

THE SONS

A play

by Daniel A. Wolf

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Cast of Characters (age)

Rita Finberg: Mother of Michael and Ben, widow of Sy (sixties)

Sy Finberg: Rita's late husband (sixties)

Michael Finberg: older son of Rita and Sy (mid to late thirties)

Ben Finberg: younger son of Rita and Sy (early thirties)

Sandi: Michael's girlfriend (late twenties to thirties)

Norm Singer (seventies)

Two FBI agents

Prison guard

Secretary

Act I

Scene 1

Circa 1990s. RITA'S home. There's a living room furnished with an armchair, sofa, end tables, and lamps. A coffee table sits parallel to the couch. A hallway leads to the kitchen area. The kitchen is generic, containing a refrigerator, table, and chairs. RITA, MICHAEL, BEN, and SANDI enter the living room, having just returned from the cemetery on the second anniversary of SY'S death. MICHAEL and BEN are wearing suits and ties. RITA and SANDI are dressed conservatively in dark or subdued colors, nothing flashy.

MICHAEL

Good to be back.

BEN

I'll say!

MICHAEL and BEN remove their jackets, loosen their ties, and drape the jackets over the far end of the sofa. BEN stretches.

That feels better.

RITA

Go on, relax. Let me go and change. I have a nice lunch.

BEN

Sounds good to me.

MICHAEL

You don't want to go out?

RITA

It's no trouble. I'm sure you boys have a lot to talk about.

BEN

You're right.

RITA

I'm just so happy we could all be together.

BEN

You miss him?

RITA

Look, I know he wasn't easy to be with, but it's better than being alone. That I can tell you. I'm sure you miss him too.

BEN

Of course. I'm just sorry Sherri and the kids couldn't make it, but you know, with school, it would have been hard.

RITA

As long as you're here, that's all that matters. Well, let me change. I got some delicious cold cuts at Hymie's. You remember Hymie's? They had a place near the store.

MICHAEL

Of course. *(to BEN)* Hey, remember what we used to say when we went in there?

BEN

No.

MICHAEL

You don't remember?

BEN

No, what?

MICHAEL

We'd walk in and say, "Hey, Hoagie! Give me a Hymie."

BEN

(laughs) Oh, yeah. That's right.

RITA

I'll be down soon.

BEN

Take your time.

RITA exits. BEN sits in the armchair. MICHAEL and SANDI sit on the sofa, with MICHAEL between BEN and SANDI.

Hard to believe. Two years already.

MICHAEL

Tell me the truth. You miss him?

BEN

Let me tell you, you wouldn't believe the kind of people I see—movie stars, producers. And you know what? These people are as dumb as rock salt. I mean, some of them can't utter a simple grammatical sentence. Then I think of Pops slaving away in a shamata shop. With his intelligence, he could've been something. A mogul, even. You?

MICHAEL

Not really. All we did was fight.

BEN

That's because you didn't play the game. See, I never challenged him. Whatever he said, I acted like he was Moses. But you, with your high ideals—you made him feel small. So he not only paid my undergrad—

MICHAEL

He paid mine too.

BEN

Yeah, but he threw in med school while you had to go nights to get your master's. Say, you ever tell Sandi about the time you were in the hospital?

SANDI

Hospital? What happened?

BEN

You want to tell her, or should I?

MICHAEL

Leave it alone.

BEN

Come on.

MICHAEL

No.

BEN

Then I'll tell her.

MICHAEL

(pause) I had an infection on my hand, so I went to Temple Hospital. The doctor said I needed to stay a few days. I called my parents, and that night they came to see me. *(to BEN)* That's it.

BEN

What are you talking? That's not it.

MICHAEL

So my father asked if I needed money. I told him they'd put my stuff in a locker, so I could use a few bucks. So he gave me ten dollars.

BEN

And?

MICHAEL

That's enough.

BEN

Tell her!

MICHAEL

(pause) When I got out of the hospital, he asked for the ten dollars back.

SANDI

You're kidding.

BEN

No, he's not. Can you believe? What father on this planet could do such a thing? And while we're at it, how did he get the store? Did you ever find out? From what I understand, Aunt Goldie expected to take it over from Grandmom. I mean, she worked there since she was a kid. But suddenly, Pops has the store and Goldie's selling shoes at Wanamaker's. How did *that* happen?

