

Space of a Moment: a refugee resettlement play

by Notch Theatre Company
and including the *BLACK COMMUNITY WATCHLINE PLAY* by Elinor T Vanderburg
created with support from coLAB Arts

"We are all migrants through time." --Mohsin Hamid, Exit West

"Literature can remind us that not all life is already written down: there are still so many stories to be told." --Colum McCann, Let the Great World Spin

Cast List

Prologue:

Actor 1 - Caseworker for I-Rise.

Actor 2 - Caseworker for I-Rise.

Actor 3 - Caseworker for I-Rise, Muslim.

Actor 4 - Caseworker for I-Rise.

Actor 5, Actor 6, Actor 7, Actor 8, Actor 9, Actor 10, Actor 11, Actor 12, Actor 13 - Members of your community

Play 1:

Berat - Asylee from Turkey, works in Global Grace Café as a cook.

Bruno - THICK Jersey accent, identifies as Scilian descent, food addict, cook in the café.

Claudia - Refugee from Guatemala, chef in Global Grace Café.

Patrick - Immigrant on a student visa.

Isobel - Puerto Rican caseworker, used to be a C.O. Tough as nails. Heart of gold. Has lived in Jersey most her life.

Taj - Runs Global Grace Café and farm.

Play 2:

Dan - Isobel's brother, houseless, an addict

Cathy - Houseless community member, living in New Brunswick.

Ashanti - Young woman who has aged out of foster care.

Sandra - Caseworker for I-Rise.

Gabriel (or Gabriela) - LatinX parent of 3, formerly worked as a doctor in their country of origin, now works in a warehouse.

Play 3:

BCW Actor A - Member of the Black community in Highland Park (HP).

BCW Pastor - White Pastor in HP.

BCW Actor B - Member of the Black community in HP.

BCW Actor C - Member of the Black community in HP.

Play 4:

Rusanganwa (Alex) - refugee from Rwanda, joyful, boisterous, life of the party.

Dola - Asylee from Nigeria, calm and parent like.

Saba - Refugee from Eritrea, young, fun, and sarcastic.

Fatima - Asylee from Syria, flirty in a kind, quiet and doe-eyed way.

PROLOGUE

The characters in this piece may become the facilitators of the dialogue between each play.

Actor 1: People have been misused and abused and people have been through so much. Gone from country to country. Living in terrible conditions. And when they arrive here, we must create safe homes for them, after not having one for such a long time.

Actor 2: We treat our clients like family.

Actor 3: And they become family.

Actor 4: This is a space for belonging.

Actor 3: Spaces of welcome.

Actor 1: We are really protective of our clients. But these are stories that people need to hear.

Actor 2: This is a story of small stories.

Actor 4: It is a story of belonging.

Actor 3: And dis-belonging.

Actor 1: There has been so much antagonism and hate against refugees -- because of [Trump], but this country is built by refugees and immigrants.

Actor 2: Sharing the story can...what? Raise awareness?

Actor 1: Show people what change is possible. What change could look like.

Actor 3: Hold up worlds we've never seen before and ask... *what if?*

Actor 4: This is a story of relationships--

Actor 1: --partnerships--

Actor 2: --mutual mentorship--

Actor 4: --interdependence...No... (*searching for a word*) Interconnectedness!

Actor 1: Inter-faith...?

Actor 2: Cross cultural, co-mmingling, CO-laborating.

Actor 4: Collaborative solutions. Instead of "I'm helping you," I think of my work as, "I have some info and resources and you have some skills that can lead to your own solutions."

Actor 1: It is a story of shared humanity, a story of how empathy is created through connection.

Actor 4: Relationships are what make my work possible. It's a story of mutual benefits, of helping one another, sharing resources, helping local businesses--

Actor 1: Oh HECK yeah! I troll social media and the community whats-apps groups for furniture for our people.

Actor 2: This is a story of small stories.

Actor 1: When this pandemic started it was like, ok, how are we going to get internet to every family who needs it?

Actor 2: Kids need to go to school, right?

Actor 3: Not just the internet, but computers too.

Actor 1: So, there I am calling the, um, cable guy, every day, like "heeeeeyyyy, me again!"

Actor 2: No you didn't?

Actor 1: Did.

Actor 2: (*laughing*) I didn't know that.

Actor 1: You know me. So, after a while, I got to know him. We talked everyday and he'd help me set up deals for whichever families we were getting online that day.

Actor 3: Do you think that when you walk into any store in Highland Park everyone is like - *Uh-Oh, this lady is gonna convince us to sell the shirts off our backs!*

Actor 1: (*laughing*) Listen, by the time I leave, they've donated the shirt, the pants and the kitchen sink!

Actor 2: This is a story of small stories.

Actor 3: The lessons you learn over and over.

Actor 4: This is a story of connection.

Actor 2: Of how connection--

Actor 1: --real connection--

Actor 2: --to one another--

Actor 4: --across distance and difference--

Actor 2: --can change our world.

Actor 1: Eritrea, Syria,

Actor 2: Congo and Rwanda,

Actor 3: Afghanistan,

Actor 4: Guatemala, Turkey,

Actor 1: China, Pakistan.

Actor 2: Sometimes you can get frustrated that you're not doing enough. Like all your work is just a drop in the bucket of this massive humanitarian crisis.

Actor 3: So, in December the state tells us, officially, you aren't getting any new families until the new year. So, everyone takes off work, right? I mean, listen, we work around the clock.

Actor 2: CRAZY hours.

Actor 1: This isn't a 9 to 5. I mean, it is... but... it isn't, you know?

Actor 3: And, OF COURSE, we end up getting four new families.

Actor 4: It was two families.

Actor 3: Who's telling the story here?

Actor 4: Fair enough.

Actor 3: And it's me, a volunteer, and her. (*Pointing to actor 2.*)

Actor 2: Oh, that's riiiiight, I forgot this story!

Actor 3: And EVERYONE is out of town. It's like, ok, well the Christians are on holiday and the Jews are on holiday. And so I'm like, alright, I'm calling up my Muslim community.

Actor 2: That's right! And they stepped up.

Actor 3: We got four new families housing in two weeks!

Actor 4: This is a story of person to person, direct advocacy.

Actor 2: This is a story of small stories.

Actor 3: It is a story of moments.

Actor 5: The moment the boat touches land.

Actor 6: The moment they decide.

Actor 7: The moment she finally speaks up.

Actor 8: The moment they choose him over you.

Actor 9: The moment she waves goodbye.

Actor 10: The moment he takes up arms.

Actor 11: The moment he pushes his weight against her.

Actor 12: The moment of metal whistling through air, the moment a village shatters.

Actor 12: The moment he cries out: *because it is my name!*

Actor 4: The moment he removes the burnt stick from his lawn, his child by his side.

Actor 3: The moment her shotgun pierces the fragile night.

Actor 2: The moment she splits at the seams with new life.

Actor 1: The first moment: first light, first orgasm, first step, first step on the moon, first step after the accident.

Actor 6: The moment of love, of coming alive in a body not our own.

Actor 5: The moment he told us that he has a dream, and has a dream, and has a dream.

Actor 8: The moment the sky opens up and he realizes he's been wrong all this time.

Actor 7: The moment a people come together in one voice.

Actor 9: The moment of no looking back.

