

# OBAMA IN BROOKLYN

By Tom Angotti with Justin Sifford

## THE CHARACTERS

**JOE**, an elderly Brooklyn character. He retired from a career as an engineer with the City of New York and a union activist. He was once an avid runner and softball player, and while old age has limited his movement he is still outspoken and sometimes feisty.

**ADRIANA**, Joe's niece, is a young nurse who lives in the neighborhood and often visits Joe. From a single parent childhood in a tough New Jersey neighborhood, she moved to New York as a teen with hopes of becoming an actress. After five years of acting and bartending while living with a cousin in Brooklyn, her mother became ill and she decided to become a Certified Nursing Assistant to help support her mother.

**SERGIO**, a young professional whose tendencies in attire, gastronomical matters, and politics could be described as liberal Brooklyn yuppie. He spent most of his youth in Brooklyn, attended part of high school there, and went to college on the West Coast. He is the landlord and caretaker of the three-unit brownstone owned by his retired parents who travel and live in California for half of the year.

**MOHAMAD** is an attractive black male in his 30's. Born and raised in a large middle class Muslim family in Ethiopia, he came to New York on a temporary visa two years ago. He works as a waiter in one of the neighborhood's upscale cafes, sends money to his family in Ethiopia, has applied for citizenship, and is saving so he can plant roots in the U.S. He commutes from Harlem, where he shares a cramped apartment with friends of the family. ADRIANA pursued him and he eventually gave in, somewhat out of loneliness, but he is ambivalent about dating someone who is not a Muslim.

## SCENE ONE

*The scene is a stoop on a block with early 20<sup>th</sup> century brownstones in Park Slope, a Brooklyn neighborhood. It is in the dog days of summer, 2013. Stage right, at the corner of the block, there is a bistro, Arturo's, with sidewalk seating. To the right of the stoop the row of brownstones continues. On the sidewalk there is a bicycle rack and a small planted area with flowers. JOE is sitting on the stoop and his caretaker, Adriana, sits two steps above him, looking at Arturo's.*

**JOE:** (To Adriana) Say, can I have a glass of water?

*Pause as Adriana takes her gaze from Arturo's.*

Hello?

*She pours water from a jar into a glass, hands it to him.*

I feel like a Bedouin, the well dried up and I'm in the middle of the desert. A Bedouin in Brooklyn.

**ADRIANA:** Drink water. (Joe drinks) Good Bedouin.

*She takes out her phone and starts texting.*

**JOE:** Brooklyn ain't ready for this kind of heat. I've been through a lot of hot ones but they're getting worse. Climate change in the neighborhood, it's real.

**ADRIANA:** So what are you gonna do?

**JOE:** Here it's at least ten degrees hotter than in the suburbs.

**ADRIANA:** That's why you have air conditioning.

**JOE:** When I was born we didn't have air conditioning and it was hot inside. Everybody sat on the stoop drinking beer and iced tea and all that good stuff. Now who do you see out on the stoop? You see anybody here?

**ADRIANA:** We're here.

**JOE:** They're all inside taking showers. They got the doors and windows closed and they're playing with their electronic devices. (Looks at Adriana, who is still texting).

**ADRIANA:** Maybe you need a shower.

**JOE:** Or they go to Maine. Or the Hamptons. Or the Bahamas.

**ADRIANA:** I'm all for that.

**JOE:** See all the parking spots here? They went away. To burn more fossil fuels. (*Pause*) You know, it's kinda lonely here now in the city.

**ADRIANA:** I know, you miss her don't you?

**JOE:** Yeah, not just her but the whole family's gone. They either died or moved to the suburbs. They used to come and visit once in a while. Not any more.

**ADRIANA:** Well, there's all the new people that moved in. And you have the café here on the corner and all the people coming and going there.

**JOE:** Yeah, but who *are* they? They don't talk to us. They don't even look you in the eye.... Remember when that was Smilowitz's Hardware? People going there would stop by and say hello. We knew each other.

**ADRIANA:** Until they shot Smilowitz.

**JOE:** Yeah. Remember Mary who lived across the street? She was always on the stoop. She was the Mayor of 10<sup>th</sup> Street. She knew everybody and didn't miss a thing.

**ADRIANA:** I remember Mary.

**JOE:** She saw everything. Remember when Sergio's bike got stolen from in front of their house? The first thing I said was, "where's Mary?" Turns out she went inside for lunch and that's when the bike got stolen.

**ADRIANA:** Hail Mary!

**JOE:** Amen.

*Long pause.*

**ADRIANA:** Hey Joe, listen to this. I'm putting together clips from Obama. He's coming back here to Park Slope. You know he lived here for a while. I'm going to see him with Mohamad.

