



Signs from God

by

Pete Barry & J. Michael DeAngelis

Revised version. May 2011.

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SIGNS FROM GOD

by Pete Barry & J. Michael DeAngelis

Signs from God was originally produced by The Porch Room at the Society Hill Playhouse in Philadelphia as part of the Philly Fringe & Live Arts Festival. Opening night was September 15, 2010. Sound and lighting design was by Pat Ibbotson. Original music was by Pete Barry. Fight choreography was by Dustin Karrat. The signs were designed by Pete Barry & J. Michael DeAngelis and created by The Sign Shop, Ltd. The production was directed by J. Michael DeAngelis. The cast was as follows:

MARTIN ROTH.....Phil Deerwester
TJALKJARDA.....J. Michael DeAngelis
OLD WENDT.....Jeff Baxt
ASHER.....Dustin Karrat
RUTH ROTH-REEVES.....Paige Hoke
PEGGY REEVES.....Nani Manion
GARY NINIVAGGI.....John P. Dowgin

The voice of the callers were Julie Vick (Rebecca Renault), Michael Tough (Larry Bohner) and Pete Barry (Mr. Angeledes)

This revised version of *Signs from God* was first presented in April, 2011 at The University of Pennsylvania in a workshop production directed by J. Michael DeAngelis. The cast was as follows:

MARTIN ROTH.....David Stanger
TJALKJARDA.....Megan Edelman
OLD WENDT.....Aaron Dinkin
ASHER.....Andrew Matas
RUTH ROTH REEVES.....Kate Davis
PEGGY REEVES.....Amelia Williams
GARY NINIVAGGI.....Jeff Barg

The voice of the callers were Caitlin Light (Rebecca Renault), Phil Deerwester (Larry Bohner) and J. Michael DeAngelis (Mr. Angeledes)

ACT I. SCENE 1.

Desert, howling wind.

TJALKADJARA, a dreamtime shaman, sits cross-legged near a small campfire. Behind him, a signpost. The posted sign is construction format, bright yellow diamond with a single dark black symbol, intricate and bold, made of loops, slashes and curlicues.

Tjalkadjara ululates in a low bass, a conjurer's chant. A quartz crystal is embedded in his tongue. He closes his eyes and is silent.

Now here comes MARTIN: American, buttoned shirt half-tucked, dirtied by desert sands. He carries a briefcase. He speaks to us.

MARTIN

Imagine yourself out of gas, walking down an unfamiliar road, searing heat radiating up off the asphalt. That is nothing compared to the desert. There are no roads in the deep desert. I've been here two months. It's hot as hell. It's strange out here. In these wild spaces. The locals say their dreams are real, and the waking world is illusion. After wandering the desert - nothing around but stars close enough to touch...I can almost understand. When the sun comes up, it is blazing hot. When the sun goes down, it is freezing cold. In the dreamtime, you don't even notice. I have walked miles. I have slept in the villages. The reality of my life has burned away, and inside me, nothing but loose ends. What ties me to Earth at all? What keeps me here?

He looks at the shaman, then at the sign. A sound escapes him - a wordless, frustrated question.

Tjalkadjara cracks an eye open. He motions with his hand: talk, if you've got something to say.

MARTIN

I came from the village. The people said that you were the only one who could answer my questions. That you're a dreamtime shaman. They say you have great wisdom, greater than any mortal man.

Tjalkadjara motions for Martin to sit.

MARTIN

Thank you.

Martin sits. A bird cries in the darkness.

TJALKADJARA

Close your eyes.

Martin does as he is told.

TJALKADJARA

Breathe. The air filling your lungs is powerful. In this spot, the world falls away. Genuine questioning illuminates the dreaming.

MARTIN

I think I understand.

TJALKADJARA

Do ya now? Do you feel it?

MARTIN

Yes. It's strange. A strange feeling.

TJALKADJARA

That's a start. Now. Look deep into yourself. And tell me. What are you here for?

MARTIN

I want to offer you a fantastic deal on a satellite television package.

TJALKADJARA

You what?

MARTIN

I represent xVision Satellite TV, and I am here to offer you the deal of a lifetime, sir, a deal that you should not pass up.

Pause. Then, Tjalkadjara erupts into deep, boisterous belly laughter.

TJALKADJARA

Go on, then.

Martin unbuckles his briefcase and hands Tjalkadjara a color brochure.

MARTIN

We take care of every thing including installation. First, you get two flatscreen high definition televisions, seventy inch screens.

TJALKADJARA

Seventy inches?

MARTIN

We suggest those for community centers or public areas. You also receive twenty-five forty inch sets. You can purchase additional sets as you need. What was that?

Martin refers to a kind of half-growl, half-laugh, audible in the distance.

TJALKADJARA

That's the cry of a bunyip.

MARTIN

Is that like a wolf?

TJALKADJARA

It's a swamp demon.

MARTIN

Uh huh. Is it nearby?

TJALKADJARA

It's impossible to tell. Will we get HBO?

MARTIN

Yes, the package includes HBO Prime and one hundred and seventeen HBO channels worldwide. We market these packages specifically to indigenous tribes like yours. I feel both cold and hot. Is that normal?

TJALKADJARA

We're on a songline. The material world is thin here, like a suspension bridge with a weak cable, sagging. Is that gonna interfere with your satellite transmissions?

Slight pause.

MARTIN

We've had no complaints about interference while broadcasting through the dreamtime.

TJALKADJARA

We get television service already, you know. Oodgeroo has one in the bar. With HBO.

MARTIN

xVision is not just television. It is a way of connecting you with the world. It combines high speed internet, video conferencing, and on demand entertainment.

TJALKADJARA

Why would we need all that?

MARTIN

You said the TV's in the bar?

TJALKADJARA

Yep.

MARTIN

Ever have arguments over what to watch?

TJALKADJARA

Heh heh. We've had some blood drawn.

MARTIN

And when those arguments end, and you settle on a show, is anybody happy with the selection?

TJALKADJARA

Not really.

MARTIN

What if I told you your xVision TV could end those fights, by picking the program for you?

TJALKADJARA

The TV picks the show? How does that work?

MARTIN

Each person in the village builds a personal online profile. When you sit down to watch, the system finds shows you like. If more than one person wants to watch on one set, the system picks the optimal program for the whole group. It's on-demand, twenty-four seven. No more waiting. No more fighting. No more searching for something to watch out of millions of awful shows. xVision does the search for you and delivers a completely personalized experience.

TJALKADJARA

That sounds expensive.

MARTIN

Ask me how much your village will pay.

TJALKADJARA

How much will my village pay?

MARTIN

Nothing. There's no risk at all. You see, sir, the Australian government is required, by international law, to supply you with certain restitutive funds. You sign a five-year contract. The government foots the bill.

TJALKADJARA

That's a devil of a deal.

MARTIN

This is blood money, sir. Your people were oppressed for two hundred years. It's a small thing to make the government pay for your television.

TJALKADJARA

It does take all the fun out of flipping through channels, though.

MARTIN

Sure, if you find that kind of endless and unsatisfying search "fun", I'd suggest you stick with it.

Long silence.

TJALKADJARA

You're a persuasive fella.

MARTIN

Thank you.

TJALKADJARA

Like a drink?

MARTIN

Is that water?

TJALKADJARA

It's more of a holy drink. It'll destroy your consciousness for a tick.

MARTIN

I can't. Not while I'm working. But thank you.

Tjalkadjara waves politely and takes a drink.

MARTIN

Do you have any other questions?

TJALKADJARA

I think you've explained everything.

Tjalkadjara draws a line in the sand and crosses it out.

TJALKADJARA

Thank you for your offer. The answer is no.

MARTIN

You can take some time, you know, there's no rush, you don't have to make up your mind right now.

TJALKADJARA

There is no mind out here. The answer is no.

A screech in the darkness. Pause.

MARTIN

Is it about the payment? You don't feel guilty about the government paying?

TJALKADJARA

No, I'm not worried about the bloody government.

MARTIN

I mean, they should pay. They were taking your children in the 1970s.

TJALKADJARA

I know. I was one of 'em.

MARTIN

I'm literally offering you something for nothing. I can't cut the price. Do you want more?

TJALKADJARA

Nothing's free.

MARTIN

This is. My company has no ulterior motives. This is a human rights issue. You'll be supplied with educational programming from around the world, dramatically increasing the standard of living in your community.

TJALKADJARA

That depends on your standards.

MARTIN

This isn't some kind of anti-technology issue, is it? You already have television service.

TJALKADJARA

You said it yourself. xVision is not just television.

More noises.

MARTIN

I'm really trying to understand this. You see that, right?

TJALKADJARA

I see you trying. I'm trying to help you. Because you're treading on dangerous territory, now.

Pause.

MARTIN

Does your refusal to buy have anything to do with that sign?

Tjalkadjara looks up at the sign behind him and muses.

TJALKADJARA

Why do you ask?

MARTIN

I've pitched this to two other villages. Both had signs like that.

TJALKADJARA

You guessed it, mate.

MARTIN

What does it mean?

TJALKADJARA

It is an abstraction.

MARTIN

Clearly. What does it mean to you? Why is it stopping you from buying?

TJALKADJARA

It's not stopping me. It's just a sign.

Another horrific noise. Martin leaps to his feet, agitated.

MARTIN

I'm lost. I'm fucking lost out here. Why is there so much noise? I don't see any animals.

TJALKADJARA

There's the two of us. We're animals.

MARTIN

Well I'm not making those noises. Are you? Are you?

TJALKADJARA

You're short a connection, fella. You're out on a string without a tether.

MARTIN

I have to fill out a report. What am I supposed to put under "Reason Customer Chose Not to Purchase"?

(points to sign)

That? Give me a reason.

TJALKADJARA

A reason? Because you're a Captain Cook.

MARTIN

I don't even know what that means.

TJALKADJARA

It means you're a foreigner bearing gifts I don't want. You and I have evoked mythic time here. This confrontation has happened before. And it does not end well.

More noises.

MARTIN

Look. I feel like I'm about to be eaten. By something that just skulks out of the darkness and snatches me up. Make me understand this.

TJALKADJARA

Our sacred pole cracked. It's the source of our connection to the dreaming. Old women and children were laying down in the sand to die. Demons carried strong men off in the night. So I went down to the howling caves looking for answers. The spirits pierced me through the back of my neck. They tore my organs out and replaced them with quartz crystal. When I came back the sign was waiting for me. And I still don't know exactly what it means. That's gonna take an endless and unsatisfying spiritual search. And our people must remain pure in that search. That is the nature of seeking the sacred. We must be wary of men selling conveniences that do our searching for us. It's not the material object, the television, that's the problem. It's the automated algorithm, the xVision method that is profane. That's not any way to discover the real world.

Silence. As Martin starts to argue more ferociously, the noises get louder and louder.

MARTIN

That? Is nonsense.

TJALKADJARA

You're the one selling telly in the desert, mate.

MARTIN

And your village will abide by this decision? Just because you're strong in the dreamtime?

TJALKADJARA

I'm not "strong" in the dreamtime. It's not the bloody Force!

MARTIN

You know what I think? I think you're afraid of a ridiculous street sign.

Martin runs to the sign and grabs the post, trying to pull it out of the ground.

The moon is blotted out. Loud, babbling voices in the darkness.

Martin releases the sign and the light returns.

MARTIN

OK! You're right, you win.

He sits and stares at the sign. Silence.

MARTIN

You said it was waiting for you. Where did it come from?

TJALKADJARA

Came in the mail.

MARTIN

In the MAIL? Was there a return address?

TJALKADJARA

Yeah, it was from the States. Gillette, I think that was the town, like the razor. There was a self-addressed stamped envelope. I had to pay them. I paid COD.

MARTIN

You paid them for the sign?

Tjalkadjara nods. Long pause.

MARTIN

Do you still have the package with the address on it?

TJALKADJARA

I think I might. You wanna see it?

Black.



ACT I. SCENE 2.

Lights up inside an old post office. A countertop with a cash register. A second counter behind a chain link cage. A fan twitters back and forth. The walls are full of signs; roadwork, construction, traffic, novelty and nonsense varieties. The most prominent sign, above the counter, reads SIGNS FROM GOD.

ASHER hovers over a work desk behind the mesh cage, entranced. His left hand plasters a stencil to a sign, his right slathers black paint with a brush. Above him, an empty shelf, built to hold drying signs.

OLD WENDT, large, 50s, sits in the corner, playing a handheld video game. The saddened beeping suggests that he is losing.

WENDT

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah nope. Damn it. Asher, I gotta get some new batteries, I'll be up stairs. Your high score's still safe by a long shot.

Wendt goes.

Martin enters. He wipes sweat from his brow; his shirt is soaked. He breathes in the cooler air, then approaches the counter and speaks to Asher.

MARTIN

Hi. I'm completely lost. I'm looking for Gillette. Is there a -

Asher slams a sign up on the shelf, without looking up. It is a familiar red octagon: STOP.

MARTIN

Uh.

Asher removes the first sign and slaps another up, a yellow diamond: CAUTION.

MARTIN

This is a post office, right?

Asher removes the CAUTION sign. He slaps a third sign up, a white rectangle: DON'T.

MARTIN

Don't? Don't what?

Slap. ASK.

Beat.

Slap. QUESTIONS.

MARTIN

What the hell is this?

Slap. Above QUESTIONS -

STUPID.

Slap. NEXT PLEASE.

Martin takes a step back. He now notices the cornucopia of signs.

MARTIN

Where did you get these signs? Where are these signs from?

Asher finally pauses in his work. He takes a deep breath.

Still without looking up, he pulls down all of the signs except DON'T and ASK.

MARTIN

Don't ask? Oh, I'm gonna ask.

Asher takes down ASK.

MARTIN

I will. I've got lots of questions. Where did you get these signs? What's your name? What is this place?

Slap. Next to DON'T -

YELL AT ME.

MARTIN

I'm not. Fine. OK, I won't yell. I just-

Slap. Also next to DON'T -

GET ANGRY.

MARTIN

I won't get angry.

Slap. Also next to DON'T -

TRACK DIRT ON THE FLOOR.

MARTIN

What? Listen, pal, what are these, the rules of the establishment? How many rules you got in here?

Slap. A huge laundry list of rules and regulations in tiny, illegible print.

MARTIN

Oh, very funny. Look at me! I'm trying to have a conversation with you.

Asher taps the rules sign.

MARTIN

I see your damn rules! You gonna talk to me?

Asher taps the rules.

MARTIN

If I read your sign, will you talk to me?

Asher taps the sign.

MARTIN

Jesus.

Martin starts to read the sign.

MARTIN

Party of the first part...what the hell is this? This might as well be in Russian!

Slap. A sign with Cyrillic letters.

MARTIN

Oh, ha ha. You got any signs in a language I can understand?

Slap. A yellow diamond with the illustration of a hand with the middle finger extended.

MARTIN

All right! I've had enough! Look at me! LOOK AT ME!

Martin starts knocking against the mesh, hard enough to topple some of the signs. Asher finally stares at him.

Short silence.

Asher sweeps the signs off the shelf, knocking them to the floor.

He slaps the sign that he has been working on against the mesh. It hangs on a hook.

Three lines of Hebraic characters, running slightly from the fresh paint.

Asher snarls. He scribbles on an order pad. When he finishes, he paces the length of the mesh, like a tiger in a cage, looking for a way out.

Martin stands frozen, staring at the Hebraic sign.

Wendt appears at the door. He looks warily from one man to the other.

WENDT

Hello help ya?

MARTIN

I was just. I don't. What's wrong with him?

WENDT

Well, you don't just walk in someplace and start yelling at people, son. They bound to get agitated. I heard that ruckus from all the way upstairs.

Wendt pulls a large key chain from his pocket and unlocks the door to the cage. He carefully opens it, sets the video game down on Asher's counter, and takes him by the shoulders. Asher remains very agitated, but Wendt guides him to the game, where he begins to play.

MARTIN

Well what's with those signs? Why won't he say anything?

WENDT

He don't talk much to people. His brain don't work like yours or mine. Being ahtistic, the way he is, the signs are the best way he can communicate.

MARTIN

Oh. Oh, wow, I'm sorry. Look I'm sorry if I flew off the handle. I've had a crazy couple of weeks. I've been driving in the heat and...I wouldn't have...I know what that's like, well I don't, but, there's this guy at work, he has Asperger's. I understand that dealing with that kind of condition requires a little, delicacy.

Asher is calm now, engrossed in the game. Wendt locks the cage again. He turns his attention to Martin.

WENDT

Sorry what? Your co-worker has some kinda problem with his ass?

MARTIN

No. Asperger's. Syndrome. You know, it's another kind of autism. Like your, um, employee. Has.

Beat. Wendt peers at Martin.

MARTIN

You said he was autistic?

Epiphany.

WENDT

No, no he ain't AWtistic. He's AHRtistic. He's a painter.

MARTIN

He's a painter...so he can't talk to people?

