

THE WAIF SPARROW

CHARACTERS

Uzma - 37. Born in Pakistan, now in New York City. Aspires to find success in writing, but continually faces obstacles.

Jimmy - 23. Having an affair with Uzma. What the audience doesn't know is that Jimmy cheats on his office work, his one and only sexual desire.

Jonee - (*Pronounced "Johnny"*) 23. A friend of Jimmy's.

Cassandra - 16. Prospective student in pre-law. Unfortunately, she is just beginning to lose all drive and motivation to perpetuate civil morality.

Mohammed - 7. Prospective student in technology and engineering.

Unfortunately, he was just beginning to gain a sense of self assurance.

Brianna - 42. Close friend of Uzma. Has very strong opinions.

You and your whole race.

Look down upon the town in which you live

And be ashamed.

Look down upon white folks

And upon yourselves

And be ashamed

That such supine poverty exists there,

That such stupid ignorance breeds children there

Behind such humble shelters of despair—

That you yourselves have not the sense to care

Nor the manhood to stand up and say

I dare you to come one step nearer, evil world,

With your hands of greed seeking to touch my throat, I dare you to come one step

nearer me:

When you can say that

you will be free!

- Langston Hughes

No artifacts of technology. Everything mechanical. Everywhere glass is breaking. Houses have no walls, walls no windows, windows no light. UZMA writing her name repeatedly on a chalkboard in white chalk.

UZMA: When you die they weigh you at the door. When you die, they empty out the contents of your pockets on the floor, each with their own logic. And where is Jimmy when you die?

JIMMY: In my dream, in my dream... she lifts her head from my hands. She rises from the dead in my dream. In my dream she straightens the wrinkles from her red velvet dress, as she always does. Each wrinkle her own good. *(Beat.)* The world crumbles when you die. She turns her head, she speaks. Her hair is wet. The rain has made a river of the street.

UZMA: I don't know how he ever loved me. I don't know how I ever loved him. You write someone else's story from her blood. When you die you take my clothes, they take your shoes. This is what he worships; writing about someone else's church of useless artifacts, worships, things of no importance. Someone has become a fierce uncoordinated child. They take your keys. They take your reading glasses that make nothing clear. When you die they take your reminders of keys that no longer open locks. What remains, you lose. The weather is a wash of rain and floods. And ha! Your life? What remains of your life is the smallest. What remains, you lose. They give you something... *(Beat.)* things. Sometimes they make you cut your hair. *(She straightens the wrinkles from her dress and wipes the tears from her cheek.)* While the world weeps, nothing is natural. It's all a shrine of junk, a shrine of charms, someone else's talismans. While the world weeps, Jimmy sings to himself. While the world weeps for the loss of him, nowhere is balance. Pens in his little hand while the world disintegrates like wet cat hair in a summer heat. Each his own strange science, old but not ancient. All glorious leavings of nothing of real importance. This is what he worships. They take your rings. But they don't want you to be a dead stranger, so they give you chalk when you die.

JIMMY: They say we shouldn't talk or write. Still they give you chalk to tempt you.

UZMA: *(Stops writing, drops chalk.)* He thinks he's a priest at the altar. Singing to himself in a roomful of junk.

JIMMY: The rain has made a beach of this city. They want you light like the sand, that's why they weigh you in. When you die they take your pencils, your life. It's all junk... mysterious yet trivial.

UZMA: Like your pens, your lies—

JIMMY: Your lies... *(Long pause.)* She doesn't lift her head from my hands. She doesn't— She doesn't stand. This is not a dream. She is dead.

UZMA: You and only you will know what I mean when I say I will be free. Remember it. I will be free from this home. This humble shelter with windows with no skies. Leave the super markets dry and bare, storm the churches, flood the streets and run mad, run naked, run pure, run free. I cannot find progress in humanity. Why must I continue to grieve over the loss of my loved ones? There has been a curse cast under this house. My son, my good and pure son. My daughter, oh why did my daughter Cassandra suffer? I dare you to come one step nearer, evil world, with your hands of greed seeking to touch my throat. *(Beat.)* I have become someone else's trash.

JONEE: *(JONEE enters the stage, talking to JIMMY.)* I brought back some leftover's from that deli you like so much. The one in Hell's Kitchen.

JIMMY: I don't want anything from that deli anymore.

JONEE: That's fine. So... *(Ping goes the lightbulb.)* There was such a long line! I found five pennies in her tip jar, but I figured she didn't need that anymore, so I took 'em.

JIMMY: YOU WHAT?!