MICHAEL

I don't know. No one ever talks about it.

BEN

Sandi, I don't know what the two of you are planning, but just remember this: Our family has more skeletons than a science lab.

MICHAEL

You're right.

BEN

Hey, ever tell her 'bout the times we went out to dinner?

MICHAEL

No.

BEN

(to Sandi) You gotta hear this.

BEN stands.

See, the four of us would go into a restaurant, and the first thing he'd do is tell us where to sit.

BEN imitates his father, pointing.

"Ben, you sit there. Mom will sit here. Michael, you sit there, and I'll sit here." By the way, this is not just with us. We'd be a party of ten, and he'd do the same thing. He's telling people where to sit who don't know him, which caused all kinds of problems if you can imagine. Then the waitress would bring us the menus. Well, you could never order the right thing. No matter what you ordered, he'd say *(imitating his father)*, "When you gonna learn how to order?" Like the time I ordered shrimp scampi. He goes, "Shrimp scampi. Who orders shrimp scampi? I never knew anybody who ordered shrimp scampi. Fine, you want shrimp scampi, eat every last bite. Don't leave anything on your plate. Oy, when you ever gonna learn how to order?"

MICHAEL

I remember.

BEN

Here's another one. I could never order veal cutlet parmigiana, only veal cutlet. He'd say, *(imitating his father)* "You don't need the cheese. You see the difference in price? It's two dollars more. You want something on top, get tomato sauce. There's no charge for that." I mean, this went on for years. I think I was twenty-one when I finally experienced the taste of cheese.

MICHAEL

Anyway, it's over. Let it go.

BEN

Let it go? You don't remember the last year of his life when he couldn't drive, and you had to schlep him from one doctor to the next? Then you'd stop for lunch, and he'd never pick up the check. You used to complain about that all the time.

MICHAEL

What am I supposed to do—carry that the rest of my life? These are the cards we were dealt. Some have Einstein. We had Sy Finberg. Meanwhile, we're not starving. Look, we went to the grave . . .

BEN

Oh, that grave. *(laughs)* I love the stone. Here lies...

BEN waves hand across as though following the inscription.

"Seymour (Sy) Finberg. It was a great ride." It should really say, "It was a great ride . . . on us." Really, do you think he ever saw you, me, and Mom as anything more than a source of cheap labor? I don't. Oh, and how about his goal?

Imitates his father.

"To be the number one mom-and-pop shop in the city of Philadelphia!" Wow, what an accomplishment! I mean, why wait for the Phillies to win the World Series? Just have the mayor declare Sy Finberg Day and have a ticker-tape parade down Broad Street. Then maybe you, me, and Mom could wave from one of the cars in the back *(waves and grins)*.

MICHAEL

(stands, confronts BEN, points) Stop it. Now just stop it.

BEN

Yeah, you're right. Why let an upbringing marked by constant abuse and browbeating ruin a perfectly lovely day.

SANDI

Sit down.

MICHAEL

I should sock you one.

BEN

(sticks out chin) Go ahead. *(points to chin)* Right here.

MICHAEL

Shmuck.

BEN

Putz.

SANDI

Sit down!

They smile slightly and sit. RITA enters wearing casual clothes.

RITA

How you kids doin'?

BEN

We can eat.

RITA

Give me a few minutes.

SANDI

Can I help?

RITA

(to SANDI) That's okay, dear. You just relax.

RITA goes into the kitchen to prepare lunch. She takes various items out of the refrigerator, places them on the counter near the sink, and then sets the table.

MICHAEL

I drove past the store the other day. It's now a grocery. I actually went in. There was nothing to remind you it had been a clothing store. I even told a helper, "This used to be a clothing store," and he said, "No, it wasn't." Brought back a lot of memories. You remember how he'd tear labels off the pants?

BEN

I remember.

MICHAEL

(to SANDI) A customer would ask for a boys' 14 jean. We didn't have it, so our father tore the label off a 16 and said it was a 14. But he was right. They never returned it. Guess they felt the kid would grow into it.

BEN

How 'bout me with the shoe stretcher?

SANDI

What's that?

MICHAEL

It's a thing to help stretch out shoes.

