

BERTRAND PRIEST
by
IAN COHEN

BERTRAND PRIEST

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"BERTRAND PRIEST won the 2006 Kaufman and Hart Prize for New American Comedy and was originally produced by the Arkansas Repertory Theatre"

BERTRAND PRIEST

*Dedicated to Steven Williford, John Eisner and The Lark Play
Development Center, NYC*

BERTRAND PRIEST

CHARACTERS

Al Steinberg
.....

A businessman. Heavy. He's in his early fifties.

Dennis Kennedy
.....

An actor who tends bar. Hasn't worked as an actor for a long time and is starting to have doubts. A desperate man in his late-thirties.

The Young Man/
Bertrand Priest
.....

A strapping young man in his early twenties.

Katrina Chernov
.....

An attractive woman, waif-like, in her late thirties. A history of drugs and alcohol is apparent. She ages to 50.

Nancy Li
.....

A young, television journalist.

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SCENE 1

Present day. About noon, a weekday. A crowded diner, midtown NYC. Two men in a booth. One man is in his early fifties. Heavy. In a dark suit that is a little too tight. He's sweating and eating an overstuffed deli sandwich. On the table, condiments and side dishes abound. The other man is a lean, handsome man in his mid-thirties, sipping tea.

AL. That's all ya want?

DENNIS. I had a big breakfast.

AL. You want a decent lunch? I'll buy ya lunch.

DENNIS. No. I'm fine.

AL. I'm offering to buy you lunch. Do you want it?

DENNIS. No.

AL. Fine. Drink your tea.

DENNIS. Had a late breakfast. *(Al eats. An uncomfortable silence.)* So, how've you been, Al?

AL. I'm *Al*. I'm always the same. Always great. And you?

DENNIS. Good. Real good.

AL. Oh, yeah?

DENNIS. Yeah. I think things are startin' to click for me.

AL. Great.

DENNIS. Yeah. I can feel it. Energy swirling around me. Electricity. I get shocks.

AL. Shocks?

DENNIS. Yeah. Everything I touch lately gives me a shock.

AL. No shit?

DENNIS. Shook hands with this top casting lady the other day, "nice to meet you, Dennis, something comes up, blah-blah-blah, extends her hand, I go to shake it, *whammo!* I saw stars. So did she.

AL. Well, she *was* lookin at *you*.

DENNIS. *(A short beat.)* Yeah. Lemme tell ya somethin. This mornin, this song stayin in my head; song about God, about Jesus carrying ya,

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and there bein only one set of footprints. Can't remember ever hearing it, but there it is, and I know somethin's up. And today, I'm sittin on the number one, and I thought, even though I'm meetin my best friend Al on 48th Street—

AL. Uh-huh.

DENNIS. —lemme get off at 42nd Street and walk the few blocks. It's a beautiful day, right?

AL. It's okay.

DENNIS. Yeah. So, I get off, climb the steps and sittin right at the top of the steps, dirty and stinkin from booze and God-knows-what, is this homeless, blind guy, playin a guitar and singin. Singin *that* song! *The same song about Jesus carrying him!* A wake-up call if I ever heard one! I pulled out a twenty and gave it to him.

AL. That's a lotta money.

DENNIS. Ya see, God was reaching me through that guy; singin the words in the song so that I would hear them. And I never woulda heard them if I didn't get off at 42nd to meet you. (*A beat.*) His energy is all around us. It's in the air. We don't know it. We're not aware of it, but it's there all the same. And that's what God is. That Energy Guiding Us. We gotta channel that energy. And to do that, we gotta empty ourselves of all the poison and let that good stuff flow.

AL. So waddaya tellin me? I got poison in me?

DENNIS. No. Well, we all do. What I'm saying is— Okay. It's fate. God. God arranged for me to get off the train at that particular stop to hear that song, just as God arranged for you and I to be sitting at this booth, at this coffee shop, at this particular time and place in the Universe.

AL. (*Very short pause.*) You called me.

DENNIS. That's irrelevant. We're all Tools of the Almighty.

AL. And this is what you called me about?

DENNIS. Yeah.

AL. Some kind of... I don't know... spiritual awakening or some shit?

DENNIS. Yeah.

AL. So this is pretty big stuff. I mean, you don't call me for five years. Suddenly, you pick up the phone, and lo and behold—

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DENNIS. Al—

AL. —it's cause you found Jesus. Congratulations. *(Pause.)* You know I'm divorced?

DENNIS. Yeah.

AL. Sheri and me...*pffft.*

DENNIS. Yeah.

AL. Everybody called to see how I was doin. Everyone but you. And ya never returned my calls either. Lookin for God, emptyin yourself of all the poison, you forgot about your friends. *(Pause.)* You hurt me, y'know that? I thought I did somethin to ya. What did I do?

DENNIS. Nothin. Ya didn't do nothin. Look, we've grown in different directions. You've chosen one avenue for yourself—

AL. I don't wanna hear this crap about avenues. A friend is a friend no matter what avenue you're on. Five years, and all you got to tell me is some cock'n bull story about some bum singin a song?

