

Tank Zeros Out

by Clark DesSoye

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Characters

<i>Tank (Tomaso) Jenkins</i>	<i>36, wanna-be wise guy, serving time for armed robbery</i>
<i>Tana Sweeney</i>	<i>28, Tank's half sister</i>
<i>Jack Thompkins</i>	<i>41, Tank's cellmate</i>
<i>Ma (Tina Williams)</i>	<i>57, Tana and Tomaso's mother</i>
<i>Mr. Blackledge</i>	<i>62, Ma's boss and Tomaso's lawyer</i>
<i>Franky</i>	<i>31, Tomaso's second cellmate</i>
<i>Shift Commander</i>	<i>off stage voice</i>
<i>Phone operator</i>	<i>off stage voice</i>
<i>Setting:</i>	<i>Present day, anywhere in the US</i>

Is it nature or nurture that defines us? And, once “defined” can you rewrite your own story? Tank has spent his life taking the easy — and usually illegal — route. But, when his family decides to cut him off, he has to learn how to take responsibility for his choices. Can he make the necessary investment in himself and take control of his destiny?

Act 1, Scene 1

Setting: Visitor's room at a state prison complex.

At Rise: Tank sits at a table alone. Jack sits at another table across from his 20-year-old son. Other tables have inmates sitting across from their visitor(s). As Tana enters, she surveys the room to find Tank's table and slowly walks to him as he jumps up.

TANK

Tana? Why...? Where's Ma?

TANA

Hi, Tomaso. Nice to see you, too!

[Tana sits opposite Tank and he sits, shaking his head.]

TANK

It's just... I was expecting Ma, she hasn't put any money in my commissary account this month and...

TANA

Yeah, she sent me to tell you about that...

TANK

Tell me what? What's goin' on?

TANA

First off, Ma's boss — your lawyer — Mr. Blackledge — has advised her to stop visiting you and sending money until things change in here.

TANK

Things change? I'm in here for, what, five more years...? What's gonna change?

TANA

You.

[Tank jumps up, shouting.]

TANK

What the fuck!

JACK

Hey, Tank, my man, keep it down.

TANK

Stay the fuck outta my business, Jack.

TANA

Cool it, Tank, or I'm outta here.

[Tank sits back down, shaking his head. He gestures to Jack by placing his palm to his chest and bowing his head.]

JACK

It's O K, man, be cool.

TANK

O K. So, tell me, Sis, what's going on?

TANA

Good. Let's just sit here and *calmly* talk. Ma figured I could explain what they want.

[Tank fidgets in his seat, waving his arms.]

TANA (CONTINUES)

Cool. Calm. *[pause]* We're just talking here. O K?

TANK

Yeah, Yeah. I get it. Go ahead, *[pause]* what's the *great* Mr. Blackledge think?

TANA

Before we get to that, I need to tell you why Ma can't keep little Tomaso anymore.

TANK

T-Three? Why was he with Ma? *[pause]* Where's Jennifer?

TANA

Back inside. T-Three was picked up wandering around the neighborhood in his underwear. Cops drove him home and found her passed out on the floor with a needle in her arm.

TANK

Oh. Shit. That stupid bi-aaa-atch...

TANA (INTERRUPTING)

Calmly...

[Tana gestures with her hands, palms down, patting the table top. Tank sits back nodding.]

TANA (CONTINUES)

DA tacked on child endangerment to her parole violation. She's looking at three years — minimum. Protective services asked Ma to take custody of Tomaso — by the way, he wants to be called T-Cubed, thinks it sounds more “gangsta” like his dad.

TANK

That's my boy. *[pause]*T-Cubed. *[pause]*I like it.

TANA

Spare me. *[pause]*Anyway, that only lasted a week. He skipped outta school, soon as he knew she was at work and started swiping stuff out of her house, selling it on the streets. So, he's in a group home now, way over on the other side of town.

TANK

A group home? *[pause]*Jeez, sis. Can't you take him?

TANA

Like I want a “gangsta kid” around my little ones?

TANK

Ah. He ain't that bad. He just needs a strong hand to keep him in line. Jennifer never did anything to reign in his... spiritedness. Is that a word?

TANA

I get your meaning. He is a handful and he hasn't exactly had good role models.

TANK

Shit, I haven't even seen the kid since... well... since I got in here this time.

TANA

Which, was only a year after you got *out* the time before...

TANK

Yeah. I know. I haven't really been there for the kid.

TANA

You have not been there. Period. But he thinks you're some... some slick James Cagney character or...

TANK

James... who?

TANA

Never mind. Junior idolizes you. *[pause]* Doesn't know you at all. But ... *[pause]*
Oh, forget it.

TANK

What, a kid shouldn't look up to his dad?

TANA

He doesn't know a thing about you, except you're some *tough* guy.

TANK

What's wrong with standing up for yourself. Takin' charge...

TANA

Taking charge? *[pause]* You? *[pause]* You've been living off the money Ma sends you every month in here for, what, ten years altogether?

TANK

Hey. That's not *[pause]* well. I mean. Sure, I've made some mistakes, but I'll make it right when I get outta here.

TANA

Uh huh. So, you're planning your next *big score* already?

TANK

I got some ideas. Get out. Pay Ma back. Get my kid back. Looks like ditzy Jennifer won't have much of a *sole custody* argument now...

TANA

Pay Ma back? You haven't even started paying off your restitution yet... that'll take you years. And T-Three? Where are you an' T-Three gonna live? In that van where they cuffed you last time? That's long gone, my friend.

TANK

I got ideas. We've been talkin'... *[louder to Jack]* We got some *big* plans, don't we, Jack?

JACK

Your dreaming, Tank. This is my last rodeo in here. I wanna be around to see this guy graduate college. Once I'm outta here, I don't ever want to see you — or any of these clowns — ever again.

*[Jack looks around to the other inmates,
who nod at him.]*

JACK (CONTINUES)

No offence.

TANK

Yeah. Thanks, *friend*.

JACK

Truth hurts!