JONEE: I took them! There were only five pennies. They've been sitting there for a week now, I was there when this old man gave them to her. He said she looked pretty in her red dress.

JIMMY: It was red velvet.

UZMA: Dead now.

JONEE: The place was packed with lardasses waiting for a jelly doughnut, and I was one of those pigs. You couldn't call it a business, where she worked, you know?

JIMMY: Do you know what it feels like to be in a room filled with so much clutter and you begin to notice you can't see the floor? *(Beat.)* I don't need company right now... anymore. I don't need company anymore, I'm done.

UZMA: Done.

JIMMY: And when it's-

UZMA: When it's done, they turn you to the place you left behind. Your memories. Like someone else's trash. *(She exits.)*

JIMMY: Do you know what it feels like Jonee? To be in a room where you can't see the floor? Where you trip over something with every step you take and you begin to fall but never hit the ground? Is it still falling if you never hit the ground, Jonee?

JONEE: *(Pulls leftovers out of brown bag. Tosses items on the floor.)* Pencils. A notebook. Crayons. One red glasses case. Reading glasses-

JIMMY: Hey! Cut that out!

JONEE: CDs. So many CDs. *(Turns bag upside down.)* And car keys.

JONEE and JIMMY leave, UZMA and BRIANNA take the space.

UZMA: Brianna, I want to write a book. I want to write a book about a lost person— mentally, emotionally, spatially, ludicrously lost. Someone who seeks consistency in their life, a wholeness, something to devote themselves wholly to. And... now please don't badger me about this, but, I want it to be a romance.

BRIANNA: So you want to write about someone who devotes themselves wholly to their partner?

UZMA: No. Actually, I had other ideas in mind. (*Pause.*) I want this person to seek a religion to devote themselves to, and in this story, I want it to be Islam.

BRIANNA: I have a problem with that idea. I feel that is not your responsibility to make clear to an audience. Why should it be paraded before the American public by a Muslim author as being typical or representative of Islam? Bad enough to have white authors holding up our imperfections to public gaze. Our aim should be to present to the general public, already misinformed both by well meaning and malicious writers, our higher aims and aspirations, and our better selves.

UZMA: I deeply sympathize with you, and I clearly see the need for some of the kinds of books you want written. But I do not see how one could expect every Muslim author to write such books. Certainly, I personally know very few people, anywhere, and from any culture, who were wholly beautiful and wholly good. Besides, I feel that the masses of our people have as much in their lives to put into books as do those more fortunate ones who have been born with the means to work up to a GED, let alone a master's degree. Anyway, I don't know the upper class Muslims well enough to write much about them. I know only the people I grew up with, and they weren't people whose shoes were always shined, who had been to Harvard, or who had heard of Bach. But they seemed, to me at least, good people too. They were their "better selves." And that is exactly what no one could take away from them. And that is exactly why I chose to write about them! Because we are the coming generation of people who need to represent people, no matter what class or culture they belong to. There is some value and significance in the curse of the starving class, the oppressed, the privileged, the isolated, the racially separated.

JIMMY: (*Holding a torch.*) The songs from there traversed the boundless heavens. Song summoned by the voices of three angels— they were helpless, hopeless, crying out. And even though the god appeared, he did not bring the words and verses we know as familiar, nor countenances radiating joy, nor omens of good fortune for the family.

UZMA: AND THE TORCH HE CARRIED MERELY SPATTERED,

JIMMY: singing only

UZMA: TEAR-PRODUCING SMOKE, NOT CATCHING FIRE WHEN HE WHIRLED IT ROUND THIS UNATTRACTIVE KINGDOM. This city, this marvelously monotonous mechanism. Like a cracked glass bottle tucked into the confines of a sidewalk, THE THRACIAN BARD, the unruly abbot.

JIMMY: I HAVE NOT COME DOWN HERE TO YOUR KINGDOM JUST FOR THE VIEW,

UZMA: I've lost THE CAUSE OF MY JOURNEY.

JIMMY: I've lost THE CAUSE OF MY JOURNEY. LOVE CAME OVER ME. And then hate.

UZMA: By all of these frightening places, by mighty

JIMMY: chaos

UZMA: And by THIS REALM OF THE SILENT, I BEG YOU TO WEAVE ONCE AGAIN MY FATE, ALL DONE...

JIMMY: ALL DONE TOO SWIFTLY.