BEN

We'd be sitting in the back, and he'd say, "Here's a 10 ½. Make it 11." So all day long, I'd be stretching out shoes.

Mimes stretching out shoes.

I think that's why I became a podiatrist. I felt sorry for anyone leaving the store wearing our shoes.

MICHAEL

I'm just glad Mom's had these few years without him. She'll never admit it, but these have been the happiest two years of her life.

BEN

What, she's not running around for mayonnaise? *(to SANDI)* Our father had her driving all over the neighborhood to find the cheapest jar of mayonnaise. What she spent on gas was more than what she saved on mayonnaise.

RITA calls from the kitchen.

RITA

Lunch is ready!

BEN

You got mayonnaise?

RITA

Yeah, I went to Acme but it was too high, so I bought it at Superfresh.

BEN and MICHAEL exchange a smile as all three enter the kitchen.

Scene 2

Nighttime on the same day. MICHAEL and SANDI have left. RITA is reclining in bed under the covers, reading a book by the light of a lamp on a night table. There is a small armchair across from the bed. BEN knocks on RITA'S partly open bedroom door.

BEN

(peeks in) May I come in?

RITA

Sure!

BEN enters and stands by the bed.

BEN

Just wanna say good night.

RITA

Good night, dear. And thanks for coming. It meant so much to me. Of course, I wish you lived closer, but as long as you can visit from time to time, I'm okay.

BEN

Are you sure?

RITA

Absolutely. Don't worry. I always have something to do. Have my shopping, work at the synagogue, take my walks . . . I'm all right. And if I need anything, Michael's here. So you just enjoy yourself. We're fine. Believe me.

BEN

I'm happy to hear that. Next time I'll bring everyone.

RITA

That would be wonderful. Kids growing up nice, aren't they?

BEN

A blessing.

RITA

And everything's all right between you and Sherri?

BEN

We're fine . . . except things are much more expensive out there.

RITA

Listen—you ever need money, just tell me. Your father didn't spend when he was alive, but he left me pretty good.

BEN

Well, Mom, to be honest, that's what concerns me. Let me sit down a minute.

BEN carries the armchair to the side of the bed and sits down.

Do you ever think what would happen if, God forbid, you needed special care?

RITA

You mean like a nursing home?

BEN

That's right.

RITA

You don't have to worry. I'm in excellent health.

BEN

I know, but I'm just saying what if. For instance, do you understand what happens to your money?

RITA

I use it to pay for nursing care which, like I said, is not going happen.

BEN

But let's say hypothetically, you need to go into a home.

RITA

So?

BEN

Well, what happens is the state comes in and exhausts all your funds. Then, after nothing's left, they pay for your care.

RITA

I know. That's what happened to your Aunt Goldie. So what are you saying?

BEN

I'm saying there's a way around that.

RITA

How?

BEN

The way is for you to transfer all your assets to Michael and me. Then if you need nursing care, the state comes and pays your expenses. I believe there's a four- or five-year lag from the time you transfer your assets to the time you're covered for care, but at least your money's protected.

RITA

Then how am I supposed to live if I hand my money to you?

BEN

We pay you an allowance—or you just tell us how much you need—and we transfer the money to your account.

RITA

But what if you boys decide not to give me my allowance? How am I supposed to live?

BEN

(laughs) What are you talking about? You're our mother! How could you even think such a thing?

RITA

It could happen.

BEN

(laughs) What you think—we'd throw you on the street?

RITA

It could happen! Not likely, but it could. Let me tell you something. Those days I work at the synagogue, you can't believe the stories I hear. This brother's not talking to that brother, this daughter's not talking to her mother, this son's not talking to his father It's impossible to find a Jewish family intact.

BEN

Well, it won't happen with us. I can assure you.

RITA

You know, I'm glad you brought this up because there's something I'd like to say. No way will I live with an allowance. I never told you boys this, but I lived with an allowance for forty-six years.

BEN

What?

RITA

That's right! Every Monday, your father would give me my allowance. I think by the time he died, he was giving me a hundred and fifty dollars a week.

BEN

You're kidding.