TANA

So, no real plans?

TANK

I've been making my own way since...

TANA

Your *own* way? *[pause]* Are you kidding me? First it was Tommy and Jocko and you decapitating parking meters... for what... ten bucks a pop? That got you two years in Juvey. Then it was the *brilliant* Roger and your big heist at the country club that got you five in the big boys' joint. And then....

TANK

Some bad choices, that's all. I *[pause]* I trust people too much. A guy tells me he's got a good scheme, I trust him and help 'im work it. That's how I get into trouble.

TANA

Where do you even find these characters? I mean, we grew up in the same house, same neighborhood. I never saw the likes of any of those clowns you “got into trouble” with. I mean, really. Where *did* you find ‘em? Or did they find *you*? The world class mark.

TANK

Hey. I’m no *mark*. I just made some bad choices.

TANA

And how’s *that* going to be different when you get out *this* time? Oh, and speaking of “role models” your Dad just got moved to maximum security, again.

TANK

Really. He only had, like a year left. What happened?

TANA

He was working in the wood shop, refinishing desks and other furniture. Worked up a scheme with some idiot outside to send in a dresser to be refinished. Only this guy tapes a bunch of cell phones to the bottom of the drawers. Tomaso Senior figures he can get like a hundred bucks a piece for them.

TANK

Yeah, sure, hundred easy. Cell phones are like gold in here.

TANA

And it almost worked. Made it through the warehouse inspection, but once it was in the shop, *that* security guy pulled the drawers out and found the phones.

TANK

Wow. That close, eh? Tough luck.

TANA

Took ‘em a minute to figure out who the “master mind” was... seems the other guys in the shop wanted to keep their jobs and ratted him out. He’d been braggin’ about it for weeks; lining up buyers for the phones. Your dear old Dad got himself five extra years and will never be eligible for any work programs again.

TANK

Ah. Those bullshit programs. It’s just slavery; what they pay you.

TANA

Well, I’ve been reading about those programs, Mr. Blackledge heard about them at a chamber event. They make a difference.

TANK

Yeah. I’ve heard the pitch a hundred times.

TANA

Well. Sit tight, ‘cause you’re going to hear it again right now. ‘Cause Ma and your lawyer — and me and T-Three — we need you to start figuring out a *real* plan or you’ll end up just like your old man.

[Curtain.]

Act 1, Scene 2

Setting: Later that day. The cell Tank and Jack share.

At Rise: Jack is sitting on his bed, the lower bunk, reading a marketing book. Tank is pacing around the cell, muttering to himself and waving his arms about distractedly.

TANK

Cut me off. My own Ma, my lawyer.

[Tank stops pacing in front of Jack and stares at him. Jack keeps reading, making notations in the book.]

TANK (CONTINUES)

They “need to see some changes in me” What the fuck does that even mean?

[Tank takes a step close to Jack and leans forward. Jack continues to ignore him.]

TANK (CONTINUES)

Come on, man. I’m asking. For real. I don’t know what they expect from me.

[Jack continues to ignore him for a beat or two then dogears the page in his book, sets it carefully on the bed next to him and places the pen next to it. Then he looks up at Tank and motions for him to sit on the other end of the bed.]

JACK

For real? We’ve been in this cell together for what, like three years? All you ever do is talk about what a shit show this is. How “the man” did this to you and that to you. And “ah shucks” what a tough break I got. Poor me.

TANK

Well sure. I've caught some bad breaks. *Real* bad breaks.

JACK

You've fucked up. It's simple. Own it.

TANK

I'm ownin' it. I'm doing my time.

JACK

You're doin' shit. It's "this guy screwed me. That guard has it in for me." And you look at me like I'm some schmuck "working for the man for peanuts, studying their books on how to make 'em more money."

TANK

Come on, man. That's not a real job. You're not making any *real* money.

JACK

No. You think so? That job helps me pay for Tommy's college? Did I tell you he's transferring from community college to the university next year?

TANK

No. That's great... for him.

JACK

It is. And I helped make it possible, because my puny little "fake" job pays me enough to send home child support. Have you ever paid any child support for your namesake?

TANK

I've been in here, for like, for – ever.

JACK

As have I, my friend.

TANK

You may be impressing them with your “I’m a new man” shit, but you’re not fooling me.

[Jack picks up us book and pen and resumes his reading. Tank gets up and starts pacing again.]

TANK (CONTINUES)

You’re useless, just like my lawyer. *[pause]* Talking my mother and sister into jerking me around. What the hell does he *[pause]* they *[pause]* want from me? I don’t get it....

[Curtain.]

Act 1, Scene 3

Setting: Three days later. On one side of the stage is a stark room in the prison with three pay phones attached to the wall with benches below them. The other side of the stage is a modern office desk and chair next to an open office.

At Rise: Tank has a phone receiver to his ear. Ma (Tina Williams) sits at her desk as her phone rings.

MA

Good morning, Blackledge and Associates.

PHONE OPERATOR (OFF STAGE)

We have a collect call from a Tank Jenkins. Will you accept the charges?

[Ma waves into the open office behind her. She holds the phone receiver against her shoulder, shouting into the office.]

MA

It's Tank!

MR. BLACKLEDGE (OFF STAGE, SHOUTING)

Told you. I'll talk to him.

[Ma puts the phone back to her ear as Mr. Blackledge joins her at her desk.]

PHONE OPERATOR (OFF STAGE)

Will you accept the charges?

MA

Yes, put him through.

[Ma hands the phone to Mr. Blackledge as she stands up, letting him sit at her desk. She paces behind him as he talks on the phone.]

TANK

Ma? Ma? What's all this shit about?

MR. BLACKLEDGE

Hello, Tomaso, it's Mr. Blackledge. You just helped me win a fiver.

TANK

Shit! What the fuck are you talking about?

MR. BLACKLEDGE

Your mother didn't think you'd call. *[pause]* How can I help you?

TANK

I want to talk to my mother.

MR. BLACKLEDGE

How about you just tell me what's on your mind?