UZMA: You owned me wholly and thought we may linger,

JIMMY: LATER OR SOONER ALL

UZMA: HASTEN

JIMMY: TO THIS

UZMA: THIS SINGLE DWELLING space. I ASK FOR HER LIFE AS A FAVOR

JIMMY: BUT IF THE FATES SHOULD DENY ME THE GIFT

UZMA: I am seeking this city on behalf of her. This metropolis of steel and glass must explain why it had to take her. My Cassandra. Why devour the innocence of a child?

JIMMY: Answer me. Speak clearly.

UZMA: Yell if you must! Be sure that you will remain here. A DOUBLE DESTRUCTION. The receding waters of early motherhood. The sacred cradle, covered in blood. And he is gone. And I am here. And I have been here. But like you said, I don't belong here. I am not meant to be here because

JIMMY: you don't want me here. You do not long for safety anymore.

UZMA: He thinks I need his help to get out of here. But he doesn't

ALL: He doesn't-

UZMA: He doesn't acknowledge that I put myself here. I no longer wanted to be a part of them. Who wants to see their mother sick, their father deceased, their brothers and sisters fall at Fate's hand, their friends turn a back on them, their career deteriorated by preconceived notion, their life in jeopardy due to a misshaped perception of their culture, their community members hide behind fences barricading a sprinkler's hissing? Those receding waters of early motherhood do not reach the grass on my end of the garden. And I fear these sights. And I fear this city. I fear my neighbor because they fear me. Feel a burn in March during the march. Feel the fire of the city. Feel the heat waves rising from concrete slow cooking sidewalks. Feel his betrayal. Feel his fear of loneliness. Feel the knots in my stomach when Cassandra comes home...

CASSANDRA enters. Her arms and face are bruised and bloody. She faces the door, turning her back to her mother. UZMA advances toward her.

UZMA: Cassandra? Where were you? Why haven't you answered my phone calls? Were you lost out there? Cassandra??

CASSANDRA: *(Turning around in rage.)* Will you give me a second to speak!

UZMA: *(Runs to her daughter.)* CASSANDRA! Who did this to you? *(CASSANDRA won't look her in the eye. UZMA shakes CASSANDRA in rage.)* Answer me! WHO HURT YOU?!

CASSANDRA: MOM! I WAS SCARED! I WAS SO SCARED AND YOU'RE SCARING ME NOW. I'm scared Mom and I... Mom- I can't breathe. *(She shakes, she mumbles, she falls into her mother's arms. MUHAMMAD enters stumbling and mumbling.)*

UZMA: Muhammad, let me see your face.

MUHAMMAD: Mom, he came back back. He was yelling at us Mommy... I saw him hit her. I saw him hit her and I started to hit him. I threw rocks at him to get him off. His hair started bleeding Mom! And her eye is purple and red. Is she going to be okay Mom? Will Cassandra be okay?

UZMA: Who was it Muhammad? Who did this to her?

MUHAMMAD: Uncle Jim Mom! Why was he so mad at her? What did she do?

UZMA: *(Laying CASSANDRA on the couch. She moans, groans and sobs.)* Baby, go get her some water and make sure she drinks it. *(Exits through front door while screaming.)* JIMMY!!! JIMMY YOU COWARD! WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU! SHOW YOURSELF! I TOLD YOU TO STAY AWAY. I TOLD YOU YOU DON'T BELONG. I WARNED YOU OF THE WORST. *(Long pause.)* ANSWER ME!!!

A much longer silence radiates through the theatre. UZMA enters. She clings to the door, backing into her home. She locks the door and tends to her children. The light shifts to a dim spotlight over the couch. Upstage of the living room stands a Minaret, a tower, transforming the stage into a masjid. UZMA, CASSANDRA, and MUHAMMAD roll out their prayer rugs. They pray. Multiple members of the masjid cross the stage, all are whispering... glaring....

THE MEMBERS: I heard she was having an affair. Those kids must be so troubled. Just look at how she allows them to dress. I bet you her daughter brought it upon herself. That tramp... What kind of mother could allow that to happen... Did she not see the signs... He was an English

teacher at the school... That woman should not have custody over... Where were the police... That girl was asking for it... I've seen the way she looks at our son... *(THE MEMBER speaking holds their son's arms and rushes offstage.)*