WENDT

We all have our talents and weaknesses. Sure, I could use some more help running the place, but a sign shop gotta have a sign maker.

MARTIN

THIS is the sign shop? It's not a post office?

WENDT

The building used to be a post office. The whole town went belly up almost, well, let's see. Number of years ago. Real estate was cheap, so I bought it out. There's already the truck route established, so it makes pick up and delivery easy. Technically, I'd say we're a shipping warehouse. Used to be a storefront, but now we do all our business through the mail.

MARTIN

And. Are you telling me. He's the one who paints the signs?

WENDT

Asher? Yeah. He's the sign maker. That may be why you looked ready to strangle him?

Beat.

MARTIN

Can we start over?

WENDT

Start over? Sure. Hit the reset button. Like the video game.

Wendt checks Asher once more, and notices the slip of yellow paper. Wendt picks it up and harrumphs. Asher waves his hands over his head and returns to his game.

MARTIN

OK.

WENDT

Hey, can I ask you something?

MARTIN

Only if I can ask you next.

WENDT

That's a fair deal. You answer my questions, and I'll answer yours.

MARTIN

I'll do my best.

WENDT

You ever played Frogger?

MARTIN

Frogger? I think. When I was, like, twelve years old.

WENDT

Thing's goddamn addictive, is what it is. Bottom half of the screen, you avoid traffic. The top is trickier. You're trying not to fall in the water, which don't make no sense to me, because you a goddamn frog. Right? Now there are lady frogs you can canoodle with. Turtles are safe to ride on. You can get on an alligator's back, but if you get close to his mouth, he eats you. Once you get across, you go right back to the bottom and you do it again. Now it's harder, because you ain't that frog no more. That frog is sitting pretty, taking up your spot. You got to find another. When you fill up the five spots, you go to the next level, which is exactly the same but faster. Maybe there are snakes, I dunno. Point is, you can never really win. I think maybe that's some kinda metaphor for life or something, but I sure cain't see what it is.

Pause.

MARTIN

So. Did you want to ask me a question about it?

WENDT

Nah, I guess not. It's just nice to have someone to talk to. For a sounding board, you know.

MARTIN

Then. Can I ask you some questions?

WENDT

Shoot.

MARTIN

Where am I?

WENDT

Oh, that's easy. You're right here. Ha.

MARTIN

Is this a town?

WENDT

Nope.

MARTIN

There's a post office with no town?

WENDT

It's not a post office. It's a sign shop.

MARTIN

Is there a town nearby?

WENDT

Not really.

MARTIN

Is there a gas station nearby?

WENDT

Well, let's put it this way. No.

Wendt is perpetually cheerful, never sarcastic or deliberately obstructive.

MARTIN

Look, I'm almost out of gas. I've got no phone reception, no internet. I've been driving for hours through amber waves of grain. I can't leave here without knowing I'm going to make it back to civilization. You said there was a truck route?

WENDT

Back about three miles. It's a hidden turn.

MARTIN

I didn't see it.

WENDT

Well. It's hidden.

MARTIN

Was there a sign?

WENDT

Asher, where's that truck route sign at?

Asher, without looking up from his game, slaps a TRUCK ROUTE sign on the shelf.

WENDT

Oh. I guess it's not out there. You could wait for my delivery guy, he'll be in Friday.

MARTIN

Friday? I'm not staying here for four days. Look, where do you go for gas?

WENDT

Oh, I don't drive no more.

MARTIN

How do you leave?

WENDT

Leave what? The shop? Why would I leave?

MARTIN

To go home.

WENDT

I live upstairs.

MARTIN

In a post office?

WENDT

It's not a post office. It's a sign shop.

MARTIN

How about...him?

WENDT

Asher? He lives here too.

MARTIN

You must leave sometimes.

WENDT

Not that I can recall.

MARTIN

Where does your food come from? Hydroponics?

WENDT

I go online. The internet delivers all my food.

MARTIN

The internet itself delivers your food?

WENDT

It's a great site.

MARTIN

Can I use your computer? Just give me your ZIP code and I'll find directions myself.

WENDT

There's no ZIP code.

MARTIN

The post office has no ZIP code?

WENDT

For the third time, son, it's not a post office.

WENDT AND MARTIN

- it's a sign shop.

MARTIN

(indicating the sign above the counter)

And you're called "Signs From God"?

WENDT

That's us.

MARTIN

Isn't that a little pretentious?

Wendt considers the question seriously for a moment.

WENDT

No.

Pause.

MARTIN

You have a ZIP code. I know for a fact you receive mail at a post office box.

WENDT

In Gillette. The driver brings the mail. But this town's gone, son. It's not incorporated any more.

MARTIN

What did it USED to be called?

WENDT

You know, it's funny. I can't really remember.

Martin controls his facial expression as best he can.

MARTIN

You know what? I'll wait for the driver.

WENDT

That's fine. Until Friday?

MARTIN

Until Friday. Because, you know, it took so long to get through that conversation without any success, I can't imagine how long my other questions are going to take to answer.

WENDT

Well, don't you worry. We'll set up a cot, we'll make you comfortable, we'll put your mind at ease.

MARTIN

You're doing a great job so far.

WENDT

You need anything to eat or drink? You look like something ate you for breakfast.

MARTIN

Oh, don't worry, I won't take your internet rations.

WENDT

We do sell snacks. People do come down the road from time to time. Never got one who was stuck here.

MARTIN

But you sell food?

WENDT

Chips and sodas.

MARTIN

Whatcha got.

WENDT

Chips. Soda.

MARTIN

I'll take a can of barbecue Pringles and a grape Sunkist.

Asher immediately slaps exactly those items on the counter. Wendt picks the food up and places it in front of Martin, who stares for a moment.

MARTIN

How much?

WENDT

Should I ring it all up?

Go ahead.

MARTIN

Slowly, methodically, Wendt rings the order up on his cash register.

WENDT

That'll be eighty-one sixty four.

Silence.

MARTIN

I think your math may be off.

Wendt frowns, looks at the register, then back.

WENDT

Nope, looks right to me.

MARTIN

How much could you possibly be charging for these items?

WENDT

The soda's a dollar. The Pringles are two-fifty. The sign is seventy-five dollars. Four percent state sales tax. Comes to eighty-one sixty four.

MARTIN

What sign?

WENDT

Your sign. That one. You said ring it all up.

He points to the sign with the Hebraic text that Asher made.

MARTIN

My sign? That's not my sign! I didn't ask for any sign!

WENDT

Of course you didn't ask for it. It wouldn't be much of a sign if you did.

MARTIN

It's like I've fallen into a parallel dimension. I can't even understand it! It's in Hebrew!

WENDT

You know it's Hebrew. That's something.

Martin begins to pace the length of the room, becoming more and more unhinged.

MARTIN

This is a joke. You people are having a big joke on me. Well I will not be made a fool of.

WENDT

Hold on, there, son.

MARTIN

I'm not your son! Don't "son" me.

WENDT

OK, OK.

MARTIN

The idea that coming here would get me any answers-

WENDT

You didn't even ask your question yet.

MARTIN

Of course not! Of course I haven't asked my question yet! You people derail me at every turn! I'm talking about gasoline and Frogger and grape Pringles and I can't even think in this place!

WENDT

Just slow down, take a breath, and ask your question.

MARTIN

Here's my question!

Martin points a damning finger at Asher.

MARTIN

Who does he think he is, sending unsolicited signs to people?

WENDT

Look, just a minute. Was this in reference to a sign you received?

MARTIN

Not me. I never got any sign.

WENDT

Well then you're asking after signs that aren't yours. So that ain't none of your business.

MARTIN

Oho! My business! They are, without question, my business! Do you know what my business is?

WENDT

You sell satellite TV to Australian aborigines.

MARTIN

(without missing a beat)

How the FUCK did you know that?

WENDT

Asher wrote it on this piece of paper.

MARTIN

Well tell ASHER that it IS my business, because my business has been severely impacted by these signs of his. I can't sell anything to these people now!

WENDT

I don't see how you can sell satellite TV in the desert at all.

MARTIN

Well, he made it harder.

(Beat.)

I want to know how many signs he made, how many have been sent to what tribes, and I want him to stop sending any more. Otherwise, you will have a lawsuit on your hands the likes of which have buried small countries.

WENDT

Son.

MARTIN

My name is Martin. You can call me sir.

WENDT

Martin. May I ask you a question?

MARTIN

Shoot.

WENDT

How in the hell are you gonna sue us, when you haven't got a clue where you are or a tank of gas to get you back to your lawyers?

MARTIN

I'll walk.

WENDT

Oh, come on, Martin. Now I don't know shoes too well, but I can see from here those two have seen better days. They ain't gonna last five miles. They'll fall right apart, and your feet'll be next.

MARTIN

If they lasted through the Queen Victoria desert, they'll last me a few more miles. I'm not staying here. It's clear to me that I'm not being taken seriously. Let's see who's laughing in court.

WENDT

Martin, stop!

MARTIN

Too late, damage done. Unless you want to send out some kind of. I don't know. Retraction signs.

WENDT

Retraction signs?

MARTIN

Why not? Tell the people who already have them that the first one's a mistake.

Asher, still playing the video game, slaps a new sign up:
NO REFUNDS.

MARTIN

Then eat the loss!

Slap. NO RETRACTIONS.

MARTIN

I'm sick of you!

WENDT

Martin, he don't know no better!

MARTIN

Go on. Start painting those retractions. Or learn how to paint license plates.

ASHER

No retractions.

MARTIN

Oh, you can talk now?

ASHER

No retractions!

MARTIN

If you can speak, I suggest you start with "sorry", my friend. You don't pull this shit with xVision International.

Asher leaps at the cage, murderous, screaming for Martin's blood:

ASHER

NO RETRACTIONS! NO RETRACTIONS!

WENDT

HEY!

Asher cringes as if a struck dog. Silence.

WENDT

Git in your box.

Asher moves to the back of the cage and crawls inside a large cardboard box. He shuts himself in. Wendt turns to Martin.

WENDT

Siddown, Martin.

Martin does as he is told. He falls into the seat, shaking.

MARTIN

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Jesus, what the hell is wrong with me?

WENDT

You're exhausted. You're overheated, and you're confused. Here.

Wendt goes to the mesh, opens a tiny cage door. He withdraws the soda and the sign and hands them to Martin.

WENDT

The soda's on the house. You hang onto that sign for right now. That's yours.

MARTIN

What does it mean? "*Limacor et ha'beli efsh'ri*". I can't even say it right. It has no vowels, so I'm probably butchering it.

WENDT

Thought you said you couldn't read Hebrew.

MARTIN

I can read it, I had eight years of Hebrew school when I was a kid. You have to enunciate the prayers correctly at your bar mitzvah while your parents' video cameras are rolling. But I don't know what the words mean.

WENDT

You telling me they taught you to read a language, but without any, uh, what, comprehension? No comprende?

MARTIN

Exactly. I understand more Spanish than Hebrew. So, why don't you take your seventy-five dollar sign and shove it.

WENDT

Well, the price is negotiable.

MARTIN

Negotiable. You know you're crazy, right?

Beat.

WENDT

I want you to make a mental picture for a minute. Can you see this in your mind? Here's a courtroom. Judge, lawyers, big shot guys in expensive suits. You're on one side. Asher's on the other. Prosecutor gets up there. Says, Your Honor? xVision International intends to show that this man here, who cain't hardly string together a four-word sentence, has defrauded us of our hard-earned business. How'd he do this? Well he sent these signs, with these abstract symbols all over 'em, to shamans in Australia. And maybe you'll put the shaman on the stand, with his didgeridoo, and whatall. And this shaman says, yessir, judge sir, this sign told me to not buy satellite television service to the middle of the desert. Howdy a think that's gonna go down in a court of law? Now who sounds crazy?

Beat.

MARTIN

I don't think that's going to happen at all.

WENDT

I don't think so, either.

MARTIN

You misunderstand me. I didn't say we're going to bring a case like that against you.

WENDT

Sure sounded like it.

MARTIN

No. When I leave here, I have to go back to my office. And they're going to want to know why I've cut my Australian trip short. A trip I fought to be the point man on. And when they find out that you're responsible, they will take you down. Not by saying, you're costing us business. They'll just turn a spotlight on you, and let the world do its work.

WENDT

How's that?

MARTIN

Come on, man. What do you expect me to believe about this place? You've got some kind of sweet scam going on here, any publicity can only be bad for you.

WENDT

What do you think is going on here?

MARTIN

What, that guy you have in the box back there is, what? What, exactly?

WENDT

He talks to God.

Beat.

MARTIN

So, what's your business?

WENDT

Well. Asher paints what God tells him to, and God tells him the recipient and their shipping address. Cost is seventy five dollars suggested, but sometimes people pay less, sometimes they pay more. It's up to the customer what the sign is worth to them.

MARTIN

But everybody pays? Always?

WENDT

To the best of my recollection.

MARTIN

Ever get any returns?

WENDT

Never.

MARTIN

Any complaints? Questions? Asking God for further instructions?

WENDT

Nope.

Silence.

MARTIN

You know what else I remember from Hebrew school? Besides Hebrew? I remember this story of how the King, some king, gave this feast. And in the middle of it this hand appeared in mid-air, and started writing-

WENDT

Right! The writing on the wall. Book of Daniel.

MARTIN

Sure. And I can remember the Hebrew words it wrote - “MENE”, “TEKEL”, “UPHARSIN”. Now that king understood Hebrew, he knew what the words meant. But he still didn’t know what the SIGN meant.

WENDT

He needed an interpreter.

MARTIN

And, what do you know, one presented himself. I guess it’s just economics. Because the interesting thing about signs from God is that they’re open to interpretation. There’s so many layers of meaning. You might almost say you could make them mean whatever you want. Which would, ultimately, make them meaningless.

Pause.

WENDT

Now you’re not taking me seriously.

MARTIN

All right, I’m sorry. So you sell God. Effectively, when Asher paints, God Himself is painting. You employ God.

WENDT

That’s a bit of a stretch, but I guess I see your point.

MARTIN

You keep God in a box in the back of your store.

WENDT

Well.

MARTIN

The Wyoming Department of Labor might have some questions about that.

WENDT

(to Asher)

Asher? You can come out if you're ready.

(to Martin)

I don't expect you to understand this, but that box is his personal space. He needs it to get a hold of himself.

Asher slinks out of the box and returns to work, shoulders hunched, cowed. He starts packaging a new sign - slip, address label, cardboard box.

MARTIN

He's also behind a mesh fence. You've got him in a cage.

WENDT

He wanders off. Found him out in the corn fields twice, confused and cut up. It's safer for him back there. Don't get the wrong idea. He's plenty happy.

MARTIN

I don't have any idea. I don't pretend to understand any of this. When I walk out that door, it's out of my hands.

WENDT

So you don't even care what goes on back there. I'm doing everyone a favor by keeping him locked up. He don't have an on/off switch. If I just let him go - there's no telling what he'd do. Probably start painting signs on everything in here.

MARTIN

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if God is talking to him or not. It doesn't matter if this shop even really exists. It might as well be in my imagination.

Beat. Wendt laughs.

WENDT

Did you really walk through the desert in those shoes?

MARTIN

Yes.

WENDT

You must be one stubborn son of a bitch. Those shoes is made of, what, leather, fake leather?

MARTIN

They're not fake, they're Guccis.

WENDT

Yeah, but everyone knows those are made by slave labor in China.

MARTIN

So?

WENDT

It just struck me, what you said about this all being in your imagination. You plain don't care about reality of the things around you. Like your shoes that you ruined in the desert.

MARTIN

OK, I'm sorry I ruined my shoes, Mom. And from now on I'll feel deep shame when I wear clothing made by slave labor.

WENDT

I'm sure you will. That's all you want: the shoes and the shame. Nothing in between. You want shoes for walking, and shame for self-respect. But that's got nothing to do with a shoe. You think the whole universe is inside you, but that shoe is its own thing. If you knew what that shoe was-

Asher begin to speak over him. Asher never looks up from his work; Wendt never looks away from Martin.

ASHER

a cow cut and skinned by an immigrant butcher the farmer gave him his last sickly animal in exchange for his daughter's hand in marriage stop the scandal of premarital sex in the village hide tanned rubbed with fat by an eighty-one year old blind woman caressed by hardened callouses shape strip and scrap the remainder packaged shipped to factory sewn by a teenage mother daughter home and starving crying milk and medicine she stitches wishing it was her boyfriend's head she shoves under the industrial machine leather like his pocked face grinning always grinning when he's drunk even when he puts her to the floor and tumbles down on top.

Pause.

WENDT

Then into a pile, shined, laced, shipped, stacked up on a shelf and sold to you for your hundred and some odd American dollars. If you knew the life of that shoe, really understood it, every morning when you slipped it on, you'd weep for that shoe, my friend. You'd weep for the world.

Long pause.

A low snarl from the corners of the room. The light dips slightly, and a pool of red light, where the shaman's fire stood in the previous scene, appears and vanishes. No one seems to notice, but Martin becomes very agitated.