TANK

What's on my mind is that she — you — suddenly cut me off!

MR. BLACKLEDGE

Not really sudden at all, Tomaso. Hasn't she been telling you for months that she — we — want you to start working on a solid plan for your future. Your sister told us she explained all this to you.

TANK

My sister, who I haven't laid eyes on in — like — ten years, comes in here with all this shit you want me to do, but you haven't got a clue how shit works in here.

MR. BLACKLEDGE

Oh, I think I have a pretty good idea. You're not my only client inside. *But* you are one of the very few who apparently plans to spend the rest of your life coming out and going right back in.

TANK

Plan. Plan, what's all this crap about plans? Let me talk to my mother!

MR. BLACKLEDGE

Sorry. That's not going to happen right now. I've heard great things about the HVAC classes they offer inside. You'd always be able to find employment with that kind of skill.

TANK

Not that shit, again. I can't take community college classes because I never finished high school.

MR. BLACKLEDGE

So, what have you done about getting your GED?

TANK

GED, are you fucking kidding me, at my age?

MR. BLACKLEDGE

It's been done. I've got a guy who's sixty working on his GED right now.

TANK

Oh, shit, man. Fuckin' losers in those classes.

MR. BLACKLEDGE

I believe we understand each other now. Is there anything else I can help you with?

TANK

Fuck you!

[Tank slams the receiver onto the phone and crumples onto the bench. Mr. Blackledge cringes at the loud noise coming through the phone, shaking his head. He replaces the phone receiver and gets up, gesturing Ma to sit.]

MR. BLACKLEDGE

He is *not* happy.

MA

Thank you for talking to him. I've *never* been able to say "no" to him.

MR. BLACKLEDGE

I know. It's O K. Give it a couple of months. He'll figure it out.

*[Mr. Blackledge returns to his office.
Curtain.]*

Act 1, Scene 4

Setting: A month later. Tank and Jack's cell.

At Rise: Jack is reading one of his text books and taking notes. Tank is pacing about with a handful of folders in his hands. Jack ignores him.

TANK

High school English, social studies, math. Shit. I hated all that crap back then and I still hate it. What's the fuckin' point?

[Tank finally sits on the floor opposite Jack and places the folders on the floor next to himself. After taking a couple of exaggerated deep breaths, Tank picks up one of the folders, opens it and starts reading.]

TANK (CONTINUES)

"Laws are written in the legislature, usually beginning in a committee focused on the topic of the proposed new law, or bill, in the House of Representatives." My god, this stuff is so boring.

[Lights go out briefly and then come back up. The pile of folders next to Tank have moved from one side of him to the other. He is now reading his math lessons.]

TANK (CONTINUES)

"If, at 1pm Central time, Tom takes a train heading east from Dallas at 25 miles per hour and, at the same time, Janet takes a train from Jacksonville heading west at 35 miles per hour, when will they meet? And where?" Really, who takes trains?

[Tank picks up his pencil and starts calculating an answer.]

TANK (CONTINUES)

It looks like it's nine hundred, ninety-six miles between Jacksonville and Dallas...

[The lights flicker and a loud voice is heard over the intercom.]

SHIFT COMMANDER (OFF STAGE)

Lights out, my friends! Another big day tomorrow and whether you're working or taking classes, you'll want to be well rested.

*[Lights go out.
Curtain.]*

Act 1, Scene 5

Setting: *Three months later. On one side of the stage is a stark room in the prison with three pay phones attached to the wall with benches below them. The other side of the stage is a modern office desk and chair next to an open office.*

At Rise: *Tank has a phone receiver to his ear, some forms in his hand that he's looking through. Ma sits at her desk the phone is on speaker, Mr. Blackledge stands behind her listening.*

MA

That's wonderful, son. A couple of set backs along the way, but you did it!

MR. BLACKLEDGE

Yes, Tomaso, that's great. Your mother just won her five bucks back...

TANK

What? *[pause]* Oh, your little office pool. Glad I can provide some entertainment for you all.

MA

I'm always picking your side...

TANK

That's something, I guess. *[pause]* Now, according to these forms I need to fill out, it'll cost me fifty dollars a class for this HVAC training you want me to take.

MR. BLACKLEDGE

We will cover that for you, as long as you take it seriously. Can you do that?

TANK

Sure, I guess. I mean, yes, I will put in the time and effort to get certified.

MA

Or is there something else you'd like to learn?

TANK

No, I looked over the offerings. These classes start in two weeks and like you said, there's always jobs for guys with HVAC creds.

MA

You're starting to sound serious, Tomaso, I'm so happy.

TANK

Thanks, Ma. I never thought I'd get through the GED testing but, it turns out, I'm not that dumb.

MA

We never thought you were stupid, just *[pause]* hanging around with the wrong crowd.

MR. BLACKLEDGE

It sounds like you're starting to make better decisions, and not giving up on things if they get *[pause]* complicated or difficult.

TANK

Yeah, and Jack has started talking to me again. He helped me with the test studying.

MA

That's nice.

TANK

So, can I go over these questions with you guys, in case there's something I don't know?

*[Tank sits on the bench, the phone receiver pressed to his ear with his shoulder and takes a pen out of his jumpsuit pocket, preparing to write on the forms.
Curtain.]*

Act 1, Scene 6

Setting: *A month later. Jack and Tank's cell. There is now a low shelf (used as a desk) with a plastic milk crate beneath it on the wall opposite Jack's bed. There are several text books piled on the end of the "desk" and a GED certificate taped to the wall above it.*

At Rise: *Tank sits on the milk crate scanning between some worksheets and an open text book. Jack is studying his text books.*

TANK

There's so much technical stuff with ACs. You gotta know square footage and the right size unit to use. So many calculations...

JACK

Step by step. *[pause]* Remember how overwhelming the GED study materials seemed when you started?

TANK

Yeah, but that stuff I just had to remember till I took the test. I'm going to need to know this stuff like, forever.

JACK

I hope that's *not* how you did your GED studying.