RITA

No, I'm not. One hundred fifty dollars a week for food, gas, maybe picking something up at Macy's Wait, that's not all. Say by Friday I'm running short. So I ask him for an extra twenty or thirty dollars. Sure, he gave it to me, but then—ready for this?—he'd deduct it from the following week's allowance. So instead of getting one-fifty, I'd get one-twenty or one-thirty.

BEN

Are you serious?

RITA

Yes, I am.

BEN

Then why didn't you say something?

RITA

Exactly! Why didn't I say something? There I am, forty-six years, standing at the kitchen table like a schoolgirl while he doles out my allowance. That's what I like about these two years. I have time to think about things.

BEN

Anything else?

RITA

Ready for this? How does a man not want to hold a woman's hand?

BEN

What?

RITA

Your father. He never held my hand. He said it looks silly for a short man to hold a woman's hand. Oh, wait. I forgot. A short *Jewish* man. Did you ever hear such nonsense? What did being Jewish have to do with holding a woman's hand?

BEN

(laughs) It's a good thing you weren't on the Titanic. You'd be saying *(extends arm)* "Quick, take my hand!" and he'd say, "Sorry, it doesn't look right for a short Jewish man to hold a woman's hand." *(continues laughing)*

RITA

And when we took over the store, how I cried every night. I didn't want that life. You think maybe once he'd put his arm around me, say something like, "I know you're not happy, but this will all work out in the end." Not a word.

BEN

So what are you saying?

RITA

I'm saying my quiet days are over. Neither you, your brother or anyone else is gonna tell me what to do. If the state puts me in the poorhouse, so be it. I'm sure you boys can survive without my fortune. Anyway, it's getting late. What time's your flight?

BEN

One o'clock.

RITA

You better get to sleep. I'll have breakfast ready when you come down.

BEN

Good night, Mom.

He bends down and kisses her cheek.

RITA

Good night.

BEN

Let me put the chair back.

BEN returns chair to its original position.

See you in the morning.

BEN leaves the bedroom, closes the door, then exits. RITA remains propped up in her bed, looking slightly suspicious as to her son's true motives.

Scene 3

BEN is in his office in California. He is wearing a white medical coat. He phones MICHAEL, who is home, sitting at a desk, marking papers. A landline phone is on the desk.

MICHAEL

Hello?

BEN

It's me.

MICHAEL

Hey, what's the buzz?

BEN

I need to see you.

MICHAEL

What happened?

BEN

I'm in trouble.

MICHAEL

What kind of trouble?

BEN

Big. Really big. Can you come out?

MICHAEL

You can't just tell me? It's not like you're 'round the corner.

BEN

It's serious. I'll explain everything when I see you.

MICHAEL

I'll try to take Friday off.

BEN

Don't say anything to Mom. Say you're going down the shore.

MICHAEL

No problem.

BEN

I'll pay when I see you.

MICHAEL

Forget it.

BEN

I'm gonna pay.

MICHAEL

No, you're not. I'll be there in a few days. And don't worry. Whatever it is, we'll get through it.

BEN

I hope you're right.

Scene 4

BEN'S office. BEN is sitting at his desk writing. He is wearing a white medical coat—intercom rings.

BEN

Yes? *(pause)* Send him in.

MICHAEL enters carrying a small suitcase.

Mike!

They embrace.

How was the flight?

MICHAEL

Not bad.

BEN

What do I owe you?

MICHAEL

I'm not taking your money. Now, what's going on?

BEN

Sit down.

MICHAEL sits down on a chair across from BEN'S desk. BEN stands in front of his desk and hands him a paper.

This.

MICHAEL looks at the paper.

MICHAEL

You made me travel three thousand miles, tell me you have jury duty?

BEN

Read it.

MICHAEL reads the paper.

MICHAEL

What's this?

BEN

My trial date.

MICHAEL

Trial date for what?

BEN

Medicare fraud.

MICHAEL

What are you talking about?

BEN

What am I talking about? Maybe two years in prison and a quarter-million-dollar fine. That's what I'm talking about.

MICHAEL

Wait a minute. What's going on here? How can they get you for fraud?

BEN

You remember a guy named Norm Singer?

MICHAEL

Of course. He was one of Pops's best friends. He helped set you up.