UZMA: They think I let it happen to her. They suspect I am a poor mother... neglectful. Well so be it. Let them think what they want. They don't know him. How troubled *he* was. My children are no trouble. Not my little Muhammad. Not my Cassandra... *(Seething.)* Did they take her to the hospital to get tested? Did they see their child blinded by his repugnant, rotting evil? They didn't have a clue. All they want to do is gossip. No one will confront the situation but me at the end of the day. Yet they still make their remarks. They feel a pride I do not have in me. They don't know what it was like to be with him. His aggressive possessiveness. His hand that whipped against my face. His stare. That wicked, silent gaze he would give when I didn't do as told. *(Beat.)* He never trusted me. Never. I think he wanted to. But nothing would keep his mind at peace. No matter how much I spoke to him, he just- he gave out and broke down. Taking down others with him. He's taken my daughter's innocence. His negligence, my suffering. His betrayal, my delusion. I look down to his sick mind, no matter how far from him I stand. Let him gain the success he wants, and see how he crumbles under pressure. See him break the rules. Watch him desecrate my child. Lurk his mind, fill it with guilt. Stuff his head with the name

ALL: Cassandra.

UZMA: Watch him fall to his knees. His tiny hands clinging to the pen, soil under fingernails. Pen as a weapon. Pen as an axe to draw blood. Listen to his soothsaying, watch his incomplete prophecy. Watch him unfulfilled, unsuccessful, without morality, without a human conscience. Manipulate him until he glares Death in the face and then let nature run its course. Watch him

beg for forgiveness, for his every wish to come true. And then notice his lack of courage, bravery, honesty, and trustworthiness. Watch his life hollow as the sun burns the snail from his shell. An empty carton waiting to be tossed in the trash. The trash tossed into a furnace. As he tossed her innocence in a furnace with no remorse, continuing to stand without a morsel of regret.

JIMMY is outside the front door, hidden and disguised. It's 7:30am and the kids are ready for school. MUHAMMAD waits by the window. A school bus is heard pulling up and honking. UZMA hands him a lunchbox, sending him off into the world, watching as he gets on the bus. The bus pulls away, UZMA waves to MUHAMMAD. CASSANDRA rushes in, kisses her mother and they embrace. She exits. UZMA, unsettled, retreats to her study. Lights fade on living room and shift to JIMMY bumping into CASSANDRA. She is in such a rush she doesn't stop to consider danger. JIMMY knocks.

UZMA: *(Offstage. Typing.)* He won't be tapping anymore. It's always the same words over and over again. You used to laugh, kiss me, throw your arms around me. You had a good job. You quit your job. You stopped writing. You forced me, pressured me into writing you a story. He an overripe tomato squashed by a beggar at the beginning of the end. I begged for his love. He enters my private darkness and dives into a river of sentences in the attempt to win me over. But I am not a prize to be won. I'm not a degenerate to be scrutinized. I am not his morning, noon, and night. I am not his light. I am not because I don't want to be. I am sick of his being and being his. I'm sick of his being. I'm sick of being his. *(Beat.)* We moved to this town in hopes of revitalization and I receive only deprecation. We longed to build a house together and he tore mine down with his tuneful axe. His axe sang the song of death. His axe sang the song of death and murdered all hope for truth.

JONEE: The summer has gone by Jimmy. You look sick. Today you haven't eaten. If you're not eating, you're dying. *(To audience.)* He tells himself, chants mantras to himself: through more typing, my brain will compute faster, stronger, clearer. Through more typing, the ink will set into paper when the bleeding is done. Through more typing, I will understand her difficulties. *(Beat.)* And when it's a mad scramble, like half formed creatures coming up from the sea swarming in the river of a street, he thinks this is what it means to compose something with value and significance.

JIMMY: This is what it means to compose something with value and significance.

JONEE: It's insane out there.

JIMMY: The world has become clearer than ever before... I hope.

MUHAMMAD walks slowly onto stage carrying an analog clock. Behind him follows a police officer. They both travel across the stage and drag their feet. They pick up speed, jogging in a circle around the couch.

UZMA: This is what he worships. He worships someone else's trash. Eating anything. Eating everything. Eating each other while eating nothing really at all. I couldn't anymore, I'm done.

MUHAMMAD and the officer are now running, continuing to run offstage. Gunshot. UZMA buckles at this sound, catches herself, and runs offstage.

JIMMY: *(To audience.)* Do YOU know what it feels like to be in a room filled with so much clutter you can't see the floor? To be in a room filled with someone else's trash? Her hair is wet with blood. Her red dress embellished with beads of rain. She smells of burnt ink on paper and stale brioche.

BRIANNA: Library card. Some change from her purse.

JIMMY: Her head is in my hands. Her legs are hanging and under her the children sleep and dream of a better school day. She looks discarded and lifeless. Her face is bruised on the side where she fell. Her face, her face is swollen and scraped. Her dress is torn on the side where she fell. Her dress, her velvet red dress wet with blood and rain and ink. But when they lay him on that hospital bed, when he is washed by the nurse. When he is laid in that clean white linen, she goes to the masjid.