Actor 11: THAT moment --

Actor 10: the space of a breath, when our lives forever changed.

Actor 1: All the lives we could live, all the people we will never know, never will be, they are everywhere. That is what the world is. That is what the theatre is.

Actor 2: A book I read that shaped my thinking, that changed my beliefs. A book by a person I will never meet. Whose words changed the very fabric of me. That is what art can do.

(Audience members have been cast, upon their entrance, to read these next lines, which are also repeated in other languages by the cast.)

Audience 1: The moment he said that “all art is political, in the sense that it serves someone's politics.” *(August Wilson quote Translated into Turkish)*

Audience 2: The moment he says: “It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” *(James Baldwin quote translated into Tigrinya)*

Audience 3: The moment she writes: “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” *(Maya Angelou quote translated into Urdu)*

Audience 5: The moment she said that, “although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” *(Hellen Keller quote translated into Hebrew)*

Audience 6: The moment she says: “We can only do what is possible for us to do. But still it is good to know what the impossible is.” *(Maria Irene Fornes quote translated into Spanish)*

Audience 7: The moment he says, “live your questions now, and perhaps even without knowing it, you will live along some distant day into your answers.” *(Rainer Maria Rilke quote translated into Dari)*

Audience 8: The moment he says, “I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.” *(Oscar Wilde quote translate into Arabic)*

(End audience participation.)

Actor 1: The voices that shape us. The stories we live by. The history we inherit. All the lives we will never live.

Actor 2: So we stumble on, bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves. It is almost enough.

Actor 1: A moment. Just a moment. Our lives. A moment. What we mean to each other. What we leave on this earth. Everything that happens in a moment.

Actor 3: “Long long ago. The simple things come back to us. They rest for a moment by our rib cages then suddenly reach in and twist our hearts a NOTCH backward.”

(BAM! We are slammed into the busy kitchen of Global Grace Cafe. Chaotic, vibrant, everyone is talking at once, a symphony of many languages and joyful voices. Music plays - I think it's Ricky Martin...)

PLAY 1: Global Grace

Claudia: Turn that music off!

(Music is turned off)

ALL *(protesting, complaining all at once)*: Hey, what the heck, que pasa, don't turn it off!

Claudia: What are you doing?

Patrick: You said to turn it off?

Claudia: Change the station.

Berat: Turn it back on!

Bruno: *(THICK Jersey accent)* We can't cook without music.

Claudia: Sheesh.

Patrick: Sorry, I'm new here!

(Music is back on, Whitney Houston's I Want To Dance with Somebody.)

Claudia: Better.

(During this scene the actors are cooking food live for the audience. The playing space is enveloped in the smell of onion and garlic and the sounds of hot food sizzling.)

Berat: I need more of the parsley.

Claudia: Cilantro.

Bruno: Comin' in hot.

(Bruno lobbs the herbs across the small kitchen, Claudia expertly ducks and Berat, just as expertly, catches them.)

Berat: Thank you!

(The kitchen operates like an olympic version of Twister. A hand darts this way to grab a potato, and another person swivels to make room. Someone has to bend over backwards to limbo under a tray being brought in while at the same time grabbing a utensil off the surface behind them. The kitchen is a well-oiled machine. Except for Patrick, who is still getting his bearings, and is just one beat behind, stepping on feet, in this dance that everyone else seems to know. And all of this is happening to the soundtrack of gossip and jokes and laughter and, of course, 80's music blaring on the radio/boombox.)

Berat: Hit me with a tomato!

Bruno: Heads up!

(Bruno again lobbs the produce to Berat. Claudia again ducks. But this time Patrick accidentally steps in the way and -- SPLAT -- right on the front of his apron.)

Berat *(to Patrick)*: How about you grab us what we need for the rice salad?

Patrick: *(heading into the dry pantry)*: Peppers, onion, black beans, corn... what am I missing?

Berat, Claudio, Bruno (*said in three languages*): ... rice / arroz / riz!

Patrick: And rice!

(Patrick comes out of the pantry, his arms full, juggling and struggling not to drop everything. He looks as if he is almost moving in slow motion through the organized chaos of the kitchen.)

Berat: Fire up!

Bruno: 86 the fish.

Claudia: We're not making fish today.

Bruno: Good, 'cause we're out. Yo, Patrick, what's good, you gonna tell us your story or what?

Patrick: *(while trying to juggle all the items from the pantry)* Oh, well, you know, I been watching my aunties cook since I was a little kid. So, I thought--

Bruno: Woah! Watch out!

(Patrick, tripping, drops the rice. Rice. Goes. Everywhere.)

Berat: Man down!

Bruno: Party foul.

Patrick: Oh shoot, oh no. Oh God, I'm so sorry!

Bruno: All good, man. *(Handing him a broom)* But you're on clean up.

(Taj enters with a box of greens and a basket of eggs from the farm, seeing the mess, laughing.)

Taj: Having one of those first days, huh? Don't worry, you'll get there. Everything you need to learn about life you can learn in the kitchen. What goes with what. What doesn't

go with what so good. You learn the courage to improvise, the patience to let things marinate, even the gratitude to take what scraps you have and make something wonderful, isn't that right?

Claudia: We used to go to the mercado in Guatemala every day, and my mother would tell me what to make, what to buy. My abuela was such a good cook! Sometimes in the kitchen, I can feel her guiding me. (*Claudia picks up a tomato and dices it like a pro.*)

Bruno: My family is all Italian, Sicilian, cooking is like... a way of life for us.

Taj: An art form.

Bruno: Culture and community.

Berat: Identity.

Burno: Family gathering around the table. Food is home.

Berat: Reminds us *of* home.

Claudia: Tapado.

Taj: Pozole.

Berat: Baklava.

Patrick: Kabuli Palaw!

Bruno: Arancini, caponata, busiate al pesto trapanese, pasta alla Norma. Oh man, I'm giddy! I might be addicted... but that's ok.

Patrick (laughin *To Taj*): Who taught you?

Taj: Taught myself. But I knew a real good cook in prison, taught me a lot of things.

Bruno: I'll bet. Gets lonely...

Claudia: Taj is talking 'bout cooking, lil' vato!

Bruno: Oh, me too!

Taj: Used to cook burritos, tamale, taught me how to pass food back and forth from floor to floor.

Bruno: Man, I do not miss those days... or that food.

Berat (*as a negative*): Uh-uh.

Taj: You know that's right. What are we serving today?

Claudia: Guatemalan chicken in coconut milk or pulique sauce with rice salad.

Taj: I thought today was Congolese?

Berat: Congolese is Fridays. Monday is Syrian cuisine.

Claudia: Tuesday is Mandarin. Wednesday is Senegalese --

Bruno: Oooo, you missed the Senegalese peanut soup! Dang, it was HOT.

Berat: And Thursday is Guatemalan.

(Bruno takes a handful of the fresh greens that Taj just bought in and inhales them deeply.)

Bruno: Mmm-Mmmm! You got Arugula in this batch?

Taj: Yep.

Bruno (*checking them out*): Mustard Greens?

Taj: Fresh from Global Grace Farm, baby.

(A chicken named Moe-Moe runs past)

Bruno, Taj, Berat, Claudia (*almost simultaneously*): NOT IT!

Patrick: Not it?