BEN

That's right. Soon after I got my license, Pops gave him a call and asked if he could do something for me. Norm said yes, so I come out and soon discover Norm's King of the Jews. I mean president of the synagogue, head of the men's club, and knows everybody. Takes me under his wing, introduces me to the Hollywood elite, and before you know it, I'm "Foot Doctor to the Stars." Except there's one problem. The man's shtupping every kurva in Beverly Hills and is always short of money. I mean, it takes a lot of money keeping a whore happy in this neighborhood. So Norm comes in for his monthly clipping, which is not covered by Medicare and tells me an idea he has.

MICHAEL stands and watches a flashback. NORM enters BEN'S office and sits across from BEN as BEN fills out information in NORM'S folder.

NORM

Look, I have an idea. Instead of putting down a clipping, put down I came in for a nail avulsion.

MICHAEL

(to BEN) A what?

BEN

(turns to MICHAEL) It's a procedure in which part of a toenail is removed. I've done it hundreds of times.

MICHAEL

So why does Norm want you to put down nail avulsion?

BEN

Because a nail avulsion is covered by Medicare, whereas a clipping is not.

MICHAEL

So let me guess. Norm wants you to put down nail avulsion, in which case he keeps the money you get from Medicare, so he can continue to fuck.

BEN

Bingo!

MICHAEL

What did you say?

BEN

So I tell him . . .

Flashback resumes; BEN speaks to NORM in his office.

I can't do that. I could go to jail. Let me just give you whatever you need.

NORM stands and moves upstage, his back to the audience. He takes a tallis bag and yarmulke from his sport jacket pocket. He puts on the tallis and yarmulke. BEN stands and moves to the front of his desk.

But Norm doesn't want to hear from that. He goes on about how much he's done for me—setting me up, the introductions—and then makes a comment about all the young podiatrists looking for work. So now I envision Norm going up to the pulpit on Rosh Hashanah.

NORM moves between BEN and MICHAEL, wearing the yarmulke and tallis. He holds a slip of paper with notes. He addresses the audience as if speaking to a congregation.

NORM

First, I'd like to wish everyone a very happy, healthy, and prosperous New Year. I have just a few brief announcements. *(reads from the paper)* The men's club will meet this Thursday night at 7:00. Herb Adelman will talk about his recent trip to Israel. Our Sisterhood will hold its annual donor dinner this Sunday, starting at 6:30. *(looks up)* And, finally, stop seeing Ben Finberg. He's a lousy podiatrist.

NORM exits.

BEN

So I get scared and agree to put down nail avulsion. I send in the claim, Medicare sends me a check, I cash it, and give the money to Norm. Now everyone's happy. I get Norm off my back, I continue my business, and Norm gets to fuck. Except two weeks later, he tells me he's fucking his secretary and needs more money. The man's seventy and fucking a forty-year-old. Thank God for vitamin V, right? So he wants me to file another claim.

Meanwhile, I look on the Internet, and there are podiatrists all over the country doing this. Sure, they get caught, but not before filing hundreds of claims. So I figure, what's the harm? Who's gonna care about a few nail avulsions when the government's losing billions? So I file another claim. Eventually, I submit a total of six, at which point we agree to stop.

Two FBI AGENTS enter.

Except I get a visit from the FBI, who want to see my files concerning Norm's nail avulsions.

BEN hands one AGENT NORM'S folder, which the two AGENTS carefully peruse.

I show them my notes, which were completely made up, and I'm telling them one lie after another, which is another crime.

AGENT returns the folder to BEN and both AGENTS exit.

As soon as they leave, I call Norm and ask him to come to the office. He comes in but now decides to play dumb.

NORM enters BEN'S office as before. BEN stands facing him from behind his desk. MICHAEL observes the conversation.

NORM

What's the matter?

BEN

The FBI was here.

NORM

The FBI? For what?

BEN

They were investigating your nail avulsions.

NORM

Nail avulsions? What's a nail avulsion? What are you talking about?

BEN

The procedure I wrote down instead of a clipping.

NORM

Why would you do that? I just came in to get my nails cut. *(pause)* Oh, so that's it. You know, some officers came to my house yesterday. One had a camera and took pictures of my feet. I couldn't understand why. Now I get it. They wanted to see if I got this, uh, what do you call it? Nail what?

