

THE WAGER
by Thandeka
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The Characters:

Manny, an African-American man in his early fifties, wears horn-rimmed glasses, a red-checked flannel long-sleeve shirt, faded Levi's and Frye boots. His hair is neatly cropped, a businessman-trendy cut. He is tall and handsome enough that he is not at all self-conscious about himself. His brown complexion tends toward an almond color. He has the panache of an urbane New Yorker who might be a distinguished economist, corporate attorney, or successful novelist.

Sandy, a Euro-American woman in her mid to late thirties, is 5 feet 6 inches tall. She is starkly pretty rather than hauntingly beautiful. Her hair, naturally blonde, is cut short and is slightly disheveled in a playfully stylish way as part of her "look." She has the panache of an enterprising woman who probably started her own business and "made it" in a man's world of marketing strategies. She is good-humored and genuinely seems to love life. One never knows what to expect from her – and for good reason.

Job, a Euro-American man in his late forties, is tall (but not as tall as Manny) and tends toward an institutional dark gray in dress and demeanor. A corporation man who self-consciously has shaped himself into the image of a successful man, he wears an expensive pinstriped suit and a tie with his college shield (Princeton) on it. He has Nordic features and skin color. He is neither spoiled nor smug. Rather, his manner is that of a person who has always had easy access to whatever he wanted. He is of the "once born" type, never having known any real adversity that might threaten his worldview, well being, livelihood or family. He means no one any harm. Why should he?

Jack, a Euro-American in his early sixties, is a bitter man. Everything he has gained – which, materially, is quite considerable – has been achieved with great cost to his soul. He lost his idealism long ago. One has the sense that he graduated from the school of hard knocks. He owns a small sweatshop that caters to the garment industry. He smokes Camel cigarettes, has been married for 25 years, and has never had an affair – not because he hasn't wanted to, but rather because he believes such intrigues would needlessly complicate his life. And besides, who said life is supposed to be fun? His wife buys all of his clothes for him at Macy's. He is not interested in fashion. If it's functional, it will do.

Sam is a Euro-American man in his mid-forties. He and Job were classmates together at Princeton. Sam wanted to become a medical doctor, but his parents forced him to get a MBA expecting that he would then join the family pharmaceutical business. Since they paid for his education, he got the MBA but then, deeply disaffected, went to work for a competitive firm. He wears a Ralph Lauren polo shirt and khaki pants. He is preppie. He has recently "retired," pressured by his company to take a bailout deal or get fired because the firm was downsizing to increase profits.

Eddy, a Euro-American man in his late twenties, teaches math in an inner city school. He had originally intended to become a structural engineer, like his father, but after graduating from college, he joined Teach for American for three years and discovered an America he knew nothing about. He loves his work but knows that he will not make teaching his lifelong profession. He is already bone-weary because he cares so deeply and wants his students to succeed. They do. He plans to write a book about his experiences. He buys his clothes at the Gap.

The Setting - Manny, seated at a card table, plays a game of chess with himself. Both the wooden chair in which he is seated and the one facing him have high backs and were purchased at a used furniture store. A stool is in the corner upstage, to the left of the table. A clothes tree is downstage close to the stage right entrance.

Manny: Checkmate! (Manny stands triumphantly as he moves the black castle to its new board position. Then, slipping out of the attitude of conquering hero, he walks to the other side of the table, slowly sits, and says slyly) Not so fast, Manny. Sit down, calm yourself, don't over-excite yourself. When have you beaten me in a game? (Pauses, as if listening to Manny's response) Right. Never. So, let's see. (He tips the board over. All the pieces slide from the board into the chess box to the side of the board. One or two pieces fall to the floor. He smiles wryly.) You know it's impossible for me to lose. (Manny stands and walks back to the other side of the table with stooped shoulders. He sits and looks at the chess pieces. After a long pause, he picks them up and places the pieces back on the board in their opening positions. As he places the king on the board, he says, smiling impishly.) Another game? (Pause) Good!

Enter Sandy. Sandy hangs her cape on the clothes tree as she enters. Manny does not seem to notice her arrival. She speaks as she walks to the table and sits opposite Manny.

Sandy: Who's winning?

Manny: Very funny. (Pause) Where have you been?

Sandy: You missed me?

Manny: Don't I wish.

Sandy: (Not at all put off by his answer) Don't you ever get bored?

Manny: (Starts to speak) Don. . .

Sandy: (interrupting) I know, I know. . .

Manny and Sandy: Don't I wish. (They laugh gently. They are good friends.)

Sandy: Why don't you play with someone who's not your equal. It's more fun.

Manny: (Not quite paying attention) Any suggestions?

Sandy: Sure. Job.

Manny: Who?

Sandy: Mr. Perfect.

Manny: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. The rich guy.

Sandy: Doesn't he wish. He's frugal. Work's hard.

Manny: Right. Mr. Predictable.

Sandy: You should talk?

Manny: (Looks at Sandy for the first time.) So why are you so interested in Job? He hasn't done anything wrong. (His eyes return to the chessboard.)

Sandy: That's the point. Why should he? He's got everything he needs and can get anything he wants.

Manny: He's not that rich.

