've seen your face more than twice and that was so long ago that if I saw you on the street, I'd have to look at your shadow in order to recognise you.

JASON: That's for sure. I don't think I'd know your face if I saw it.

ARCHIE: Maybe we can reach across.

JASON: I don't think it will work.

ARCHIE: Let's try, please.

JASON: OK.

Jason gets up and moves to the front corner of his cell, near the wall next to Archie, who does the same from his side. Both men squeeze their faces into the walls as tightly as possible, reaching their arms through the bars around the wall that separates them. They finally touch and shake hands awkwardly.

ARCHIE: *(Excited.)* We're shaking hands!

JASON: How about that?

ARCHIE: You really are more than a shadow!

JASON: Surprise, surprise!

ARCHIE: Don't let go yet!

JASON: You're about to break my fingers.

ARCHIE: I don't want them to take you, Jason. It isn't right.

JASON: You're crushing me.

ARCHIE: I won't let them!

A prison guard enters. The men pull their hands back into their cells and both men stand tall. The guard walks over and stands before Jason's cell.

PRISON GUARD, BENNIFER: 45523?

ARCHIE: No, it's 45522. Can't you tell 45522 from 45523?

BENNIFER: Shut up—

JASON: Yes, sir, 45523 here.

BENNIFER: You have a visitor.

A man comes in, sheepishly, hesitantly. He's in his mid-fifties, balding and rotund. It's Jason's brother, Larry. The prison guard places a chair outside the cell and out of reach of Jason. The man sits once the chair is positioned.

BENNIFER: *(To the visitor.)* You have 10 minutes. Do not move from the seat. Do not approach the prisoner, nor touch him in any manner. The slightest infraction and the visit terminates. Do you understand?

As the man nods, the guard leaves.

JASON: *(Standing by the bars.)* Larry?

LARRY: Yup, Jason, it's me.

JASON: I can't believe it!

LARRY: It's true.

JASON: Wow! This is, well . . . unexpected.

LARRY: I know, but I'm here.

JASON: Yes, yes, you are. Ah . . . how are you?

LARRY: Good, real good.

JASON: Glad to hear that.

LARRY: Yeah, real good.

JASON: Good, good.

LARRY: I know I should have come to visit earlier . . .
but my family has been keeping me busy.

JASON: Of course.

LARRY: The twins—what a handful!

JASON: I bet.

LARRY: And my job keeps me on the road a lot, too. I'm all over the place. One day here, tomorrow there, next day somewhere else. Gets a bit wearying after a while, you know what I mean?

JASON: Yeah, sure.

LARRY: Life's so busy nowadays. Just struggling to pay the bills, we barely have time to watch TV any more, you know?

JASON: Sure.

LARRY: We've been following your case, though.

JASON: That's good.

LARRY: Sorry to hear the appeals have run out.

JASON: That's fate, Larry. We have to learn to live with what we can't change.

LARRY: Wow! That's profound. I'll have to remember that. *(He lowers his head, glances around and whispers.)* There's not much time left, is there?

JASON: No.

LARRY: I'm sorry.

JASON: That's the way things go sometimes.

LARRY: Been hard on the family, as you can imagine.

JASON: I can.

LARRY: The twins—they don't know nothing. Marge and I have worked real hard to keep it from them. They don't ask about their Uncle Jason any more. I don't think they even remember you.

JASON: That's good.

LARRY: I'm glad you understand. I told Marge you would.

JASON: Marge, she's OK?

LARRY: Good, real good.

JASON: Good.

LARRY: Yeah.

JASON: You're looking fine, Larry.

LARRY: Thanks. Been getting a little thick in the middle, you know?

JASON: It happens.

LARRY: Not enough exercise. Life keeps folks too busy. You don't even have enough time to exercise any more. It's crazy.

JASON: Yeah, sure.

LARRY: Of course, I do eat a lot of those fried cinnamon sticks at the mall. You remember how much we used to love them?

JASON: Yes, Larry.

LARRY: Deep fried, coated in sugar and cinnamon. Ummm! I must eat 10 a week. They are so crunchy, so sweet, so rich. I know they aren't good for me—the fat and all—and Marge complains a lot, but we all gotta go somehow, right?

JASON: Right.

LARRY: Yeah, we all do.

JASON: Look, Larry, however short my time is, yours with me is even shorter. Was there anything you wanted to say, or is this simply an older brother coming to pay his last respects to his little brother?

LARRY: Yeah, that's what it is—an older brother coming to pay his last respects to his younger brother. (*He glances around.*) You've been in here a long time.

JASON: More than five years.

LARRY: Has it been that long?

JASON: Afraid so.

LARRY: It seems like just yesterday. Time has a way of going by so fast, doesn't it?

JASON: It can.

LARRY: I mean, it just seems like yesterday we were hunting with Jeff and his crazy dog. Remember how he bragged and bragged about that dog. And then, that first time out, he shot a duck, and sent the dog after it and . . . it ate the duck! (*Laughing hysterically.*)

JASON: (*Smiling, but not sincerely.*) Yes, dogs do that.

LARRY: I'll never forget it. *(He looks at his watch.)* Wow, time goes by so fast.

JASON: We've already established that.

LARRY: Yeah, well, there is one thing I did want to tell you.

JASON: OK.

LARRY: It's not easy and part of me thought about not bothering you, but something inside made me feel I ought to. Plus, Marge insisted, so here I am.

JASON: Thank Marge for me.

LARRY: But I'm real glad I came because it's good to see you again.

JASON: I am glad you came, too.

LARRY: You look great, Jason. Prison seems to have agreed with you.

JASON: Thanks.

LARRY: You're welcome.