MARTIN

No one could live like that. Thinking about everything all the time.

WENDT

Not the way you call it living.

MARTIN

So, what? I should just fall down in despair because shoes are made by people in horrible conditions?

WENDT

I didn't say "shoes". I said that shoe. Asher's telling you the story of that shoe on your foot. You take everything and make it bigger, general, plural. I'm talking about the full wonder of the World Almighty.

MARTIN

He doesn't know anything about my shoe. That's not possible.

WENDT

I guess you got it all figured out then.

Asher continues to work on his sign, but his voice is suddenly powerful, lecturing, and slightly Romanic:

ASHER

MENE: God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it;

TEKEL: you are weighed on the scales and found wanting;

UPHARSIN: your kingdom will be divided and given to the enemy.

MARTIN

Who is he?

ASHER

Alef, bet, gimel, delet, he, Martin! Pay attention!

Martin stands, swaying on his feet. The lights dip again, the animal noises get louder. The shop is turning into Australia.

MARTIN

Stop it.

WENDT

Easy, Martin.

ASHER

I teach you *alef, bet*, you remember nothing? Nothing but *shin, hei, gimel, nun, shin, hei, gimel, nun*.

MARTIN

WHO ARE YOU?

ASHER

(a child's voice)

I'm not a joke! I'm not a joke!

MARTIN

Get out of my head, you freak of nature!

WENDT

Martin, Martin, it's OK! Asher knock it off!

ASHER

Limacor et ha'belti efsh'ri! Limacor et ha'belti efsh'ri! Limacor et ha'belti efsh'ri!

MARTIN

(over Asher)

Stop it stop it stop it! You tell me what it means! Go ahead! Say it! WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Martin slams the sign against Asher's mesh. Asher finally looks at him.

ASHER

"Sell the impossible".

Martin gasps, as if hit in the chest. At the same instant, the lights come back up, the animal noises stop. Martin sits down, hard.

WENDT

It's OK. It's OK. Breathe.

Martin sits down, hard. Asher speaks quickly at first, winding down like a record, pulling the thoughts of Martin's opening monologue right out of his head:

ASHER

Two months no roads hot as hell out of gas searing heat strange spaces dreams are real waking world close stars blazing hot freezing cold walked miles burned away loose ends. What ties me to Earth at all? What keeps me here?

Pause.

MARTIN

To sell the impossible.

Asher and Martin stare into each other's eyes for a long time. Then Asher goes back to his work, packaging up a new sign. Silence.

Martin opens his wallet.

MARTIN

What did you say I owed you?

WENDT

Uh. Eighty-one sixty four, I think.

Martin slaps his credit card on the counter. Wendt scans it.

Long silence.

WENDT

Eat the chips. Get some salt in you. Good for the system.

MARTIN

I doubt it. I have high blood pressure.

WENDT

If that didn't make you go pop, a coupla Pringles won't kill you.

Silence.

MARTIN

Where did you find him?

WENDT

That was a bad night. I was still living down South, I'd been getting pretty friendly with Mr. Jack Daniels and I thought about ending it all. So I just got in my truck and I stepped on the gas. I just wanted something to hit me, hard enough to matter. Then I saw Asher. And he had this sign. It was the funniest thing I ever saw. It was one of them yellow caution signs, but the picture was a little truck falling off a cliff, like a cartoon. And I had to stop, and I just started laughing. I got out of the truck and went out to look at this stupid sign, and I saw that I had stopped four feet from the guard rail, and past that guard rail was a thirty foot drop, and then there was a trailer park. And I could see the lights on in the trailer I woulda landed right on top of, and I heard the TV on in there. I heard Dumbo, you know, the Disney movie? Pink elephants on parade. Some kid watching it, probably. Who knows how many people inside. And I fell to my knees and just laughed, and then I puked. Then he helped me home, or maybe I helped him, probably a little of both, and when we get in he finds some paint in my shed and starts painting sign after sign after sign.

Asher hands Wendt a new slip of paper and his new package. Wendt looks at it, almost double takes.

WENDT

What?

He looks at the package in his hand, then back at Asher, who doesn't meet his eye. When Wendt looks away, Asher stares steadily at Martin.

MARTIN

What's wrong?

WENDT

Nothing, I just. Nothing. So we started with local road signs and construction, but when the speciality signs started coming that sort of took over. Been doing em ever since. Eventually came up here, found the post office. So you got the answers to all your questions?

Wendt puts the box on the counter. Martin looks at it.
Pause.

MARTIN

You're doing this all wrong.

Martin plucks the box off the counter. Wendt grows slightly alarmed. Asher watches Martin and the box, interested but unconcerned.

WENDT

Uh, now, wait a minute. That's someone else's.

MARTIN

Just hear me out, old man. You have a prophet. And you're not making much profit.

(giggles)

You're selling God one box at a time. And telling people to pick their own price. You're completely missing the boat. I can revolutionize this industry.

Wendt holds out his hand, trying to indicate to Martin to hand back the box, almost grabbing for it.

WENDT

There's no industry. It's one shop.

MARTIN

Did God tell you to set up your business this way?

WENDT

I sort of figured it out myself. I mean, I got Asher, I think God would say something if He wanted to change things.

MARTIN

I think he just did.

(Pause, as it dawns on Wendt what Martin is saying.)

I spent the last six months of my life trying to do exactly what you're doing. Selling people the impossible. Television in the desert? xVision? What a joke. Forget xVision. *This* is the sale.

WENDT

Martin, look. You just had a life-changer. You gotta slow down. Why don't you just relax and wait for the driver to come. I'll get the cot down here. I'll put some fresh sheets on and you can spend a few nights. The driver will take you out to the highway or a gas station or wherever you need to be.

MARTIN

You need me. God wants me. God can't compete this way. His business model sucks.

WENDT

I think God's doing OK.

MARTIN

Oh, yeah, he's doing great in the Australian aborigine segment. But this is America, Jack, this is where the money is. God's not doing so well against TV, movies, McDonald's.

WENDT

Wait a minute. There's not a town in America without a church. Most everybody goes to church. Or you know, you people too. I mean. Y'all go to Jew church.

MARTIN

That's selling religion, not God. Religion's doing great. It's got so much brand loyalty we've got wars everywhere. But you're selling the actual voice of God. And you're doing it badly. When I'm done with you guys, people will be beating down your door for signs.

WENDT

This is not a print on demand service. The signs come when they come.

MARTIN

How many a week?

WENDT

Not many. We try for ten.

MARTIN

You're kidding me. Ten?

WENDT

I work him five business days, two signs a day is about his limit. So that's a rare item you've got there, and I'd appreciate you giving it back.

MARTIN

That's about a five hundred signs a year. At seventy five dollars per sign, that's, what, thirty seven thousand dollars a year revenue? Less expenses, you're probably below the poverty line.

WENDT

We're doing just fine. We got a roof over our head, and food on the table. That's plenty.

MARTIN

That's your opinion. What about Asher? What does he want?

Wendt hesitates, then looks back. Just before he looks back, Asher drops his eyes, engrossed in his work.

MARTIN

What do you want, Asher?

Silence. Wendt turns back to Martin, and Asher immediately looks up to watch them.

WENDT

Aw, this is just, stupid, Martin. You don't know Asher. He don't know what he wants.

MARTIN

But you do?

WENDT

I've taken care of him for years, now. I'm all the family he's got, and believe you me, he needs one. He'd be dead in a day without me. When I found him-

MARTIN

You didn't find him! He found you. You're the one who'd be dead. You and those people in the trailer. Asher doesn't need you. What's your function in all this?

WENDT

Careful.

MARTIN

Nothing! Nothing! You have no place in this! You're management! What does he need you for? To load this box on a truck so Mister -
(he checks the name on the box)

Ruth - what?

Dead stop. Wendt sighs.

MARTIN

This is for my wife.

WENDT

Yeah.

Martin bursts out laughing.

MARTIN

That's hilarious.

WENDT

Is it?

MARTIN

My wife. I thought she freaked out when I went to Australia. She'll drop dead if God sends her a sign.

WENDT

Why's that?

MARTIN

She. She was raised a strict Methodist. Her mother is a Methodist pastor. Don't even ask about our wedding. Now she thinks she's some kind of Buddhist. She's constantly on my back to go to Shabbat. She's always talking about her "spiritual journey". I've never met a woman with fingers in more religious pies. If there was such a thing as religion of the month club, she'd be a charter member. So if God himself has something to say to her, it's gotta be pretty funny.

Martin takes out his credit card again.

WENDT

What's this about, now?

MARTIN

I'll pay for her sign. Seventy five dollars again? Might as well. Hey, make it an even hundred.

WENDT

That's very kind of you, to speed the process. Still, I think she should receive it before - what the hell you doing?

Martin is reaching to open the box.

MARTIN

I'm buying the sign.

WENDT

You can pay for it. You can't buy it. You can pay for it and I'll send it home to your wife. Doesn't mean you can open it.

MARTIN

Until I hear it from ASHER, I don't want to hear of your rules anymore. Those are your rules. Not God's. God doesn't talk to you. So I want to see it. Run the card.

Martin rips open the box. He sticks his hand inside.

Before he can pull it out, Wendt reaches beneath the counter and pulls a double-barrelled shotgun.

Silence.

WENDT

Not my rules. It's a federal offense to open someone else's mail. That's part of the postal code.

MARTIN

But it's not a post office it's a sign shop.

WENDT

Martin.

MARTIN

You're not gonna shoot me over a stupid sign.

WENDT

No I'm not. It's not gonna come to that. Now hand me the package.

Beat. Martin holds the package up to Wendt, hand still inside the box. Wendt relaxes the gun and grabs the box. When he pulls back from Martin, Martin pulls the sign out, leaving Wendt with the empty box.

The sign is a standard One Way sign, but the inside of the arrow reads: "LEAVE."

WENDT

Ah, goddammit, Martin. Whydja go and do that?

MARTIN

What the hell is this?

WENDT

You were not supposed to see that.

MARTIN

What does this mean? Are you telling my wife to leave me?

WENDT

Martin, look at that sign. Does it say "Leave your husband?"

MARTIN

It says leave.

WENDT

You're the one who leapt to the conclusion that it meant you. Now I'm no shrink, but maybe that's something you want to explore on your own time.

MARTIN

What else could it mean?

WENDT

Maybe she's having an affair.

MARTIN

What?

WENDT

Maybe she's having an affair and the sign is telling her to leave her lover. Maybe she's thinking about leaving her job. Maybe there's a gas leak in the house. Or maybe it is about you. Maybe you're having an affair.

MARTIN

Me?

WENDT

Why not? I mean, I don't know you, Martin. I don't know anything about you, except a couple of things written on this paper. That, and you seem an arrogant sort, coming into my place telling me what to do with my business. Maybe you're a jerk screwing his secretary and your wife should leave you.

MARTIN

You listen to me. I am not cheating on my wife. But I'm not gonna say my marriage is in perfect shape. This is gonna tip the scales the wrong way.

WENDT

It is not fair to take someone's else sign away from them.

MARTIN

This sign isn't fair to me! What gives you the right to ruin my life? Because you were lucky enough to find some guy who talked to God and lock him up? You think God gave you the job to tell my customers to screw off and my wife to leave me?

WENDT

HELL YES! If God wanted me dead, I was dead. He put Asher where he was to save me. And I done right by him for more long years than I can remember. And he's my responsibility. That means I decide what's best for him. And I just decided what's best for him is for you to turn around, open that door, and start walking.

MARTIN

I'm not leaving.

WENDT

You'd better!

Wendt brandishes the gun. Silence. Wendt smiles.

WENDT

Look. We all got a little animated here. Maybe you're right. Maybe you really are here for some reason. We can talk about that. I'll get the cot. Set you up in the room here. Let's sleep on it. And tomorrow, we'll talk this over. What do you say?

As Wendt finishes, Asher slaps a sign on the shelf. As usual, Wendt does not bother to look.

The sign reads HE'S LYING.

Asher stares right at Martin. Martin keeps an admirable poker face.

WENDT

Well?

MARTIN

You really want to talk about. A new way to run your business?

WENDT

I got a little carried away, there. Really, I'm an open-minded guy. Talking don't hurt anything, right?

Asher slaps up a second sign: HE'LL KILL YOU.

MARTIN

I um. I guess we could sleep on it.

WENDT

Sure we could. It's getting late now. Not so hot anymore. Almost cool, in't it?

MARTIN

Almost.

WENDT

You need a change of clothes?

MARTIN

I got some with me.

WENDT

OK. Now. May I have my sign back?

Martin looks down at the sign: LEAVE. Then at Asher.

WENDT

What?

MARTIN

No, it's just. I thought I might have figured it out. Leave.

WENDT

Don't think about it too much, Martin. It wasn't meant for you.

MARTIN

Right. Here you go.

WENDT

Thank you.

Wendt reaches for the sign, gun still outstretched. As he takes hold of the sign, Martin grabs hold of the gun. They struggle. Asher begins to panic, letting out stressed cries.

They break free - Martin with the gun, Wendt with the sign.

Martin, holding the gun squarely at a breathless Wendt, motions for Wendt to hand over the sign. Defeated, Wendt hands it over to Martin.

ASHER

Martin.

Startled, Martin turns to Asher. Seeing Martin's guard down, Wendt lunges at Martin violently.

Martin spins around and cracks Wendt over the head with sign - twice.

Wendt slumps to the floor.

Martin lets out a shocked cry. Asher begins shouting in hysterics.

MARTIN

Shut up shut up SHUT UP!

Martin grabs the keys from Wendt's belt. He fumbles through them, then holds them out to Asher.

MARTIN

Which one? WHICH ONE?

Asher licks his lips, flicks each key with his fingers, then chooses.

Martin unlocks the cage. Asher leaps on him, hugging him like a frightened monkey.

MARTIN

It's OK. It's OK. I'm gonna get you out of here. It was a signal, wasn't it? I got it. Leave. Let's leave.

Asher seems confused.

ASHER

Wendt! Wendt!

MARTIN

Went where? Leave. We're going to leave.

ASHER

Wendt!

MARTIN

Wait, Wendt? Is that him? He's Wendt? He's OK. He's-

Wendt groans. Asher and Martin both retreat in terror.

MARTIN

We have to go Asher we have to go now. If you want to leave here, we have to go!
COME ON!

Asher shakes his head repeatedly.

Martin thinks. He leaps back to the cage and grabs the handheld Frogger game.

MARTIN

Look. Frogger! Frogger!

He sticks it in Asher's hand. Asher starts playing, calms himself.

ASHER

Frog. Frog. Frog.

Wendt groans again.

MARTIN

OK we have to go now. Asher, come on. What are you doing?

ASHER

Frog.

With his free hand, Asher searches the pile of signs by the wall. He comes up with one:

GILLETTE 15

He holds it up and turns slightly, like a weathervane. He stands still. Martin is transfixed.

His reverie is broken by a choked cry from Wendt.

MARTIN

OK move move move.

They run.

Black. Music.

ACT I. SCENE 3.

Music. Lights up. The idea of a living room: coffee table on a rug, couch, a comfortable chair, two end tables.

Asher enters, surveys the space, and exits.

He returns with boards and nails. He flips the coffee table on its side. He hammers in two boards and a crossbar, forming a crude frame. He exits again.

He returns with the contents of an entire refrigerator, pantry, and bathroom: milk, coffee, toothpaste, Jell-o, cake icing. He also carries a supply of kitchen utensils.

He mixes the items with a whisk and knife. He applies the resulting mess to the front of the coffee table with a knife and basting brush.

He creates a circular abstract design of stunning color. On the top crossbar, he paints: LEMONADE.

He dumps several lemons in a pitcher, stabs them repeatedly with a serving fork, and then pours a Brita filter full of water into the resulting mess.

RUTH enters and screams. The music stops.

Asher screams back at her.

RUTH

Who are you? What are you doing to my coffee table?

Asher only continues to bray pleadingly, holding his hands out in self-defense.

RUTH

Get out of my house! I'll call the police!

Ruth picks up the whisk and begins hitting Asher with it. He continues to yelp. Ruth pulls out a cell phone and dials, holding the whisk threateningly.

RUTH

I'm an excellent cook and I know how to use this! So don't move! Or leave! Either don't move, or leave! Your choice! Hello? Mom? There's a man in the house! I don't know I don't know! Please come help!

ASHER

Please come help!

RUTH

Shut up! Mom, just come quick, please! OK, I will!

She hangs up.

RUTH

OK, that wasn't the police. That was my mother. But she's even worse. Believe me. And she's right down the block.

MARTIN (OFF)

Ruthie?

RUTH

Martin? Martin!

MARTIN (OFF)

Hang on, I'm coming!

RUTH

Martin, there's a man in the house and he's, he's, what are you doing?

Martin runs into the room, carrying two suitcases.

MARTIN

Hi, hi, I'm back, I'm sorry I didn't call and warn you. I brought somebody.