*Adriana turns on the portable CD player. At first, Joe is oblivious, but he starts listening to the speech.*

**AUDIO:** *"We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace."*

**JOE:** Yeah, I don't know about that. Look, there's a whole new tribe around here. They come and go, to the bars and cafes, they hang around with each other, they don't talk to anyone else unless they have to.

**ADRIANA:** Come on, Joe. Give Obama a break.

**JOE:** I voted for the sonofabitch!

**ADRIANA:** You wanna come with us to hear him?

**JOE:** I can't take that stuff about the lines of tribe dissolving.

**ADRIANA:** Oh come on. *You* don't belong to a tribe.

**JOE:** Yes I do. And so do you.

**ADRIANA:** You were born and raised in Brooklyn!

**JOE:** *My* tribe came from a little village in Sicily, generations ago. They were kind of like nomads too, once they got uprooted. They moved to Mulberry Street. Then East Harlem, then they moved to Brooklyn. Then the suburbs. Now they're from nowhere. The tribe from nowhere. They still stick together and protect each other out there. They're still a tribe.

**ADRIANA:** (*still texting*) Hmmm....

**JOE:** Now their kids are moving back to Brooklyn.

**ADRIANA:** Like me?

**JOE:** Well, yeah, but at least *you* come and visit me. The others joined the gentrification tribe.

**ADRIANA:** I wish I could afford to be.

**JOE:** When Obama lived here he was what they called a *pioneer*. First it was the yuppies and buppies and now it's the hipsters. They jack up the rents, chop up the brownstones into tiny cubicles. "I'll buy your house, Mr. Joe...I'll give you ten times what you paid."

**ADRIANA:** You're just pissed 'cause you didn't cash in on your brownstone?

**JOE:** Obama started it all.

**ADRIANA:** Oh come on! He just needed an apartment.

**JOE:** Yeah, so why did he come to Park Slope?

**ADRIANA:** Maybe because he could stay with his white girlfriend without getting dissed.

**JOE:** Okay, but you think he cares about gentrification now?

**ADRIANA:** Everybody wants to live in a better place.

**JOE:** But how about doing something so that people don't get forced out?

**ADRIANA:** Like what could he do?

**JOE:** He could have used the federal money to help the people who need it instead of bailing out the banks. I worked for the city 30 years. I had a good job and a good pension, I'm not complaining. But when I retired I said what can I do to make it better for the people that weren't so lucky.

**ADRIANA:** I know, you're always doing something.

**JOE:** I wish I could move around like I used to and go to all those meetings. The union's always got something going. *That's a busy tribe.*

**ADRIANA:** Hey, you can rest a bit.

**JOE:** Yeah, that's what I'm doing now, maybe a little too much, out here on the stoop.

**ADRIANA:** So let's go see Obama next week, ok?

**JOE:** He wouldn't have anything to do with your tribe or mine, or even the one he came from! I don't feel like waving a flag for him.

**ADRIANA:** (*Goes back to texting as she talks*) Actually, he's got the right ideas about health care and puts them into practice. Now I'm covered. And look at the alternatives! He voted against the war in Iraq when...

**JOE:** (*Interrupting*) – Yeah, that was one war, then ten years in Afghanistan, and all those bases primed all over the world. And the drones. He's got a long way to go to get to "common humanity."

*Long pause.*

So Adrianna, now that our family's all over the place, for you, what's *your* tribe?

**ADRIANA:** (*Puts down phone and addresses audience*) What's my tribe? The only tribes we had in New Brunswick were the Bloods and Crypts. Don't mind my uncle here. He's extra negative today. So what am I? I get kinda tired of that same question. *Technically*, I'm Puerto Rican and Italian. In my neighborhood it was strictly Puerto Rican, Dominican, and black kids. Like, if hip-hop was a race, I probably would've checked that box off on the census. I'm used to getting the "what are you?" question, though it's usually from a dude on the street - the type who follows that question with one about my sign. (*Pause*) Maybe they think that if they know my background, they'll know what line to use. Maybe they just want to feel like they've figured me out. I just say "Spanish," even though I've

never been to Spain. Anyway, it happens so often, I don't really mind anymore, especially from him (*nods toward Joe and goes back to her phone*).

**JOE:** Adriana, do you believe in fairy tales?

**ADRIANA:** Huh?

**JOE:** You know, this stuff about being a melting pot. You come over here to this country and you come to Brooklyn and you melt.

**ADRIANA:** What does that mean?

**JOE:** The day you get off the boat, you're supposed to forget that you're an Italian or Puerto Rican.

**ADRIANA:** Oh? Except that everybody reminds you.

**JOE:** Well, he got elected because they said he was the American Dream, he melted! Here's a black guy but guess what, he's not black, he's white, but guess what, he's not white. He's black *and* white and it's all melted together. They believe in all that post-racial society bullshit. It's Madison Avenue....