TANK

Well, no. I *[pause]* well, I think most of that stuff I already knew, but like forgot, so it was like a refresher. It'll stay with me. But this tech stuff...

JACK

The world runs on technology now. Everything's complicated. You just need to stick with it. Take in one thing at a time and then another thing, building up slowly till you've learned it all.

TANK

I don't know...

*[Tank writes down some figures, stares at them for a moment then looks into the textbook. After another moment he slams the book closed and crumples up the worksheet.
Curtain.]*

Act 1, Scene 7

Setting: *A month later. Jack and Tank's cell same as last scene.*

At Rise: *Tank paces the cell. Jack is studying his text books and doesn't look up while replying to Tank.*

TANK

God damn it! They cut me off, again.

JACK

Of course. Wasn't it contingent on you taking your classes?

TANK

I tried. I really tried. *[pause]* But the other guys in the class, kids right outta high school, they all got it. I just couldn't keep up. I felt like an idiot.

JACK

You are *not* an idiot. Some people are just better at some things. You just need to figure out what you're good at.

TANK

What I'm good at is fucking up. Disappointing people...

JACK

Don't go there, my friend. *[pause]* Have you looked at the recent job postings?

TANK

Please, not with the jobs again.

JACK

You've got the skills for a few of them, why not?

TANK

'Cause I'm not gonna work for peanuts in some fake job...

JACK

Some of them pay pretty well. I've got a nice little nest egg built up and when I get out, all my restitution will be paid off — again, from the pay from my *fake* job. When I get out, I'll be able to get a *real* fresh start. Paying your debt to society is more than just doin' your time, which is ALL you're doing. It's about becoming a different person.

TANK

Ah. You're deluding yourself. People don't change. The world don't change. You get out, you'll be the same old you. The world will still see you as that crazy fuck up who had ten too many beers one night and ran a red light, killing a little girl and her mama.

JACK

I own that! *[pause]* I know it's me, and me alone, who killed them. I live with that guilt every day. But I haven't had a drink since, I did the rehab program — which, again, by-the-way, is NOT bullshit. It works, I learned about myself and why I drank and how to not crave it. And I don't any more — and not just 'cause I'm locked in this cage where there's nothing to drink.

TANK

Hey. That's great man. You keep believing that.

JACK

I'm doing it. I wanted the program to work and they helped me make it work, for me. And I wanted the job to work and they helped me make that work too, for me.

TANK

Blah, blah, blah...

JACK

O K. Never mind. Go back to your muttering, why not bang your head against the wall over there, too. Just keep it down, so I can study.

[Jack picks up his book and opens it to the page he had been reading. Tank stares at him for a moment then stands up. After a beat or two, he shakes his head and sits back down, reaching over to touch Jack's shoulder.]

TANK

Look. I'm sorry. I'm glad for you. Glad you're helping your kid and you're sober. But this job you're doing, in the call center, that's what you wanna do when you get out?

JACK

Frankly, I never would have considered that kinda work on the outside. But it turns out, I'm pretty good at it. I like talking to people, explaining the program. You know the benefits, the ROI?

TANK

Lost me there, bro.

JACK

Return on investment. ROI. It's, well, it's essentially what everything's about. You invest in your kid's education, he learns how to do stuff that people want done and he ends up with a good job. Like your sister. How'd *she* end up teaching college and you end up... well... here?

TANK

Different dads.

JACK

Really? Your step dad wouldn't help you go to college?

TANK

College? Me? I quit school when I was 16. I had better things to do. I was working at the corner garage, making good money, too. Got myself a nice set a' wheels...

JACK

But that's what I'm talking about. You never made that investment in yourself. You just did this to get that. And what did that set a' wheels get you?

TANK

Whatta you mean? Those wheels took me plenty a' places.

JACK

Like where?

TANK

Like, anywhere I wanted to go. To the movies, races... One time, me and Jenny, Jennifer, T-Three's ma, we went to the coast, swam in the ocean. You ever seen the ocean?

JACK

Yes, I've been to the ocean. But you're missing the point, Tank. *[pause]* Shit I absolutely hate that name. Can I call you Tomaso? *[pause]* That's your *name* name, right?

TANK

Sure, whatever.

JACK

Maybe that's it. Maybe... Let's do try this, Tomaso. From now on, start thinking of yourself as Tomaso, instead of Tank. What the fuck's a tank anyhow? Some big dumb thing that runs over shit.

TANK

It's more 'an that. It blows things away, it's power. Might!

JACK

And that's how you see yourself?

TANK

Well. Yeah.

JACK

Blowing shit up?

TANK

More like, powerful. A force to be reckoned with.

JACK

That's certainly *not* how *I* see you. And, frankly, not how I want to see anyone. Why would anyone want to work with “a force to be reckoned with?” Why would anyone want to be friends with that?

TANK

Well. Women like strong, forceful guys!

JACK

Really. You think that's how Jennifer saw you?

TANK

Well yeah. We were like... like... Bonnie and Clyde.

JACK (LAUGHING)

Oh — my — god. You *are* just a little boy. Aren't you?

[The lights flicker and a loud voice is heard over the intercom.]

SHIFT COMMANDER (OFF STAGE)

Lights out, campers! Rest up so we can do this song and dance better tomorrow.

[Lights go out.]

JACK

So, it'll be Tomaso from now on. O K?

TOMASO

Sure, Jack, I guess.

[Curtain.]

Act 2, Scene 1

Setting: *Two days later. Same (Jack and Tomaso's cell).*

At Rise: *Jack and Tomaso are sitting next to each other on Jack's lower bunk reading in one of Jack's textbooks.*

TOMASO

You really... understand all this stuff?

JACK

Sure. I was a project manager in a machine shop before... here. We used all kinds of computer programs to design products and parts. It's wild what you can do these days. I was taking online classes to learn Solidworks — it's the 3D CAD program the top manufacturers use. In fact, I'd just got my certificate for completing the first level when...