Berat: Tavuk sende!

Patrick: Yeah... still unclear...

Burno: Moe-Moe.

Patrick (*He goes to shake Bruno's hand*): Hi, I'm Patrick.

Claudia: No, Burno's talking about the chicken.

Patrick: Oh thank goodness, you all saw that too? Thought I was losing my mind.

Taj: That's Moe-Moe.

Claudia: She lives at the farm. (*Pointing to the eggs that Taj brought in*). Those are her eggs.

(*Patrick goes to touch an egg and there is a loud squawk off-stage, he jerks his hand back.*)

Taj: If we're being accurate, Moe-Moe *owns* that farm.

Patrick: You cook and farm?

Taj: Told you I'm an artist, baby. Cooking as an art form, farming is an art form...

Claudia: Artista de mierda...

Taj: Exactly.

(*Isobel arrives*)

Isobel: Morning.

Taj: Morning.

Isobel: Moe-Moe's harassing the staff.

Taj: New guy?

Patrick: Right. On it.

(Patrick begins to leave.)

Taj: Oh, and Patrick?

Patrick: Yeah boss?

Taj: We are really, really glad you're here.

Bruno: Yeah man, welcome.

(Over the next part of the play we hear the sounds of Moe-Moe putting up a clucking fight as Patrick tries to wrangle her somewhere off-stage.)

Isobel: You put him on Moe-Moe duty already? You are evil!

Taj: Yeah, *(laughing)* rite of passage. He's gonna be great. How many orders today?

Isobel: Let's see, four... plus Sebastian, plus another *(counts on her fingers)*, the housing unit on Albany Street, the Flower House, the family at 2nd, so that makes... let's say 20 for today.

Berat: Comin' up. Good to see you Isobel.

Isobel: You too.

Berat: Where you been?

Isobel: My caseload was out of control for awhile there, but got it down to 27 now.

Berat: 27 cases is *down*?! Does that include home stays?

Isobel: Oh yeah.

(Patrick emerges, shaking his head in defeat. Bruno laughs.)

Taj: I'm heading back. Gotta get those Harvest Bags together. Turns out *sustainable* farming doesn't actually *sustain* itself. Takes serious elbow grease.

Bruno: Not to add to the workload, but the Congolese cooks are gonna want cassava, if you can grow it.

(Taj is writing this down.)

Claudia: Add Cilantro to the list.

Taj: Cilantro we got. I put it to seed a few days ago. Need to figure out how to do cassava in this climate. This Jersey soil is fighting me on some of the tropical climate perennials. Patrick, what do you need?

Patrick: I'm kinda thirsty actually.

Taj: No dear, I mean from the farm. We're trying to grow the produce that folks need to cook culturally-specific dishes. So what ingredients do you need?

Patrick: Oh, my wife does all the cooking.

Bruno: Then why didn't we hire her?

Patrick: She doesn't live here, actually... yet.

Bruno: So you just aren't gonna eat until she arrives?

Patrick: I am open to learning. That is why I am here. If I have to eat another ramen noodle I might puke. How about pumpkin? For Kadu Bouranee.

Taj: Pumpkin we can do. *(Writes it down)*.

Patrick: And I might be new to this cooking thing, but I am pretty good at farming, if you ever need a hand.

Taj: I would love that. I could use all the hands I can get. Takes a village. So come on down, (*pointedly to the audience*) we have open hours Saturday and Sunday mornings y'all. (*Whistles like calling a pet dog*): Moe-Moe!

(*The chicken trots in, gives Patrick a dirty look and she and Taj exit together.*)

Isobel (*to Patrick*): Don't feel bad, dude. She's taken down all of us at one time or another.

Patrick: Hi, I'm Patrick.

Isobel: Isobel.

Patrick: I'm new.

Isobel: I'm old.

Claudia: Isobel works with the Accompany Now program.

Patrick: Accompany Now?

Isobel: Unaccompanied minors.

Patrick: Kids?

Isobel: Yeah, kids.

Patrick: They're alone?

Isobel: No man, they're not alone; they got us out here fighting for them.

Berat: Here you go. (*She hands Isobel a stack of food boxes*). I gave Sebastian a little extra (*winking*).

Isobel (*to Patrick*): Help me with these?

Patrick picks up a stack and walks with Isobel to her car.

Patrick: Who's Sebastian? If you don't mind me asking...

Isobel: He's a 17 year old kid. He just came to us. And if I don't get his home study completed before he turns 18 next month, they'll deport him. At 18 they cut off all services. So if a kid hasn't been placed, they go right back to where they just fled.

Patrick: Is that enough time?

Isobel: Don't matter. That's the law.

Patrick: Bad law.

Isobel: Yep.

(They put the boxes in her car. Patrick takes off his apron.)

Isobel: Done for the day?

Patrick: Yeah. *(Rubbing his back)*. ...You want company?

Isobel: *(Taking stock of Patrick)* Sure. C'mon.

END PLAY 1

(Between these plays there will be facilitated conversation with the audience led by the characters from the prologue.)

PLAY 2: Accompany Now

(Patrick and Isobel have arrived at a public park. Throughout this play the food that was prepared in the last scene is being handed out to the audience.)

Patrick *(referencing the boxes of food)*: So who are these for?

Isobel: We're gonna give a batch of them out to the houseless folks who--

Dan: Hey Isobel!

(Isobel hands a box to Dan who stands up from a seat in the audience)

Isobel: Dan, really good to see you out of that chair and walking.

Dan: Yeah, just need the crutches now. On that healing journey, you know?

Isobel: Oh, I know it well.

(Her phone rings, she checks it, sends it to voicemail.)

Patrick *(to Isobel)*: I thought you worked with kids.

Isobel: That's right.

Patrick: So--

Cathy: What the heck, Isobel?!

Isobel: Hey girl.

Cathy: Where you been?

Isobel: Busy is where. Up to my you-know-what in work.

Her phone rings.

Cathy: *(laughing)* Shoot, we missed you.

They do some sort of socially distanced arm tap.

Isobel: Not as much as I missed you. *(Back to Patrick)* You were saying?

Patrick: This is part of your job too?

Her phone rings. She checks it, sends it to voicemail.

Isobel: When things got busy I stepped up to help out and now I don't wanna give it up.

Patrick: Ok, so, what else is your job, or, like, what is your real job or whatever?

Isobel: Um... *(handing out boxes)* I'm basically a: "figure it out" and "take care of business" kind of woman.

(Her phone rings.)

Patrick: Ok, yeah. I get it... No, sorry, I really don't get it.

(Isobel stops to look at Patrick.)

Isobel: So these kids arrive here--

Patrick: Alone.

Isobel: Alone. But usually they have some sort of connection, relatives or friends to stay with. But we gotta make sure they are safe. We check out the house, make sure it meets all the requirements. Check out who is living in the house, everyone has to get fingerprinted, background checks. Sometimes we have to help get kids enrolled in school, making sure the adults understand the vaccinations that kids need to get...

Patrick: ...Medical insurance.

Isobel: Actually, kids can't get insurance in New Jersey if they don't have asylum status.

Patrick: That's not right.

Isobel: You have no idea. I got a client now, tender age, with a serious medical condition--

Patrick: Tender age?