**ADRIANA:** That ain't Brooklyn.

**JOE:** You got it!

**ADRIANA:** That ain't Brooklyn. (*She turns on the recording again*).

**AUDIO:** *"This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed -- why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent Mall, and why a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath."*

*Sergio enters LEFT and walks in front of the stoop. Joe sees him.*

**JOE:** Hey you!

**SERGIO:** (*Hesitantly*) Hey, Joe.

**JOE:** Give me your opinion, Sergio. Do you believe in the melting pot?

**SERGIO:** What's melting and where's the pot?

**JOE:** Yeah ha ha. I was just gonna say that I grew up in Bensonhurst when it was all Jewish and Italian. So now it's all Chinese and Russian. Not much melting goin' on there.

**ADRIANA:** Hey Sergio, Joe's on the pot again.

**SERGIO:** Hah!

**JOE:** Now the city is practically the United Nations but everybody has their own little clubs.

**SERGIO:** Not here they don't.

**JOE:** Huh?

**SERGIO:** Just look around, Joe. Used to be blacks and whites would stay away from each other.

**JOE:** Yeah, and now they just walk past each other and don't look each other in the eye. And they send their kids to the same schools. And they all compost in their back yards and jog in Prospect Park.

**SERGIO:** So? You used to play softball in the park, remember, with my dad?

**JOE:** And they shop at the Park Slope Food Coop and recycle their plastic bags.

**ADRIANA:** And they like waiting on line.

**JOE:** And they don't sit on the stoops any more because they got to be plugged into something. And they all believe in that common humanity bullshit. They don't want to admit they belong to a tribe.

**SERGIO:** Let's talk anthropology...

**JOE:** Let's talk history. Do you know what the Dutch and British did to the tribes that were here when they came to Brooklyn? Melting ain't the word. That's a *long* and rotten story.

*(Sergio lets out a huge guffaw)*

**ADRIANA:** *(To Sergio)* And he'll make it longer.

*She smiles politely then looks back at her phone.*

*Don't bother me.* I get paid by the hour.

**JOE:** *(To Sergio)* Ok, you think I'm kidding? So tell me, what *are* you?

**SERGIO:** *(Slight pause)* Meaning . . . ?

**JOE:** So your father was Italian but that doesn't make you Italian, see, only a hyphenated American.

**SERGIO:** Joe, you're obsessed with this thing of identities.

**NARRATOR:** *(Sergio pauses and turns to audience).*

I've told him this before. . . I can excuse him at his age but I get tired of it. Well, ok, I'm half WASP and half Italian. I actually grew up in this neighborhood, though I was gone for a while at boarding school and college. So even though a lot of people doubt it, I'm from Brooklyn. I really love the place. I had a sort of ecstatic childhood in this neighborhood. I know it sounds trivial at this point, especially after

listening to Joe go on and on, but the neighborhood was so different back then, for better and for worse. More people sat on their stoops. There was more difference, more kids playing together in the street . . . well, also more crime, more crack. You see that bistro over there? That was a hardware store owned by Mr. Smilowitz and now it's owned by some company in Florida. The workers there never last. But there's still a lot of diversity here on 10<sup>th</sup> Street and that's one thing I really like about it. Compare it to the suburbs, or those Park Avenue condos or the Hamptons. You can live here and have your own identity and your lifestyle and nobody will bother you. Some places you can't even walk down the street and look different, and....

**JOE:** (*Interrupting Sergio*). Yeah, when the chain stores moved in with their private security guards you could forget being different! The people in the *brochures* are all different but not on the block!

**SERGIO:** Hey Joe, please don't interrupt my monologue! Sometimes you sound like a broken record.

**JOE:** At least I go on record.

**SERGIO:** Look at this city, it's a United Nations. Not everybody loves each other but we live together and ride the subways and share the parks. (He takes out his phone and starts texting).

**JOE:** Look at this block! Nobody on their stoops. They have a block party maybe once a year, for the kids. Remember the Puerto Rican kids who used to live in the apartments across the street? They're gone and now all that's left are twenty-somethings who commute to Wall Street and hang out in the bars and never see anybody else.

**ADRIANA:** Yeah, I always watch how people look at each other. But you know some of them say hello to me.

**JOE:** And I look at the way the NYPD looks at everyone. Stop and frisk. Or listening in on the mosque. Bet they got you and Mohamad covered.

**ADRIANA:** You know, we should have a debate, Joe. Featuring you. That'll get the neighbors out. Close off the street and invite the neighbors.

**JOE:** What? They're too busy. And they'd have to leave their air conditioners.

**ADRIANA:** Well maybe you could get them to listen and do something about it.

**SERGIO:** That's right, let's talk about gentrification, Joe. Neighborhoods change all the time, and not just from black to white. Harlem used to be Jewish. Did anyone cry foul when it changed to black?