BEN

(realizes he's been played) Nail avulsion. *(to MICHAEL)* Then as he left, he said something that really hurt.

NORM

You know, your father was right. You're not very smart.

NORM exits.

BEN

So there you have it. Obviously, I was set up. But why would he do that? He was one of Pops's best friends. He's here to help me, not hurt me, right?

MICHAEL

Let me sit.

MICHAEL sits on the sofa. He holds his forehead as a thought comes to him.

Unless . . .

BEN

Unless what? Talk! Unless what?

MICHAEL

Unless Pops conspired with Norm to do you in.

BEN

You're insane. He wouldn't do that. What father on this planet could do such a thing?

Fade out.

Act II

Scene 1

The waiting room at a prison. There is a long table with two chairs on each side. A PRISON GUARD stands more or less at attention. MICHAEL paces the room waiting for BEN to enter.

GUARD

He'll be out soon.

MICHAEL

How's he doing?

GUARD remains silent.

Lose any weight?

GUARD stays silent. BEN enters wearing prison garb.

BEN

Hey!

MICHAEL

Ben!

They are about to hug.

GUARD

No touching!

BEN and MICHAEL drop their arms.

BEN

Let's sit down.

They sit across from each other.

How's Mom?

MICHAEL

I can't lie—she's not taking it very well.

BEN

I know. I'll visit as soon as I'm out. You tell her.

MICHAEL

I will.

BEN

And how are you doing?

MICHAEL

Same.

BEN

You like your students?

MICHAEL

They're okay.

BEN

Sandi?

MICHAEL

Good. Look, enough about me. How are you?

BEN

Me? (*arms outstretched*) I'm at the Ritz!

MICHAEL

One more year.

BEN

If I make it.

MICHAEL

Of course, you'll make it.

BEN

Then what? I can't work. I'm a felon.

MICHAEL

You'll find something.

BEN

Find what? I'm a doctor. It's the only thing I know.

MICHAEL

You'll do something else. Just concentrate on getting out.

BEN

You gonna see Norm?

MICHAEL

Not sure what good it would do.

BEN

I plan to kill him.

MICHAEL

Oh, so you want to live here forever?

BEN

I'm serious.

MICHAEL

Stop it. You're not killing anybody. You're gonna get out and get your life in order. "I'm gonna kill him." Tough guy.

BEN

You seeing Sherri?

MICHAEL

We're going out to dinner tomorrow night.

BEN

Kids too?

MICHAEL

Yeah.

BEN

Tell 'em I love 'em.

MICHAEL

They know that.

BEN

Just tell 'em!

MICHAEL

I will.

GUARD

Two minutes.

MICHAEL and BEN stand.

MICHAEL

I'll come around Christmas.

BEN

Thanks. You're a great brother.

MICHAEL

You too . . . shmuck.

BEN

Putz!

MICHAEL

I should sock you one.

BEN sticks out his chin and points to it.

BEN

Right here.

GUARD

No touching!

MICHAEL and BEN laugh. The GUARD walks BEN back to his jail cell. MICHAEL and BEN wave goodbye.

Scene 2

Synagogue office. A SECRETARY sits at a desk, working with a computer. NORM SINGER sits at his desk, which is divided by a door from the SECRETARY'S space. He wears a long-sleeved white shirt and a tie. A suit jacket hangs over his chair. He's reading a report and turning pages. MICHAEL enters. He wears slacks and a sport jacket.

SECRETARY

Can I help you?

MICHAEL

Yes, my name is Harold Furman. My family just moved into the area, and we're looking to join a synagogue. I was hoping I could speak to the president if he or she's available.

SECRETARY

Just a moment.

She calls NORM on an intercom. NORM answers.

NORM

Yes?

SECRETARY

There's a young man who'd like to see you. He just moved into the area and is interested in becoming a member.

NORM

Tell him to wait. I'll be right out. What's his name?

SECRETARY

(to MICHAEL) I'm sorry, what's your name again?

MICHAEL

Harold Furman.

SECRETARY

(to NORM) Harold Furman.

NORM

Thanks.

NORM puts on his suit jacket, straightens his tie, and opens the door.

NORM

Mr. Furman, please come in.

MICHAEL

Thank you.