RUTH

You brought him here?

MARTIN

I did, yes. He's a friend of mine. I need you to be a little patient with him, because he's gone through a very traumatic...what the hell did you do to my house, Asher?

Asher again begins to bray.

MARTIN

I told you not to touch anything! What, should I have drawn you a sign?

RUTH

He's ruined the coffee table and the carpet!

MARTIN

All right all right all right. It's fine we'll figure this out we'll clean it. Asher can you. Please. Just get out of here for a minute.

Asher gets up and begins to carry his lemonade stand out of the house.

MARTIN

No no no, just leave that, OK, you know what, fine, go ahead, take it with you.

RUTH

Martin!

MARTIN

Just, he's fine, just let him go, he's not going to hurt anything. I mean, anything else. I'll buy another coffee table, I just. I need to talk to you. Asher, go.

Asher leaves them alone. Ruth sits crosslegged on the floor and begins to breathe deeply.

MARTIN

Now, look, I'll explain. I - oh, not now, Ruth.

RUTH

I need to regain my center.

MARTIN

Your center is fine, you've got a fine center.

A short silence.

RUTH

Why did you bring that man into my house?

MARTIN

It's a very long story. I cut my Australia trip early. You were right, it was a terrible idea. I couldn't sell anything.

RUTH

Good. It would have corrupted their culture. That was a terrible thing your company tried to do.

MARTIN

Well, you'll be pleased, then. Because I'm going to quit.

RUTH

Quit? Wait, quit? I didn't say quit!

MARTIN

Listen. This man's name is Asher. He's special.

RUTH

You didn't quit, did you?

MARTIN

Listen to me. What I'm going to tell you is going to be hard to believe, but I'm not going to beat around the bush. Try to believe it, or at least accept it until you can prove otherwise. I think you, more than anyone, will be willing to hear me out.

RUTH

All right.

MARTIN

All right. Asher talks to God.

Pause.

RUTH

Martin.

MARTIN

He does things, says things, knows things. You'll see for yourself. I want him to stay with us. And I want you to help me. With some very spiritually fulfilling work.

RUTH

Help you do what?

MARTIN

We're going produce an Asher television show.

RUTH

What?

MARTIN

A reality show, where people can talk to God. There's a huge market just waiting for this kind of thing. There's a lot of details to be ironed out. But I want to do this. Together.

Beat. Ruth sighs.

RUTH

Martin. Honey. You're obviously tired.

MARTIN

I'm not. I'm on fire awake.

RUTH

You're really stressed, and you've travelled a long way. I'll get you something that will help you relax.

Ruth digs into an end table drawer. She digs through a massive collection of religious paraphernalia and comes up with a small bottle of vitamins.

MARTIN

You don't believe me.

RUTH

I want to believe you, but you have to admit that what you're saying is very hard to swallow. Here, take these homeopathic tablets.

She tries to put the pills in Martin's hand; he takes her hands gently.

MARTIN

Babe, I need you to help. You're always looking for something; you were made to do this with me.

RUTH

That's ridiculous, Martin.

MARTIN

What's ridiculous about it?

RUTH

The whole thing. Not the least of which is, I don't know a thing about making television shows.

MARTIN

That's not why I need your help.

RUTH

What do you think I could possibly do for you?

MARTIN

This man is going to change the world. And people are going to try to take advantage of him. They've already tried. *I might try.* But you won't let that happen, Ruth. Once you see what Asher can do, I know you'll believe in him. And once you believe in him, you'll protect him. And you'll make sure no one ever mistreats him or misuses him as long as you're around.

Ruth tries to respond, but finds herself surprised into silence.

PEGGY, 60s, plain and proper dress, appears in the doorway. She views the room with a mix of disgust and disbelief.

PEGGY

I could tell you were home, Martin.

RUTH

Oh, Mom, it's crazy.

MARTIN

It's under control, Peg.

PEGGY

More like under attack. I saw the mob outside and I feared the worst.

RUTH

The what?

MARTIN

What mob?

PEGGY

All of those people. Haven't you looked out the window?

Martin and Ruth look out the window.

RUTH

Oh my God.

MARTIN

What the - is that Asher?

RUTH

What are they doing?

PEGGY

It's as if they're lined up for a show. Is that your coffee table, Ruth?

RUTH

What the h...eck is he doing, Martin?

MARTIN

It looks like he's selling lemonade.

RUTH

Can't you stop him?

MARTIN

Let me see what I can do.

PEGGY

Yes, I think you'd better.

Martin goes out.

PEGGY

Are you hurt?

RUTH

No, Mom, no, I just. I don't know what's going on.

PEGGY

Who is that man?

RUTH

Martin brought him home. He destroyed the coffee table. Where did all these people come from? He was out there for, like, five minutes.

PEGGY

Don't use "like", Ruth. And he couldn't have drawn that crowd in five minutes.

RUTH

They're all looking at the sign he painted. Is that -

PEGGY

What?

RUTH

He painted a symbol on the table, on the front of the stand. It looks like a mandala.

PEGGY

It looks like third grade in the asylum. I don't know what Martin has dragged in here, but I'd stop this, Ruth. He's been acting very strangely of late.

RUTH

Here he comes.

PEGGY

He's not bringing that maniac in here, is he?

RUTH

He says he knows him, he was being abused, or something, oh Mom, just give him a chance, don't leap down his throat.

PEGGY

I? I've said nothing. I'm an impartial observer.

Martin comes in, dragging Asher. He takes from Asher a pitcher, a glass, and a fistful of money.

MARTIN

Just stay here. Sit.

(to the women)

There's a hundred people down there, all clamoring for lemonade.

PEGGY

That seems unlikely.

MARTIN

It does, doesn't it, Peggy? There are three guys out there who look like expensive lawyers. There's kids and mothers, two mailmen, every age, color, creed, and demographic lined up to buy Asher's crappy lemonade.

PEGGY

Martin, please. Don't exaggerate and don't be crass.

MARTIN

You think I'm exaggerating? You know how much money he made? Five hundred dollars.

RUTH

No.

Martin hands the money to Peggy.

MARTIN

Count it.

PEGGY

He didn't sell five hundred dollars worth of lemonade. The pitcher's only half empty.

MARTIN

Asher, how much were you charging? There's no price marked on your sign.

Asher stares blankly.

MARTIN

Was it like what Wendt did? Pay what you want? Decide on your own price.

Asher snaps his fingers: *exactly*. Martin turns to the women, vindicated.

MARTIN

They paid him what they thought the lemonade was worth. And he made five hundred dollars.

RUTH

How is that possible?

MARTIN

It's not the lemonade. It's-

(Martin takes a sip of the lemonade)

It's not - well, actually, it is pretty good. But it's not five hundred dollars worth of good. It's the sign.

PEGGY

Hypnotic advertising?

MARTIN

This isn't the way the other signs worked. This is something new. Wendt was right. See what happens when we let you out of your box?

RUTH

What are you talking about, Martin?

MARTIN

They know he's special. They want to be near him. To understand the sign. You know what, Asher, you show em, go back out there, make some more money.

RUTH

No.

Beat, then Martin smiles.

MARTIN

OK. No more lemonade. But Ruth, this is what I'm talking about. Asher speaks to God.

PEGGY

What? Martin!

MARTIN

Just give him a chance. You'll see it, too. You want a journey? This guy's a roller coaster ride.

RUTH

Oh!

Ruth crosses to Asher. He has found something in the open drawer: five colorful sticks and a metal file in a hermetically sealed plastic bag.

RUTH

I'm sorry those are mine. I got them during the Dalai Lama's last visit to America.

MARTIN

You keep them in a bag in a drawer. You never use them.

RUTH

I will use them when I am ready.

MARTIN

You'll never be ready, Ruth. You want to see someone who's ready to use them? Give those things to Asher.

Pause. She offers the bag for Asher, hesitantly.

RUTH

Would you like to see these? Do you know what they are?

(She opens the bag for him.)

You scrape these. Bits of sand come off of them. You make a mandala with them. Like you painted on the sign.

ASHER

Mandala?

RUTH

Do you know what that is? That's Tibetan for "circle".

MARTIN

He barely speaks English, Ruth, he doesn't speak Tibetan.

ASHER

Om Mani Padme Hum! Sems Dkon mchog! Sems nang la Dkon mchog! Gcig kyang ngas gso brgyab brel ba sems!

Beat.

PEGGY

What does he do for an encore, Sanskrit?

RUTH

Here, Asher. Watch.

She scrapes a few grains onto the floor.

Asher gets it. He starts scraping quickly, painstakingly etching a new design. Martin beams at Ruth. Ruth winces, but watches.

Asher seems dissatisfied with the sticks, but he continues to work.

PEGGY

If this is bothering you, Ruth, don't let him do it. You don't have to get swept away by this lunacy.

MARTIN

Great, I'm a lunatic now. You gonna go home and flip through the yellow pages for a place with a rubber room, Peggy?

PEGGY

Don't be melodramatic, Martin. I'm sure we'll find quite a modern facility.

RUTH

Oh, it's spilling over, here. It's so fine.

MARTIN

Relax.

RUTH

You shouldn't breathe on that. It scatters the sand, it's getting on everything. Look, I have a - hold on.

Ruth leaves.

MARTIN

You're too uptight about this. Look at him go. He moves so fast. So accurately.

PEGGY

He's an artist of considerable skill. It doesn't give him the right to open a bag of sand on your floor.

MARTIN

It's funny, Peg. I remember you talking about how Jesus did all his writing in the sand. Isn't that right?

Ruth returns with a mouth-fitting mask.

RUTH

When we went to see Sarah's baby we bought these because I had a cough. Another thing that never gets used. Here.

(she shows Asher)

You put it over your face, so you don't breathe the sand away.

Asher's face lights up: he gets it. He puts it over his mouth and goes back to work. Two seconds later he sits up, tears the mask off, grimacing, rolling his tongue as if trying to get rid of a bad taste.

RUTH

Well. You don't have to use it. I was just trying to help.

Asher goes back to his work. Ruth collapses in the chair, miserable. Peggy stands with her.

RUTH

Martin. You said you want to put Asher on television. How do you expect to do that?

PEGGY

Oh, well, I can't wait to hear this proposal.

MARTIN

Actually, I'm glad you'll hear this, Peg. No offense, but I'm gonna put you out of a job.

PEGGY

Huh!

MARTIN

Whatever you're trying to do for your flock every Sunday - that's what Asher's going to do, without a middle man. We're going to give people a direct connection to God.

RUTH

How?

MARTIN

We hire a small crew with good cameras. It won't take much. Shoot a pilot show. People will call in to talk to Asher, and he'll paint them their own personal signs from God. Their own mandalas.

PEGGY

And how much do you expect that will cost?

MARTIN

To do it right? About a hundred thousand dollars.

RUTH

Oh, Martin!

PEGGY

And that will come from where? Your Australian exploits, I suppose?

MARTIN

We're going to take out a second mortgage.

RUTH

Oh God. What then?

MARTIN

We shop it around to the networks. Try to get it attached to something on a cable package. Discovery Channel. QVC, even.

RUTH

What if you can't sell the show?

MARTIN

We're not sunk. If a cable channel won't make room for us on their lineup, we'll buy carriage.

RUTH

We'll BUY A CARRIAGE?

MARTIN

Not *a* carriage. We pay the cable provider directly to carry our own network. Twenty four hours of Asher bringing the word of God to the people.

PEGGY

And how much will that cost?

MARTIN

It depends on the markets we go to, but I figure somewhere in the neighborhood of two to six million dollars.

Silence.

PEGGY

Martin. Are you hearing me? I'm going to say something now that I haven't said to you as much as I should have. You're a good man. You're a good husband, and provider to Ruth. One of your fine qualities is the ability to buckle down, and keep a head on your shoulders. You are about to lose that head. You have a hungry look in your eyes, a gambler's look. You've been sold a bill of goods by your own midlife crisis. You've been had.

MARTIN

You're not looking. You're not seeing what Asher does.

PEGGY

You've found a man who draws exotic signs. That's not a miracle. That's a Rorschach test.

MARTIN

Ruthie?

Beat.

RUTH

It's so much money, Martin.

MARTIN

You're really gonna make me do this alone?

RUTH

Make you...well, finally. Now you know what I live with, Martin. It is lonely to find God in strange places. It's scary to reject your upbringing, and embrace something that your family doesn't. It's hard. So you deal with it for once.

Beat.

MARTIN

I deserved that. All right. I'll be back.

Martin walks out.

RUTH

Martin?

PEGGY

Let him go. Let him get his head together.

RUTH

This is infuriating. I'm always looking for something like this, then it drops in my lap, why can't I believe it? I have crystals and crucifixes and Stars of David, Mom. The other day I gave money to a homeless man with a laptop computer. I want to believe in everything.

PEGGY

You've searched for a long time. Perhaps you've learned to recognize a fake.

RUTH

(points to Asher's work on the floor)

Look at that.

(plucks the cash out of Peggy's hand)

Look at this. Look at this man. Something is going on here, Mom. Something real. And my first reaction - my very first, gut reaction - was to deny it. Because Martin said it. What a strange, shallow, suspicious reaction. And that suspicion makes everything else - everything I accepted so easily - seem fake now. Corrupted and naive. This can't be real. It doesn't make any sense. Why would a good God let something bad happen to my coffee table? Tell me!

PEGGY

I can't answer that, Ruth. That sounds like a Buddhist question. Maybe you should ask them at your temple.

RUTH

Oh, you didn't!

PEGGY

What?

RUTH

You still can't resist any chance to tell me I don't fit anywhere, especially at my temple.

PEGGY

You don't fit, Ruth. Maybe you're seeing that now. If you like Buddhist philosophy, then read Robert Pirsig and live the good life. But Buddhism is a religion. It is part of a seven-thousand year old culture into which you were not born. You are a white, American, suburban Methodist.

RUTH

And Martin's a Jew. And that's that.

PEGGY

Where is this coming from?

RUTH

Martin found this man and he's CHANGED, Mom, can't you see that? He's found something that I couldn't find in all my searching. IT'S NOT FAIR.

PEGGY

It's not real, Ruth.

RUTH

It is real! It's real for him! He's a fanatic! He's a true believer! Why can't I do that?

Martin enters. He lugs an upright vacuum cleaner, plugged in offstage. He walks it up to Asher's creation and hands the vacuum to Ruth.

RUTH

What are you doing?

MARTIN

You say you don't believe in this. That's OK. Just vacuum it up.

PEGGY

Martin, now you're being cruel.

MARTIN

Asher won't mind. It's what he does. He'll make another. If you don't believe that it's sacred, then it's sand on the floor, vacuum it up. But if you think there's something to this, then let's do this together. Let's neither one of us be alone any more.

Ruth stares down at the sand. She sits down on the couch. She holds the vacuum in one hand, and lifts the other up into a meditative pose.

RUTH

I'm going to regain my center now.

PEGGY

Martin, why don't you-

RUTH

I'm REGAINING MY CENTER. PLEASE STOP INVITING NEGATIVE AND DIRTY THOUGHTS INTO THIS SPACE.

At that exact moment, Asher, who has been studying the vacuum bag, growing more and more excited, tears the back of it open, spilling a gallon of dirt onto the floor.

Ruth wails. Asher begins to trace his finger in the dust, a vast sign.

ASHER

Mandala!

RUTH

MY VACUUM CLEANER!

PEGGY

What is he doing HE'S DESTROYING THE HOUSE!

He is. He flips the couch on its side, creating a kind of long cavern. He stacks the end tables on top, and between them, sets the vacuum cleaner.

Asher unzips Martin's suitcase and pulls out Martin's clothes. He dresses the vacuum cleaner, making an odd statue. The whole edifice resembles a rudimentary temple.

RUTH

Stop stop stop!

PEGGY

Martin do something! This is insane! Martin! Ruth, stop shrieking and get your self under control.

RUTH

SHUT UP!

PEGGY

Excuse me?

RUTH

SHUT. UP. MOTHER.

MARTIN

Now we're getting somewhere!

PEGGY

Martin! Ruth!

RUTH

STOP TALKING. MY HOUSE IS DESTROYED. GOD HAS ABANDONED ME. You have Jesus! Martin has a crazy interior decorator! And how am I supposed to finance a religious television program when I don't believe in anything! What do I have? What do I do?

In the middle of this, Asher reaches over to the suitcase, opens it up, and pulls out the sign: LEAVE. He slaps it on the front of the temple.

Ruth screams and sucks in air, much like Martin's earlier epiphany, just as violent.

PEGGY

Ruth! Ruth are you all right! Breathe, darling.

MARTIN

Asher! Where did that come from?

PEGGY

What did you do to her? Get out! GET OUT!

Ruth, crying, tears away from her mother and crawls to Asher. She begs like a small girl.

RUTH

He's real. Oh, he's real. Please tell me. Please. Is Daddy. Is he in heaven? Please just tell me is Daddy in heaven?