**JOE:** Gentrification ain't about change. It's all about the real estate industry making a shitload of profits while it forces people to move. People who love their neighborhoods, who worked to make them better.

**SERGIO:** The city is bigger than the neighborhood.

**JOE:** I beg to differ. We're still a bunch of tribes and we care about our turfs. Yeah, if you're billionaire Bloomberg it's all one big happy family you look down on from your global headquarters and you go off to the Bahamas for the weekend. Over there in City Hall it's all one giant spreadsheet with the prices of real estate in one column, all the rest blank. But for us it's our land. It's where we love and play.

**SERGIO:** Is that why you get nostalgic about the Brooklyn Dodgers?

**JOE:** It ain't nostalgia, it's *love*!

**SERGIO:** And yet you hate the Nets?!

**JOE:** Those crooks used eminent domain to force out tenants and homeowners, then they gave it to a Russian billionaire and a Chinese developer, and where's the affordable housing?

**SERGIO:** Joe, everybody who owned anything got paid more than a fair price. And look at the numbers, there weren't that many.

**JOE:** Shit, the renters got shit. And it's an environmental catastrophe. Sticking that ugly turd in the middle of our neighborhoods. You wouldn't be so happy if it was you that got thrown out of your house. Imagine, Sergio, if your father were alive and it looked like he was forced to move because they wanted the house so they could build an arena. The house he put all that money into to fix up. You wouldn't remember but the goddamn roof was practically gone. And he had to put in all new plumbing. We have no idea what it is to lose our homes. But the unwanted tribes, they always lose their homes.

**SERGIO:** Hey, you're the one that's always talking about how much things changed because of the civil rights...

**JOE:** You never faced the discrimination of the back of the bus, the separate water fountains!

**ADRIANA:** Did you?

**JOE:** In 1962, I had a black girlfriend, and we were walking down the street in Tuscaloosa, Alabama holding hands, and we got arrested. We had to spend the night in jail! In separate jails of course. You're a white guy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what do you know?

**SERGIO:** Last time I checked, you're white too.

**JOE:** Hell no, I'm Sicilian!

**ADRIANA:** Yeah? Sicilians are thick slices, right?

**JOE:** Everything is homogenized milk now. Yeah, *frozen* slices. Madison Avenue's done a pretty good job with us.

**SERGIO:** (*To audience*) Yes, there are advantages to being the same race and sex as most of the people in power, for now, but being a blond white kid named Sergio in the bad old days of Brooklyn led me to face some prejudice of my own. Now I was raised by Park Slope liberals, you know they always made you feel guilty about being white, so it was almost impulsive of me to excuse the harassment I got, but what pissed me off most was that in addition to the petty theft and assault, they always had to liken me to some California surfer dude stereotype that they got from TV. They'd say (*with sarcastic tone*) "Hey Dude! *Dude!* Surf's up, man!" and then they robbed me. I never rode a surfboard in my life! After enough runs-ins like that, my parents shipped me off to boarding school.

And now people look at me and they think I'm a gentrifier. I'm privileged! But this is where I was born! Just because I'm white.... Thank god I don't have to pay a huge mortgage and taxes like the new people.

Joe, you know there are a lot of Sicilians with blue eyes?

**ADRIANA:** (*Irritated*) Sorry to interrupt the debate, but I have to get my stuff inside. I'm running late, and you know how the train is on weekends. I'll see you later, Uncle Joe. (*Coyly*) Bye, Sergio dear! Go right ahead without me. (*EXITS into house*)

**SERGIO:** Oh . . . Ok. Bye.

**JOE:** So I suppose you voted for Obama again. (*Thinks a moment*) Ok, so did I. Wall Street advisors and all. (*Pause*)

In the meantime, nobody's out on the stoop any more and it's getting hotter every day. The reservoir's going to dry up some day if they keep building condos and everyone takes three showers a day. (*Pause*)

And then they're going to keep on building those shitty condos with waterfront views so they can watch the storm surges and get far away from the sewer backups. (*Pause*)

So where the hell's everybody on the block? Waiting for Obama?

*A young woman in shorts listening to a headset exits Arturo's, crosses to center stage, stops and boogies, then exits stage left. LIGHTS OUT.*

## SCENE TWO

*Outside Arturo's cafe. Adriana sits at a table, texting, next to Joe, who is reading a newspaper. Mohamad is standing to the RIGHT talking to Joe.*

**MOHAMAD:** . . . This is a public sidewalk and the people have a right to use it, don't you think? So what's wrong with the café having tables? It means more people get to use the sidewalk, no?

**JOE:** I didn't say people shouldn't use the sidewalk, only that nobody should have a monopoly on it just because they own a café. Hey, I remember when we didn't have one café in a 5 mile radius. Now we got 'em all over the place. Where does it stop? And you can sit but what ever happened to the 25 cent cup of coffee?