TOMASO

You know, you might as well be talkin' in Greek. I don't understand any of *that!*

JACK

Yeah. Sorry. Well, that's not important. What I'm trying to say is that, once you start using one kind of software, you can pretty much figure out how to use *any* kind of software.

For instance, this software I'm selling at work, it's got nothing to do with designing stuff, but it helps companies manage everything, from payroll to accounting, inventory, logistics, project management....

TOMASO

Greek territory, again...

JACK

O K, let's concentrate on the marketing stuff instead, grab that book I was reading the other day. It's up on that shelf.

[Jack points to the shelf on the opposite wall. Tomaso gets up and points from one book to another until Jack shakes his head "yes." Tomaso returns to the bed with the book.]

JACK (CONTINUES)

Before that, tell me. Did you apply for that job with Universal Transportation I told you about?

TOMASO

I did, in fact. They said they'd "let me know" in a couple days.

JACK

Great. So, how was it? Did they ask you anything you couldn't answer?

TOMASO

Not really. Just the usual stuff: "Can you take direction? Are you a team player?" They wanted me to give them examples, from past jobs to illustrate. Luckily, I could talk about working in the neighborhood garage when I was ... younger. That seemed to impress them.

JACK

See. I told you.

TOMASO

There was one question I kinda stumbled over though.
They asked why, during all the time I've spent inside, I never applied for a job.

JACK

Yeah, I should 'ave warned you about that one. What did you say?

TOMASO

What could I say? I said something stupid like "I just wanted to keep my head down, stay out of trouble and do my time."

JACK

That doesn't sound too bad.

TOMASO

I hope not. 'Cause they showed me all around the shop, over behind D yard. It's quite an operation they got going there.

JACK

Yeah, I've seen it.

TOMASO

The guys working there can completely teardown and overhaul semis, trailers, busses. And they just started doing car maintenance and repair for the State fleet. They've got torches and welders and huge equipment for pulling engines and straightening frames and...

JACK

Hey. You actually sound like you're excited about being a part of all that...

TOMASO

I don't know. I don't think the guy from Universal liked me. You could tell, he never got his hands dirty in any shop...

JACK

You'll know soon, one way or the other. There are some openings in the call center if...

TOMASO

No. I could never do what you're doing. That computer stuff is outta my league.

JACK

No, it's not. You're a smart guy, Tomaso. You can figure it out. Their training is excellent. You'll learn stuff that you can use in a hundred types of jobs outside. I've seen guys apply there, just to get the training. And they got great jobs outside!

TOMASO

I don't know. Let's see what happens with Universal...

JACK

Fair enough. Here, let me show you this stuff I've been studying. It's really interesting and I didn't even realize I was using it in my sales pitches.

[Jack opens to the dog-eared page in the book and Tomaso leans in to read the headline at the top of the page.]

TOMASO

“How to zero out an account” O K?

JACK

It’s like what we were talking about before with ROI, remember?

TOMASO

Yeah, you make an investment and get something *bigger* in return.

JACK

This is just taking it a step further. Like with the software investment I’m selling. Say a company pays a hundred grand for the software...

TOMASO

Really, you’re selling stuff for a hundred grand?

JACK

That’s the baseline package price, actually. Most are more like a million...

TOMASO

Are – you – fucking – shitting – me?

JACK

No. Every day we’re selling stuff in that range. But let’s stick with a hundred grand for now.

TOMASO

Shit. That’s big money.

JACK

So right off the buyer has a huge debit (cost) on their books for this software investment. I need to show him (or her, you won't believe how many women there are in C-suites these days). Show 'em that the money they'll be saving in their day-to-day operations, thanks to this software, will zero out that investment in say three years. They don't have to sell one extra product or get one more client, it comes from the savings the software generates. Savings that'll continue forever.

TOMASO

They *buy* that line?

JACK

It's *not* a "line." It's a fact. We've got all kinds of customer testimonials. Verified, audited results. It works. Delivers exactly as promised.

[The lights flicker as an intercom announcement sounds.]

SHIFT COMMANDER (OFF STAGE)

Lights out, my friends! Day shift wanted me to remind you that they want you to be fresh as daisies tomorrow morning, so let's get some beauty sleep.

[Lights go out.]

TOMASO

That guy's quite the comedian, eh?

JACK

He tries. Let's pick up here tomorrow night, OK? And good luck with Universal.

TOMASO

Thanks, Jack. *[pause]* I mean it. *[pause]* Thanks.

JACK

You bet, my friend.

[Curtain.]

Act 2, Scene 2

Setting: *Next day. Same, Jack and Tomaso's cell.*

At Rise: *Jack is sitting on his bed reading his marketing book. Tomaso comes into the cell excitedly, carrying a large folder full of papers and manuals.*

TOMASO

I got it, Jack! I got the job with Universal!

[Jack puts his book aside and stands up, offering Tomaso his hand.]

JACK

That's great! Congratulations.

[They shake hands and sit on the bed. Tomaso opens the folder and starts sorting through the manuals.]

TOMASO

Look at all the stuff they want me to learn.

JACK

Wow. When do you start?

TOMASO

Tomorrow. I need to know the stuff in this one cold, when I get there tomorrow.

JACK

Let's take a look.

TOMASO

Can you help me with this?

JACK

Of course. That's our deal, right?

TOMASO

Yeah, but you got your own stuff to learn...

JACK

It's O K, Tomaso. I'm just studying for myself. I've got my job down. And, about that. I've got some exciting news myself.

TOMASO

What?

JACK

Later. Let's tackle this stuff.

*[Jack leans in to read the first manual.
Curtain.]*

Act 2, Scene 3

Setting: *An hour later. Same, Jack and Tomaso's cell.*

At Rise: *Jack and Tomaso are poring over the manuals that Tomaso got from his new "employer."*

JACK

You've got this, Tomaso. You can do all this stuff, right?

TOMASO

I don't know, Jack. It's been so long since I had a... legit... job....

JACK

Yeah. But... this is all stuff you've done.

TOMASO

Yeah, this one. But look, there's like five more I need to learn.