At the Minaret.

BRIANNA: The ship is standing still, movement an illusion. For she is winter. She wraps herself in cloth for prayer. The members stand in awe. They stand in the snow. They stand in the snow, waiting in a thick and hot silence. And in that silence she comes to know. In that silence, the members come to understand her pain upon her descent.

UZMA: *(To BRIANNA.)* Why are you here?

BRIANNA: The sound of silence woke me. The calls to prayer made me get up early. *(They both share a moment of uncomfortable confusion.)* Are you okay?

UZMA: The last time I got out of bed for prayer this early, I ran into him. He was going to prayer for Eid, it was the closing of Ramdan. We said nothing. He just smiled, removed his shoes and entered for prayer. I saw him again as I was leaving the masjid and invited him over for breakfast. I made some coffee. He asked me how my fast had gone that month. I couldn't move my lips. I couldn't utter a syllable despite all I wanted to say. He made me so happily nervous. I finally built up the courage to speak. I told him it went well. *(Pause. She snaps out of that memory.)* I had a strange dream the other night Brianna. I dreamt I was asleep in a large field. I got up, feeling a strong sense of panic and walked through a tall field of grass. I had this urge to hold someone's hand. *(THE MEMBERS hold hands.)* I began to run to a river when a large man startled me from behind. He asked to hold my hand, but I continued to run. He started to run after

me, shouting for me to stop. He shouted “Wait!” I ran across this bridge and over the river. He stopped at the bridge and panted. He was so out of breath and that made me feel guilty for running away. It was as if the river were some magic boundary, as if crossing will save me, as if escaping will save me. I failed to see the signs. I failed to believe his cunning truths. His hidden deception cloaked in the most lyrical words that would just- *(Begins to break.)* his writing would just sing from the pages. But I feel the poison he planted. I feel the poison in my blood. He as a snake, his writings the venom. I die and he stands, his name unscathed by his actions. A true injustice. We are both distracted by our dreams, walking down rivers and canals half conscious, just outside this crowded city. *(Picks up reading glasses.)* I fumbled with my reading glasses to catch the color in his eyes, just so I could write about how golden they were once I got home. Once my kids came home from school... Muhammad died last night, in my arms, in that cold and sterile hospital bed dressed in white linen. My dress was soaked in rainwater. My dress was slimy with blood. His blood. I got there too late.

BRIANNA: One would think someone that saw would have done something.

UZMA: But they didn't. I'm sure they all just stood there staring. Just like Jimmy after I crossed the bridge.

BRIANNA: And where were the police?

UZMA: More officers showed up soon after I got the phone call from school. They told me it was an accident. A fatal accident. The officer that guards the school did not care to meet Muhammad, not until yesterday. After more officers showed up, they set up barriers, but the crowds didn't diminish. Instead they set up the burial ground. They beg and they weep.

BRIANNA: When all the evidence is washed, all memories washed by the rain and empty into the rivers of this city, of where she's been. When all her things have been removed and are tossed on the floor. Her body is silence.

ALL: The earth is silence. Her world removed and now they tell her she is absolutely clean. Nothing of the street, the rain, the soil. Nothing of the winter remains. The rain wets the snow and it melts. The soil, away and into the river goes the best soil. Her toes rich with earth for she had no shoes here. She remembers nothing from the fall. The blood. The ink. Nothing of the accident. Nothing of the life remains. A lie is tangled in the branches of the tree outside her apartment window that no one can see. A modest shade of red is her dress, is her blood. A pad of unlined paper. Just words. Envy Frenzy Rage Aggression Wonder Desperation Betrayal and Love. Love as the divine spirit to call to when in need. But when they lay them on that hospital bed, when washed by the nurse, when laid in that clean and white linen dressed bed, he hovers over her like an omen. This being he treats like an artifact, as if she were some long lost friend or lover. It was not an accident.

UZMA: No. It was not an accident. But now it's just blood on his hands. Just some blood on his hands. His hands are prohibited from the touch of the rain's water now. It's spirit cannot cleanse his palms now. Now, Just some pens and unlined paper. Some writing. It's all normal junk now.

BRIANNA: Now, what I want you to do is pick up the chalk and write and erase when needed. The orator reminding you, 'I am yours to command.' Everything to do with Love is mystery.

*Lights fade. Blackout. Sound of chalk on chalkboard. UZMA wipes the board.
End of play.*