**MOHAMAD:** Well, everything went up.

**JOE:** Yeah.

**MOHAMAD:** Joe, why don't you go to the park where you can have all the space you want?

**JOE:** Yeah, I used to play on a softball team, but we all aged out. I played for years.

*A young white man in lycra pants, skin-tight t-shirt, and bright white running shoes, with plugs in his ears listening to music, enters LEFT, stops center stage and sings out loud a musical phrase while jogging in place, then runs off stage RIGHT.*

**MOHAMAD:** You should see the new ice skating rink they're putting in, and they still have concerts in the summer...

**JOE:** All of which you got to pay for.

**MOHAMAD:** They ask for voluntary contributions.

**JOE:** Voluntary my ass! It's a shake-down!

**MOHAMAD:** I don't mind paying to hear good music.

**JOE:** Thank god we can still listen to the African drummers.

**MOHAMAD:** Yes, some of them are Africans.

**JOE:** Yeah, anybody can join in, and they don't charge. But you just wait.

**MOHAMAD:** I don't think so.

**JOE:** Now they're renting out the meadows for these huge concerts that cost to get into. The next thing they're going to be charging to barbecue, or charging kids to use the playgrounds, or you're gonna have to swipe a card to get into the park. Oh yeah, they'll say the city has no more money. No more money – that's right, they're giving it all to the big developers! Millions to build the Berkeley arena...

**MOHAMAD:** Barclays.

**JOE:** ...millions for Yankee Stadium, millions for the Coney Island hucksters, millions for the...

**MOHAMAD:** Mr. Joe, here you can enjoy the café for as long as you want. Don't worry about all of that.

**JOE:** (*He's stymied; there's a long pause*) Anyway, we were saying about race – (*looks up at Mohamad*) – so you were stopped and frisked?

**MOHAMAD:** (*Wryly*) I have to be, it's my duty. I am poor, black and Muslim. And...

**JOE:** You know my grandfather came from Ethiopia.

**MOHAMAD:** Really, from where?

**JOE:** I don't know. He migrated to Sicily and married a Sicilian, and never left a trace of his tribe in Africa.

**MOHAMAD:** So you should come with us to hear Obama speak. He's part of all our heritage.

*Adriana puts phone away and looks up.*

**MOHAMAD:** Africa is proud of Obama, and African-Americans are proud of him. At the very least, you admit – the symbolic value is important?

**ADRIANA:** (*To Mohamad*) Okay, let's not get into the Obama thing again? (*To Joe*) I think it's time for a walk down to the corner...or maybe a trip to another planet.

*Adriana approaches Mohamad and lovingly takes his hand, which remains limp. She looks at him, but he's looking away somewhat uncomfortably. She goes back to Joe.*

**ADRIANA:** Ok, Uncle Joe, come on.

**JOE:** Yeah, my legs are getting stiff sitting here. Hey, Mohamad, can you hold on to this *Daily News* for me? I'll be right back.

**MOHAMAD:** No problem.

*Adriana takes Joe by the arm, begins to exit LEFT, and briefly looks back at Mohamad, who moves forward and addresses the audience.*

**MOHAMAD:** Some people can't go beyond their little worlds. They're stuck their whole lives. When I came to New York, I couldn't let myself stay trapped. The money was good, better anyway, even if the housing was not. But things are changing all the time, and if you don't change along with everything, you'll get stuck in the mud. (*He gestures towards Adriana*). She is not Muslim, so I cannot get stuck. She is very attractive and very good, but I say to myself, don't get stuck.

Ten years I am here from Ethiopia. In this city there is so much opportunity. And so many roadblocks. Many black men are shut out of opportunity, but also too many act disrespectful, in the "gangsta" mode. They should try to be more like Obama.

I been here so long I miss seeing my parents. They always taught me respect. And to go beyond our country, not just in body but in your mind. Their parents migrated too, from the village to the city. But here I am, thirty-two, I survived so much hardship, and sometimes I feel lost and helpless here, I am the boy missing his mother, looking for direction. But here I am. I'm not just from Ethiopia, I'm not just from New York, I am who I am, a man.

**ADRIANA (offstage):** Come on, Joe.

**MOHAMAD:** I tell myself: don't get stuck in the mud. Like those Americans who can't get with the new world, the world the way it is, not the world that they fantasize about or that they read about in the *New York Times*.

*Adriana enters LEFT with Joe.*

**ADRIANA:** Christ, you're slow today!

**JOE:** I can't help it if the sidewalks got potholes!

**ADRIANA:** You just made that up.

**JOE:** You can't just make this stuff up! Ok, let's see if Juan Gonzalez has a story here about potholes or something else, like the drone strikes in Pakistan.

*Joe sits at the table and goes back to his newspaper. Adriana goes over to Mohamad, away from Joe.*

**ADRIANA:** Ok, Mohamad, so what more can I do? You know how I feel about you.

**MOHAMAD:** I'm sorry. I'm thinking about a lot of things. You know, I told you before. It's not you. We're very different.