MICHAEL enters NORM'S office. NORM closes the door behind him.

NORM

I'm Norm Singer, president of the synagogue. My secretary tells me you just moved into the area. Please take a seat.

MICHAEL

Thank you.

MICHAEL sits across from NORM.

NORM

Where are you from, if I may ask?

MICHAEL

Philadelphia.

NORM

Philly! Had a great friend there. Died a few years ago. Maybe you knew him? Sy Finberg? Owned a small clothing store in the Kensington area, if I remember. Forty years at the same location. I kept telling him, "Sy, you got two sons. Expand!" Could have had an empire by now.

MICHAEL

Mr. Singer—I knew Sy Finberg.

NORM

Really? How did you know him?

MICHAEL

I'm his son Michael.

NORM

Oh.

They look at each other. There's a long pause.

Well, how's your mom?

MICHAEL

Good.

NORM

And her health?

MICHAEL

Very good.

NORM

Happy to hear that. And how are you? I think your father said you were a teacher.

MICHAEL

That's right.

NORM

What grade?

MICHAEL

First.

NORM

First? That must be very challenging.

MICHAEL

It is.

NORM

Yeah, your father never stopped talking about you boys—Michael this, Ben that. He was really proud of you kids. I'm sorry I only got to Philly once after the war. I think you were about five, and your brother was around two.

MICHAEL

I remember that.

NORM

Of course, I wanted to attend the funeral, but it was hard to get away. I really loved your father. I guess you know we were in the war together. You should have seen him—short but very strong. Especially those legs. Could've been a fullback. I'll never forget how after the war we were given a week's pass, so your father and I went to Paris. The things we did there! (*laughs, then turns serious*) But that's not why you're here.

MICHAEL

No.

NORM

How's he doing?

MICHAEL

He'll be out in a year.

NORM

Glad to hear it.

MICHAEL

Really?

NORM

Sure. He's a good kid.

MICHAEL

He's not a kid.

NORM

I know. It's an expression. (*pause*) What do you want?

MICHAEL

The truth.

NORM

About what?

MICHAEL

About what happened.

NORM

With your brother.

MICHAEL

That's right.

NORM

What do *you* think happened?

MICHAEL

We think you set him up.

NORM stands and moves to where MICHAEL is sitting.

NORM

Well, I suppose I could ask you to leave, (*sarcastically*) Mr. Furman, but you're Sy's son, so I'll answer you. Yes, I set him up.

MICHAEL

Why?

NORM

One day I get a call from your father. Tells me Ben graduated med school and asks if I could do something for him. Of course, I say yes. So there I am at the airport, and I'm expecting, no offense, someone who looks like your father— short, maybe heavysset . . . Then suddenly this tall, handsome man comes up to me. "Excuse me, are you Mr. Singer?" I'm shocked. Here I am expecting your typical nebbish, and I'm looking straight at King David. A few months go by. I set up his practice, introduce him to some Hollywood honchos, and before you know it, he's Foot Doctor to the Stars. Marries a lovely young lady, has two adorable children and becomes active in the synagogue—so active many see him as a future president. Good, right?

MICHAEL

Yeah.

NORM

Except one thing—I've been skimming off this place for years, and no way can I let your brother get near the books. I mean, thousands of dollars pass through here. A tzaddik couldn't resist, and hell if I'm gonna give it up for some upstart, no matter whose son he is. So now the question becomes, how do I get rid of him? That wasn't too difficult.

MICHAEL

Falsify medical reports.

NORM

That's right. Guess after all I did for him, he couldn't resist. Anyway, I contacted the authorities, showed them the reports, and he was gone. Worked like a charm if you think about it. The only question I have is why a sharp kid like Ben could fall for a trick any streetwise kid could see through in a minute.

MICHAEL

He was afraid you'd steer business away from him. You threatened as much.

NORM

Pure bluff. He was too popular, and rumors had been spreading about me for years. Anyway, like you say, he'll be out in a year. Not so long.

MICHAEL stands, grabs the lapels of NORM'S suit jacket.

MICHAEL

Then what? You ruined his life!

NORM pulls MICHAEL'S hands down.

NORM

Better he should ruin mine? Let me explain something to you—and I'm surprised your father never told you this. People like me are everywhere. We burrow into different organizations and make ourselves men of honor. Then, when no one's looking, or maybe when everyone's looking, we steal.