DENNIS. It's more than that! It's about God and—

AL. *No more talk about God! You sound like a nut! (Silence.)* It's always the same shit with you; nice day, blah-blah-blah, bullshit-bullshit-bullshit. You think I'm stupid?

DENNIS. No.

AL. You think I don't know what you're about? You think I don't know you? I know you. Next time you call me, spare me the bullshit.

DENNIS. Al...

AL. No. I don't have time for this. *(Al gets up and throws some money on the table.)* I have to get back to work.

DENNIS. Al! See! This is why it's so hard—

AL. Just tell me what you want.

DENNIS. Why do you assume that I want something? Maybe I just—

AL. Who do you think you're talkin to?

DENNIS. *(Long pause.)* I met these people. Good people.

AL. Finally, we get down to business. *(Al takes out a pad and pencil. He takes notes throughout this conversation.)* Where?

DENNIS. *(A short beat.)* They came in one night.

AL. The Metro?

DENNIS. Yeah.

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AL. You're still workin there?

DENNIS. Yeah. (*A short beat.*) Anyway, these people are quality people.

AL. Names?

DENNIS. Wha?

AL. These quality people got names?

DENNIS. Yeah. Renée Gautreaux and Stephen DePolicci.

AL. (*Writing.*) Uh-huh.

DENNIS. He's Robert DeNiro's nephew.

AL. No shit.

DENNIS. Anyway, they've got this group—

AL. Uh-huh.

DENNIS. They wanna do some meaningful stuff. The kinda stuff that'll blow people away! Make 'em think! Knock their heads off! The kinda stuff that—

AL. Do they want any money from you?

DENNIS. Let me finish!

AL. Dennis—

DENNIS. You always do that! Anyway, they've got this project. This writer's—

AL. What's his name?

DENNIS. —written some powerful stuff. Lemme talk!

AL. Awright. Awright.

DENNIS. Al! Al! Audiences go crazy!

AL. What's his name?

DENNIS. They're talkin about it all over town coz it's the truth! See, it's what people wanna hear, but they don't know it yet! When they hear it, they go "yeah, that's it! That's the truth!"

AL. What's his name?

DENNIS. You'll love this guy, Al. He reminds me a little of you.

AL. *What's his fuckin name?*

DENNIS. His name is Bertrand Priest. (*Blackout. End of Scene.*)

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SCENE 2

Katrina's dream. Lights up on a television anchorperson.

NANCY LI. Bertrand Priest was killed today in New York. As he emerged from his upper west side apartment, a lone gunman, identified as Dennis Kennedy, took the life of Mister Priest. The outpouring of grief throughout the city has been tremendous. The Mayor, (a longtime foe of Mister Priest), said, and I quote "We will long remember and appreciate the contributions of Bertrand Priest." Dignitaries, celebrities, and ordinary people from all over the world are flying into New York City to pay their respects. For those of you just tuning in, Bertrand Priest was shot as he emerged from his upper west side apartment in New York City by a lone gunman, identified as Dennis Kennedy, a friend of Mister Priest. Mister Kennedy's motive may never be known as he turned the gun on himself. *(The lights fade. End of scene.)*

SCENE 3

The Past, about twenty years ago. Lights up on Katrina's lower east side apartment. Katrina is in her late-thirties, attractive, though waif-like. A history of drugs and alcohol is apparent. Her friend is much younger. They're in bed. Katrina is reading a manuscript. Rock music is playing. And running the length of the wall is a large tank housing a python.

THE YOUNG MAN. You have a big crack in the ceiling.

KATRINA. Where?

THE YOUNG MAN. Over the bookcase. *(He climbs up the furniture and takes a closer look.)* I'll take care of it tomorrow. Little spackle. Little plaster. Good as new.

KATRINA. Where'd you learn to be so handy?

THE YOUNG MAN. My dad. We've gotta hardware store on seventeen. *(He notices a large jar on the kitchen counter.)* What's this?

KATRINA. Oh. That's The Jar.

THE YOUNG MAN. What's all the confetti?

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KATRINA. That ain't confetti.

THE YOUNG MAN. No? Then what...?

KATRINA. Those are the phone numbers of all the men I know. I keep 'em in one of those big mayonnaise jars. That way, when I'm in one of my low periods, I know that I can close my eyes, reach into the jar, call some guy and have him come over.

THE YOUNG MAN. Am I in that jar?

KATRINA. No. You don't wanna be relegated to The Jar, do ya?

THE YOUNG MAN. No. (*A beat.*) It looks like thousands in there!

KATRINA. You want me to read this, dontcha?

THE YOUNG MAN. Yeah. It's just—

KATRINA. Shh. (*Katrina reads a bit and puts the script down.*) You can't have people talkin shit just because you want them to. You gotta have a good reason. Who are you anyway, God?

THE YOUNG MAN. Well, I did create their world.

KATRINA. You're too smart for your own good.