**ADRIANA:** But that's ok with me. And you told me so many times how that's what makes the world what it is.

**MOHAMAD:** You wouldn't wear a veil, right?

**ADRIANA:** Is that what it's all about? Just a veil?

**MOHAMAD:** It's part of it. It's part of living as a Muslim. This means a lot to my family.

**ADRIANA:** I have a family too.

**MOHAMAD:** Yes, I know that.

**ADRIANA:** Did you forget those weekends we spent together in the mountains, no veil, no families, we were so happy just with each other.

*(She takes his hand, they embrace)*

**MOHAMAD:** Yes we were and I meant all the things I said to you.

**ADRIANA:** Well, if you meant everything then why are you so cold to me now? Ok, so maybe I'll never wear the veil, maybe we can't be married, but we do love each other, I know we do.

**MOHAMAD:** Yes, maybe we do. But that's not good enough. There is the family to think about.

**ADRIANA:** Your family doesn't even know me.

**MOHAMAD:** And they couldn't. Don't you understand?

**ADRIANA:** But I...

**MOHAMAD:** And you see that I have nothing and have to work two jobs just to pay the rent in a place with a hot shower, sharing it with two men from Kenya who are barely making a living.

**ADRIANA:** I know, I know, but look at me too, just making a living. Mohamad, we can help each other.

*(They look at each other, embrace, look again at each other with intensity. ADRIANA addresses the audience).*

**ADRIANA:** I refuse to be anyone's slave. I'm independent and am going to stay that way. So many men are just interested in a quick thrill, and then when I find someone who seems to really connect with me as a human they come up with new games. It's always ME who has to give up my freedom. Doesn't matter if they themselves ain't free. They think they're free, but what kind of freedom is it if they're gaming their women, just going from one to another, running away all the time? I can do fine by myself. I have friends, good friends, and I have family. I'm not stupid, I can support myself, I don't

need to depend on anybody. (Pause) But I really love (voice cracks) really love Mohamad more than I ever loved...

**JOE:** Hey Adriana dear. Let's go home and get some real food!

**MOHAMAD:** You'd better go get him some food.

*Adriana moves towards Joe, keeping her gaze on Mohamad.*

**MOHAMAD:** Mr. Joe, I know you appreciate Adriana's cooking. Enjoy. I'll be waiting for you to come back again tomorrow.

**JOE:** Hell, we're all waiting. Waiting for Obama, dammit!

### SCENE THREE

*Back on Joe's stoop. It is evening. Sergio sits on his stoop, next door. He reads the New York Times and sips on a Pennant Pale Ale (Brooklyn Brewery). A couple is sitting at the bistro, each texting. One of them stops, looks up at the other, pauses, then returns to texting. The other does the same. Then each mutters to themselves, one of them distraught and the other smiling. They both get up together and without looking at each other walk off together stage RIGHT, absorbed in their texting.*

*Adriana walks Joe out from the house and seats him in a chair on top of the stoop. She puts his cane next to the chair.*

**ADRIANA:** (Talking to him loudly and somewhat like a little child). Here are your keys.

*Adriana jingles keys in front of Joe and slides them into his pocket. Sergio looks over at Adriana.*

**ADRIANA:** Here is your water, and don't stay out here too late. See ya tomorrow, honey. (She starts to exit).

**JOE:** Eh. (He waves his hand dismissively).

**SERGIO:** Hey Joe – one more day until Obama comes to Brooklyn.

*At this, Adriana, who was leaving, hesitates.*

**JOE:** (At first surprised, then his face sours). What, he didn't gentrify enough the first time?!

**SERGIO:** (to Adriana) I bought a new camera. He's going to the Promenade, Downtown Brooklyn, Grand Army Plaza, Prospect Park, then Bed Stuy. Do you believe it – a President in Bed Stuy?

**JOE:** Is he buying a condo there? Maybe they'll let him do a few stop-and-frisks.

**SERGIO:** You know, while you're picking apart Obama, he's . . . (*He decides not to bother. Then, he whispers to Adriana.*) He's hopeless.

**ADRIANA:** Ooh, I want to see him in person. That man is fiiine! Well, before he became President he was. Did you see the pictures of him playing basketball?

**SERGIO:** (*Forces a laugh to ingratiate himself with ADRIANA.*) Ha ha! That's one way to restore hope! Maybe he'll be playing with Jay-Zee or the Nets!

**ADRIANA:** He's going to Prospect Park. And then there's a concert there with Bruce Springsteen. And Barbara Streisand.

**SERGIO:** (*To audience.*) I've always liked Latina women. Call me an ethnophile, but something about the olive skin, they're always done up, the hoop earrings . . . anyway they usually seemed more interested in the guy from the neighborhood who drives a nice car and goes to all the clubs.