MICHAEL

And you call yourself a Jew?

NORM

That's right—best there is, buddy boy, a survivor. Hey, don't be so naïve. Let me ask *you* something. Ever wonder how your father was able to afford a middle-class lifestyle selling crap? Huh, how'd he do it? Had a good home, drove a nice car, put you boys through college, one through med school. How'd he do it?

MICHAEL

He worked hard.

NORM

You're as dumb as your brother. *(mockingly)* "He worked hard."

MICHAEL

Then tell me.

NORM

He cheated! They all did. It was all cash-and-carry in those days, so he underreported his income. Why you think he wanted that store so much? He graduated with a degree in accounting. Get it? Accounting. With that kind of knowledge in a cash-and-carry business, that place became a goldmine. And don't start asking me about Jewish. You want your Jewish pure, join a yeshiva. I prefer *real* life. Anything else? I have to get to a Shiva soon.

MICHAEL

One more thing.

NORM

What?

MICHAEL

Did my father have anything to do with it?

NORM

With Ben?

MICHAEL

Yes.

NORM

No! Why would you think that?

MICHAEL

I just want to know.

NORM

What a strange question! Let me tell you a story about your father—then I must get going. You know we fought in the war together. Anyway, one night your father and I were sent on patrol, just the two of us. We were coming around the side of a church, and there we were, face to face with a German soldier. Your father had his gun out, so he had the drop on him. All he had to do was shoot. So your father looks him in the eye, and with his gun (*miming with his hand*), waves him away. I said, “Sy, why’d you do that? You let him get away.” He didn’t say anything, and we never spoke about that again. That’s the kind of man your father was—a lot of bark but basically a decent man. Feel better now?

MICHAEL

Yes.

NORM

Anyway, it was good seeing you and if you think of going to the police, I have my tracks covered.

MICHAEL

Maybe I’m wearing a wire.

NORM

No, you’re not. Nice Jewish boys don’t do that.

MICHAEL stands. NORM puts on his jacket. Set goes dark.

Scene 3

MICHAEL and RITA are standing in RITA’S kitchen (stage right). She is making coffee. There is a plate of Danish pastries in the center of the table and coffee cups and small plates for three. Stage left is a restaurant table with four chairs. The table is covered with a white tablecloth and place settings. Menus are stacked in the middle of the table.

MICHAEL

(shouts) Come on. Everything’s ready.

BEN

(offstage) Be right there.

BEN enters.

MICHAEL

There he is—Foot Doctor to the Felons.

BEN

Shut up.

RITA

Leave him alone. Just be thankful we're all together. Sit down

MICHAEL and BEN sit. RITA pours coffee for everyone and sits. Each takes a Danish from the plate.

Have you given any thought what you might do?

BEN

I don't know. I mean, there's always Israel. I think I can practice there.

RITA

Israel? California's not far enough?

BEN

I'm just thinking. Nothing definite. Now I just need to recover.

MICHAEL

(puts his hand over BEN'S hand) You'll be fine.

BEN

Thanks.

A pause as all eat and drink.

MICHAEL

Mom, do you ever think about those Sunday dinners at the diner?

RITA

All the time. Seven o'clock sharp. Oh, how your father got angry if either you boys came late.

SY enters and stands midway between the kitchen and the restaurant table.

BEN

I remember.

RITA, MICHAEL, and BEN stand and walk towards the restaurant table. SY meets them.

SY

Why can't the two of you ever get here on time?

All four approach the restaurant table.

Ben, you sit there (*points*). Michael, there (*points*). Your mother will sit here, and I'll sit next to your mother.

All sit. They pass around the menus and look for what to order.

Ben, you know what you want?

BEN

Think I'll get shrimp scampi.

SY

Shrimp scampi. Who orders shrimp scampi? I never knew anybody who ordered shrimp scampi. Fine, you want shrimp scampi, eat every last bite. Don't leave anything on your plate. Oy, when you ever gonna learn how to order? How 'bout you, Mike?

MICHAEL

I think I'll have chopped steak.

SY

(*to BEN*) See, now that's ordering like a normal human being.

Lights fade.

End of Play