THE YOUNG MAN. Katrina, I—

KATRINA. I'm tellin you the truth. Listen to me. I wrote some powerful shit in my day. A fuckin novel. Remind me to show it to you sometime.

THE YOUNG MAN. I will.

KATRINA. I wouldn't put up with the bullshit. Bein a woman, they pull shit like you wouldn't believe.

THE YOUNG MAN. Really?

KATRINA. You kiddin me? Limousines, coke, alla that shit just to get into your pants. Evil people. No good, man. Kills your spirit. That's why I'm all messed up now. Remind me to tell you about it someday.

THE YOUNG MAN. Tell me about the jar.

KATRINA. Forget the jar, they'll be time enough for that.

THE YOUNG MAN. I wanna know. Did you...?

KATRINA. Did I "what?"

THE YOUNG MAN. Well, you're a beautiful woman—

KATRINA. I am not. I'm skinny, yet flabby. My legs're like twigs. Waddaya talkin about?

THE YOUNG MAN. —I mean, well... you can probably have any guy

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you want.

KATRINA. And? (*Very short pause.*) I thought you were comin over to work, but turns out I'm just some piece of ass?

THE YOUNG MAN. Yeah! I mean, no! I— I value your opinion. You're my muse.

KATRINA. Ohhhhh. I see. Look, this only happened because I wanted it to. You had nothin to do with it. Look at you. Now you got that silly grin and stupid attitude. I shoulda been more careful. You've been entrusted to me. And I broke my Promise and now I gotta pay. (*She lights a joint. She smokes, offers a hit to the young man, and he turns it down.*) See, I don't know if you're mature enough to handle this information.

THE YOUNG MAN. What kinda information?

KATRINA. Information's not right. Concept. Yeah. It's more of a concept than it is information. No. Concept's wrong. It's too "right side of the brain." It's more, what? (*She takes him in.*) This was a mistake. A big mistake. A humongous error of gargantuan proportions. I never shoulda fucked you. I shoulda left well enough alone. One weak moment and I mighta ruined everything. (*A beat. She calls out—*) Sherman! You were right! I shoulda listened. (*She reaches into the tank and takes the python out.*) He told me you weren't ready, but I wouldn't listen. I told him I had my eye on you. I told him I liked your shit from the first day, and he told me to lay low, wait a few more weeks, not to bring you up here, and I— I shoulda known. Sherman's never been wrong about anyone.

THE YOUNG MAN. (*Sherman lovingly wraps himself around Katrina. She teases Bertrand with him.*) No! You know I'm afraid of that thing!

KATRINA. You're afraid of Sherman? You're a coward! If you wanna be an artist, you can't be afraid! Hold him!

THE YOUNG MAN. Get away!

KATRINA. You gotta hold hands with death! You gotta face the dark and not know whether you'll ever see the light of day again!

THE YOUNG MAN. No, I don't!

KATRINA. Yes, you do!

THE YOUNG MAN. Why?

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KATRINA. *Coz the rest of us are all too afraid! We're chicken-shits who are lookin to you!*

THE YOUNG MAN. Katrina, I gotta tell ya—

KATRINA. I don't wanna hear it!

THE YOUNG MAN. I can't!

KATRINA. You have to! That's why you have that star on your palm!

THE YOUNG MAN. What star?

KATRINA. That's why you're born on the seventh day of the seventh month!

THE YOUNG MAN. Lotsa people are born July seventh—

KATRINA. *Take him—*

THE YOUNG MAN. —Ringo Starr, Pierre Cardin!

KATRINA. —*or die! (A beat.)* Sherman wants you. You have no choice. *(He reluctantly takes the animal. The python wraps himself around him. A "peace" envelopes them.)* See? Waddaya know?

Sherman loves you. Lookit his little face. Awwww. Animals know.

THE YOUNG MAN. He's squeezing me a little.

KATRINA.

He's hugging you. That's all. When you walk by, the cats and dogs stop whatever they're doin, eating, chasing, playing, and give you the eye.

You ever notice that?

THE YOUNG MAN. I hate cats and they always come to me.

KATRINA. They *know* you.

THE YOUNG MAN. They make me sneeze.

KATRINA. Animals can see things we can't. They can see your aura. Sherman sees.

THE YOUNG MAN. Could you get him offa me?

KATRINA. Not yet. God sent you to me to— what? *Raise?* No. Not the right word. *Indoctrinate* might be better. No. *Indoctrinate's* not right either. Too political, *brainwashy*. It's more...uhmmm...

THE YOUNG MAN. Katrina, enough.

KATRINA. It'll come to me—

THE YOUNG MAN. Look, I gotta tell you the truth.

KATRINA. —probably in the middle of the night or somethin.

THE YOUNG MAN. When I first came over to you—

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KATRINA. *Educate?* No, educate's too...*what?*

THE YOUNG MAN. —after the meeting—

KATRINA. —*schoolish.*

THE YOUNG MAN. —I just wanted to... *you know*—

KATRINA. *Guide* you! That's it. *Guide!*

THE YOUNG MAN. —get you in... you know... bed.