JACK

Yes. And tomorrow we'll tackle the next one and then the next one....

TOMASO

They're giving me, like, a month to get up to speed. If I can't hack it by then...

JACK

Easy. All the jobs are like that. And to tell you the truth, I didn't think *I* was going to get through the training, yet alone the trial period.

TOMASO

Really?

JACK

Really. You've got this. You're ready. Tomorrow's going to be a big day for you. But I promised to tell you *my* news.

TOMASO

Yeah. So, what's going on?

JACK

You know how they're expanding all these private business partnership work programs.

TOMASO

Yeah. New job postings are going up every week.

JACK

Exactly. Well part of this push are some enhancements to the programs.

TOMASO

I've heard rumblings about that, figured it was just more of their bullshit.

JACK

Not this time, my friend. It's adding some real incentives. You know how the Department is always short staffed?

TOMASO

Yeah, the guards are always complaining about extra shifts....

JACK

Exactly. Well, the governor doesn't want to hear about it anymore. He pushed through a bill to allow early release to *qualifying* inmates. *[pause]* Fewer inmates, fewer security staff.

TOMASO

And *that* means?

JACK

It means, for people like me... and now *you*, that are doing a good job and have impressed their employer enough that said employer will offer them a job after release, they can qualify for a “dramatic” reduction in their sentence.

TOMASO

How dramatic? A few months?

JACK

Well, for instance, yours truly is getting 18 months knocked off my sentence.

TOMASO

18 months! That's great, Jack...

JACK

Exactly. They want me to keep working for them outside.

TOMASO

That means, wait, you're getting out in like, a month?

JACK

Two, actually. I'm starting my prerelease programing in three weeks.

TOMASO

I'm so happy for you. Congratulations. You *will* get to see Tommy graduate college.

JACK

The university, next year. Right. And in the meantime, we are going to keep working our way through these manuals. Make sure you keep this job through the probation period and make sure you impress them so much that Universal will want you to join them outside.

TOMASO

Yeah, right.

[Lights flicker and intercom sounds.]

SHIFT COMMANDER (OFF STAGE)

Lights out, gang! Tomorrow promises all kinds of new adventures — for all of us. So, let's recharge and be ready for it!

[Lights out.]

TOMASO AND JACK (TOGETHER)

Right.

[Curtain.]

Act 2, Scene 4

Setting: Two weeks later. Same, Jack and Tomaso's cell.

At Rise: Jack is studying a text book. Tomaso is pacing around the room, carrying one of the manuals from his new "employer."

TOMASO

Shit. Shit. *[pause]* Shit!

[Tomaso tosses the manual into the corner of the cell and sits down hard on the milk crate at his make-shift desk.]

TOMASO (CONTINUES)

I thought I knew this shit cold. But I screwed up. *[pause]* Got the timing all wrong on a tune up. *[pause]* A fucking tune up, for chrissakes. *[pause]* The boss nearly took my head off!

JACK

It's a learning experience, Tomaso. You make a mistake; you learn from it. You move on.

TOMASO

He's such a shit! *[pause]* Screamed at me in front of the whole crew... Made me feel like an idiot.

JACK

And you've never seen him yell at anyone else?

TOMASO

He's yelling all the time. All day long.

JACK

So, he's not singling you out as some special kind of stupid. *[pause]* He's the instructor and you're the students. It's a process. He, maybe, has crappy methods that include a lot of yelling, *[pause]* but it's just part of the learning process.

TOMASO

Yeah, well, it sucks!

JACK

O K. Remember when you were studying for the math tests, how frustrated you were?

TOMASO

Yes. Yes. And I needed to step back, approach it like a puzzle to solve. I had all the pieces, I just needed to find the one that fits each particular puzzle.

JACK

See. You are a good student. You remember that. And you can learn the correct timing, or whatever. Right?

*[Tomaso gets up to retrieve the manual he'd thrown in the corner and sits beside Jack with it.
Curtain.]*

Act 2, Scene 5

Setting: A week later. Split stage with the inmate phone room opposite Ma's office.

At Rise: Tomaso sits on the bench talking on the phone. Ma is at her desk talking on the phone.

MA

That sounds real promising, son.

TOMASO

It's so *[pause]*I don't know; weird. *[pause]*Having a real job to go to each day. *[pause]*Money showing up in my account.

MA

And it's something you enjoy?

TOMASO

I'd forgotten how much I loved working on my car. Remember that old Firebird?

MA

You were always fussing with it. Always kept it cleaned and polished.

TOMASO

I kept that old clunker going for years. *[pause]*It must 've had, like, 250 thousand miles on it.

MA

And the people there? They like you?

TOMASO

Sure. *[pause]* Took some getting used to the different *[pause]* personalities and all. They want me to join the training program at their facility in town, *[pause]* but I'll need to get some kind of special status. *[pause]* Did you give Mr. Blackledge that form I sent you?

MA

Yes. Yes. I gave it to him yesterday. He filled it out and we put it in the mail right away.

TOMASO

Great. Thanks, Ma. *[pause]* I think this 'll be an important chance for me. They only picked, like, three of the new guys in the training to continue at their off-site shop.

MA

Really. They must believe you can do it.

TOMASO

Oh. I know I can do it.

[Curtain.]

Act 3, Scene 1

Setting: Two months later. Tomaso's cell, which he now shares with Franky.

At Rise: Tomaso sits on his bed (now he's on the lower bunk) writing a letter atop one text book while another text book is open next to him, along with a dictionary and a Thesaurus. Franky is pacing around the cell mumbling to himself. Tomaso ignores him, talking softly to himself as he composes a letter.

FRANKY

Did you see how that guard shoved me?

TOMASO

"I hope this letter finds you well" Who the fuck talks like that?

FRANKY

And that jerk-off Creed. Thinks he owns the whole fuckin' yard.

TOMASO

But *[pause]*I do hope he's doing well. *[pause]*I know he must be doin' O K.

FRANKY

I couldn't eat that slop they served up for supper. The worst!

