reluctant to burn

a play by korde arrington tuttle

time
present

setting
act one — brooklyn, ny
act two — charlotte, nc
act three — both

characters
eddie, mid-20s, black, cis-man
aj, mid-20s, white, cis-man
james, late-40s to mid-50s, cis-man
lala, late-teens, latinx or afro-latinx, gender-non-conforming (female-bodied)

playwright’s note
a slash (“/”) indicates a point of interruption; when the next character’s line begins.
resist the impulse to overdramatize lifted language. a “beat” doesn’t necessarily equate
to a break in dialogue. “pauses” and “silences” are intentional.

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[excerpt begins mid-way through act one/scene one.]

eddie
do you want another beer?

EDDIE collects their now empty beer bottles and goes inside. AJ adjusts the table. looks out. he tosses an imaginary baseball up in the air and takes a couple of phantom swings, the second of which, EDDIE walks-in on, carrying two more bottles.

going, going, gone...

aj
should'v'e asked you to bring water for barbara.

eddie
no use. (gestures at their bush) look at her. she's on her way out.

aj
my bush.

eddie
we can get another bush.

in the distance, the sound of a glass bottle shattering.

aj
seventh grade, j.v.—fourth inning, i'm playing shortstop.

eddie
isn't shortstop, like, the toughest / defensive—

aj
yes.

eddie
characterized by, i dunno—extreme athleticism / and—
aj

yes.

eddie

then—

aj

extreme oversight on coach boone’s part.

EDDIE laughs.

it’s four hundred degrees out, the inside of my mitt is a sauna. i’d put on way too much eye-black. we all did.

laughs.

it was dripping all onto my jersey. tell me why, for some insane reason, i decide not to wear my cup. like, actively made the choice, it’s a no cup day! i mean, to be fair, i hadn’t needed it up to this point. plus, it fucked up my stride.

eddie

stride?

aj

my—gallop. my boogie. really fucked up my boogie.

eddie

the worst.

aj

this asshole hits a grounder—headed right in my direction.

eddie

oh, god.

aj

oh, yes.
eddie
don’t finish / it—

aj
there was sweat in my eyes, but, like, ain’t no thang—

eddie
mhmm—

aj
i’m in my stance, glove out—baseball’s zooming towards me—

eddie
i can’t—

aj
tell me why, at the last second, the ball hits this random clump of grass—

eddie
nope.

aj
catapults up and—

EDDIE grimaces.
bam! smashes right into my left nut.

beat.
miracle it didn’t rupture.

eddie
no kidding.

aj
‘bout swells-up the size of a cantaloupe. mom is down on the field before i even hit the ground—shrieking. you know / her—
eddie

oh, i know kathy.

aj

jordan, the ath—no, jenna—jenna, the athletic trainer, gives me an ice pack, and mom whisks me off to the emergency room.

beat.

bad enough my doctor’s fine as hell, but mom has to stay in the room with me. i’m fifteen. going through puberty. and mom is the last person i want seein’ my junk. definitely one of those wish dad was around kinda moments.

beat.

i’m trying so hard not to cry in front of this fine-ass doctor, with his hazel eyes and veiny hands. pants at my ankles, grapefruit for a testicle, and...and i see the way mom is looking at my—my penis, my dick. she’s looking at it, like she—well—all the blood drains from her face, and yeah, she was hysterical before—but...the tears welling up in her eyes are different. spilling from a completely different place in her body.

pause.

we never talked about it. didn’t have to. i knew. instinctively, i knew.

eddie

knew—

aj

that—my old man might not’ve left me shit else, but—

eddie

but...oh.

aj

yeah.
eddie

ohhh.

aj

yeah.

eddie

hunh.

beat.

aj

that night, i overheard mom telling my aunt sally about it over the phone and—

eddie

that's a lot.

aj

yeah.

pause.

smells like popeye's.

long pause.

eddie

aj, look. i'm invested in what we're doing. if i wasn't, i wouldn't be here. but we're not married. i don't want to be married. our personal life is just that—ours. and neither of us knows... what might—

beat.

he's excited to meet you, though.

aj

no, he's not.
eddie

yes, he is.

aj

eddie—

he’s not, not.

aj

you’re lying.

beat.

eddie

yes, i am.

beat.

aj

there’s no way your childhood’s off-limits.

eddie

it most certainly is.

aj

how is that fair?

eddie

(amused) the hilton!

aj

i wanna see where you grew up. your childhood home, with the trampoline.

eddie

i bet it’s haunted.
aj

by whom?

eddie

my mom, maybe. she loved that house. i loved that house.

beat.

everything about everything, i learned in that house.

aj

like—

eddie

sodomy.

AJ laughs. EDDIE pauses. drinks.

hunter-green-and-white-striped wallpaper in the kitchen. white cabinets. granite countertops. white, tile floor. island with a raised bar. three hunter-green stool chairs.

beat.

copper backsplash.

pause.

dad, in these green, plaid boxers—same shade as the wallpaper and stool chairs, i remember. i'm eating a massive bowl of cinnamon toast crunch, so it must've been a saturday. mom's loading the dishwasher. she starts giggling. mom had this way of—it'd kinda ping around in her chest before making its way up her throat 'n into her mouth. james, she says, tryna keep it together. the horse is out of the barn.

aj

the horse is / outta—

eddie

the horse is out of the barn.
eddie (cont’d)
look up from my bowl, and my dad’s gigantic, flaccid—penis—i was gonna say cock, but / cock is so—

aj
yeah, maybe not cock—

eddie
had flopped outta the slit in the—guess the button came undone.

aj
what’d he do?

eddie
he turned his back to me—forcefully, like he was angry at me. think it scared him. turned his back to me, fixed himself.

aj
how old were you?

eddie
six or seven.

beat.
definitely laughed at himself, but mom was—dying. had to put the dishes down. straight-up, waterfall status.

beat.
i’ll never forget being amazed by how thick it was. i mean, yeah, i was eight, so—in reality—maybe it wasn’t the kielbasa i remember it being—

aj
gross.
but it was definitely—

*EDDIE’s gesture is clearly exaggerated.*

that’s disgusting.

and dark.

okay.

much darker than his regular skin.

enough.

what?

i don’t wanna talk about your dad’s / penis.

just a penis.

it’s not just a penis, it’s your father’s / penis.

just a—i’ll drop it.

thank you.
eddie
penis.

AJ cuts his eyes at EDDIE.