KATRINA. Well, it took you long enough! (*A beat*) I'm Here to Guide You On Your Journey. Understand?

THE YOUNG MAN. No.

KATRINA. You know that woman who found the baby floating down—

THE YOUNG MAN. *You didn't find me! I came on to you! (A short beat.)*

KATRINA. You are so cute! Do you know how cute you are?

(*Short pause.*) Anyway, that woman who found the baby floating down the river picks him up and raises him as a prince. That's what I shoulda done, ceptin I fucked him. See, when God asks you to do somethin, you do it. You don't mess around. That's why I might never enter the Promised Land.

THE YOUNG MAN. *What are you talking about?*

KATRINA. I'm talking about God and You and Me.

THE YOUNG MAN. You believe in God?

KATRINA. Gimme my baby! (*She takes Sherman. Sherman lovingly wraps himself around her. Stroking Sherman—*) I know you look at me and you think, “this chick don't believe in shit,” but I'm very religious and I have real faith. I don't go to church. I don't do anything like that, but I pray. I pray to God directly. I don't need no intermediary. I don't need no special building. I don't need no statues. No saints. No artifacts. Nothin. Everything I need is here. (*She indicates her heart.*)

I pray for World Peace. I pray for My Family, wherever they are. And I pray for you. I pray that you're well and healthy and happy. And I pray that you'll never give up your dream.

THE YOUNG MAN. I won't.

KATRINA. Don't be so sure. It doesn't happen so easy like you know it's happening. It's slow and sneaky. It's not somethin like one day you

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wake up and say, “hey, I think I’m gonna give up my dream now.” No. It happens slowly. Little choices along the way; *a job; a girl; a guy; a car; you don’t wanna put up with bullshit*, could be anything. Then one day, you look around and you say, “hey, remember when I used to dream about... (*A short beat.*) —*whatever?*” And you realize that you just ain’t doin it anymore. You’re doin somethin else.

THE YOUNG MAN. Dreams can change.

KATRINA. Some can. Some just get forgotten. Or ignored, but they’re still there tuggin at ya. And you’re hopin they’ll go away, coz when you think about ‘em, about how much they meant to you, and how you turned your back on ‘em, it hurts.

THE YOUNG MAN. Is that what happened to you?

KATRINA. Don’t worry about what happened to me. Remind me to tell you about that someday. This is about *you... Bertrand Priest.* (*The lights fade on them. End of Scene.*)

SCENE 4

Present day. In the restaurant.

AL. Bertrand Priest? Never heard of him.

DENNIS. Al! Listen! He’s a regular guy. Has a hardware store in New Jersey; wants nothin to do with the bullshit. You can’t get his number, his email, nothin. He just writes and writes. And they know him! Seems Renée knows this—

AL. Gautreaux?

DENNIS. Yeah —there’s this weird woman who lives in her building, strange pets and shit, tells me they been tryin to get her outa there for years.

AL. Dennis...

DENNIS. Anyway, Renée sees her out on the stoop one night and she’s drunk as usual and she starts yakkin it up about guess who?

AL. Who?

DENNIS. Priest! Can ya believe it? Turns out she knew him *when*. And

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to make a long story short, Renée gets some numbers, makes a few calls, a few meetings, and asks him—

AL. Asks who?

DENNIS. Priest. —if they can produce his stuff.

AL. Wait. Who's they?

DENNIS. Renée Gautreaux and Steven DePol—

AL. DeNiro's nephew.

DENNIS. Yeah! And get this. Priest *loves* DeNiro. So Steven got him his autograph on an old Taxi Driver poster.

AL. Unbelievable.

DENNIS. Yeah. And Priest says “okay” and he always says “no.”

AL. Why? Seems a writer would want—

DENNIS. He does. He just wants it done right. And they wanna do it right, believe me. And here's the best part. *They want me.*

AL. You're gonna be in it?

DENNIS. Yeah! Gotta big part, too! Anyway, this part is really good for me. They were tellin me I'd kill in this.

AL. They saw ya?

DENNIS. Yeah.

AL. What'd they see ya in?

DENNIS. Nothin. You don't hafta see me on stage, you can tell that I've got somethin special just from meeting me. They say I've got this energy; this presence that's perfect for this guy's stuff. It demands a certain intensity. See, I've always been told that I'm very intense. Al, you don't know, coz you've never seen me work, but take my word for it, when I walk on stage, everybody looks. Eyes are riveted on me. Wonderin what I'm gonna do next. What I'm gonna say next. I can do that to people. I've heard it over and over.

AL. Wow. You're sure you don't want lunch?

DENNIS. Yeah. I'm sure. Anyway, they want me for the show, the second lead, and they want me for their Power Base.

AL. And what is that?

DENNIS. It means they want me in on it.

AL. And what does that mean?

DENNIS. (*Short pause.*) It means that everyone is putting in five grand.