Isobel: He's 7 years old. And when he was apprehended at the border, he was separated from his father. As I'm sure you know, this country has a LONG standing and ongoing policy of separating parents and children at the border. I talked to the clinician this morning and they have no idea where the father has been sent. The kid is immediately hospitalized. Because his condition is literally life and death. He's in Texas now where the law is different. But when he's placed in New Jersey, you know how the

medical system is, if you don't have insurance, they just won't help you. And it's not like foster care, the parents who take these kids in won't get any aid from the government. They're all on their own.

Patrick: What's going to happen to him?

Isobel: I don't know. (*A moment of worry crosses her face*) All I know is that I am going to do everything I can. I'm educating myself on his illness so I can be the best advocate I can be for him. Basically we do what we need to do to take care of these kids, make sure they are placed and safe. So, yeah, we help out with a lot of stuff.

Patrick: What else?

Isobel: Everyone and everything is online right now 'cause of the pandemic, right?

Patrick: And some folks don't have computers.

Isobel: Try, some folks are from rural villages without electricity. Like we are starting there in terms of cultural barriers to accessing the system. That's not, like, in the job description, but we do what we gotta do for these kids. Some of these minors speak indigenous languages and the schools don't have anyone to even translate for them.

Patrick: Huh, I thought I was working at a cafe.

Isobel: It's also an Affordable Housing Corporation and Refugee Resettlement Agency so they do way more... like, yes, we provide home studies and post-release services to unaccompanied refugee minors and that's where I fit in, but they also provide housing to young women aging out of foster care, to veterans, to men who are justice system involved, to chronically houseless individuals, individuals with disability, folks struggling with persistent mental health conditions. AND they resettle refugees and asylees from around the world, which includes assisting survivors of trafficking. So that covers a ton of ground even beyond housing. I'm talking English Language Learner classes, job placement, socio-emotional support, WIC and EBT and so on and so on and so on.

Patrick: And you somehow have time to give out food?

Isobel: I make it my business to find the time.

Patrick: You have any kids yourself?

Isobel: Three dogs.

Patrick: Bad-ass lady like you, I bet you got pitts.

Isobel: Dachshunds. My co-worker almost convinced me to foster once though. Three kids!

Patrick: One for each dog.

Isobel: But I already have enough kids. I have Sbastian and Emanuel, Gabe and Eliseo and Arielle. I've supported over 300 kids in my life.

Patrick: That's a lot.

Isobel: Eh, that's just the sexy part.

Patrick: *That's the sexy part?? (Obviously not thinking it sounds sexy at all; in fact, it sounds really freakin' hard!)*

Isobel: Oh yeah, don't get me started on the paperwork. Half my job is filling out paperwork. I got paperwork coming out of my --

Ashanti: *(Taking a box)* Box? Thank you, love!

Isobel: My pleasure. How's Janet?

Ashanti: She's ok. She is... ok... Thanks for asking.

Isobel: She's in my heart. And thoughts. And, like, prayers and all that stuff.

Ashanti: And you are in ours, friend.

Isobel: *(Back to Patrick)* Where was I?

Patrick: Paperwo--

Isobel: Argh. You got me started on paperwork? Reports and homestay forms, and Apricot online whatever the heck, and the SMART, uh 'Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time bound goals.' The paperwork piece is overwhelming. There's *a lot* of bureaucracy. Sometimes it feels like it's getting in the way of serving the actual people who need me. But it's also critical, you know? Reports and audits -- these things are linked to our organization's survival, which means they are linked to our clients' survival. Why'd you have to go and get me all riled up about paperwork!?

(Patrick laughs.)

Isobel: You have kids?

Patrick: Yeah, they are still with their mother. I came alone and they will join when I can get the *paperwork* for them.

Isobel: Ah, paperwork. So you get it?

Patrick: Not really. I immigrated. Totally different story. I started on a student VISA. I wasn't in danger, I didn't have to flee, or live in a camp or detention center or worry about applying for my status once I got here, like a refugee would have to do.

Isobel: Asylee.

Patrick: Asylee, sorry.

Isobel: Both Asylum Seekers and Refugees have fled their country due to a "well founded fear" of persecution. However, asylum seekers apply for protection in the country of destination, once they get here. Refugees arrive with their status.

(Her phone rings again. She checks it.)

Isobel: I have to take this.

She steps aside to take the call. Gabriel approaches, very upset. He is speaking quickly in Spanish to Patrick.

Patrick: Hey, sorry, slow down. I'm not, I don't speak...

Sandra comes up behind her. Isobel hangs up the phone.

Isobel: Woah woah, what's going on?

Sandra: Sorry Iz, I was trying to--

Isobel: That's ok. Patrick, this is Gabriel. And Sandra is a caseworker with I-Rise. Patrick just started working in the cafe.

Gabriel (*in Spanish*): Fui al DMV porque usted me dijo que yo tenía que tener mi licencia renovada si Sebastian se va a venir con nosotros. y tuve que solicitar salir de ese estúpido trabajo que ya no soporto estar y mi jefe fue tan pinche.

(subtitle: I went to the DMV. Because you told me that I have to have my license renewed if Sebastian is going to move in with us. And I had to request off work from that stupid job that I can't stand and my boss was such a prick.)

Sandra: He's mad about the job.

Isobel: I understand.

Gabriel (*in Spanish*): No el trabajo, el DMV!

(Translation: Not the job, the DMV!)

Isobel: Ok, so then what?

Gabriel (*in Spanish*): No, no solo el trabajo, la escuela! Estoy tan enojada con esa estúpida escuela.me tratan como si yo fuera una idiota. (*Gabriel turns to Patrick and in English says*) I am not an idiot!

(Translation: No, not just the DMV, the school! I am SO mad at that stupid school. They treat me like I am an idiot.)

Patrick: No sir.

Sandra: Mauricio was suspended today.

Gabriel (*in Spanish*): Porque yo estaba retrasada corriendo para el estúpido DMV por esa estúpida licencia por culpa de mi estúpido jefe. Yo soy doctor, Isobel! Soy doctor y tengo que trabajar en un warehouse? Y el estúpido DMV ha estado cerrado por dos semanas por culpa del COVID y me tomó otras dos semanas hasta que al fin conseguí una cita. y luego ellos me hicieron apagar el teléfono! Así que cuando me llamaron de la escuela no pude contestar!

(Translation: Because I was running late to the stupid DMV for this stupid license because of my stupid boss. I am a doctor, Isobel! I am a doctor and I have to work at a warehouse? And the stupid DMV has been closed for two weeks because of COVID and it took another two weeks until I finally got an appointment. And then they make me turn my phone off! So when the school calls I don't pick up!)

Isobel: You want me to call the school?

Sandra: I called them.

Gabriel (*in Spanish*): Y ahora puede que ellos no dejen que Sebastian se venga si Mauricio no está inscrito en la escuela. Mauri ni siquiera hizo lo que le estaban diciendo.

(Translation: And now they might not let Sebastian move in if Mauricio isn't enrolled in school. Mauri didn't even do what they are saying!)