Asher tries, in his silence, to answer. He shrugs, blows on his fingers, and raises his hands into the air, like releasing butterflies. Ruth smiles through her tears.

RUTH

Don't worry. You're safe now. I'm going to leave.

MARTIN

Leave who?

RUTH

Leave the temple. Leave the faith. I understand why those people came for the lemonade. I would pay anything to feel this certainty. It's like being split apart by lightning, split into two parts, and the solid, surefooted part of me remains, while the confused, doubting part withers away.

PEGGY

You're going to give up on Buddhism? And then what?

Ruth turns to Martin and beams.

RUTH

We're going to take out a mortgage!

Martin cheers. He sweeps Ruth into a kiss. They dance and wave Martin's clothes around like banners. Asher joins in.

PEGGY

Martin. Is there blood on that sign?

Martin puts a glass of lemonade in Peggy's hand. Asher throws himself around Peggy in a giant hug.

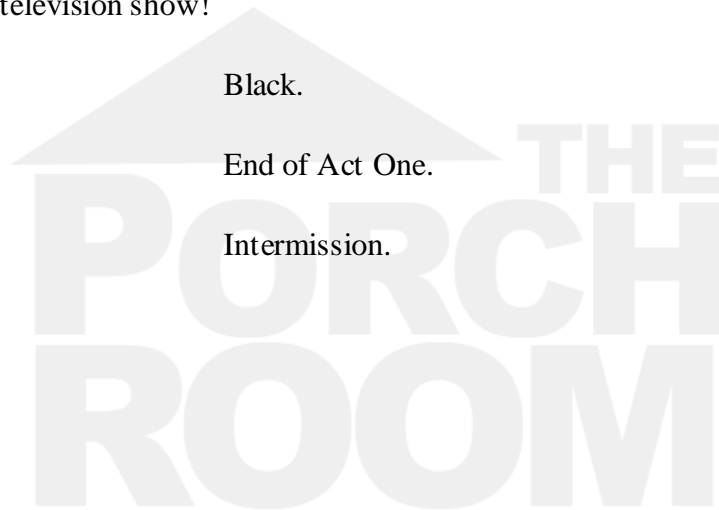
RUTH

Let's go make a television show!

Black.

End of Act One.

Intermission.



ACT II. SCENE 1.

In the darkness:

MARTIN

Can I have some lights up?

Nothing.

MARTIN

Lights? Please?

A spot on Martin.

MARTIN

More. You can light the set.

Lights up. A local television studio. A simple desk and unassuming chair set up, as if for a talk show. A backdrop hangs behind the desk - perhaps a city skyline, or the station logo. The odd plastic potted plant rounds out the set. There are three exits; two in the left/right rear, and one stage left which leads into the control booth. If we could see beyond the lip of the stage, this is where the TV cameras would be, and a window into the control booth.

MARTIN

A little more. A little more.

Lights out.

MARTIN

Um. Is there a problem?

GARY (OFF)

Blew a frigging fuse.

MARTIN

Uh. OK. Can we fix it? Hello?

Lights up.

MARTIN

Better. You know, when I talked to Arthur-

GARY (OFF)

Who?

MARTIN

Arthur. The station manager?

GARY (OFF)

I'm the station manager.

MARTIN

Well, who are you?

GARY (OFF)

Gary. You mean Art?

MARTIN

Art, Arthur, I suppose, yes. I told him how to arrange the space. Did he talk to you?

Silence.

MARTIN

Can you help me fix up the set?

Silence. Then, lights out.

MARTIN

Oh, Jesus Christ.

PEGGY (OFF)

Don't be profane, Martin.

MARTIN

Is there a problem with the lights? I'll be honest, it's making me a little nervous.

PEGGY (OFF)

I thought you were convinced that God had a hand in this.

MARTIN

Right now I need a lighting designer, not God. Maybe if God showed up with some duct tape, I'd feel better.

Lights up. A large man stands next to Martin holding a roll of duct tape.

MARTIN

Ah!

GARY

You want to change the set?

MARTIN

You're Gary?

GARY

Yup.

GARY is mid-40s, dress shirt, untucked over his jeans, necktie loose around his collar. He has a set of studio headphones with a mic around his neck.

Peggy enters.

MARTIN

How much time before we go live?

PEGGY

Less than ten minutes.

Gary indicates the "cameras" stationed in the audience.

GARY

Look, sorry if there was confusion. I had my hands full all day integrating your crew and cameras with our system. Why didn't just use the studio cameras?

MARTIN

We're going to try to sell the show to Discovery, they want high definition. Your cameras, sorry, weren't good enough.

GARY

Then why not rent a nice studio? Why shoot in this dump?

MARTIN

We needed a built-in audience who could phone in. You'll put the number at the bottom of the screen, right?

GARY

I don't know. You talk to somebody about that?

Martin starts moving the set pieces. Gary follows his lead.

MARTIN

Forget it. What I really wanted was the same set as the guy who does the painting show.

GARY

Paint Dreaming with Dave? We haven't taped an episode of that in ten years. Last I heard, Dave was in Mexico. Sniffed a little too much paint fume if you know what I mean. We don't show artists anymore. They're too spacey.

Asher suddenly bounds in through one rear door, and out the other. As he goes:

ASHER

Frog? Frog? Frog? Frog?

Gary and Martin watch him go.

GARY

Who was that?

PEGGY

The artist.

Ruth now runs in, carrying a suit on a hanger, and a sign in the other.

RUTH

Asher! Martin, did he-

Martin points after Asher.

RUTH

Do you have his video game?

MARTIN

I thought it was in the car.

Peggy withdraws the handheld Frogger game from her purse and hands it to Ruth.

RUTH

Thank you, Mom. He's very nervous. He needs it. It's OK, everything's going to be great! Hi, I'm Ruth!

GARY

Hi Ruth. Is that our ON AIR sign?

RUTH

Yes! Look what Asher did. Isn't it inspiring?

She shows off the sign. It once was a usable ON AIR placard, but now it appears to have been splattered with chocolate sauce. Beat.

MARTIN

It's great.

RUTH

(gazing at the sign)

It fills me with such hope.

(a revelation)

He needs a tie!

She hands the sign to Gary and runs off. Gary eyes the ruined sign.

GARY

Just so you know, your security deposit is non-refundable.

MARTIN

Just start a tab. Can we get an easel?

GARY

The stuff from Dave's show is probably still in the prop closet.

He pulls a key ring from his pocket. Peggy takes it.

PEGGY

I'll see what I can find.

MARTIN

Thanks, Peg. I know you don't want to have to deal with any of this.

PEGGY

Martin, do you really think you're doing this for God? Or are you doing it for yourself?

MARTIN

It all amounts to the same thing.

Peggy goes.

GARY

Ever produce a show before?

MARTIN

No.

GARY

Hectic, huh? Last minute issues, it's always a rush job.

MARTIN

I thought this would go so smoothly. I thought it was meant to be. I could really use some kind of...sign...that I'm on the right track. That I'm supposed to be here.

GARY

I don't suppose you'd want to use the kitchen set instead? I've got a kitchen set down the hall for Gourmet Gary. That's my show.

MARTIN

I don't think that's the right track. You're a chef?

GARY

I used to be a chemist.

MARTIN

Really?

GARY

Yeah, I used to come home to microwave dinners every night. I kept promising myself I'd learn to cook a decent meal. I only started when this poster of a sugar molecule came for me in the mail. That was weird. It came COD, but I certainly didn't order it.

Martin shoots a startled look at Gary as Ruth wanders on with a pair of ties. She is holding them to the light, as if looking for hidden messages in them.

RUTH

Martin, which tie do you think is more profound - the paisley, or Snoopy and Woodstock?

MARTIN

Send Asher out here. Right now.

RUTH

He's not dressed yet.

MARTIN

Get him dressed and get him out here. Now!

Ruth runs. Martin motions to one of his "cameramen" - two fingers, then points at himself, and Gary. Then a "roll camera" motion. Thumbs up.

He turns half to the camera, half to Gary. Gary puts the last of the set in place.

MARTIN

Gary, would you tell me the story of that poster you received?

GARY

Oh. Sure. Well. One day I'm in the lab waiting for the gas chromatograph to finish its analysis when I get this poster of a sugar molecule. I don't know where it came from - but it got me thinking. Cooking's not a lot different from chemistry. You're taking different elements in measured proportions and making them work together. But there's something mysterious about cooking. Take sugar. I can write an equation where sugar plus energy gives me carbon and water. I know that before I even burn it. But think about sugar itself, like sugar cane. At some point, some guy said, you know what, I'm gonna pull this plant up and grind it up and put it in my coffee and it's gonna taste great.

What made him do that? You can predict things in chemistry, but I didn't know how anyone could predict what a new recipe would taste like without actually making it first. I had to find out. So I quit right there. Enrolled in culinary school the next day. Five years later, I'm Gourmet Gary.

Ruth enters, shrugs. Martin motions to Ruth to get Asher. She runs backstage.

MARTIN

Would you say that poster, that sign, if you will, changed your life? Made you the person you are today?

GARY

Oh yeah.

MARTIN

Now what if, I could snap my fingers.

He snaps, and at that exact moment, Asher, in his suit and tie, is thrust out into the light.

MARTIN

And by some magic, bring to this studio the very person who made that sign. Who changed your life. What would you do?

GARY

(congenially)

I'd fuck him up.

Pause.

ASHER

Frog?

Gary looks back. Asher and he stare at each other, confused.

MARTIN

You'd. I'm sorry. You'd. Why?

GARY

Why? I ditched a six figure job in a pharmaceutical lab to go to cooking school. And now I run a TV studio. Which I live in.

ASHER

Frog?

MARTIN

But your show...

GARY

Gourmet Gary? Not even my mother will watch Gourmet Gary. She likes the Food Network. You know, *high definition*.

ASHER

Frog?

GARY

Two weeks after I left my lab, my team made a break through. They made a fortune, I got NOTHING.

ASHER

Frog?

GARY

I got a two bit TV station and a recipe for a chocolate soufflé that will give you a hard on.

ASHER

Frog!

GARY

I wanted to show people how to cook a gourmet meals for themselves. Make them to feel just the way I felt when I was making a roast duck or a *coq au vin*. Warm. Happy. Connected. You know what? No one cares.

ASHER

(sympathetically)

Frog.

GARY

Now I'm broke - renting this place out to crackpots and used car salesmen. So I'd be real happy if I could get my hands on the guy who sent me that sign.

ASHER
Sugar equals C6 H12 O6.

GARY
What?

ASHER
Frog?

MARTIN
You know what? Let's cut this interview short.

GARY
Wait a second.

MARTIN
You know, I think we only have three minutes left-

Ruth bursts in, holding the LEAVE sign.

RUTH
Martin? You never told me if you wanted to do my segment!

MARTIN
Ruth, Asher really needs to be mic'ed up RIGHT NOW.

GARY
Who is this guy?

RUTH
Oh, didn't Martin tell you? You've never seen anything like Asher.

GARY
I haven't, huh?

MARTIN
Ruth! Three minutes! Please!

GARY
No, tell me, I'd like to know what this show is about before we air it in three minutes.

RUTH
Asher draws signs from God. He painted this sign, and it changed my life.

GARY

“Changed your life?” Really?

Gary grabs Asher by the lapels.

Ruth shrieks and leaps onto Gary’s back, beating him over the head.

RUTH

Don’t you hurt Asher!

GARY

Get this psycho off me!

Martin manages to separate everybody.

MARTIN

Ruth, just go! Get Asher out of here!

Martin shoves Ruth and Asher off the set. He stands in Gary’s way.

GARY

I’m gonna kill that frog fetish son of a bitch!

MARTIN

Gary!

GARY

I’m gonna give him a god damn sign. He owes me my life back. Or cash.

MARTIN

Gary, I think that’s exactly why we’re here. Let Asher do his show tonight and tomorrow, you and I are going to be discussing million dollar contracts.

GARY

Million dollar contracts?

MARTIN

You’re the producer, aren’t you?

GARY

I guess.

MARTIN

This show is going to make you more money than any chemical formula. You'll buy your old company back and burn it to the ground.

Pause.

MARTIN

We got less than two minutes, Gary. Come on.

GARY

You got a set on you, I'll give you that. Alright. Bring him on. Just don't be disappointed when the only person watching is the kid in the control booth.

Peggy returns, carrying art supplies.

PEGGY

I found these.

GARY

Listen, lady, if you're not in the show, you can watch up from the control booth with me and Stevie. Assuming you won't attack me.

PEGGY

We'll see what happens. Good luck, Martin.

MARTIN

Thanks, Peg.

GARY

Yeah, good luck there, pally. If this doesn't work, you owe me a million dollars.

Gary and Peggy leave.

MARTIN

Ruth! Will you bring back Asher?

RUTH (OFF)

Is it safe?

MARTIN

Oh for crying out loud. Yes!

Ruth drags Asher on.

ASHER

Frog?

RUTH

I know, sweetie. I will keep Frog safe until you are done, okay?

(to Martin)

He won't wear the jacket.

MARTIN

He's fine, he looks great.

GARY (OFF)

Let's go, folks. One minute to air.

RUTH

KEEP YOUR SHIRT ON.

Martin sits Asher down in the guest chair and places himself behind the desk.

RUTH

This is it. It's happening.

MARTIN

It is.

RUTH

Good luck sweetie.

She bends in for a kiss. Martin turns to get it, then realizes the kiss is for Asher. Ruth bounces excitedly off.

MARTIN

OK, Asher. You've got some markers here and a nice big pad of paper. Just start drawing a sign and then tell me who it's for, okay? And we'll make sure they get it, okay? They don't even have to wait for the delivery man.

ASHER

OK, Wendt.

Martin almost responds, shocked, but before he can:

GARY (OFF)

Martin, stand by. In five...four...three...two...one...

Martin straightens up. Asher, begins doodling on the easel.

MARTIN

Hello. My name is Martin Roth. My friend Asher has a very special gift. I believe that he is receiving signs from God. These are not signs like a burning bush or plague of locusts. The signs Asher receives are personalized messages that speak directly to you. Signs that will change your life. I know it sounds impossible, but you are about to see that it works. Asher, who is our first sign for tonight?

Asher hands Martin a wad of paper.

MARTIN

Our very first sign is for...Mrs. Rebekah Renault of Boise, Idaho. Uh...Asher. We're trying to start local. I don't think we're transmitting in Idaho.

Asher grunts, points at the paper he handed Martin and returns to making his sign.

MARTIN

OK. All right, well, Mrs. Renault, if you are out there watching, please give us a call at 345-2175. Let's see if we can get a glimpse of what your sign is...it looks to me like Asher has...drawn a picture of the sun.

Indeed he has. Bright and shining.

MARTIN

The sun. Again, Mrs. Renault if you are somehow getting this in Idaho and a picture of the sun means anything to you, the number is 345-2175, um, are we in, what area code is this? Mrs. Renault will probably need an area code.

Silence. Asher, sensing Martin's woe, draws a happy face on the sun.

MARTIN

OK. So. Asher, why don't we try someone else?

Asher frowns, confused.

MARTIN

Why don't you put Mrs. Renault's sign down, and we'll try someone else. Someone closer.

Asher puzzles this concept out. He starts scribbling again on his paper.

MARTIN

Great. Well, ladies and gentlemen, once again, Asher is going to reach out to God, to bring us another person who needs our help to change their lives. And we have-

(he takes the paper from Asher)

Mr. Larry Bohner from...Nampa, Idaho.

Asher smiles and grabs his markers, ready for instruction.

MARTIN

That is closer, I guess. Tell you what. Asher, let's try to show everyone out there one of your signs. When you first came to my home, you did an incredible thing. It brought people from all over the neighborhood. Can you show these people what you did?

Asher smiles and gets right to work.

MARTIN

Great. Ladies and gentlemen, you're going to see a real artist now, a divinely inspired artist-

Asher loudly capsizes the interview table, spilling a plastic jug of flowers across the floor. He begins cheerfully destroying the furniture.

MARTIN

NO NO NO! Asher! Not that! Mandala! Mandala!

Asher freezes, holding a chair over his head, ready to smash it against the floor.

MARTIN

Put it down. Put it down. Can you draw a mandala? With these markers?

Asher looks at the markers. Then at Martin: *are you crazy?*

MARTIN

What? You need sand?

Asher nods emphatically.

MARTIN

OK you know what, my wife, my wonderful wife, Ruth-

Ruth leaps onto the stage, eager and ready.

MARTIN

-Ruth's life was one of search, and struggle, and. She has a sign she'd like to show you.

Ruth runs off.

MARTIN

Her story is so moving, it'll move you. You will be moved. Let's hope it moves you out of Idaho and into the radius of this broadcast. And Ruth is, gone.

Asher starts writing on the table.

MARTIN

Good. Good, Asher, that'll take care of the rest of the security deposit. Well, maybe we should regroup a little. Are there any callers?

Silence.

MARTIN

Right. Maybe we should try something new.