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AL. Everyone?

DENNIS. Well, yeah.

AL. Even DeNiro?

DENNIS. DeNiro's not in it.

AL. Oh. I thought, with all the money this guy's got...

DENNIS. No. He'll come to see it, though.

AL. Great. So will I. (*A beat.*) Five grand's a lotta money.

DENNIS. "Voyage" cost five million.

AL. What I mean is—

DENNIS. Five grand is nothin in this business.

AL. —it's a lotta money for *you*.

DENNIS. Al, I trust you. You know about this stuff. Money-stuff. D'ya think I should do it? What're your feelings about this? Be honest.

AL. You wanna do it already. Sounds like you've got your mind made up.

DENNIS. I kinda do. But I like to run this stuff by you.

AL. Why?

DENNIS. Your point of view.

AL. You know my point of view. I don't think you should pay a dime. They should be payin *you*.

DENNIS. Yeah. True. But this is quite an opportunity! And sometimes, once in a lifetime, when somethin like this comes along, you gotta pounce on it! You don't get second chances in this business. (*Lights out. End of Scene.*)

SCENE 5

The Past. Katrina's apartment.

THE YOUNG MAN. *Bertram Priest*??? Who's he?

KATRINA. You.

THE YOUNG MAN. Bertram—

KATRINA. *Bertrannnd.*

THE YOUNG MAN. Bertrand. Bertrand Priest. What kind of a name is that?

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KATRINA. Your name. It came to me last night. I was dreamin about you again.

THE YOUNG MAN. You don't hafta dream, I'm right here.

KATRINA. *(He moves to her, touching her.)* Stop. Hands off. Not those kinda dreams. The kinda dreams that Joseph had. Seven lean years, seven fat years, mine're very twenty-first century, but with an ancient feel; death, murder, mayhem. Crazy stuff.

THE YOUNG MAN. Wow.

KATRINA. You get killed.

THE YOUNG MAN. I do?

KATRINA. Yeah. Lotsa different ways too.

THE YOUNG MAN. Shit!

KATRINA. It's all symbols. Remind me to explain 'em to you some day. Don't worry. No one's killin you. At least, not literally.

THE YOUNG MAN. Good.

KATRINA. *(Thinking—)* *Bertrand Priest.* It's perfect for you.

THE YOUNG MAN. It's weird.

KATRINA. Course it sounds weird now, but you'll get used to it.

THE YOUNG MAN. Sounds phony.

KATRINA. Don't you hear the power of that name? "I'd like you to meet Bertrand Priest." Oooh! Gives me chills!

THE YOUNG MAN. Yeah?

KATRINA. Oh yes! It conjures up a man of great intellect and integrity!

THE YOUNG MAN. It's not me.

KATRINA. It's sexy too.

THE YOUNG MAN. Well... could work.

KATRINA. Let's try it out for a while. Give yourself time to grow into it. If you don't like it, if it feels wrong, we can always go back to your nondescript, ordinary name.

BERTRAND PRIEST. Okay.

KATRINA. But right now, Bertrand, it's time for you to find Your Purpose.

BERTRAND PRIEST. Can't we just lie down?

KATRINA. No. Finding your Purpose takes precedent over everything.

BERTRAND PRIEST. Okay. What kinda purpose?

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KATRINA. Not purpose. *Purpose.* You gotta find out what it is. I can't tell ya. This is deep and personal. It's between you and Him. Somethin you gotta do alone. And here's how. When you go home, turn out all the lights except for one candle; get on your knees, and ask Him to reveal to you your Purpose. Remember to say it with a capital P. Okay?

BERTRAND PRIEST. Yeah. Capital P. Yeah.

KATRINA. You gotta concentrate hard on it, too. Coz He knows if you're not serious. You gotta be pure. You gotta empty yourself of the past. All that stuff your parents gave you, teachers, other kids, me even. You gotta throw it all out and you gotta come to Him, honest and open. When you start, introduce yourself. Then say something like, "Lord? What is my Purpose?" I like to call Him, The Creator. Call Him whatcha like, Jesus, God, Lord, Allah, whatever, it's all the same really. And remember to be humble. I mean, you're talkin to The Almighty. And you wait. Then maybe in your dreams, or right before you fall asleep, that second, He will come to you. And reveal to you your *Purpose.*

BERTRAND PRIEST. How will I...?

KATRINA. Don't say anything. Don't even think anything. And don't get impatient. Time is very different for Him. A thousand years is like a nanosecond.

BERTRAND PRIEST. So, I could be waiting for a very long time.

KATRINA. Your whole life.

BERTRAND PRIEST. (*Pause.*) This has gotta stop.

KATRINA. What?

BERTRAND PRIEST. All this talk. I mean it sounds great. But, come on!

KATRINA. What?

BERTRAND PRIEST. All this talk about God and My Purpose? Gimme a break!

KATRINA. Bertrand!

BERTRAND PRIEST. And me being something important and powerful. I hate to break it to ya, but I'm just havin some fun before I go home and work for my Dad.