Sandra: Listen, I have already--

Gabriel (*in Spanish to Isobel*): Amo a mi hijo! Vinimos aquí por él, por su futuro. Y ahora siento que lo estoy decepcionando a cada paso. Siento ansiedad todo el tiempo. Y yo no quiero molestarla. Me siento tan pequeña teniendo que pedir ayuda constantemente. Y muchos de estos sistemas son intencionalmente difíciles y, francamente, humillantes! No me siento yo misma aquí. Ya casi ni sé quién soy. Soy esa persona que está gritando en un parqueo! Esa no soy yo!.

(Translation: I love my son! We came here for him, for his future. And now I feel like I am letting him down at every turn. I feel anxious all the time. And I don't want to bother you. I feel so small having to constantly ask for help. And so many of these systems are just intentionally difficult and, frankly, humiliating! I don't feel like myself here. I don't even know who I am anymore. I am this person who is yelling in a park! This isn't me!)

Isobel: Sometimes we need to yell. *(Isobel lifts her head toward the sky and lets out a primal yell)* AHHHHHHH!!!

(Gabriel stops pacing, looks at Isobel. They yell together. Up into the endless sky. That same sky that is right now looking over people in Eritrea, and Afghanistan, and Congo, and El Salvador. That boundless sky above refugee camps and ICE detention prisons across the world. So much bigger than any one of us, than any one story. That sky of time immemorial, which knows no man-made borders, no country lines.)

Isobel: Com'on Sandra, get in on this.

(Sandra yells. Gabriel yells. Some other folks in the park join in. Maybe the audience yells as well. Patrick lets out the biggest yell of them all.)

Isobel: Ok! Yes!

(They laugh.)

Gabriel: I am so busy trying to make ends meet, making seven dollars an hour. I don't have the money to go back to school. I can't even make the time to study and take my exams. *(Pause)* I got other dreams, you know?

Isobel: I know.

Gabriel: And what will happen to Sebastian?

Isobel: When I first started this work we had a kid, 17 years old, turning 18 before his 90 days were up. And I was doing his home study, and I am just getting all these red flags. They wouldn't let me talk to him, he was never available, he was out of the house all day and didn't have a cell phone.

One day, I visit the home and there's the mom and her two kids, little kids, 4 years old. And one of *them* has a cell phone. Red flag. And when I'm talking to them, I notice that it's on. And I'm like, ok, something is definitely wrong here. So I pulled my client out of the home. We finally got to talk alone. And it turned out that the step-father was trafficking him. Whenever I was there doing the home study they had the step father on the phone, listening to everything I was saying.

So, I called the Department of Child Services and reported abuse in the home for the other kids, the two little ones who weren't my clients. We tracked down an aunt and uncle and got the kid situated with them, we got him T-Vap services. Now, I was new, I had no idea how to get services for survivors of trafficking, but our Refugee Resettlement Agency, we are really really good at what we do. Our lawyer, this is her lifeblood.

And that kid? His VISA just got approved. He is speaking English now, has his social security card, has a job, he's moving into his own apartment.

Gabriel, I see that you are suffering. I also see you and think, "wow, look at all that you have accomplished. You have so much strength and you inspire me." *You inspire me to do this work.*

So what can I do?

Gabriel: The yell helped.

Isobel (*in Spanish*): I am here for that. Literally anytime.

Sandra (*to Gabriel*): You are not alone.

Gabriel: Then why am I so lonely?

Patrick: This is the loneliest country I have ever lived in. And I've lived in six.

Sandra: We live in a very disconnected world.

Patrick (*pushing back, he has something to say*): But it's more than that. America, specifically, you all live in these big houses by yourselves. You don't have extended family around; you raise your kids alone, not in community. Where are the spaces for people to come together? I can't find them here. This country is so cold to one another. There is such a strong bias against helping people, against helping yourselves even. Self care, people! It's survival. I'm not talking about a spa day--those are great, don't get me wrong--what I'm saying is that self care is self preservation. We can be traumatized vicariously, that is just the real science of it. And to be an ethical practitioner of this work that you all do, you must take care of yourselves or else you risk hurting people. We all

need love and family. That little boy in a hospital in Texas needs his father. I need my children and my wife. I can't get the recipe for Kadu Bouranee right without her. I can't get the recipe for my life right. We need intergenerational spaces, and laughing, and friends, and neighbors...

Dan: Food?

Patrick (*impassioned and on a roll*): ...and food and culture and art and play and conversation, those spaces can combat a lot of this pain. This loneliness.

Dan: The food?

Patrick: Yes, food builds community too. Oh, hello Dan, sorry I was...

Dan: I get it, man. You're on that healing journey too. You got any extra boxes?

Patrick hands him a box.

Dan: Thanks. (*To the audience*) This food is amazing.

(Patrick, blushing after his soap box moment, hands boxes to Gabriel and Sandra.)

Patrick: Berat put an extra one in for Sebastian.

Gabriel: Thank you. It was great to meet you, Patrick. Maybe I will see you at the cafe?

Patrick: That's where I'll be.

Sandra and Gabriel walk off together.

Patrick: Yikes. Sorry. I just had a moment there, didn't I?

Isobel: Nice to finally meet you.

Patrick: I have been here for one day. ONE day! And I just had a whole... you know... thing... You do this EVERYDAY?

Isobel: It's hard. And imperfect. And yeah man, I'm bone tired! But this is also healing and inspirational work. Sure, we can be traumatized by someone else's story. But stories can also heal us.

I call it "Post Traumatic Growth." When I sit with someone, I hear them, I listen. And their story resonates with me and I can share my story back with them. And they know they are not alone. They know that they are not forgotten.

Patrick: Damn. I mean... just... damn. How do you hold it all?

Isobel: Boxes. (*She hands him a food box*)

Patrick: Huh?

Isobel: You learn your limit in this work. REAL fast. We all have a limit. And then you send the call to voicemail, if you need to. That's a box. It will still be there later. When I have a big emotion. When I feel like I might break down. When the stress or the hurt gets too much. I close my eyes (*she does this*), I visualize a box, literally visualize it. I open it up. I put the feeling in there. The thought. And I say, ok, you wait here. I will be back for you. When I get home, when I have the space and the time, then I can open the box back up. I can look at it, I can let myself feel it, I can process. But for now. I *have* to move forward. My clients need me to move forward. That minor in the hospital in Texas only has so much time. Sebastian only has so much time. And his ability to stay in this country, his whole future, is dependent on me, RIGHT NOW.

Patrick: ...Boxes... (*considering it*) Is that healthy?

Isobel: Shoot, I don't know. (*Laughs*) It's survival.

(*Patrick is silent.*)

Isobel: Like, ok, how many languages you speak?

Patrick: Six. Maybe nine depending on what you count.

Isobel: Dang, was that hard to learn? All those languages?

Patrick: Hard? I mean... it wasn't a "learning" thing, I just... I had to. Otherwise I couldn't have--

Isobel: Survived?

(Patrick and Isobel share a look. He isn't alone.)

Isobel: You want a lift home?

Patrick: You finally done for the day?

Isobel: Heck no. But I can drop you off first.

Patrick: No way sister, you're stuck with me now.

(They Exit.) END PLAY 2

(Between these plays there will be facilitated conversation with the audience.)

PLAY 3: BLACK COMMUNITY WATCHLINE by Elinor T Vanderburg

(A and PASTOR are talking. Catching up? It's a friendly chat, maybe just finishing lunch?)

A

Hear me out –

I'm in my car –

(He pauses. A better idea. He springs up, and ushers to PASTOR to take his place in the chair.)