TOMASO

"My life has changed so much these last few months"

FRANKY

And the shit last night!

TOMASO

No sign of Tank; thank god. For a long time, I'd still catch a glimpse of him, but I'm real good at recognizing him and *[pause]*stepping back. Like you always said. "That's not who I am anymore," I tell him and, puff, he's gone.

FRANKY

Did I tell you what my shithead lawyer said?

TOMASO

"Thank you for *[pause]*for" *[pause]*What am I trying to say? He was like... *[pause]*He showed me *[pause]*how I should act by the way he acted...

[Tomaso flips through the Thesaurus.]

FRANKY

He says that there's no "grounds" for appeal!

TOMASO

"Example." That's it! "Thank you for the example you set..."

[Curtain.]

Act 3, Scene 2

Setting: Two months later. The same visitors room as Act 1.

At Rise: As before, inmates and their visitors are quietly talking. Tomaso is sitting across from Tana, his sister.

TANA

We've been getting some very positive reports on you, Tomaso.

TOMASO

Oh, really. Like what?

TANA

You're working. With Universal trucking, repairing State fleet vehicles?

TOMASO

Yeah. Yeah, it's actually kinda fun. Reminds me of Franklin's. Remember Franklin's Garage, down the block from us?

TANA

Of course, you worked there when I was still in grade school.

TOMASO

Old man Franklin was a great guy. At first, I was scared of him, he always looked so crotchety, like that guy on TV who played Scrooge. But, once he saw I was serious about doing the job, he taught me all kinds of stuff about engines and drive shafts.

TANA

I never knew that. We were never close. You were always off at work or with your friends.

TOMASO

Yeah, I fancied myself all grown up; ready to take on the world. Of course, cars now are a whole ‘nother ball game. But the guys in the garage are helping get me up to speed. They’re glad to have the extra hands. Universal just got a contract to maintain all the Parks Department vehicles, we’ll be getting in some interesting things soon.

TANA

And your commissary account is...?

TOMASO

Yeah. That’s fine, part of my wages go into it automatically. And they will be sending money to T-Three’s group home each month, too, and they started paying down my restitution. And get this, I’m paying taxes!

TANA

That’s great. Didn’t I tell you it was a good idea to start applying for the jobs they post inside?

TOMASO

It *is* a lot different than I expected. You know, Jack helped me with all of that, after we talked that day. I was fuming at you and Ma and bouncing off the walls in our cell.

TANA

He did seem like a nice guy... You know, considering where we are and all.

TOMASO

Yeah. You know, before that day, we never really talked. I mean we celled together for like three years and just... well just... like talked *at* each other. Does that make any sense?

TANA

Sure. Happens all the time. But if you watch out for it and start listening to what other people are saying, you can actually engage.

TOMASO

Well, it was all kinda new for me. But we started to really talk; engage. He told me about his rehab and all about his job at the call center. He told me about how he sells high end, I mean, *really* high end, computer software programs to like CEOs and company presidents and people like that. Of course, he had to learn all about that technology stuff. And they're really good trainers. *[pause]* Well anyway, he was always studying in the cell, so till then I just let him do his thing. But once, like you say, I started listening to what he was saying, it all started to make sense.

TANA

How so?

TOMASO

Well, for instance, he talked about ROI, you know what that is, right?

TANA

Return on investment.

TOMASO

Yeah, am I the only person in the world who didn't know that?

TANA

Probably not.

TOMASO

Anyway, he said that you got to invest in yourself if you want things to go better.

TANA

That makes sense.

TOMASO

Yeah. But at first, I didn't get it. I mean, he talked about how he helped pay for his son's college — you wouldn't believe how much money some of those guys make. And, when he graduates, companies will want him on staff to work on their technology stuff — he's studying computer engineering. So, he'll have a good job when he graduates: the return on the investment.

TANA

Exactly.

TOMASO

Yeah, well anyway. You probably think I'm some idiot not grasping this, like really basic stuff, years ago.

TANA

That's not important. What's important is that you get it now. That you're working toward something positive. A real plan.

TOMASO

Jack showed me something in one of his books that real stuck with me, it was like this big revelation, though to you it's probably like "yeah of course."

TANA

Not necessarily. Tell me.

TOMASO

It was just this little sidebar quote: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result" or something like that.

TANA

That's perfect. That's kind of what I was trying to tell you last time I was here.

TOMASO

Yeah. I see that *now*. I didn't have a plan before. I was just going to get out, look around for my old buddies with their stupid schemes and hope I don't get caught next time.

TANA

That's what we were afraid of. We didn't want you to end up like you father, always playing the angles, shooting for the big score. *[pause]* Even running a con in here.

TOMASO

Yeah. I do *not* want to end up like him. So, how's the kid doing?

TANA

He seems to like the managers at the group home. They've got all kinds of rules and regulations and make sure he gets – and stays – at school every day. But they do some fun activities, like going to the community pool and the library, where he's discovered online games on the computers there. This summer their going to a computer camp.

TOMASO

Really, my kid a computer nerd?

TANA

And he's given up the "T-Cubed" idea. The teachers and people at the group home and the other kids mainly just use their real names and he overheard a girl he really likes in his English class gushing about some singer named Tomaso and decided to use Tomaso, too!

TOMASO

That's my boy all right! *[pause]* Could you do me a favor?

TANA

Sure, if I can.

TOMASO

It's nothing... shady. If you could take a... well a letter I wrote to Jack. I've got his address.

TANA

Jack got released? I didn't know that. I thought he still had a couple of years to go?

TOMASO

He did, but, well there's this new program where good workers can get time knocked off their sentence.

TANA

Wow. Does that mean...?

TOMASO

Here's hoping. *[pause]* So far so good. I've learned all the manuals, got through the "probation" period. I was one of three guys taken in a special training program. And they're starting to have me do complete jobs from start to finish; including all the paperwork.

TANA

Ma wanted me to tell you that she'll be visiting you next month, like before.

TOMASO

Thanks, Sis. And, the letter...