**ADRIANA:** (*To audience.*) That's because the neighborhood guy in the car got swag. Sergio here's nice . . . smart . . . he's got money . . . he's even kind of cute. But he's not really my type.

**SERGIO:** (*To audience.*) Anyway, it's great living in Brooklyn because everywhere you go you can see the future. The nation of diversity is here, in Brooklyn. He (*gesturing towards Joe*) can only see the world through that old lens. Black and white, that's all there is. Ok, maybe we're not there yet but compare this place to the others. Just over there Jews and Arabs live in the same neighborhood. Then a little further is all of Eastern Europe and Russia. And then there's all of Latin America over there in Sunset Park, South Asia in Kensington, and the Caribbean in Flatbush. And hell, that's not all. I go to all these places. It's amazing but we are living in a place that's more hopeful than any other in the world.

(*Adriana receives a text message. She looks at it and looks up at Sergio and Joe.*)

**ADRIANA:** I gotta go. I'll see you tomorrow, Uncle Joe. Bye bye, Sergio.

**SERGIO:** Bye, Adriana.

**JOE:** Eh.

*Joe gives a semi-wave goodbye. Sergio goes back to reading his paper. Joe takes in the night. Sounds of Brooklyn on a warm summer night are heard: a few children playing, a siren, a car revving.*

**JOE:** Obama – huh! Nobody got all excited about Walt Whitman coming to Brooklyn, or Norman Mailer. Do you think they even *think* about Shirley Chisholm, the first presidential candidate from Brooklyn, long before Obama went to law school. She was from Bed Stuy before he even heard of it. Hey, *she* stood up against the goddamn bigots instead of taking them out for a beer. I went door-to-door for her and so did a some of the sisters and brothers in my union. Even though the Central Labor Council did shit.

If Julie were here she would be just as excited as they are to go see Obama. I would go along with her. When you're married to someone 40 years I guess you don't get so wound up about things. We understood each other even if we didn't agree on a lot of things. I guess we tolerated each other. (*Pause*) I miss her. Especially out here on the stoop. We used to meet our friends here. And her friends from down the block who used to get together and cook once a month. Cook! That's when people used to eat at home! Shit, I sound like a sentimental old fart. God, I really miss her!

*(A man in work clothes enters stage RIGHT and sits at the bistro table. After a few seconds he looks around to be waited on. No one comes.)*

**SERGIO:** Hey Joe. What are you going to do when Obama comes? (Sarcastically) Let's see, I suppose you could always go to the local Tea Party meeting? Or maybe the Communist Party is having a rally?

**JOE:** You are a LIBERAL!

**SERGIO:** What! Who's the liberal? Bush stole the first election, but enough liberal idiots voted for him the second time and enough of you guys didn't even vote. And yet you sit here and rant about power to the people.

**JOE:** Shit, I voted. But that's not all I did. Anyway, the elections are all corrupted by money.

**SERGIO:** How can you run for anything without....

**JOE:** That's my point.

**SERGIO:** What?

**JOE:** The fat cats are the ones...

**SERGIO:** Just because people have money doesn't mean they're corrupt. What about human nature? You want to make everything about class, but you know what? A lot of the working class people have the same fucked up human traits as the greedy rich people, and you put them in power and see if they don't act....

**JOE:** How can they get into power unless they bow down for the money. The system...

**SERGIO:** You spend so much time focusing on the macro that you've lost track of the micro – the people in front of you.

**JOE:** They ain't in front of me any more. They're in front of electronic devices. Or dead.

**SERGIO:** At the end of the day, you still have to be able to enjoy life. It's a beautiful night in Brooklyn. Life is good here, Joe. (*Gets up and storms inside his brownstone. Joe looks a little taken aback at first, but quickly waves off Sergio*).

**JOE:** (*Makes a motion as if knocking on his head*). A bullshit liberal!

*The man at the bistro, still looking around, bangs on the table.*

**MAN:** Hey Mohamad, can I get some service here? I been sitting here for an hour? (*Pause*). Hey, I'm a customer for chrissakes!

#### SCENE FOUR

*At the bistro, a few balloons are attached to the table where Adriana and Joe are sitting. It's Joe's birthday. A few coffee cups and a half-eaten piece of birthday cake are on the table.*

**JOE:** You know what this place used to be?

**ADRIANA and JOE:** (*She's heard this before –she responds simultaneously with Joe*). A hardware store.

**JOE:** Now they want an arm and a leg for an espresso. At least before you could get a screw driver and I don't mean the kind with vodka. And anybody could hang out on the corner without having to pay for a table. Or get stopped and frisked.