You sit, you sit, you sit.

PASTOR

Me?

(They do.)

A

This will be better

This will be –

Accessible

(He starts again.)

Close your eyes.

(To PASTOR, but also, really, to the audience)

No, seriously: close your eyes. Just listen:

You – you're in your car

At the wheel

Driving – home

Boulevard of the Eagles: coasting, no traffic –

Riding free

PASTOR

(Into it)

Top down, wind in my hair?

A

It's a Corolla, boo

PASTOR

Oh

A

But the sun is setting

And it's the type of sunset that could make you forget all your bad days

Which is what's going through your mind as the colors paint the sky –

Orange, yellow, pink, violet,

Red

Red and

Red and blue

It's coming up from behind you a police car that wasn't behind you before

But you remember seeing one in the opposite lane

. . . it must have turned around

And you were enjoying the colors but now you see the officer in the car waving to the shoulder

Waving – *you* – to the shoulder

PASTOR

Why?

A

That's what you wonder

You check your speed: you're not over

And you got the car inspected last week. Everything's in working order

You wonder if this officer could possibly be signaling to someone else
But they make it clear that they are waving to you
So
You
Comply
As you do
As you do, as you pull over, the red and blue lights flash against your skin
And that glorious sunset vanishes behind the horizon as
the officer gets out of his car and approaches you
You know he'll ask you for your license and for your registration but for now
You keep your hands on your wheel
Where he can see them and where you can see him seeing them
Because you've seen this . . . before

(Another performer, B, speaks from their seat in the audience:)

B

I had seen this before
The um. Aura, they call it. It's a disruption in the way I
Perceive
What's around me and um
It's manageable. When I have the space to manage it. I just need space
And I was taking space that afternoon I was
Sitting in my car in the parking lot at the CVS on Bound Brook Road and just
Visualizing. Working through the aura and waiting it out
Trying to just
Breathe
Waiting for it to pass
So I could go home

(A third performer, C, speaks. She carries one or two big hampers of laundry.)

C

It happened when I was home
Apartment #142
We stepped out of our units at the same time, me and my laundry and
The woman in #145
I don't know her name, but of course I recognize her: she's my neighbor
It's my responsibility to recognize her. To see her
That's what neighbors do, right?

I see her. I wave. Well
It's more of a... nod.
'Cause-a the laundry.

(She nods at an invisible Woman from #145.)

And she –
She's looking at me –
But she's not *seeing* me.

B

I didn't see him until he was at the window
A – a cop
At first I thought he might be a security guard from the shopping complex but
He's got the the the badge and I hear the static from a dispatch coming off him
Crackling off him
And he's leaning over my car
Leaning over the window

A + B

A shadow blocking out the sun
Then he's asking you/me for my license and registration

A

"I'll need to take my hands off the wheel" you say
"Is that all right?"
You ask if it's all right because you have seen this before

C

I know she's seen me before
She just saw me coming out my own house
But her eyes are looking past me, through me, like when a –
Like when you're planning your escape

B

At that moment I wish I'm somewhere else I wish I'm anywhere else
With him hovering over me like this when I'm trying to just breathe and he's
Asking me

A

"License and registration please"

B

I say – "why"

C

Why is she looking at me like I'm a stranger here?

A

"Why are you headed north," the officer says to you
Looking over your documents in a way that isn't about the documents
He wants to know where you're going
You tell him you're just trying to go home
"Long day," he says

C

I nod

A

"Where you coming from?" he says
"Not from *school*," he adds
"How much school: did you finish high school?"
You did
"College?"
You did
"Not *college*, really?"
He sounds incredulous

PASTOR

What does where I'm coming from have to do with him pulling me over?

A

That's what you're asking yourself
While you hope your hands aren't shaking too much
While you hope you're not sweating too much
While you hope he'll just – let you go

B + C

I haven't done anything wrong

A

"You're shaking," the officer says

"You got anything in your vehicle that I should know about?"

B

I ask him why he wants to know

A

"Anything?

Drugs?

Alcohol?

A firearm?"

You say 'no'

PASTOR

No

A

"Then why're you so nervous"

C

Why're you so nervous, lady from #145?!

B

I'm so nervous and I I I

I try to tell him I'm

Just trying to calm myself down

This – happens sometimes?

Panic attacks – but I can manage it if I just have time –

I try to explain

A

"Drugs? Alcohol? Weapons?"

He's asking you again. Again, you say

PASTOR

No

B

I know my rights

I know there's no reason for him to need my documents

I'm just *in my car*

I ask him, another time:

Why

Why do you need to see them

Have I done something wrong?

Is there something you need to ask me?

I have nothing to hide, but –

A + B + C

You/I have seen this before

C

And suddenly, she's heading back

This lady she's walking backwards, turning back, keys out

Back to her home where she

Checks the door

Checks the door to make sure it is locked

B

Suddenly the officer is reaching back

Hand towards his holster – I'm terrified –

He takes his nightstick – it comes crashing down into my window

I scream

C

I want to *scream*

A

"Drugs? Alcohol? Weapon? Weapon? Weapon?"

Again and again

B

And again it comes down and the web of cracked glass grows larger and

He hits it a third time – my window explodes into shards that rain into me

C

I want to scream: "just because I'm a dark-skinned Black woman, you're treating me like I'm a thief"

I am your *neighbor*

I see you

Again and again A

I throw my body out of the way B
The – aura, the – noise
It's too much
I just want to go home

You just want to go home A

This is *my* home, too C
But when they see me coming they won't hold the door
They just look through me

And then he says B
"Can't drive home with a shattered window. Wish you'd shown me your documents like
I'd asked. You'll need a tow"
And then

And finally A

Off he goes B

Off she goes C

Without giving me a ticket A

Off she goes in the other direction C

I'm sitting in glass and in my own terror B

Not seeing me C

The sun has disappeared and now it is night A
And you are

Shaking B

Shaking A

Shaking. I'm so angry C
I work hard like everybody else here
But they treat me like a thief

You're still not sure why you were treated like a suspect A

Not even human B

But you've seen it before A
And you're grateful to still be here

Breathing B

Just trying to do my laundry C

Just trying to make it home A

PASTOR
. . . What happened next?

A

Aside from making an effort to never drive home this close to dark again?

(He laughs. It's not funny.)

I'm glad you asked. There's an organization that was formed to help with moments like this

B

I'm shaking

(C takes out her phone. Dials. A quick ring, and response. She speaks into the receiver:)

C

Hi, is this the Black Community Watchline?

A

The Black Community Watchline is a coalition that responds to incidents of racial aggression and profiling and sends first-responders in to de-escalate – and protect the vulnerable.

C

I understand your mission is to provide free and confidential support to Black people experiencing anti-Black racial violence and abuse.

A

I called them to report what happened to me on the road.

B

I called my mom. But *she* called BCW and told them what happened to me.

A

They're an incredible resource for residents of Middlesex – and the network is only expanding. In addition to navigating incidents, they offer counseling and tools to diffuse conflict.

B

My mom was pretty upset. She said, "think about what *could* have happened if that officer hadn't finally walked away."

C

Because we have seen this before.

A

Every week. Every day. We don't want to see it happen again.
And we are not powerless.