KATRINA. Doin what?

BERTRAND PRIEST. Workin in the hardware store.

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KATRINA. Instead of stayin here and doing something of value?
Something important?

BERTRAND PRIEST. What's so important about makin up stories?
People need hammers and nails, paint and spackle a lot more than they
need a story.

KATRINA. A story can change your life. A paint job is a paint job and
that's it.

BERTRAND PRIEST. (*A short beat.*) Well, I promised my Dad I'd
help out, and—

KATRINA. No. That life is over for you. You may have planned to do
that, but that's not you. Not anymore.

BERTRAND PRIEST. Who are you, anyway? Tellin me what I am.

KATRINA. All I know is that you're *more*—

BERTRAND PRIEST. More than what?

KATRINA. More than what you think you are.

BERTRAND PRIEST. Which is what?

KATRINA. More than a guy who works in a hardware store in New
Jersey.

BERTRAND PRIEST. See! I knew it! You think you're better than
other people!

KATRINA. What people?

BERTRAND PRIEST. My people. People who run hardware stores in
New Jersey.

KATRINA. Not better. Different.

BERTRAND PRIEST. You think you've got some noble cause or
somethin. My old man, now he's noble. A lot more noble than you.

KATRINA. I never said—

BERTRAND PRIEST. Drinkin vodka and doin drugs every night and
sleepin till three in the afternoon isn't noble.

KATRINA. I never said I was noble.

BERTRAND PRIEST. My dad's out the door every morning at five.
Leaves before the rest of us are even up. Stays in that store till closing.
Six days a week. Sometimes seven! Never complains about it neither.
That's noble!

KATRINA. Are you a Republican?

BERTRAND PRIEST

BERTRAND PRIEST. That's why they hate people like you.

KATRINA. I'm glad Republicans hate me.

BERTRAND PRIEST. Not Republicans! Normal people! People like my dad. People who work hard and bank their checks and pay their bills and love their families. Those people.

KATRINA. (*A short beat.*) Forget about going home to New Jersey. I won't let you. There's too much at stake. You have a Gift. Whether you wanted it or not, you have it. God Gave You a Gift and it's Your Duty to Use It in the Way He Intended.

BERTRAND PRIEST. How do you know what He intended?

KATRINA. I have connections.

BERTRAND PRIEST. God didn't give me any—

KATRINA. You don't want to accept it! And I don't blame you one bit! It's hard being Gifted. It's a double-edged sword. On one side you've got your Gift and on the other side you've got all the Pain and Confusion that go with it.

BERTRAND PRIEST. I promised my dad that I'd help out.

KATRINA. He didn't give you such a Wonderful Gift so you could go work for your father in the hardware store.

BERTRAND PRIEST. He needs me.

KATRINA. Anyone can work in a hardware store—

BERTRAND PRIEST. Not true! You gotta know the right tool for the job! You gotta know the difference between a number four and number eight drill bit! You gotta know the stock! And sometimes the customer'll come in and thinks he's gotta do two coats, but I'll tell him he could get away with one coat if he primes the job first! Sometimes a cus—

KATRINA. Bertrand! (*I love calling you that!*) Working in the hardware store is a fine and noble thing to do. It is, but He sees more for you and so do I.

BERTRAND PRIEST. You're makin a big mistake, Katrina. I'm just an ordinary guy. I'm not smart enough. I'm not good enough.

KATRINA. You *are*. Besides, that's not for you to decide. That's up to *us* to decide whether you're good enough or not.

BERTRAND PRIEST. I'm not strong enough to do what you think I can do.

BERTRAND PRIEST

KATRINA. You are.

BERTRAND PRIEST. I'm weak.

KATRINA. You may think you're weak. You may even feel weak, but to me, you're Daniel Boone! Yeah. Daniel fuckin Boone. Leavin a life of luxury in New Jersey—

BERTRAND PRIEST. It's not a life of—

KATRINA. —to go blazing trails through the wilderness of New York City! That's you and that's what you're doin! Whether you know it or not!

BERTRAND PRIEST. No. That's not me. *(Pause.)* Katrina, I just wanna be with you.

KATRINA. Here I am. *(Sherman moves around in his tank as Katrina gets very close to Bertrand.)* Ya know, Daniel Boone didn't start out strong. He was a little guy. He hadda exercise and *get* strong. That's what you're doin here. Exercisin. You're getting muscles. You are. It took a lotta strength for you to tell me what you just told me. That's a very good sign. You're a very strong person.

BERTRAND PRIEST. Why don't you believe me?

KATRINA. Coz I believe *in* you, Bertrand Priest. *(They kiss and begin to make a sad kind of love as the lights fade on them.)*

SCENE 6

Lights up on a television anchorperson.

AN IMPORTANT VOICEOVER. We interrupt your regularly scheduled program to bring you a bulletin from ABC News. Please standby.