TANA

Yes. Yes, I can take it to Jack...

TOMASO

Thanks. *[pause]* And stay there. *[pause]* Tell him I want you to be there when he reads it. Please?

TANA

If you want. Sure. Are you O K?

TOMASO

Yes. Yes. Of course. I just miss Jack. My new cellmate's a real cracker. Thinks he's some big shot wise guy...

TANA

Sounds familiar....

TOMASO

Ha. Ha. That was my Tank days... They are behind me.

TANA

I can see that. I'm... proud of you, Tomaso.

TOMASO

Thanks. And... well, I know I never told you how... well how proud I am of you. You stuck it out in school and college and married a great guy and... the kids.

TANA

Want to see? I have some pictures from Ben's birthday party last week...

[Curtain.]

Act 3, Scene 3

Setting: *The next day. A cozy living room in Jack's apartment.*

At Rise: *Jack is sitting on the edge of chair next to a love seat where Tana is sitting. There are glasses of ice tea on the coffee table that they sip from throughout the scene.*

JACK

So, Tomaso is doing O K?

TANA

Yes. Yes. Really well. These last few months it's been – like – well, like for the first time in our lives I feel like a have a big brother. You know?

JACK

I get it. I've been – trying to – mend lots of bridges, too, since I got out. There are a few people I haven't talked to in years that I owe....

TANA

It must be tough... Have you been able to spend time with your son?

JACK

He tries to stop by a couple nights a week, but he's got all that school work and he's applying for internships for the summer next year.

TANA

Yeah. I remember those days!

JACK

That's right. What are you teaching this year?

TANA

I'm still doing the government administration studies. But the university is starting a new program focused on justice reform that I'm going to move into, if they'll have me.

JACK

The powers that be *do* seem to be taking some baby steps in that direction.

TANA

Yeah, and hopefully we can lengthen those strides. And your work is going well?

JACK

Great. Already promoted to group supervisor, spearheading new programs...*[pause]*
The learning never stops.

TANA

That's for sure. But you enjoy that, right?

JACK

Yes. Always have. Drove my friends crazy growing up. Always asking questions, searching for answers.

TANA

Some of that rubbed off on Tomaso, you know?

[Tana reaches into her purse to get the envelope Tomaso gave her and extends it to Jack.]

TANA (CONTINUES)

He wanted me to give you this. And. *[pause]* He wants me to stay here while you read it.

JACK

O K. Not sure what that's all about, but...

[Jack carefully unseals the envelope, extracts the letter and spreads it open on the coffee table between them.]

TOMASO (OFF STAGE)

Dear Jack, my friend,

I hope this letter finds you well. (I got that from one of the Business Communications books you left me.) I really do hope you transitioned OK.

My life has changed so much in the last few months. Remember how you were always saying it's me making the changes? But if it wasn't for you, and the kick in the pants my mother and sister gave me, none of it would have happened.

Thank you. Thank you for the example you set for me, when I finally opened my eyes to see it.

Thank you for listening and helping me to listen.

I want you to know that I'm keeping it; keeping everything you taught me and using it — every day.

I'm in at Universal. Breezed through the trainings and probation. This is going to work out. Might not get the early release or job on the outside, but with this experience on my résumé (yes, I'm putting together an actual résumé) there's thousands of places that'll be happy to have me.

As you once said, this is my last rodeo in here.

TANA

Ha, I remember that.

JACK

Yeah. That sounds like me.

TOMASO (OFF STAGE)

The new guy is no Jack, more like Tank. Oh well. He leaves me to my studying so it'll work out, I guess.

JACK

He gets the irony of that, right?

TANA

It's not lost on him. Believe me.

TOMASO (OFF STAGE)

The other thing you said, that you never want to see any of us after you get out. I respect that and won't ask. I just want you to know how much you helped me zero out Tank. You won't have a chance to see the return on the time you invested in me, but I want you to know it was a good investment.

Have a great life. Remember how you saved my life whenever you think about the lives you took. Forgive yourself, my friend.

Thank you,

Tomaso Jenkins

[Jack looks up at Tana with tears in his eyes. She reaches across, placing her hand in his, resting on his knee.]

JACK

There's no zeroing out what I did. It will always be with me. That family will never be whole. *[pause]* There's no fixing that.

TANA

You're a *good* person, Jack. You made a mistake, that's all. Don't let that define you. Like Tomaso said, "forgive yourself."

[Curtain.]

Act 3, Scene 4

Setting: A week later. Tomaso's cell.

At Rise: Tomaso sits on his bed reading one of the text books Jack left him. Franky is pacing around the cell mumbling to himself.

FRANKY

Do you believe it? My old lady didn't put any money in my commissary account this week.

[Tomaso ignores Franky, making notes in the textbook as he reads.]

FRANKY (CONTINUES)

I mean, who the fuck does she think she is, sitting in the apartment I got her?
[pause] Hey, man, *[pause]* Tomaso, can you spot me some credit?

[Tomaso continues to ignore Franky, who strides slowly over to stand right in front of him, leaning in.]

FRANKY (CONTINUES)

I'm talking to you.

[Slowly Tomaso looks up, raising an eyebrow.]

FRANKY (CONTINUES)

I'm outta smokes, man, can you help me out here?

TOMASO

No.

[Tomaso goes back to his reading.]

FRANKY

What's your deal, anyway? *[pause]* Work all day, study all night. *[pause]* What's *that* all about?

[Tomaso ignores him.]

FRANKY (CONTINUES)

Come on, man. We're stuck here together. *[pause]* Can we...

[Tomaso speaks without looking up.]

TOMASO

No. I don't think we can.

FRANKY

What the fuck. *[pause]* Really. *[pause]* What the hell is that you're reading, anyway?

TOMASO

It's about ROI, do you know what that is?

[Lights flicker and intercom sounds.]

SHIFT COMMANDER (OFF STAGE)

Lights out, all! And remember, only you can make tomorrow better than today was. And if we can all string enough of them together, just think how great it'll be next month!

[Curtain. End of play.]