[Smooth pitch for BCW]

(They Exit.) END BCW PLAY

(Between these plays there will be facilitated conversation with the audience.)

PLAY 4: Affordable Housing Corporation

(Patrick and Isobel arrive at an assisted housing unit for their final food delivery of the evening.)

Dola (*shouting off*): She's here!!

Isobel: Hey mama.

(They Embrace. Isobel puts food on the table.)

Alex (*entering and also shouting off*): Dinner time everyone!

(Isobel starts to leave.)

Saba (*entering*): Where do you think you're going?

Isobel: I was just...

Saba: Think again.

Isobel: It's been a long day.

Dola: Which is why you are going to sit down at this table and have a rest and tell us all about it.

(Fatima enters)

Fatima (*to Patrick*): Hi, I am Fatima.

Patrick: Nice to meet you, I'm Patrick.

Isobel: Nice try Fatima, he's married.

Fatima: Whaaat? I was just saying hello. (*A little annoyed*) You should wear your ring!

Alex: Patrick, here, sit next to me. Thank goodness we have another man in the house tonight. I am learning far too much about women's stuff like knitting and *cooking*! What do you do?

Patrick: I work in the café... as a cook.

Alex (*laughing*): Serves me right.

Dola: Shall we pray?

They all, in a chorus of different languages, pray together. They hand out the food. They eat.

Saba: Mmmmm, this is good.

Fatima: Anyone want my chicken?

Alex: I will trade you for the salad.

Fatima: Deal!

Saba (*complimenting Fatima*) Check out that english, huh? Making deals! Taking names!

Patrick: So, how do you all know each other?

Saba: We're friends.

Fatima: We're family!

Alex: Part of this refugee resettlement thing is affordable housing for refugees.

Dola: And asylees.

Alex: Right. So the state pays for part of it, like a voucher system. Several houses in the area are part of that affordable housing system.

Saba: Oooo....the neighbors love that.

Alex: Some of them are really kind, actually.

Saba: And some of them are REALLY not.

Isobel: What's this about?

Saba: That art teacher guy.

Isobel (*rolling her eyes*): Right him.

Dola: Some people just live in fear of what they do not know. Don't let him get to you.

Saba: I, for one, am *done* with living in fear.

Fatima (*changing the subject*): Why was your day so long, Isobel?

Isobel (*with a sigh*): Sometimes it feels like we are building a plane in mid-air.

Alex: (*laughing*) No doubt, sometimes it feels like I am watching a plane being built in mid-air!

Saba (*laughing*): And you're the passenger!?

Alex: Yep!

Fatima: He's joking. You always look like you know what you're doing. I never felt as if I was, to use the plane thing, free falling. You held me. I felt strapped in.

Saba: You are lying!

Fatima: What!?!

Saba: You never felt like you were free falling?

Fatima: Well, the whole journey is a free fall. You get here and you have expectations and none of them are true and you have no idea what's going on, what you deserve, or need or are allowed.

Dola: A lot of people don't know they are entitled to resettlement services.

Alex: And after that free fall, it's like you are dropped in a big ocean. You have no idea where you are, how to get to land. And then the question is, are you willing to learn to swim or are you just going to sink?

Saba: But the depression.

Dola: The depression.

Saba: Days. Crying.

Fatima: I couldn't get out of bed for a week.

Alex: That is real.

Dola: The shame. How do you swim anywhere with all that shame hanging on you like dead weight?

Alex: You have to keep busy, find something to do to keep your mind off it or else it will take you under. You have to find a purpose.

Saba: Find a purpose? I am still reconciling who I was, with who I am. I feel like I am split down the middle, two people. A before and an after.

Dola (*agreeing*): Mmm, split at the seams. The loss of the self. My sense of self was just shattered.

Alex: And you have to try and put it back together.

Saba: Can it be put back?

Fatima: No. What is shattered cannot be put *back*.

Dola: Rebuilt then?

Alex: For me, personally, I believe that when I share my story to new refugees they can feel -- okay. It gives them hope. You are not alone. Everybody has been here. And if you have that hope, then you learn to swim in that big ocean and you will get where you want to be.

Dola: But first, you have to come to terms with the death of your old life. It is a death, really. Then you hold on to what you can and plant new seeds.

Patrick: Plant new seeds. I like that.

Alex: You like that? Ok then, you put down roots, yes? You reach your branches toward a new future. A new you. You are still you, yes, ok. But you are also changed--

Fatima: Forever.

Alex: And you can still bear fruit.

Dola: But not until you have healed.

Fatima: Sheep's yogurt.

Alex: ...What's that?

Fatima: I miss sheep's yogurt. I can't get it here. It seems silly, but I go to the grocery, I look at the yogurt section and I just feel the tears start running down my face. Because of yogurt!

Saba: So you all went through that too? The sadness?

Dola: Oh yes.

Saba: Why didn't we ever talk about it?

Alex: How? Where?

Saba: I am taking medication now. That has been helping a lot.

Isobel: There are mental health services, but they're not provided by the government.

Dola: I tried to go to a doctor, a therapist. I called close to 20 offices and no one took Medicaid.

Patrick: You'd think that would be a given. I mean, people who are already coming from severe trauma, and then being displaced on top of that.

Saba: And then the trauma is compounded by having to re-tell your traumatic story over and over and over and over. Needing to auction your story off to establish a "well founded fear" of persecution just to get access to come here. To get your status. You auction off a piece of yourself to get this "new life."

Dola: Another part of yourself lost. Shut off.

Saba: And then that becomes a new trauma in itself. The telling of your story.

Alex: The questions people feel allowed to ask.

Fatima: And when you actually want to go to a therapist and talk about things, you have no idea how to even begin looking for that kind of support.

Patrick: There's no way to know what services are available?

Isobel: Asylees who are granted a status are entitled to receive resettlement services --

Saba: But the issue is that there's no funding attached to those services. So there is no connecting folks to the resources.

Dola: Refugees are connected with an agency. Asylees get their status and they have no support from there.

Isobel: And they *are* entitled to support, but there is just no mechanism connecting them to that support, to an agency for instance.

Alex: Absolutely nothing to make sure there is a safety net for asylees.

Isobel: Asylees are dramatically underserved. So, here we are, building the plane in mid-air.

Alex: But once you get those services you live happily ever after, right everyone?

(Laughing)

Isobel: Well, the government measures success for refugees based completely on economic self sufficiency: 'Did they get a job? Can they pay for their lives?' Then check the box, and we did a good job! And that is not the marker of success in a human being's life.

Saba: Just 'cause you can slog through a job and pay rent doesn't mean you are okay.

Isobel: The government measurements are just so inadequate and don't actually support well-being.

Fatima: And there are two kinds of refugees or asylees, people who have everything back home and people who are coming from nothing.

Alex: It is like a buffet!

Saba *(groaning)*: Alex, enough with the metaphors! It can't be a tree and a plane and an ocean and a buffet!

Alex: No no, I really got it now.

(He is arranging the food around the table to tell his story)

Alex: So this buffet has ALL these options, all these dishes. Coconut Shrimp!

Patrick: *(the actor playing Patrick names a dish from home)*

Dola: *(the actor playing Dola names a dish from home)*

Fatima: *(the actor playing Fatima names a dish from home)*

(Maybe there is audience involvement here?)