NANCY LI. *(Lights up on a television anchorperson.)* TWA Flight 777, enroute to London from New York's Kennedy Airport has disappeared over the Atlantic Ocean. The Navy has commenced searching for the aircraft, but as yet, nothing has been found. *(Nancy Li sees the camera is still on her and that she has no copy; a moment of fear and confusion. We get a glimpse of a stagehand, ducking under the camera's eye as he hands her a sheet of white paper.)* Excuse me. Something has been

BERTRAND PRIEST

handed to me. (*Reading.*) It is believed that among the two hundred and seventy-three passengers, playwright and political activist, Bertrand Priest was onboard the aircraft. As the details emerge, we will keep you informed. We join your regularly scheduled program already in progress. (*The lights fade. End of scene.*)

SCENE 7

Present day. Lights up on the restaurant.

DENNIS. So, right off the top of your head. Your feelings.

AL. My feelings... (*Pause.*) They say they want you for their power base. And it'll cost you five grand. You ask them what that means.

DENNIS. What *what* means?

AL. What "power base" means. What do you get for your five grand? Or is it just a lotta feelgood bullshit?

DENNIS. Bullshit?

AL. Yeah. You're a desperate guy—

DENNIS. Hey!

AL. Let's get down to brass tacks. You're desperate and they know it. So they're playin you. They see you pullin beers. They see ya moppin the floor. They know who you are. Your dreams. They know 'em. They got 'em too. They know if they say what you wanna hear, you'll give 'em anything they want. Right? (*Pause.*) You write the check already?

DENNIS. No.

AL. You sure?

DENNIS. *Yes.* (*Pause.*) I knew I shouldn't a called you.

AL. See, a little bell is goin off in your head that's sayin "I'm a shmuck and I better go to Al." You want my advice, you come to me, I gotta give it to you. My advice is this: Tell them you'd love to work with them, bullshit-bullshit-bullshit, but you don't have that kinda money. Which you don't. See what they do. Maybe they'll come down and you can be part of their power base for a couple hundred and not your life savings.

DENNIS. (*Short pause.*) You hate me, don't you?

BERTRAND PRIEST

AL. No. I love you.

DENNIS. You're jealous of me. You always—

AL. This again.

DENNIS. You're jealous of me and you've always tried to kill everything good that happened for me. That's why I stayed away from you for five years. You're negative. You're a negative person.

AL. I'm not negative. I just calls 'em as I sees 'em.

DENNIS.

That's why your marriage fell apart! If you really want the truth! That's why Sheri—

AL. Don't talk about somethin you know nothin about!

DENNIS. (*Short pause. Dennis catches his breath.*) You make these people sound like crooks or somethin. They need help with their project. They came to me. They coulda asked others. They asked me.

AL. Look, you asked me what I—

DENNIS. Why did I come to you???

AL. Because you know I'll tell you the truth. And you want it and you fear it too. You fear that these people are not into Their Vision and The Work and all that high-falutin stuff you crow about. What is really on their minds is that they wanna be rich and famous. And the hard truth is that there is no love for The Work or Their Vision or this Bertrand Priest guy. They're just a bunch of desperate fucks (like you) tryin to get from Point A to Point B at any cost. And right now, they're comin to you. Coz you got a little money that you worked hard for. That you sweated for. Poured drinks till five in the morning for. And now you've come to me, coz in your heart of hearts, you feel that too.

DENNIS. You're jealous. That's all it could be.

AL. Why in God's Creation would I be jealous of you for anything? I'm just sitting here eating my sandwich. Enjoying my food. Living my Life. So, with that in mind—

DENNIS. You're jealous of me coz you're fat! You've always been fat!

AL. Are you trying to hurt me?

DENNIS. And I'm neat and lean. And I'm operating from a place of honesty and decency. And I'm willing to put my money where my mouth is and invest in a project I believe in.

BERTRAND PRIEST

AL. So do it! God bless ya!

DENNIS. Even if you were right (and you're not) I can't trust you, coz you never thought I could do anything right. You have no faith in me. You think anybody who wants me has got to be takin advantage of me. Using me, and I'm too stupid to see it. And these people, who want me in their power base—

AL. What fuckin power base? They don't have shit!

DENNIS. They need five grand! And I like them and they like me!

AL. *Course they like you! You're dumb enough to give them five grand!* Look, you might as well give *me* the five grand and you can be in the Al Steinberg Power Base. And lemme tell ya, you could do a lot worse.

DENNIS. You're wrong about this! This is a good deal! Look at the papers they drew up!

AL. *(He opens his portfolio and pulls out some papers.)* I don't need to look at no—

DENNIS. Look at the papers! Come on! Look at 'em! I get thirty percent of the—

AL. *Denny! Stop! (Pause.)* I don't need to look at no papers to know that they're takin advantage of you coz they see a nice guy, a talented guy, who's a good guy with a good heart who's saved some dough to fuck with.

DENNIS. No one's takin advantage of anybody.

AL. And they figure, well, if he's got money to fuck with, why not let him fuck with it with *us*.