Ruth runs back onto the set, grinning.

MARTIN

What do you think we should do, Ruth?

Ruth holds her sign up, pleased: LEAVE.

MARTIN

OK, let's go to commercial.

Asher fishes in her back pocket and comes out with the video game.

ASHER

Frog.

Long, painful silence.

GARY (OFF)

And we're out.

Peggy steps onto the set.

MARTIN

How long was that segment?

GARY (OFF)

Four minutes and twenty three seconds.

MARTIN

How long before we're back in?

GARY (OFF)

Three minutes.

(beat)

Here come those millions. I can taste 'em.

RUTH

Should I tell my story, Martin?

MARTIN

Just. Please. Take Asher backstage and wean him off that machine. We don't have any time.

RUTH

I'm here if you need me.

MARTIN

Yes, yes. Please, hurry.

Ruth takes Asher out.

MARTIN

How did this happen?

Pause.

PEGGY

Martin, what was your idea for this show?

MARTIN

What do you mean?

PEGGY

I mean, what planning did you do? What did you do with the money?

MARTIN

I got the space and the cameras. Those are serious cameras.

PEGGY

I can see that. And what was your idea for the show?

MARTIN

I'd open. Asher would make his first sign for someone. That person would call in. Because that's what happens when Asher makes signs. Then Asher would make a sign for every one watching. I'd interview Asher. If possible. Then more people would call in. And Asher would make their signs. And then. You know. People would be impressed.

PEGGY

For an hour program?

MARTIN

It should have been a half hour, huh? Oh my God. I have to go on with this nightmare for another fifty minutes.

PEGGY

Martin, for someone who sold television services, you don't know a lot about show business.

MARTIN

I shouldn't have to know anything about show business! Everything Asher touches turns to gold.

GARY (OFF)

Sixty seconds.

MARTIN

Ruth! Bring Asher back!

ASHER (OFF)

Frog!

PEGGY

Martin, wake up. You're going to need a bigger miracle than Asher to make this show work. Take it from me, even God has to fight for ratings.

MARTIN

Then God's a sucker.

PEGGY

What?

MARTIN

Your God's a loser, a chump, Peggy, because He DOESN'T DELIVER. This Guy made the universe, He used to knock down mountains and slaughter armies, what the hell happened to Him? Where is He?

PEGGY

I'm not surprised He didn't show up for this reception.

MARTIN

I'm here to give Him His big comeback! You know what, you're right, I don't know anything about television shows. You tell me what kind of show He wants, Peggy. You're in show business.

PEGGY

I resent that.

MARTIN

You sell people every week and what do they walk away with? Some nebulous sense of satisfaction? You can keep it. I'll go down with the show.

GARY

(off)

Get your boy out here, Martin, fifteen seconds.

Ruth strolls Asher out and into position.

RUTH

OK, Asher, one more sign, then more frog. OK?

Ruth runs out, leaving Asher behind, bewildered. Peggy stands frozen.

GARY

(off)

Ten seconds!

Peggy walks back to the set and sits down. She reaches into Martin's jacket.

MARTIN

Peggy! What are you-

PEGGY

Shht.

She pulls Martin's wireless lavalier off of his jacket, and pins it to herself.

GARY

(off)

We're live in five...

MARTIN

What are you doing?

GARY

(off)

...four...

MARTIN

Peggy!

GARY

(off)

three...

Silence. Peggy and Martin face the camera.

PEGGY

Good evening. I'm Reverend Margaret Reeves. Thank you, Martin, for that illuminating introduction to Asher.

MARTIN

I.

PEGGY

Sometimes life gets out of control, doesn't it?

MARTIN

You can say that again, Peg.

PEGGY

You feel lost.

MARTIN

Yes.

PEGGY

Like everything is crashing down around you.

MARTIN

Can we move on, now?

PEGGY

Often, Martin, when the structures in our lives that we depend upon, that we take for granted, when these things fail us, it is then that we begin to see signs from God.

MARTIN

Except, apparently, on this program.

PEGGY

Asher, why don't you draw whatever comes naturally to you. Use whatever materials you want. Go ahead.

Asher begins another drawing with one hand. The other hand dances in the air, a strange sort of choreography.

PEGGY

The fact is, the signs are always there. Before catastrophe strikes. Before the walls that shape and support our lives begin to shake. Ironically, those walls, which we build ourselves, for ourselves, prevent us from seeing God. Tonight, for one hour, forget about your day at work, the argument you had with a loved one, and let us find the deep meaning in our lives. Maybe in this.

She motions to Asher, who steps aside to reveal his latest work. It is an adorably simple drawing of a smiling puppy...and a small pile of droppings under it. Wiggly lines raise up off of the droppings representing their odor, like a child would draw.

Martin drops his head into his hands.

Asher hangs the sun and the puppy up on the wall and starts another. His hand keeps moving.

PEGGY

That's. Lovely, Asher. Childlike. Perhaps reflective of a time of wonder. When we more easily saw the joy in everyday, mundane things.

MARTIN

You're unbelievable, Peg.

PEGGY

If you would like to join our conversation, call the number at the bottom of your screen.

MARTIN

There is no number at the bottom of the screen!

PEGGY

Then why don't you give them the number, Martin?

MARTIN

345-2175! Call now, please!

The phone rings.

Martin and Peggy stare in astonishment. Long pause.

GARY (OFF)

What the hell's that?

MARTIN

IT'S THE GODDAMN PHONE PICK IT UP GARY!

GARY (OFF)

Oh. Uh.

A filtered voice is piped in through the speakers.

REBEKAH RENAULT (O.S.)

Hello? Is this the man on television?

MARTIN

Yes. Who is this?

REBEKAH RENAULT (O.S.)

This is Rebekah Renault.

Martin stares back at the sun picture.

MARTIN

Rebekah Renault? From Boise?

REBEKAH RENAULT (O.S.)

I was just flipping through the channels and I heard my name. I thought this channel was the Wheel of Fortune. Have you replaced Pat Sajak?

PEGGY

No, Mrs. Renault. We don't really know how you're seeing us all the way out there, but we're glad that you found us.

REBEKAH RENAULT

Oh, I can get anything in the country with this new service they gave me. xVision. It's good, but there's too many channels. It's all over the country, I get Kansas programs, California programs-

PEGGY

They're in Australia, now, you know.

REBEKAH RENAULT

Really? I think it's...oh my God. Oh my God!

PEGGY

Are you all right, Mrs. Renault?

REBEKAH RENAULT

Where did you get those pictures?

Everyone looks at Asher. He has created many more childish drawings and hung them on the back wall.

PEGGY

This is Asher, our...special artist, Mrs. Renault.

REBEKAH RENAULT

Those are the exact pictures my third-grade class drew two years ago. He's even hanging them in the same order.

PEGGY

Do these pictures mean anything to you, Mrs. Renault?

REBEKAH RENAULT

It was the last thing they did before...it was heartbreaking...the entire class was kidnapped by the school bus driver.

Horrified silence.

Asher finishes the last painting, and begins pacing back and forth, moving his hands and arms in the same precise manner as before.

Suddenly, a cacophony of beeping. Multiple phone lines.

GARY

(off)

Holy crap, Steve, get some of these phones.

PEGGY

Mrs. Renault, that's terrible, I can only hope that Asher has some reason-

REBEKAH RENAULT

Where did he get those pictures?

GARY

(off)

Peggy, I got one of the parents on the line!

MARTIN

Oh God.

PEGGY

Put them through!

MARTIN

What?

PEGGY

I'm sorry Mrs. Renault, hold on the line, please. Hello, to whom am I speaking?

LARRY

Hi, this is Larry Bohner, my sister called me from Springfield and told me you were calling my name on some local access station. And you got my daughter's picture up there.

MARTIN

Sir, it's not your daughter's picture, it's an artist-

LARRY

I know it's not hers cause I got hers right here on the table. Oh my God I got you online here that's all the pictures. You say that man's from God?

PEGGY

He...paints signs from God.

LARRY

My wife and I, we'd given up hope, we were planning the funeral, what does all this mean? Is he telling us that she's alive? Is my little girl alive?

PEGGY

We're just starting to understand this, Mr. Bohner-

LARRY

Can he ask God for us?

MARTIN

Peggy, this has got to be some kind of federal investigation, I don't know if we should get involved with this.

PEGGY

We are involved, Mr. Bohner, and I don't know the answers yet, but if you will, pray with me, pray for these children.

LARRY

Oh, I'm praying, I'm praying. I'll keep watching.

PEGGY

Thank you sir.

GARY

(off)

Peggy you gotta take this next one!

PEGGY

Mr. Bohner, hold on, please. To whom am I speaking?

ASLANEDES

(thick Greek accent)

Hello?

PEGGY

Hello.

ASLENEDES

Yes. My name is Georgio Aslanedes.

PEGGY

Hello, Mr. Aslanedes. Are you from Idaho, sir? Did you know one of the missing children?

ASLENEDES

Yes, I did. My granddaughter. I am local, however, I watch Gourmet Gary. Wonderful show.

PEGGY

But one of the children is your granddaughter?

ASLENEDES

Yes. But. I know what this is. I know what he says.

PEGGY

What he says?

ASLENEDES

I know what he is saying. My wife. She passed on, last year. But she not able to hear. No hearing. From birth. So I know. This is Greek Standard Sign Language.

All stare at Asher. He continues, oblivious, with his hand motions.

Ruth enters in a state of awe.

PEGGY

It's sign language. Sir, can you tell us what he is saying?

ASLENEDES

He says, we are here. We are here. Find us. Bad house. Bad house. And then numbers and letters. But this is not Greek. This is, I think, American Sign Language.

PEGGY

The letters and numbers?

RUTH

I know it, Mom, I see them now. L. Two. G. Three. Y. One.

PEGGY

Does that mean anything to you, sir?

ASLENEDES

No, I don't-

GARY

(off)

It's a postal code. Canadian. Hold on.

Gary runs onto the set and tears through one of the drawers. He pulls out a road atlas.

GARY

I used to be good with this. I think it's somewhere near Niagra. Don't worry, folks, we'll find those kids.

Silence.

PEGGY

Well, this is a good time to take a break, and perhaps we can alert the authorities. With God's help, these children may be reunited with their families. For now, let's take a quick break. When we come back, perhaps we can pray together.

GARY

(without looking up)

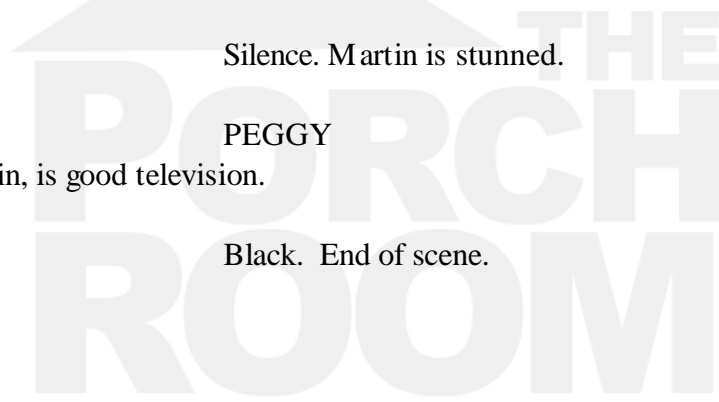
Steve cut to commercial.

Silence. Martin is stunned.

PEGGY

Now that, Martin, is good television.

Black. End of scene.



ACT II. Scene 2.

The sound of phones ringing fill the air.

It suddenly becomes high energy music and we hear voices, as if in a commercial.

MARTIN

(V.O.)

Are you lost? Seeking contact with something greater? Do you suffer from sleepless nights, your mind adrift in the terrifying void of empty space? Wandering in the proverbial or literal desert seeking meaning? If so - what you need is a sign.

LARRY

(V.O.)

Asher gave me a sign and reunited me with my daughter! The day she disappeared, I stopped believing in God, but my sign changed all that. I've been reunited with not only my beautiful daughter, but the Lord as well. I'll never doubt again.

ASLENEDES

(V.O.)

My friend Asher, he give me a beautiful sign. He tells me my wife says it's okay to remarry. Thanks to his TV show, I have a beautiful new bride who comes in the mail! Thank you, television!

MARTIN

(V.O.)

Is your sign waiting for you? Join Reverend Margaret Reeves every Saturday night at six PM for the most miraculous hour of television there is. Asher is standing by - now exclusively on xVision.

Under the commercial a scene unfolds:

A red STOP sign on a post. A bench.

Asher enters. Paint kit, paint bucket.

Asher stands on the bench and paints the STOP sign a solid green. He then paints a black symbol over the green.

A FIGURE in a long coat and brimmed hat approaches. Long hair covers its face. It walks with a slight limp.

Asher sees the form and hisses at it. It retreats.

The scenery changes around them into an office with a desk. Asher sits at the desk with an touch screen tablet computer. Various other computer monitors clutter his work area.

The children's pictures that Asher drew in the TV studio are hung on the wall - now proudly displayed as if historic works.

Asher plays his video game.

Martin enters and speaks to the audience, while Ruth, Peggy, and Gary enter in business attire. They stand behind the desk and face front. The resulting tableau looks like a presidential signing, or perhaps a strange, Addamsesque family photo.

MARTIN

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board,

It gives me great pleasure to inform you that we have decided to retain, for our branding, the corporate name of xVision. I know this decision has been a long time coming since the acquisition of xVision by Asherco, and I thank you for your patience.

Asher Himself has designed new logos, which should be immediately implemented on all products, advertising, and stationery.

The branding announcement will coincide with this week's launch of our project to map the songlines of America. You should all take a moment to congratulate yourselves on a transition well completed, and to contemplate your roles at this transformational point in human history.

Until now, the human being's relationship with the divine has been haphazard, disorganized, and disappointing. Rarely has a successful business model been based upon asking sacrifice from its clients, while dealing in poor results, spotty customer service, and lethargic response to changing markets. This is no longer the way the Source of the Universe chooses do to business. The new Way, now and forever, is xVision.

Sincerely, Martin Roth, CEO.

PEGGY

Margaret Reeves, President of Entertainment.

RUTH

Ruth Roth-Reeves, President of Sales.

GARY

Gary Ninivaggi, President of Communications.

Ruth puts the tablet computer in Asher's hand. He moves his fingers across the screen. Ruth holds it up to reveal an elaborate design.

RUTH

Asher.

Gary and Peggy withdraw into the darkness. Lights change.

Martin and Ruth wear a wireless headsets. Ruth brushes Asher's jacket sleeve. Martin gazes out of a large window.

MARTIN

I love this view. It's inspiring. I love being so far above the city. I wish I could open the window, feel the air. Feel that electricity. The Dalai Lama's down there somewhere. Driving through the city. He's coming to us.

RUTH

Oh, Asher. I don't know how you got ice cream on this jacket.

MARTIN

I ran the numbers this morning. If he signs on, if we get the spiritual leader of six hundred million people as a subscriber? Acquire Vajrayana Buddhism? We'd have over two billion subscribers. That would surpass Hinduism, Confucianism, and any other major historical movement. xVision will be the dominant world religion. We'll own the world.

RUTH

You know, he doesn't even eat ice cream.

MARTIN

I thought you'd be more excited, Ruth. You always told me that the Dalai Lama was the person you most admired in the world. Used to make me a little jealous. What if you met him at some spiritual retreat and just ran off with him!

RUTH

I've never actually seen him eat anything.

MARTIN

That was a joke. You running off with the Dalai Lama. Joke.

RUTH

Oh, I did catch him eating a bug yesterday.

MARTIN

Oh, Martin. Your rapier wit. That's why I married you.

RUTH

Mom thought it might be a locust. The old prophets used to eat locusts and wild honey.

MARTIN

I don't know why it's taking him so long. Should I meet him in the lobby? Which is the direct elevator down there, I never get on the right one. I always get one the one that terminates at 15.

RUTH

Why don't you ask Asher? He would know.

MARTIN

No, he'd have to draw a whole map. He's playing his game. It's his break, let him have his fun.

RUTH

You're just asking directions.

MARTIN

We've been here for six months, why is it I still don't know how to get around my own building? I paid for the damn thing. You know this place better than I do.

RUTH

I love it, it's perfect! I love the view from up here. It's inspiring.

MARTIN

You know, I've heard people say that.

RUTH

You look glum, Martin. Maybe you should have Asher draw you a sign.

MARTIN

I get one every day with the newspaper.

RUTH

Mine was lovely this morning. An abstract. Such bold color, blues and purples. It filled me with joy and courage.

MARTIN

Express elevator?

RUTH

What was your sign this morning, Martin?

MARTIN

Uh. I couldn't figure it out.

RUTH

What do you mean?

MARTIN

Nothing. It just didn't. It didn't really strike a chord with me.

RUTH

Stop it, Martin, you're teasing!

MARTIN

I'm not. What? You've never had a sign that didn't blow you away?

RUTH

No! They're from God Himself, Martin. Have they lost their novelty for you?