**ADRIANA:** Be happy. It's your birthday!

*Mohamad enters wearing waiter's apron.*

**JOE:** Eh, each year is a little crueler to me. Aging ain't no fun.

**MOHAMAD:** Mister Joe, you haven't eaten all of your birthday cake.

**JOE:** Too sweet. Sweet and sour don't always mix. I'm going to the bathroom.

*Adriana and Mohamad attempt to help him up, but he hastily waves them away. It takes Joe a comically long time to gather his things, get up, and shuffle offstage with his cane.*

**ADRIANA:** What's going on with you?

**MOHAMAD:** This is not the place to talk about this.

**ADRIANA:** I've been trying to get in touch with you for two days. I texted you a million times. What's going on? If you're busy, I understand, or if you need to slow things down, that's fine.

**MOHAMAD:** (*Waves to someone approaching on the street – offstage. Turns to ADRIANA. Even firmer this time.*) I told you, this is not the place.

*Sergio enters, wearing an Obama "Foreward" T-shirt*

**MOHAMAD:** Hello, Sergio. Inside or outside?

**SERGIO:** Thank you, I'm not eating today. I just wanted to say happy birthday to Joe. Are you guys going to see Obama speak?

**MOHAMAD** and **ADRIANA** together: I have to work. (*They look at each other and smile*).

**MOHAMAD:** And it costs too much.

**SERGIO:** (*to MOHAMAD*) Where's the birthday boy?

**MOHAMAD:** In the men's room. Excuse me. (*He goes back inside restaurant*).

**SERGIO:** How's he feeling on his birthday?

**ADRIANA:** (*She is polite, but feeling uncomfortable. Sergio's clearly more into this conversation than she is.*) Ha ha. Not really.

**SERGIO:** I think he's missing her a lot these days. I always try to tell him to remember all the good times and to be happy with what he's got. That's all we can do, right?

**ADRIANA:** Yup.

**SERGIO:** But also he's always got some axe to grind with some businessman or politician. My view is: this world will always have negativity – corruption, cruelty, you know – and we can fight against those things, but you also have to be able to take the world as it is and enjoy the positive, enjoy the people you love, stop and say "You know what? This world is fucked up, but I'm going to be happy while I'm here."

*Long pause. Adriana stares in the distance.*

There was an article in the New York Times about aging...*(He sees Joe entering)* Hey, Joe. Happy birthday!

**JOE:** *(Shuffles in from restaurant. His white shirt is sticking out of his zipper. He notices Sergio's T-shirt).* Oh, you're still waiting for Obama?

*Adrianna gets up and helps Joe into his seat. She also points out his zipper issue. After a pause, Joe figures out what Adriana is gesturing to, and he zips up.*

**ADRIANA:** There you go.

**SERGIO:** We don't have to wait much. He's on his way.

**JOE:** I don't know, tonight over 50,000 people in the city have to camp out in a city shelter!

**SERGIO:** Oh come on, the president of the whole United States can't solve all the city's problems.

**JOE:** Well, he started it all with this gentrification.

**SERGIO:** When was the last time you left New York? This is the country of strip malls and drive-through grocery shopping – the country where more people vote for TV shows than for the President, where half of the country thinks evolution and global warming are a hoax.

**JOE:** Yeah, and he's their man! *(He waves dismissively).*

**SERGIO:** He's more like us than any other President – he even lived in Brooklyn! He spurred a grassroots movement and got elected!

**JOE:** How do you know he won't show up?

**SERGIO:** Huh?

**JOE:** Bobby Kennedy came to Brooklyn, and you know he made a big impression. Got some things going. But he never came back.

**SERGIO:** Time for a cold shower. I'm going to see history made today. Happy birthday Joe!

**ADRIANA:** Ok, now. Have fun. Take some pictures for me.

*SERGIO exits.*

**ADRIANA:** *(to Joe).* Chill out, Uncle Joe. Its your birthday!

**JOE:** One year older. *(He makes a "check, please" motion to Mohamad, who is offstage in the restaurant).* I'm ready for home.

**ADRIANA:** Suit yourself.

**MOHAMAD:** *(Entering)* Happy birthday, and have a great day, Mr. Joe. It's on the house.

**JOE:** *(Stunned).* Uh. Thanks. Must've cost a lot. How can they afford it with the goddamn rent they have to pay?

**MOHAMAD:** Thank you, Mr. Joe. You're very important here, on this block.

**JOE:** *(He takes out his wallet and leaves a few bills as a tip.)* Thank you sir, and this is for you.

*Adriana briefly looks at Mohamad then gets up and helps Joe. Mohamad turns and heads back inside. Adriana and Joe sit in silence; Adriana is texting. Suddenly she shrieks with glee, looking at her smart phone.*

**ADRIANA:** OBAMA'S IN BROOKLYN!

**AUDIO:** *Fade out as Peter Tosh's "African" plays: If you come from Brooklyn, if you come from Clarendon, you are an African . . . ).*