JASON: What did you come to tell me?

LARRY: It's about Sally, your wife—your ex-wife.

JASON: I know who she is.

LARRY: I don't know how much you kept in contact with her.

JASON: We've had no contact, at my insistence.

LARRY: That's right, I forget. That was mighty noble of you—giving her the divorce, giving up your rights as a father to the kid. I mean, to try and give them a whole new start and all, with nothing like your murder conviction holding them back. You were real generous in all that.

JASON: You have only another few minutes, Larry.

LARRY: Yeah, well, I don't know all the details. The paper didn't really say much about it.

JASON: As in the newspaper?

LARRY: As in the newspaper.

JASON: What happened?

LARRY: Like I said I don't know the details, but things—things weren't going so good for her. I mean, it started out real good. She had all that money you gave her. And that little house you got her.

You remember that?

JASON: Of course.

LARRY: And she was working, only part-time, so she could spend more time with the baby. Just as you had arranged for her.

JASON: Go on.

LARRY: But she started going crazy, again, Jason. Like she always was. Drinking, spending money like mad, you know. Marge and I, we would talk to her and try to put some sense into that pretty head, but once these women get notions to do something, there's just no reasoning with them. I thought Marge was stubborn. She was daisies compared to Sally—

JASON: What happened?

LARRY: Finally she just cut us off. Even sold the house and we couldn't find her or the kid. Then we heard that she was back into drugs and had moved to the city. I tried, Jason, I really tried to track her down. Things must have gotten bad, really bad. I still think it was an accident, you know.

JASON: Accident?

LARRY: I mean . . . I mean I don't think she meant to do it, though it was ruled a suicide.

JASON: Sally committed suicide?

LARRY: That's what the police said, but I don't think so. I really, really don't think so—

JASON: Suicide?

LARRY: I think it was an accident. Drug overdose—I don't think she would've committed suicide, Jason . . . do you?

Jason drops to his knees, his face falling against the bars.

LARRY: But the little girl, she's OK. She's so cute. Jason, you'd be so proud. Don't look like you much, kind of has this Chinese look to her and all, but she's like a little doll. And smart as the day is long. And that's why we'd like to take her in ourselves, but—

The guard steps over and signals to Larry that time is up. Larry moves toward his brother but the guard stops him and leads him offstage as he stares at Jason, who's on his knees, his face pressed into the bars. Sounds like a small animal being tortured squeeze out of Jason's throat. Archie

pushes his face against the bars, trying to see Jason but can't. He looks at the floor, where he sees Jason's shadow instead.

ARCHIE: Jason?

Jason moans, then slams his head against the bars.

ARCHIE: *(Seeing Jason's shadow, he speaks gently.)* Take it easy, man.
Jason starts to cry.

ARCHIE: It's going to be OK.

Jason's face is still pressed against the bars. The words "No! No! No!" come out smothered amid sobs. He seems oblivious to Archie. After a minute of these sounds, Jason begins to calm down, though his face remains pressed into the bars.

ARCHIE: Take it easy!

The sobbing stops. Jason sits on the floor of his cell, motionless, as if in a trance. He then jumps up, grabs both bars and squeezes them, his face and body contorting. Archie watches the shadow on the floor.

ARCHIE: What are you doing?

Jason squeezes the bars, grunting, his face turning red.

ARCHIE: Jason, what are you doing?

Still gripping the bar, Jason starts breathing loudly and deeply. It comes out as a hissing between his teeth.

JASON: Suicide? Sally committed suicide?

ARCHIE: Calm down. OK, so she committed suicide. Get a grip.

JASON: I'm dying for a suicide?

ARCHIE: What are you talking about?

JASON: She's killed herself . . . and—and I'm heading to the chair!

ARCHIE: Calm down.

JASON: This is too much—too, too much!

ARCHIE: I'm missing something here.

JASON: Oh, you're missing a lot—a whole lot . . .

He falls face first into the bars, hard enough for Archie to hear.

ARCHIE: What's going on?

JASON: (*Muttering.*) Suicide? Sally committed suicide? This is one nasty joke. Even I couldn't have thought of something this mean. . . .

The Big Guy upstairs must be hooting over this one.

ARCHIE: Jason?

JASON: (*Starting a dialogue with himself.*) I'm dying for her in less than 17 hours—and now she's dead? Is that what I'm now facing? (*He laughs.*) Yes, Jason, that's what you are facing. Oh boy, isn't that an unfortunate turn of events? My, yes, it really is, Jason. The innocent dying for the dead, how nice! Oh, but don't worry, everything will work out—

ARCHIE: What are you talking about?

JASON: Just what I said. The innocent dying for the dead!

ARCHIE: Innocent? Who's innocent?

JASON: Me, Jason Bartello, 45523 death row, your fellow, about-to-be-fried shadow!

ARCHIE: Innocent?

JASON: As a newborn baby!

ARCHIE: Innocent? How can you be innocent?

JASON: That's easy—by not doing it.

ARCHIE: By not doing it? What do you mean "by not doing it"?

JASON: I mean not doing it by "not doing it." Is that simple or what?

ARCHIE: But you confessed years ago!

JASON: People do lie, don't they? Oh, yes, they do!

ARCHIE: Innocent? You're saying that you are . . . innocent?

JASON: As a newborn baby!

ARCHIE: Wait a minute, wait a minute . . . The innocent dying for . . . the dead? Sally, she, she . . . ?

JASON: My, my, you are the philosopher extraordinaire, aren't you?

ARCHIE: She did it?

JASON: Two shots, point-blank, in the back of the neck. I knew she had a mean streak but—

ARCHIE: You're kidding me? (*He tries to feign a laugh but it doesn't*

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