

READER'S THEATER

X: A Novel by Ilyasah Shabazz and Kekla Magoon

Characters:

Narrator One	Sammy
Narrator Two	Bartender
Narrator Three	Policeman
Malcolm	Stranger(s)

Harlem, New York, 1945

Narrator One: Friends tell me trouble's coming.

Narrator Two: I ease out of the restaurant onto the sidewalk, gun in my pocket. Hand in there too, keeping it close for good measure.

Narrator Three: I gotta get back to my pad, and quick now. One foot in front of the other. Keep my head down, hope no one sees me.

Stranger: Hey, Red.

Narrator One: I flinch, flick my fingers on the metal. Detroit Red, they call me, though Michigan seems so far behind me now.

Stranger: Hey, Red, I heard Archie's looking for you.

Narrator Two: West Indian Archie. The numbers runner I work for.

Narrator Three: My pulse beats firmer under my skin.

Malcolm: Oh yeah?

Narrator One: I play it cool. Keep moving.

Narrator Two: Half strangers know? Hell. Rumors don't lie. West Indian Archie's mad. He says I wronged him, but I didn't. You'd have to be out of your mind to try to cheat a guy like Archie.

Narrator Three: A door slams somewhere along the block, and I jump about a mile.

Narrator One: A voice calls out, but not to me. I clutch the gun in my coat and scurry on.

Narrator Two: How did it all go so wrong?

Narrator Three: When I first set foot in Harlem, I was a step ahead of everything. I could blend in with the jive cats, swirl the Lindy ladies, let my feet groove, think of nothing but the now.

Narrator One: I could close my eyes, and in closing them not be seen. Slip into the seams of the streets and let them swallow me. It was a glorious fit, so seemingly warm.

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Narrator One: Cop car comes rolling around the corner, real slow. Damn. Got to keep outta sight.

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Bartender: Hey, Red. Archie's looking for you. He's good and

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Malcolm: So I heard.

Narrator Three: Bartender looks me up and down.

Bartender: Well, well. You fixing to fight?

Malcolm: I don't know. I don't know.

Narrator One: Sitting at the bar is an old man from the islands. He moves himself in that wise, wrinkled way. His warm, open expression gives me the out-of-place feeling that he can help me somehow, maybe even save me. I want to lean into it, but when he speaks, it's to send me away.

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Policeman: You're clean.

Narrator Two: A strange piece of fortune. No reefer, no joint, no stray bag of powder. I place my hands in my pockets, real casual.

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Narrator One: Sitting at the bar is an old man from the islands. He moves himself in that wise, wrinkled way. His warm, open expression gives me the out-of-place feeling that he can help me somehow, maybe even save me. I want to lean into it, but when he speaks, it's to send me away.

Bartender: You should get outta town, son. And I mean today.

Narrator Two: The door bangs open. Our three heads turn. A beat cop from the neighborhood strolls in.

Narrator Three: My hand is still on the gun. I ease it out of my pocket, up onto the bar, behind the old islander's back. The bartender slips it out of sight behind some bottles, but I still can't breathe.

Policeman: Detroit Red. You been causing trouble?

Malcolm: No, sir.

Narrator One: I raise my arms for the pat-down. The bartender meets my eye, wipes the counter. You owe me one, he's thinking. And I know he'll collect.

Policeman: You're clean.

Narrator Two: A strange piece of fortune. No reefer, no joint, no stray bag of powder. I place my hands in my pockets, real casual.

Narrator Three: The cop stands close. I've seen him around, patrolling

the neighborhood. I wouldn't have guessed he would know me by name. “

Policeman: I would've thought you'd be carrying. Rumor is you've got a gun.

Malcolm: Maybe I had one. Maybe I threw it in the river.

Narrator One: The cop breathes peppermint inches from my face.

Policeman: Watch your back, now.

Narrator Two: He sounds a little bit pleased. I remain stuck there, unmoving, as he strolls out. It's hard to breathe, to think.

Bartender: Get outta here, Red. I don't want any trouble.

Narrator Three: I leave the bar out the back way. All that's left is to run. If there's one thing I can do, it's run. I've already been running for so long.

Narrator One: The avenues are alive with people, late afternoon. Stretch your legs and shoot the breeze. Let your throat loose and holler. Blow off steam. An everyday scene. Not for me. Not today. I run.

Narrator Two: People try to stop me. Try to warn me.

Stranger: Watch out—

Narrator Three: I can't make it home. Not like this. I race up to my friend Sammy's pad.

Narrator One: Sammy's stretched out on the bed. He lifts his head. Sees me standing there, panting, fists clenched.

Sammy: My man. You bringing trouble up in here?

Malcolm: I'll just be here a minute.

Narrator Two: I shut myself in the bathroom, splash some water on my face.

Sammy: Red? You OK?

Narrator Three: I'm not. I'm not OK.

Narrator One: My skin is flushed hot. I let the water run, dip my cheek into the ice-cool flow. It feels good.

Sammy: Red! Archie's down front. His guys say he's coming up. They say he's got a gun!

Narrator Two: My knees buckle. My body bumps down onto the tile, back against the door, tucked as small as I can. I close my sweat-stung eyes. And there are tears now, salty and hot. What have I done?

Sammy: Red!

Narrator Three: He bangs on the bathroom door.

Sammy: You gotta go, man. You gotta go now!

Narrator One: I curl against the chipped, grimy tiles. I never imagined I'd be brought so low. Archie's here to kill me, and there's nothing I can do.

Narrator Two: My life flashes before my eyes. Every place I've ever known. Every face I've ever loved. Everything I've ever done . . . And it all seems like a dream now, as if any minute I'll wake up in my childhood bed in Lansing, Michigan, and I'll be five years old, with Papa still alive and Mom home and smiling, her arms open wide to hold me.

Narrator Three: But Sammy's voice is what's real.

Sammy: Red! You hear me? Red!

Narrator One: Here and now, I don't want to be Detroit Red. I want to slip the skin of this life, to be new and clean again. Just start over. I've done it before.

Narrator Two: I slide my hands over my smooth conk, down to my neck bones, fingers locking tight. It isn't me they're after. It isn't me who's here.

Sammy: Red! Red!

Narrator Three: No, no, no. Not Red.

Narrator One: I am Malcolm. I am Malcolm Little.

Narrator Two: I am my father's son. But to be my father's son means that they will always come for me.

Narrator Three: They will always come for me, and I will always succumb.