(Even Saba joins in and names a dish from home)

Alex: Exactly! But what am I eating? It's hard to know: what do you want? Some people come to the buffet and they say, 'I don't eat meat, I don't eat this or that.' That's ok, you can take what you want and pursue what you want. Take the cake! Eat it all! You deserve it! How about a cookie? I can say sugar is sweet like candy, but if you never had candy, how do I tell you what sugar is? How do you know?

The hard part is, ok, back in my country I didn't have exposure to certain ideas, things I had never seen, even on TV, and it's hard to tell someone what could be, what potential there is if they haven't ever seen it, never tasted it! I will give you an example. I was talking to a new refugee family just the other day, I told them my story, that after the Genocide I had lived in 4 different countries. I spent most of my life in a refugee camp in Namibia. That is where I met my wife, raised my children. They are in Virginia now. My family, my mother and siblings, are spread out all over the world. I haven't seen some of them in many many years. And I said to this family, I know it feels like 'oh, where would I start!? I don't know anything.' Everyone had that feeling when they arrived. But it is not about what you *don't* know. It is about what do you want to do with your life? You may not know English, you may not know the system, how to navigate it, but are you willing to learn? Because here (*gesturing Isobel*) are good people who can teach you or can direct you.

This family, they tell me that 'we grew up in a camp and none of us learned to drive.' In fact, back home women can't drive. But here - what stops you from driving, if you want to? The only person stopping you, is you. They said, 'oh, I can't drive.' And I said, 'if you want to drive! Go for it!' There are people around you that will help you learn. But if you stop yourself, there is no one who can help you then. It is you who says that to yourself.

I hear people say, 'I can't do that, not that job, I am not American.' This is what binds people. How do we remember that we are worthy of happiness after so many terrible things we have witnessed and experienced? How do we believe in ourselves when we

are so far away from everything that reminds us who we are? How do we help one another understand that what we have been through, what has happened to us, does not define us, but is a mark of our strength, our resilience, our ability to change and grow and that we should be proud! Life can be so hard because you don't know how to navigate the landscape, you do not know what all this food on the buffet even is. But if you can open your mind and faith in you-- and that is hard, I know-- that buffet can offer you so many delicious possibilities!

Saba: Yes, for me, for a long time life here just felt... unrecognizable.

Dola: And sometimes it is like breaking culture. Something that you have carried for 40 years, passed down from family. How do we hold on to our culture and still survive here? How do I let go of what is not serving me anymore? How do I know the difference?

Patrick: And I am sure that your experiences are unique to each of you, there is not just one refugee story.

Dola: We left so quickly. It just was this sudden, jarring experience.

Alex: Whereas I was in a camp most of my life. I waited and waited and prayed to come here and meanwhile built a life in that camp.

Fatima: We lived, hiding out, in a basement with no windows for a year before being placed here. It flooded and smelled of mildew and we never saw the sun.

Saba: I stayed as long as I could. I was a doctor and my community needed me. But when my child's school was bombed, I realized that my life, too, had been blown apart beyond repair. We had to leave, for her, for my daughter.

Dola: For our kids, yes. My sweet nephew has had to take on so much. Translating for me in the grocery, at his school.

Alex: You are correct Patrick, it is a story of many many stories.

Fatima: I thought for a long time that maybe things would get better, we could go back to our home. I kept pretending it was temporary.

Alex: But this is home now.

Fatima: This is family now.

They all hold hands.

Fatima (*almost to the audience*): I just pray you never have to know, never have to go through what I have been through.

Dola: I pray that no one should have to go through what we have been through.

Alex: Not even my enemies.

Saba: Not even that art teacher man down the street who spit on me.

Dola: Not even him.

Fatima: Not even that officer at the detention camp who touched the women too long, made us take off our hijabs.

Dola (*almost like a chant, almost like a prayer*): Not even him.

Alex: Not even the men who killed my father.

Haniay: Not even them.

Saba: Not even in that moment when they separated me from my daughter.

Fatima: That moment when I said goodbye to my mother. I thought it would only be for a few weeks. That moment three years and 78 days ago.

Alex: That moment when I met Isobel for the first time and she said, "Damn, it's too hot in this office, wanna go for a walk?"

Isobel: That moment when Alex and I ended up with the worst lemonade I have ever had!

Alex: Oh it was so bitter!

Patrick: That moment when “just another day job” finally felt like a home.

Dola: The moment when I got my first driver's license.

Saba: The moment when my daughter asked for braces?!

Dola: Oh no! Then that is also the moment when you get a second job?!

(All laughing. The moments change from dark to light, from past to future, from pain to hope.)

Saba: The moment when I watch my husband walk her down the aisle.

Fatima: With straight teeth!

(All laughing)

Saba: I don't know if at that moment she will be wearing a traditional Habesha Kemis gown or a white dress. But I know, in that moment, it will be her choice. *(An aside)* As long as she chooses the Habesha Kemis...

(All laughing)

Fatima: So much to be hopeful for.

Dola: So much to dream about.

Saba: At night, when I close my eyes, my dreams are slowly starting to replace my nightmares.

Fatima: Me too. ...Slowly.

(A moment of silence. They dream together.)

Dola: Ok, let's get this table cleaned up. I can only take so many of Alex's metaphors. And I am going to learn how to play these dominoes if it is the last thing I do!

(They all begin cleaning up the table and exiting.)

Fatima: You are taking dominoes way too seriously, Dola.

Dola: I *will* be good at this!

Alex: It's just a game.

Saba: Work hard, play hard. See, check out those english skills, baby!

(Isobel and Patrick are alone)

Isobel *(to Patrick)*: You gonna stay and play dominoes?

Patrick: Yeah, I think I am. Are you heading home to the dachshunds?

Isobel: Larry, Curly, and Moe? Not yet. One more stop. I want to check in on Sebastian.

Patrick: He's lucky to have you.

Isobel: Eh, it's my job.

Patrick: See you tomorrow?

Isobel: And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow!

(END PLAY)

"There's a part of me that thinks perhaps we go on existing in a place even after we've left it."

— Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*

*"The news in those days was full of war and migrants and nativists, and it was full of fracturing too, of regions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling away from hinterlands, and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart. Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play." — Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West**

NOTES ON THE PLAYS:

The presentation should strive for simplicity, with a focus on community voices and actors at music stands reading the plays. It is all about the people and their stories. No fancy costumes or spectacle, no special effects or fog machines. Consider how the experience can be multilingual, which means dreaming into creative offerings for translation and captioning in a variety of languages and cultural contexts.

Since the plays strive first and foremost to be 1.) Educational, modeling the work for other spaces who may want to replicate this kind of service; 2.) A tool of advocacy and policy shift; 3.) Awareness raising of issues facing refugees, they are designed to be mobile and nimble, able to present outdoors and to adapt to our quickly shifting world. For example: a play could be used as testimony when a bill is being heard about refugee resettlement or at a policymaker event. They can be performed all together or a single play could be put up quickly at a rally, or at a march, or at another church or community event. The work should be flexible enough to do that, to be a tool of personal storytelling for RCHP's overall mission and work.

Finally, the short plays are recommended to be paired / interspersed with facilitated dialogue. So that the audience can be in conversation with one another about the issues and stories presented on stage.