MARTIN

Forget it.

RUTH

What was your sign?

MARTIN

I said, forget it.

RUTH

Tell me what your sign was.

Martin's phone rings. He touches his headset.

MARTIN

Hello? OK. He's what? You're kidding. Shit. OK, put him through.

(To Ruth)

Ruth. The Dalai Lama. Sounds like they're stuck in traffic.

RUTH

Oh, no!

MARTIN

Maybe I can butter him up right now, in the car. You can come on the call if you want. Are you in, or are you out?

RUTH

Oh, I'm in! Let me just get Asher set up with these profiles.

MARTIN

Profiles? It's seven thirty. He should be going to bed soon.

DING. A bell chimes.

RUTH

Break's over!

Asher puts down his game immediately and turns to his computer screens.

Ruth smiles and hands a folder to Asher. He pulls out several sheets of paper, each topped with a headshot. He studies each one, then his fingers dance across the touch screens.

Martin straightens and speaks to the phone.

MARTIN

Good evening, Your Holiness. Good evening, brothers. I'm sorry that you're stuck in traffic. New York.

RUTH

Asher, there are six thousand new profiles here, I need signs for them in the system by tomorrow night.

MARTIN

My wife-

Ruth touches her headset.

RUTH

Good evening, Your Holiness Om Mane Padme Hum! We are truly blessed to hear your voices, and the voices of so many great men of wisdom.

MARTIN

Or, your translators' voices, at least. You're all in the car together? Stretch limo, I see. Well, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask-

RUTH

I hope you're feeling quite well, your Holiness. Have you met Asher?

MARTIN

I don't think he-

RUTH

You absolutely must. It would be a historical moment.

MARTIN

Asher has been quite busy with his signs lately.

RUTH

Asher doesn't do many signs with physical materials these days. He mostly uses a multidimensional virtual reality program. It allows him to create millions of personal signs at once. But for you, your Holiness, we'd certainly make an exception!

MARTIN

Yes. So.

PEGGY (OFF)

Ruth!

RUTH

I'm in Asher's office, mom!

Peggy enters with a blank sheet of paper and a charcoal pencil.

PEGGY

I'm glad you're here. Tell Gary to leave the entertainment department to me.

MARTIN

We're on a call, Peg. With the Dalai Lama.

PEGGY

Oh, my goodness, please, let me speak to him.

She hands the drawing materials to Asher.

PEGGY

Asher, I need a logo for the new show.

MARTIN

I'm sorry, gentlemen-

She touches her headset.

PEGGY

Your eminence! Reverend Margaret Reeves, it's a pleasure to speak to you again.

MARTIN

It is great whenever you get a chance to talk.

RUTH

Your logo may have to wait, mom.

PEGGY

Nonsense. Asher can multitask.

She taps the paper. Asher continues to work at the computer, while occasionally breaking off to scratch an abstract logo.

RUTH

Brothers, have you seen Mother and Asher's show?

PEGGY

Of course they have. But we're always freshly reinventing ourselves. We've decided to move forward with a game show.

RUTH

Oh! That's a good idea.

PEGGY

We don't need Asher to create a new sign every show. The sign could be a bonus prize. Build some anticipation. I would host it. No, Your Holiness, I don't know what they call a female game show host.

Pause. Then, Ruth and Peggy burst into devilish laughter.

PEGGY

My word.

MARTIN

Ha ha. So. Brothers. Your Holiness. You've seen what xVision can do for Buddhists the world over-

Gary bursts in with a pile of papers: some maps, some covered with mathematical equations. He sets the papers in front of Asher.

GARY

OK Asher I drew up those networks...what the hell's this a party? Where's the vodka?

RUTH

Gary!

PEGGY

The Dalai Lama's on the phone.

GARY

Bitchin.

(Taps his headset)

Good evening, your holiness. Did you drive in?

MARTIN

No, Gary, the Dalai Lama hopped the A train.

RUTH

Yes, they drove. They're stuck in traffic.

GARY

Seriously?

Gary touches his headset.

GARY

Your Worshipfulness, where are you? What street? Uh huh. Hang on.

(Gary rifles through his papers. To Asher:)

He's on Forty-fifth. Where should he go?

(Asher points to a map and draws three quick lines.)

Awesome. Sir? Tell your driver to turn left at the corner.

MARTIN

Gary, what are you doing?

GARY

Traffic sucks, don't it? Horns blaring, cops whistling at you, somebody's always blocking the box. Now look around. How many signs do you see? Can you even count them? And they're not really clearing up the traffic, are they? OK, you're making the turn? When you get to the next intersection, tell me what looks different.

Martin touches his headset and gets Gary's attention.
The others mute their headsets as well.

MARTIN

What's going on?

GARY

You know how Asher keeps sneaking out at night and painting the traffic signs?

PEGGY

Oh, Martin. Is he still doing that?

MARTIN

He's not supposed to be. I told Gary to stop him. And you, Ruth!

RUTH

I know. He just loves it so much.

MARTIN

He's destroying public property! We're gonna get the city after us.

GARY

Not after this. Watch and learn.

Everyone touches their headsets and jumps back on the call except Martin.

GARY

You see the sign? I know, it's hard to miss. Just let your driver look at it and then do what comes natural. Asher's got signs all over midtown. You'll be here in five minutes.

PEGGY

Is that true?

GARY

It's true, Mister Lama, Asher is gonna solve midtown traffic with his signs.

MARTIN

(still not back on the call)

Are you sure about this?

GARY

All those inefficient signs, littering up the city? They're what, indicative instead of interpretive. Buncha clutter. But on the corners with an Asher sign? People are already moving together, perfectly synchronized, in harmony with the signs.

MARTIN

This had better work, Gary.

GARY

They know just when to go, when to wait, when to merge, it's like ballet, they're zipping along, we're gonna get rid of all the street signs, even the traffic lights.

MARTIN

Do not promise things that are not going to happen!

RUTH

(enthralled, but not sure)

That's a little nerve-wracking, isn't it?

GARY

You want nerve-wracking? I had to go up to Poughkeepsie for a conference. That was a nightmare. A jackknifed tractor-trailer. A thirty minute drive took four hours.

PEGGY

Oh, just awful.

GARY

Here's the funny part. I'm out of my mind by hour three. I'm telling the driver, I gotta get outta here, I feel like the air is running out. And then I look up and there's this sign. And I swear, I must have read it four times, I thought I was losing my mind. It's got two arrows pointing left and right, and it says,

(he indicates the arrow direction)

this way, "White Plains",

(indicates the other direction)

that way, "No White Plains".

RUTH

What?

GARY

I was like, what? What in Gah - what the -

PEGGY

You can say it, Gary. "What in God's name?"

GARY

What in God's name does that sign mean? I mean, maybe if I were a Buddhist or Zen or something I could figure it out.

MARTIN

Gary!

GARY

I'll tell you what, anybody who's against Asher's abstracts, saying signs should say what they mean, you tell me what that means, Your Honor - "White Plains, No White Plains".

Gary, Ruth, and Peggy laugh hysterically.

MARTIN

North White Plains.

GARY

What?

MARTIN

It was “N-O-period”. North White Plains. There’s a town next to the town of White Plains called North White Plains.

Silence.

GARY

Oh.

(to his headset)

What’s that, Your Holiness? That’s it, you’re here!

PEGGY

Thank you so much, Gary. Your Holiness, why don’t you have them bring you right up to Asher’s office? You can meet him in person.

RUTH

What a wonderful idea!

PEGGY

Excellent. We’ll see you soon.

(They all disconnect. Cheers.)

Well done, Gary!

MARTIN

Wait wait wait. Gary, what the hell? We can’t just let Asher roam the streets painting over street signs.

PEGGY

We’ll have to smooth it over with the city. I know the head of the D.O.T., I’ll talk to him the next time we’re at the club.

GARY

Martin, relax. First off, Asher loves going outside. It's like when I used to take my mom's poodle for a walk, he'd raise his leg on every damn street sign we passed.

RUTH

Asher! I thought we had that under control!

PEGGY

I think Gary was speaking metaphorically, dear.

GARY

Thank you, Peg.

MARTIN

Are you telling me you've actually been taking him out to paint signs ON PURPOSE?

GARY

Martin, have you stepped out of this building in six months? I saw that traffic with my own eyes. You saw a PR nightmare, but I saw an opportunity.

PEGGY

And it paid off.

RUTH

He could replace the traffic signs for the whole city.

GARY

Forget the city. Asher's gonna repaint every street sign in America. I want to do a road trip straight through the country - real Americana, you know? With Asher painting over every sign as we go.

MARTIN

Sounds great. Head right down route 66.

GARY

No - this is the best part. Asher knows where to put the signs for maximum effect. It's on the, whatdoyacallum, the ley lines, the lines of power, you know?

MARTIN

The songlines?

GARY

That's it. You guide traffic to the songlines. I've already started the project.

MARTIN

No! That's MY PROJECT.

GARY

I didn't hear that.

PEGGY

I didn't think that was settled.

MARTIN

This is out of control! This is not what we do! Listen, Peg, I let you have the TV show and I let Gary handle our integration into xVision, but the songline project is mine. It's the only project I have left. I'm not letting it get subsumed into some crazy traffic scheme.

The buzz of an intercom. The voice of Rebekah Renault.

REBEKAH RENAULT

(V.O.)

Your new hire is here, Mr. Ninivaggi.

GARY

Thanks, Rebekah, send him in. I wish you'd told me sooner, Martin. I already hired a guy to head the project up.

Tjalkadjara walks in. He is neatly coiffed in an expensive suit. He carries a map and steel compass.

TJALKADJARA

G'day, folks.

MARTIN

What the hell is he doing here?

RUTH

You know each other?

TJALKADJARA

Sure, Martin and I are old mates. Ain't we, fella? You wouldn't be standing in this room if it weren't for me.

PEGGY

(ribbing)

Or a lot of other people.

RUTH

Mom.

GARY

You ready to jump right into a meeting? The Dalai Lama's coming up.

TJALKADJARA

Sure. Asher, check this map for me.

Tjalkadjara lays the map on Asher's desk. Asher incorporates the map into his work.

TJALKADJARA

I've heard the Dalai Lama is much shorter in person than he is on the telly.

RUTH

Oh you haven't met? He's the nicest person.

MARTIN

You're telling me this is the guy you hired?

GARY

Yep. That's my new man from Algorithms and Networking.

PEGGY

I understand you've walked the alterjinga since you were twelve. You're a man genuinely sent from God.

TJALKADJARA

You don't have to "God" me, sheila, you're talking to the village priest, not the village idiot.

Peggy and Tjalkadjara laugh.

MARTIN

When did you hire him? How did he even find him?

TJALKADJARA

Well, first I was a customer. I bought you guys for the villages. From your wife.

MARTIN

(to Ruth)

YOU sold xVision to HIM?

RUTH

I think it was a smart buy.

GARY

He's gonna go from New York to California and find the, what, the - what are those things, again?

TJALKADJARA

The songlines, Martin, you remember.

MARTIN

Yes. I remember. I remember it from when it was MY PROJECT.

TJALKADJARA

And where'd you get the idea from, songlines? I wonder.

GARY

We're gonna build new roads for the signs. We need to upgrade the network. Concentrate the power. I'll get Cadillac to sponsor, it'll pay for itself.

PEGGY

Why not get Nike instead? We're going to map the song lines, Asher can walk them! It's much more Biblical.

GARY

Eh. Too Forrest Gump.

Now everyone speaks very rapidly, overlapping. Asher whips himself into a frenzy of activity.

RUTH

Are these algorithms for the road network the same kind we use for the xVision interface? I think it's so fascinating.

GARY

Did I tell you the Iroquois Nation signed on? And they want roads.

MARTIN

I haven't approved any of this, Gary. And if it happens, I want final say.

RUTH

Asher's been very busy, I hope this isn't too much.

PEGGY

It's like the feeding of the five thousand. The signs keep coming.

TJALKADJARA

I think Reality gets "final say". You should bring this to Sydney. The traffic's a nightmare.

GARY

Yeah, the independent churches eat it up. It's the big guys who want to hold onto their little fiefdoms.

MARTIN

Well, why don't you go back to Sydney and play with your sacred pole?

RUTH

You know, I want to stand on those songlines with Asher. To just be filled with clarity.

GARY

But we got the American Catholics! We'll never get the Pope, but they're jumping ship over here.

PEGGY

Perhaps. But the construction itself, we need trained professionals. We can't leave such delicate work to inexperienced amateurs.

RUTH

I'm so proud of Asher. Do you watch Asher's show?

GARY

That Archbishop was in the paper. He said, "Thanks to xVision, we are all cafeteria Catholics now." End quote.

TJALKADJARA

Yeah, not off the government tit, though. Fella from Labor tried to wear me down, talking politics, economics, science.

MARTIN

Is no one listening to me?

PEGGY

Imagine each person on earth an enlightened one, a Boddhisatva.

TJALKADJARA

I said, if you knew something about quantum electrodynamics, fella, you'd know you had a bad understanding of photons.

RUTH

We want to cut down his workload, but we also want to live up to our promise.

MARTIN

Asher, don't touch those maps. Here's what you do. Start making a sign for the Dalai Lama.

TJALKADJARA

You don't see me at all, but a symbolic man, with symbolic attributes, what philosophers of language call a "sign".

PEGGY

But signs from man must be interpreted, and sometimes that interpretation is faulty.

GARY

It's a death knell.

RUTH

A religious tsunami.

GARY

They want signs.

TJALKADJARA

Could be anything.

GARY

Like your mandalas.

PEGGY

A Navaho sand painting.

TJALKADJARA

Jesus on rye bread.

GARY

Gnostic sculpture.

PEGGY

Vedic art.

TJALKADJARA

Lady Chatterly's Lover.

GARY

Nothing measures up to xVision. Name any other major spiritual interface on the market that combines mathematical analysis and divination to directly answer specific personal questions.

RUTH

Oh! The I Ching.

GARY

The I Ching can go jump in a lake.

And now, everyone speaks at once:

MARTIN

I am the goddamn CEO of this company, why does no one listen to me? If it weren't for me, you'd still be in a second rate TV studio. Or tending to a dying flock. Or sitting in the middle of the desert. Or using religion as a way to hide from how screwed up your marriage is. I'm the one who changed that. I'm the one God picked, not you. It's me!

GARY

That's why I know the Dali Lama's gonna sign with us. Then the rest of the East will jump on the network. Well, China and India, screw the Middle East, that's a disaster. We're never gonna get a toehold on those Ayatollahs. Hindus. That's the ticket. Who's their leader? They must have a leader. I'll find out who he is.

TJALKADJARA

Your brain receives a matrix of optical stimuli. Your brain, based on your personal neural profile, filters the infinite experience of the world and shows you what you think you see. To a certain degree, what you want to see. It elicits a fabricated personal experience. That's what you're replicating, here.

RUTH

And this isn't the first time we've talked about, what would you call it, distributing the signs. The personal ones. And maybe it would be smart to pull back a bit. For Asher's sake. We don't want to intentionally generate scarcity, you understand.

PEGGY

I used to preach to people every day, but it doesn't mean they understood what I was telling them. People misinterpret and misrepresent the word of God all the time - they use those misunderstandings to justify bigotry or oppression or to advance political ideas or to start wars. Or their own desires. From now on, there will be no more confusion. There will be clarity.

As the cacophony reaches its peak, Asher collapses on the desk.

MARTIN

Asher! What happened?

Martin and Ruth run to him and sit him up.

RUTH

Asher? Asher? Oh you poor baby.

MARTIN

Here, here you go. Frogger.

ASHER

Frog.

RUTH

Mom, go get him some water.

GARY

Water? Go get him a cheeseburger. Don't you feed this guy, Martin?

MARTIN

It's OK, he's OK. He just needs a break. He's working on too many things. Why don't you give us a little breather, OK, everyone? Just go get ready for the meeting with the Dalai Lama.

PEGGY

All right. Gary, why don't we show your new friend his office.

TJALKADJARA

I hope there's not a firewall on the computer network here. Oodgeroo and I have been playing a mean game of online cribbage...

Peggy, Garry and Tjalkadjara go off. Ruth gives Asher a piece of candy.

RUTH

Here you go, sweetheart. Have a little sugar. It will get you going again.

MARTIN

Candy? This is your solution?

RUTH

There's nothing wrong with candy.

She takes a piece herself.

MARTIN

We have to cut back on some of these projects. Maybe you can convince your mom to hold off on the game show idea. Tell her it would work better during sweeps week or something.

RUTH

If you think it would help.

MARTIN

Thank you. I knew I could count on you, Ruth.

(To Asher)

How you doing, buddy?

ASHER

Frog.

Right.

MARTIN

The work bell dings. Asher puts down the game and starts to paint.

Break's over.

RUTH

Ruth! What did we just say?

MARTIN

RUTH

That we'd postpone doing the game show. I'm not deaf, Martin. Why do you always make me repeat you?

