

Redeemers (Excerpt)
Written by Bilal Dardai



A neighborhood bar, the week before Christmas. Multi-colored lights the shape of firefly torsos, shiny cardboard cut-out letter banners, distant sounds of Christmas songs not performed by choirs. NICK and ABEL sit on stools, at a tall table near the wall, their coats hung on hooks nearby. NICK has a half-finished cocktail in front of him. There are Christmas cards in envelopes on the table. NICK seems unsure how to begin speaking to the audience.

NICK

I don't know how to tell this story. *(Beat.)* It's not that I don't know how to tell a story. I can tell you *a* story. I have a six year-old niece. Whom I visit regularly.

NICK (continued)

Whom I will gather in my arms and take upstairs while my sister is loading up the dishwasher and she will ask Uncle Nick for a story; Uncle Nick will oblige her...once upon a time, and you know...? We brainwash the kids with that. We make their lives harder with that.

ABEL

Fairy tales?

NICK

Fairy tales, yes. But not the way you think. Although yes, that too, with the princes and good defeats evil and happily ever after. That *too*, but that's not what I mean. I mean "once upon a time." I mean the opening. My niece she *demand*s that, because she has been told that this is how it begins. If it does not begin this way then it was *not* a fucking fairy tale. Which I learn the hard way one night. I learn because I start a story one night with "There once was" and I don't remember which story I told, maybe the one about the tailor and the flies and the giant. She listens, my niece, the whole way through, eyes on me the whole time, not falling asleep like usual just—pop. Staring at me. So I get to the end, at which I point I say, *the end*, and still she's staring at me. I say now go to sleep, honey, and instead she folds her arms. Her mouth gets *tense*. That stare of hers hits a temperature like the outermost moon of Saturn and she says: "**You didn't start it right.**" (*Beat.*) She will not be mollified, my niece. My apology means nothing to her. She does not say anything further but I understand, whatever language she's emitting through those arctic eyes of hers, I understand that I am to start this story over and that when I start this story over I am to start it over in the correct manner. Once. Upon. A Time. Because that is how her mother starts stories. That is how her father, her *father* who went off to a sales convention in Anaheim and then sent back his wedding ring 2-Day Air, that is how *he* would start stories, and in this moment I have somehow failed to clear even the lowest bar of human decency that he could clear every single night. (*Beat.*) My niece, then, has decreed, not in words, that Uncle Nick is to start the story over. I hesitate, because at first I think I have to tell her a different story than the one I just told her, making sure this time to begin the story correctly, but I then realize that she stopped listening immediately after I botched the opening. And and, and *this* is something. You may notice: my niece didn't interrupt me as soon as I'd made the error. No. She didn't say "Uncle Nick that's not how the story starts, it starts once upon a time." She *waited*. She held her...offense, I guess you'd call it, bottled up inside of her for the entirety of my story and then she let it all out *after* I was finished, like some steam pipe that the valve hadn't been

open. This is something that she gets from her mother. I know. It's the exact same mannerism. My sister's ex is a fucking lowlife and if I ever see him again I'll kick him in the ribs; but seeing that look on my niece's face I could almost understand. *(To ABEL.)* You don't ever tell her I said that.

ABEL

I've never met your sister.

NICK

If and when you do. *(To the audience.)* I tell my niece the exact same story again, beginning with "Once upon a time." But we both know. This isn't real. Whatever magic there is in telling a story to a child at bedtime, that's gone. What we have left that night is a routine, and no matter how much expression I put into the telling or how attentive she is this go-round, the whole enterprise is dead at the core. She listens and she falls asleep because that's the machinery. *(Beat.)* She's forgotten the incident, of course, far as I can tell. But me? It never been quite the same for me. I'm always so careful with the opening of the story now and when she goes to sleep smiling I feel this tiny corkscrew unwind itself out my spine that I hadn't even realized was there. Once upon a time. Can you imagine how much harder it is for a kid to write a, a book report, a What I Did On My Summer Vacation essay, because of what we do to them with that? Because we hammer into their heads...what's that number, that stat or whatever. How it's seven times harder to unlearn a bad habit than it is to learn it correctly the first time? Is it seven? It's some weird number like that and I don't have the slightest idea how they came up with it. *(Beat.)* We do that. When we're not careful. We impart a fool notion into the heads of our kids that a story has to start one way. Had I been there earlier? For my niece? I would have mixed it up a little. "Let me tell you about." "This story takes place in." "There once was."

ABEL

(looking at his cellphone)

It's ten.

NICK

What's ten? *(He looks at his watch.)* It's barely half-past eight.

ABEL

It's ten times harder to unlearn a bad habit. I, uh, I looked it up. Just now. *(He holds up his phone.)* It's not scientific. It's a quote. From Charles Dudley Warner.

NICK

I don't know who that is.

ABEL

(reads from his phone)

Charles Dudley Warner, an essayist...born 1829, died—

NICK

—I misspoke, Abel, I'm sorry. I meant: I don't *care* who that is. All right, it's not scientific, that's fine. Has nothing to do with my point.

ABEL

What's your point?

NICK

That I know how to tell a story. *(Beat.)* I just don't know how to tell this one.

*MERCY enters holding a bottle of beer
and glass of wine. She wears black.
She places the beer in front of ABEL
and has a seat.*

MERCY

(to the audience)

Once upon a time, there were three friends sitting in a bar.

NICK

Goddammit.

MERCY

What. I've been gone all this time and you haven't told them anything.

ABEL

What do I owe you?

MERCY

Get the next one. If you're not going to tell this story then I'll start.

NICK

"Three friends sitting in a bar" is not a story. It's a joke.

MERCY

Three friends *walk into* a bar is a joke. We're past that. Catch up.

NICK

I'm going—! I'm going to tell the story. I am trying to *formulate*—

MERCY

(to the audience)

Once upon a time, there was this chickenshit narrator who refused to start telling a story.

NICK

All right, all right.

MERCY

He had refused to tell the story not because he didn't know the details...

NICK

...just give me a second...

MERCY

...or because he didn't know where to begin...

NICK

...will you *please* just...

MERCY

...but because he didn't know how to tell the story without making him and his friends sound like petty, vicious—.

NICK

—Mercy!

Pause. MERCY sips her wine.

MERCY

I like making you shout my name. I like to pretend it's you begging.

NICK

(to the audience)

Yes. That's why. When I tell you this story by the end of it you're going to believe that the three of us are horrible, horrible people.

ABEL

(to the audience)

Which we are.

NICK

(to ABEL)

You're not helping. You might think you're helping but you're not. *(To the audience.)* The problem is the first part of the story. The first part of the story is *familiar*. It's a heartwarming family classic, so you're already predisposed to having an emotional attachment. When we try to explain to you why we did what we did your first instinct is you're going to shake your heads and cluck your tongues and whisper to each other "These *bastards*. These sons of *bitches*."