DENNIS. We all want the same thing!

AL. And we'll put him in the *Power Base* and we'll ask him some questions, like we give a shit what he thinks—

DENNIS. They *do* give a shit what I think!

AL. —but we'll have his money and we'll do what the fuck we want for *us*—

DENNIS. Just shoot me down, Al! Shoot me down again and again!

AL. —and then when it's over, “thank you very much, it's been great. You were wonderful! I hope we can work together again.” Meanwhile, you're out five grand, pourin drinks till five in the morning *again*, workin your ass off for nothing *again*, behind in your rent *again*,

BERTRAND PRIEST

wonderin where the hell the money went.

DENNIS. You're wrong! I'm gonna invest the five grand! I'm gonna do it just to show you!

AL. You shouldn't be doin this to show me or anyone anything. We don't care what you do. You have two reasons to do this. It will make you money or make you happy. Period.

DENNIS. Well, I've gotta score to settle—

AL. Fine.

DENNIS. —with you!

AL. Settle the score, but don't worry about me. I'm gonna forget we had this conversation, right after my next bite of this corned beef. *(Al takes a bite. He savors his sandwich as he chews. He swallows and takes a drink of his Cel-Ray soda. A beat.)* Now? What was it you wanted?

DENNIS. *(Dennis can't move. Pause.)* Al, I— What am I talkin about? I don't have five grand. I don't have five cents. *(Pause.)* I was hopin you'd... you know...

AL. Here it comes.

DENNIS. *(A beat.)* ...loan— I'll pay you back... oh, Jesus...

AL. You don't have to bullshit me for half an hour before you get to the point. You're not foolin Al.

DENNIS. I was afraid. Afraid to ask you... *(Short pause.)* There's no one else, Al.

AL. And who's fault is that?

DENNIS. *(A short beat—)* Yeah. I'm sor— ...just that, well, you know... when Kevin died—

AL. Shame. Kid had it all.

DENNIS. Yeah. He did. *(A beat.)* —and then, when Ma went off—

AL. Long time ago. Why are you bringin' that shit up?

DENNIS. Well, you know, you took care of me like a brother...

AL. *I know the story.* I had no choice. What was I gonna do?

DENNIS. Well...

AL. Letcha live on the street?

DENNIS. No. *(A short beat. Hesitant—)* I figured I could always go to Al. *(Pause.)* I gotta do this thing, Al. I gotta. This could make me.

AL. I'm a businessman, Denny.

BERTRAND PRIEST

DENNIS. Yeah. *(Pause. Then, with finality—)* Yeah. *(Dennis gathers his things and rises from his seat.)*

AL. Gimme those papers. *(Dennis gives Al the papers. Al takes a cursory look. Grimaces.)* You coulda just asked me. *(Al folds the papers, puts them in his inside jacket pocket. Blackout. End of Scene.)*

SCENE 8

The Past. Sherman is lovingly wrapped around Katrina. Bertrand is up on a ladder, fixing the ceiling.

BERTRAND PRIEST. I don't know why you didn't get the super up here.

KATRINA. I can't call him.

BERTRAND PRIEST. Why not?

KATRINA. We're natural enemies. It's a battle that began sometime around the Bronze Age with the Landlord and Tenant Wars of 700 BC. I was a Landowner back then, so now I'm payin for it. Remind me to explain it to ya someday.

BERTRAND PRIEST. Just tell your landlord your ceiling—

KATRINA. The less we have to do with each other, the better. Besides, he wants me to get rid of Sherman. *(Sherman reacts to this.)* No sweet baby. Katrina's not gonna let anyone get rid of you. We'll just keep out of his way. *(Bertrand comes down from the ladder. The ceiling work is done.)*

BERTRAND PRIEST. When it dries, you'll see. You won't even be able to tell where the crack was. Your whole ceiling could've come crashin down. That crack went deeper than I thought. You'da been diggin yourself out for a month. Your books, your records, everything would've been destroyed.

KATRINA. They're just *things*, Bertrand. Haven't you been listening?

BERTRAND PRIEST. How come everything I do isn't as important as everything you do?

KATRINA. You need to look beneath the surface. All you see is a cracked ceiling and a bunch of "things."

BERTRAND PRIEST

BERTRAND PRIEST. And tell me this, why does everything have to have some Hidden Meaning?

KATRINA. Cause everything does.

BERTRAND PRIEST. *(A beat.) Okay. Here it is.* I fixed your ceiling. There was a big crack and I sanded it, plastered it and painted it over. And now, if it rains and rains, or if the kid upstairs leaves the water on and the bathtub overflows, the water won't gush in here. I made it safe. For *us.* *(A beat.)* I wish my dad was here to see it. See? That's what he called "a job well done."

KATRINA. How come you never talk about your mother?

BERTRAND PRIEST. *(Silence. A beat.)* Katrina... *(Indicating the ceiling.)* I did this for you. I did this coz I love you.

KATRINA. I know. *(The lights fade. End of scene.)*

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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