MARTIN

Because that's NOT what we just said. I mean, yes, it is what we SAID, but it's not what we MEANT. We need to cancel the game show because Asher is overworked. He's burnt out.

RUTH

I get it, Martin.

MARTIN

I don't think you do! Your idea of a break is to give him a bonbon and set him right back to work.

RUTH

He has to paint a sign for the Dalai Lama, Martin. It was your idea.

MARTIN

I know, but-

RUTH

He's coming upstairs right now. This isn't for some bumpkin, it's for a major spiritual leader who could legitimize Asher as a religious figure. He can take a break after he's done securing his place in history.

MARTIN

This is your idea of taking care of him?

RUTH

Excuse me?

MARTIN

You were the one that was supposed to make sure that people didn't take advantage of Asher. To make sure he was treated like a human being.

RUTH

He's not a human being.

MARTIN

What?

RUTH

He's not a human being, Martin. He's been touched by God and that makes him greater than you and me. Nobody's forcing him to spread the word - it just flows out of him. If he wanted to quit, he'd quit. Jesus didn't quit. Jesus kept on going.

MARTIN

Jesus was a human being! "Going on" killed him!

Ruth laughs.

RUTH

I'm sorry. But after all these years, NOW you want to have a religious debate. I spent so much time seeking out a spiritual connection and you never once tried to really talk to me about it. Then, one day, out of the blue, you brought me a miracle. My husband, my sweet Lost Boy, you did what even my mother the preacher couldn't do. You brought God to me. And now you want to argue semantics?

MARTIN

I'm not talking about semantics, Ruth. I'm talking about Asher's welfare. What good is having a conduit to God if we can't ensure his health?

RUTH

If Asher needed something he'd let me know. He'd give me a sign.

MARTIN

I'm getting so sick of signs! You're all becoming zombies. By the time Gary and your mother are done, people will literally not be able to drive down the street without a sign.

"I know my house is to the left, but I feel like this abstract sign is telling me to go right. Oh no, I've just fallen off a cliff! It must be OK, though, because God told me!"

RUTH

This has nothing to do with how I take care of Asher. You seem jealous Martin. Of everybody who's been touched by Asher. I don't know why. God chose you to bring Asher to us. You get signs every day and somehow you're miserable inside.

MARTIN

My signs are broken.

RUTH

How can your signs be broken? What was your sign today?

MARTIN

I told you, it was nothing. More nonsense.

RUTH

Maybe you're reading it wrong. Let me see it - I'm really good at interpretation.

MARTIN

There's nothing to interpret. Asher, why don't we go get some fresh air. We'll let the...

RUTH

Martin Roth, do not ignore me.

MARTIN

Ignore you? That's a laugh. Half of the conversations I have with you might as well be with a brick wall lately.

RUTH

That's not true.

MARTIN

You ignore me, your mother ignores me, God ignores me-

RUTH

God is not ignoring you, Martin! You're not looking deep enough.

MARTIN

Oh yeah? All right, go ahead. Interpret this morning's sign for me.

He flips over the large diamond shaped sign. In pixilated video game lettering it reads "GAME OVER."

RUTH

I. I'm not sure-

MARTIN

Yeah, well neither was I. All I know is he's been playing that game too much. Because this is either a joke, or extremely depressing news.

RUTH

You don't know that.

MARTIN

Really, Ruth? Fine. Game over. What could that possibly mean?

The intercom buzzes.

REBEKAH RENAULT

Mister Roth, a Mister Wendt is here to see you.

Terrible silence.

RUTH

George Wendt? From Cheers? Send him in, Rebekah!

MARTIN

No!

RUTH

How exciting! The Dalai Lama and Norm in the same day!

A man enters - it is the shadowy figure in the hat. It is Wendt. He uses a large walking stick.

RUTH

NORM!!!!

(Realizes)

Oh. You're not George Wendt.

WENDT

I'm here to settle a debt. Martin's been expecting me.

RUTH

That's so like you, Martin. Double booked with the Dalai Lama in the lobby.

(She starts to go.)

You better deal with this. I'll go see if the conference room is ready. Make sure Asher finishes that sign.

MARTIN

Ruth, wait!

RUTH

(already off)

I'm here if you need me.

MARTIN

I need you!

Ruth is gone.

Wendt removes his hat and coat. His face bears a terrible scar.

Martin tries to speak, but no sound comes out.

WENDT

You OK? Not gonna faint or nothing, are you?

MARTIN

Look, I didn't want to hurt you. You were keeping Asher prisoner. I had to. I honestly didn't think I hit you that badly.

Pause.

WENDT

Oh! No, I was in a car accident on Thursday. You gave me a knock, sure, but not-

MARTIN

Oh.

WENDT

Yeah, I was in a cab. Would you believe it, some stupid son of a bitch painted over a stop sign up by North White Plains and I got plowed into by a truck. Eh, his insurance'll take care of the hospital bill. I hope so. Cause, you know, I ain't got no insurance, Martin.

MARTIN

I.

WENDT

Never did. Never had a care in the world back in the sign shop. But that's all gone, I guess. Just gotta take care of a few last things, and I'm done.

He reaches into his jacket and grabs hold of an object inside. Martin stiffens.

MARTIN

Look. I I I-

WENDT

Martin, stop it. You got a guilty conscience, I get it. Be a man about it. You made a decision, now you gotta live with that decision. And all the consequences of it.

MARTIN

I won't. I'll scream.

WENDT

What are you, a six year old girl?

MARTIN

I don't care. I have no dignity left. You found me, you found Asher. Let's see what you got.

WENDT

Fine.

Wendt pulls the object out of his pocket. Martin flinches.

Asher jumps in front of Martin, as if to take a bullet.

The object is a manila envelope.

Wendt slides out of the envelope a small slip of paper and a wad of cash. He counts the bills out onto Martin's desk.

WENDT

Twenty. Forty. Sixty. Seventy. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. That's yours. I had a pen somewhere. Well it's your office, you must have one. You just gotta sign...here.

He indicates on the slip. He chuckles at Asher.

WENDT

You must really like him. Doubt you'd take one for me.

MARTIN

What is this?

WENDT

Now, before you complain, I know you paid by credit card, but I couldn't possibly lug my swiper across the country, even if I plugged it into my laptop, which, I gotta tell you, took me forever to figure out.

MARTIN

Wait. This is?

WENDT

A refund.

MARTIN

For what?

WENDT

That sign.

MARTIN

My sign?

WENDT

The sign. With the, you know, Hebrew. Still charged you for the chips and soda, though.

MARTIN

Why would you give me...what the hell is this?

WENDT

Yeah. Well. I'm not so good at this. I can see how you might be a little confused.

MARTIN

You could say that.

WENDT

Truth is I'm a little embarrassed. Thing is. Well. I made a mistake, Martin. He never told you this?

He indicates Asher, who is suddenly engrossed in painting.

MARTIN

Never told me what?

WENDT

See. Asher handed me all that info about you. I thought that meant the sign he posted was yours. Turns out, it wasn't.

MARTIN

What?

WENDT

He musta just been handing me your info because you walked into the store. It took me a while to sort it out, but I found out that sign was actually meant for someone totally different.

MARTIN

Who?

WENDT

I don't remember her name. Just some woman.

Martin glares at Asher, who ignores him and keeps painting.

MARTIN

I'm not taking it. I don't need your money.

WENDT

It doesn't matter what you NEED, son. This is FAIR and SQUARE.

MARTIN

You're lying. You're trying to screw with my head because I stole your business.

WENDT

Nice of you to finally admit you stole my business, but no. I'm not lying, Martin.

MARTIN

I had a revelation! I was supposed to sell the impossible!

WENDT

No, son. You were half-crazed with heatstroke and revenge. Asher did his thing and he knocked you for a mental loop. You had a minor hallucination.

MARTIN

What's the difference? How can you tell a hallucination from a religious experience?

WENDT

How the hell should I know?

MARTIN

I'll tell you the difference. Results. I created all of this. None of this would have happened without me.

WENDT

OK, there you go. You did it. That should satisfy you, right? What's wrong? What more do you want? Credit? Crown of gold? What do you want?

MARTIN

You know what I want? I get a sign every day. So does my wife, and my mother-in-law, and half a million other people. Have you seen the ones who get the signs all the time? They're different.

WENDT

Sure. Remember what you said to me? That nobody could live like that all the time, thinking about everything? Well, welcome to that world, Martin. Asher's making more and more signs, that's like a drug, a drug that makes you real small. And it's cheap. And plentiful now. And everybody gets some.

MARTIN

I don't. I look at their faces. I don't know what they're seeing. So I wanna know: what's wrong with me? Don't I matter? Doesn't my life matter?

WENDT

What, you think it's on God's head to make your life matter? Who the hell are you?

MARTIN

I'M A PAYING CUSTOMER!

WENDT

You're nothing. It's not God's job to tell you why you're special. Or give your life meaning. It's your job to fall down on your knees and weep in awe of His Presence. You're nobody, Martin. That's what it comes down to.

Pause.

MARTIN

It figures.

Martin signs the slips and takes the cash.

WENDT

Thank you kindly.

MARTIN

There He is.

WENDT

There who was what?

MARTIN

On the dollar bill. The eye on the pyramid. That's the eye of God.

WENDT

I guess.

MARTIN

I want you to answer a question.

WENDT

I'll do my best.

MARTIN

Why'd you keep him in the box?

WENDT

I told you, he wandered off, hurt himself-

MARTIN

That's not what I meant. I mean, was it worth it to keep a man in a box to make a living selling...your business?

WENDT

You did the same thing.

MARTIN

I know I did. I'm asking you. Was it worth it to you?

WENDT

What else was I gonna do? What do you do if you've got God in a box?

MARTIN

You didn't have God in a box. You had a man in a box. Take Asher back.

WENDT

What?

Asher looks sharply at Martin.

MARTIN

Not to the sign shop. You said it. The sign shop's done. Take him out of here. Set him free.

WENDT

Uh. Don't you have some kinda contract or something?

MARTIN

He legally works for me. Asher? You're fired.

Asher considers this.

He goes back to painting.

MARTIN

Asher? Stop working. You don't have to do that anymore. I'm letting you go.

No response.

MARTIN

Anything you want, it's yours. I'll give you enough money to take care of yourself for life. Your own island. Medical attention. Anything you need. What do you need? What do you want? Stop painting. Stop it, Asher. Stop. STOP.

Martin viciously tears the dollar bill in his hand.

Asher stops drawing and looks at Martin, stunned.

WENDT

Uh. Now. I think that's a federal offense to destroy a dollar. At least if you wanted to get rid of it you could've lended me the cab fare.

Martin throws the remnants of the dollar bill at Asher.
He holds up another.

MARTIN

Are you a human being? Are you a Jesus, or a Buddha, or a Moses, or a Muhammed, or an angel, or what? Are you God? Are you an alien? Or some kind of radio receiver? What are you? Explain it to me. What do you want?

ASHER

Frog.

MARTIN

Are you a man?

ASHER

Frog! Frog! Frog!

Asher weeps. Martin understands.

MARTIN

Listen. Forget the sign. Your work here is done.

ASHER

Frog.

MARTIN

You're not that frog. You're not controlled. You don't have to keep doing the same thing. You don't have to do what anyone tells you to.

ASHER

God.

MARTIN

You don't even have to do what God tells you to.

Asher shakes his head and tries to communicate the impossible in his stunted way.

Martin walks over to the displayed children's signs. He rips one in half.

Asher cries out, half in pain, half in terror.

The lights dip. Snarls. Australia begin to flood the room. Wendt shrinks into the corner in fear.

MARTIN

Oh, now you wanna talk, huh?

WENDT

That's a holy artifact you destroyed, Martin. The Shroud of Turin or something. I wouldn't-

Martin tears another one. Asher reacts again.

WENDT

Martin you're gonna get hit by lightning and turned inside out if you don't quit this.

MARTIN

(to the room)

You listen to me. Let him go.

Martin tears another painting. The noises grow.

ASHER

Pillar of salt! Pillar of fire!

WENDT

Listen to him, Martin! God's giving you a chance to stop! Don't make Him-

MARTIN

(to the room)

I'M DONE. He's a man. You can't keep him in a box any more. I won't let you.

Martin destroys more of the office. Asher tries to stop him. Wendt cowers in the corner.

MARTIN

DO YOU HEAR ME? DO YOU HEAR ME?

Martin tears apart the Dalai Lama's sign.

Black out.

Red light on Martin. He utters a horrible choking noise.

ASHER

STOP!

The noises stop. White spot on Asher. He screams at his own hands.

ASHER

STOP IT! STOP!

Martin breathes heavily, frozen, terrified. Asher looks at him, sadly.

WENDT

Heavenly Jesus have mercy on me. Heavenly Jesus have mercy on me.

Wendt repeats his hysterical mantra.

Martin twists, as if being played with like a ragdoll.

Asher makes his decision.

He reaches his arms out, embracing the universe.

Slowly, he brings his hands together. As he does, the lights all seem to be drawn into him.

Asher cups his hands together. Then squeezes.

Martin is released from his captivity and crumples to the floor. He looks up.

MARTIN

Asher. What are you doing?

Asher plucks the tiny object out of his fist.

It is a speck of dust, too small to see.

Wendt stops praying and gasps. Martin is dumbstruck.

MARTIN

Is that-

WENDT

Yes.

Martin and Wendt stare silently at the speck of dust.

Asher smiles at the speck like an old friend.

He kisses it, and opens his hands as if releasing butterflies - exactly as he did for Ruth earlier.

Martin and Wendt gasp. They are overcome with awe. Asher turns to Martin. His voice is steady, warm, and human.

ASHER

Martin.

Martin gets up and runs into Asher's arms. They embrace in a powerful hug.

MARTIN

I'm so sorry, Asher. I never meant for any of this to happen.

Asher goes to his art supplies.

MARTIN

Asher, no. What are you doing?

ASHER

One more.

Asher takes some of the supplies he was going to use for the Dalai Lama's sign and quickly, but elegantly, paints his last message:

GOOD-BYE.

He picks up the video game, then thinks, and puts it down.

MARTIN

Let's leave. Come with us.

Wendt startles out of his reverie.

WENDT

Me?

MARTIN

Why not?

WENDT

Oh, no reason, I just thought it's gonna be harder to get out than in. No one paid attention to me, but I think they'll notice him leaving. Ain't security gonna find us the minute we make a break for it?

MARTIN

Nope.

WENDT

Why not?

MARTIN

Because we've got the man who designed the building.

Martin grabs his coat and Asher's coat. Wendt belts out a hearty laugh.

WENDT

Well, hi-yo Silver! Where to?

ASHER

Away.

Martin takes Asher by the hand and they leave, followed by Wendt.

After a moment, Ruth rushes on. She announces to the empty room:

RUTH

OK, Martin, we're ready!

She calls off stage in various directions.

RUTH

Martin? Martin? Asher? Asher, I've got a chocolate bar for you. Come on out sweetheart.

Silence. She notices Asher's art supplies laying on the floor. She picks up the note - "Goodbye." Her eyes grow wide and she begins to tremble.

RUTH

Mom! Mom!

Peggy rushes in.

PEGGY

Ruth! What's the matter?

RUTH

They're gone. He's gone.

She hands Peggy the note.

PEGGY

What's this supposed to mean?

RUTH

He's gone, mom. Asher left us.

PEGGY

Martin. Ruth, call down to the front gate, stop them before they leave the building.

Ruth touches on her headset. Gary rushes in.

GARY

Peg, the delegation's stepping off the elevator. What's going on?

PEGGY

Martin and Asher have left.

RUTH

They haven't seen them, but Martin's car is gone.

GARY

Balls.

PEGGY

Oh, watch your language!

GARY

Jesus Christ! Our savior just went on the lam!

RUTH

What are we going to do? How are we going to explain this?

PEGGY

I'll tell you how we're going to explain this. An ascension.

RUTH

What?

PEGGY

Martin and Asher have been called home to the Lord.

RUTH

That's not going to sell to Buddhists!

PEGGY

It's all a matter of language and branding. Parinirvana, the Astral Plane. They vanished in a fiery light. We don't need to speculate.

GARY

Lady, you are so crazy. I think I'm in love with you. But Asher's our product. We can't sell without him.

PEGGY

We don't sell Asher. We sell signs from God. Boot up the computer and pull some of Asher's rarer signs from the database. I'm sure the Dalai Lama will be quite impressed.

Ruth runs to Martin's laptop and starts typing furiously.
Gary moves to the door.

GARY

I'll bring the delegation in here.

(calls out the door)

Right this way, gentlemen! Please, bear with us, there's been a change in plans!

PEGGY

An exciting new development.

GARY

An exciting new development!

RUTH

Mother? Are you sure this is going to work?

PEGGY

Just tell the customers, you never know when they might come back.

Ruth suddenly sees Asher's goodbye note lying on the desk. She tears it up and tosses it into the wastebasket. All three face the door with forced smiles.

End of the play.