Sandy: Sure, but he's got good connections.

Manny: Okay. So maybe I've been a little indulgent with him. What's the harm? He's loyal. An upright man. Good family values. Leave him alone.

Sandy: I haven't done anything to him. (Pauses and then after a moment, smiles impishly) Yet.

Manny: Good. (He has finished setting up the board.) Want to play?

Sandy: (She tips over the board, the pieces fall into the chess box to the side of the board.)

Manny: (Long pause. Very calmly) I hate it when you do that. (He starts putting the pieces on the board again.)

Sandy: I learned it from you.

Manny: (Looks up from the board.) I know.

Sandy: (Standing up. Impatience. Starts pacing about the room.) So what about job?

Manny: (To himself) There has to be a way that I can beat myself at this game without losing. . .

Sandy: (in his face) Job!

Manny: Where have you been?

Sandy: You just asked me that question.

Manny: Memory never was my long suit. (Pause) Long suit! Bridge? (Takes a deck of playing cards out of his shirt pocket.)

Sandy: Face it, Manny, You're bored. (Manny does not respond. He folds the chessboard, places it under the box and then begins laying out the cards for a game of solitaire.) Let's play a new game.

Manny: There aren't any new games. I should know.

Sandy: It's called "Job." We'll invent the rules as we go along.

Manny: (Stands up, walks about the room impatiently.) What is with you and Job? Leave him alone. He's not particularly religious but you'll not find a more politically correct white man on earth.

Sandy: That's the point. (Sandy places her hand on top of Manny's to get his attention. He stops the game, puts down the deck and listens, bored but attentive.) He's politically correct. And why not? He's a Vice President at America Inc. - his company. His kid's getting a MBA at Harvard, his wife is mayor of the city, and their six-year old just won the lottery. Why shouldn't he love everybody?

Manny: He's a contented man.

Sandy: Take it all away, and he'll curse you. Scratch the surface of any contented white man and you'll find a . . .

Manny: You're cynical.

Sandy: So here's the deal. I wager you that if you take away his job, threaten his good fortune – he'll crack.

Manny: (Becoming intrigued by the idea of the game) He'll never curse me.

Sandy: Wanna bet?

Manny: (Smiles) You're on.

They shake hands, stand and exit, stage left.

Long pause.

Enter Job, carrying a personal, state-of-the-art notebook computer, which he places on the table, opens it and becomes immediately absorbed in its operation. He is immaculately attired. His posture is perfect. He shows no emotion. He looks and acts like someone totally in control of himself, his life and his world. After a long pause, he loosens his tie, puts his hands to his face, hunches his shoulders and is still. Enter his three friends: Jack, Sam and Eddy. They are out of breath.

Eddy: We came as soon as we heard.

(Job does not look up.)

Sam: We don't know what to say.

Jack: (To the audience) Wise guys, we're not.

Job does not move. After a long pause, Job starts tapping the computer keyboard keys again. Sam puts on earphones, goes to the stool upstage, sits and is absorbed in his music; Eddy takes out a copy of The Nation from his coat pocket and sits on the edge of the stage and reads; Jack sits across from Job, picks up the deck of cards and continues the game of solitaire begun by Manny. No one speaks. Each man is totally self-absorbed in the task at hand, oblivious to the presence of his friends.

Sandy: (Off stage) And none of his friends spoke a word to Job for seven days and seven nights, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

Eddy turns a page of The Nation. Jack picks up the cards and starts a new game.

Job: (As he speaks, his friends listen. Job is beside himself with despair. His movements are histrionic. He pulls at his hair and tries to rend his clothes.) Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night which said, 'A man-child conceived.' Let that day be darkness!

Sam: Oh no. He's out of Prozac!

Immediately, the three friends spontaneously reach into their pockets. Each friend offers him a pill. Job spurns their offers and starts to sob loudly.

Sam: (Unsympathetically, but not with hostility. He speaks more like a big brother.) Get a grip. I told you to take the parachute when they offered it to you. There's more to life than work – especially if you can afford it.

Jack: And you can?

Sam: (Confidently) As long as Nora keeps working.

Jack: I'd parachute to hell before I'd be a househusband.

Sam: (defensive aggression) So would I if I were married to Jane.

Eddy: Cut it out, you two. We're here to comfort Job.

Sam and Jack immediately grin, sheepishly.

Job: (self-pityingly) I've always had a job.

Sam: Not working isn't so bad. You get up when you want to; you can read all the sections of the New York Times. You get to think about everything you never had time to think about.

Jack: Right. Like, should we give Japan a permanent seat on the Security Council at the UN? Should we balance the state budget in seven years? Are block grants the best way to . . .

Sam: Okay. So I get bored sometimes, is that a crime . . .?

Job: (interrupting) The company's making more money than it ever has. How could I have known I'd be downsized?

Jack: Always take the easy out if you're given the chance. You didn't so you've come in for a hard landing. You should have jumped ship a long time ago. Started your own business like I did. Face it, you made a dumb decision.

Job: I didn't decide anything.

Eddy: You weren't pro-active. Look at me.

The three men look at Eddy. Eddy, as the youngest and shortest man, blushes.

Sam: Mr. Success himself. (The three men laugh at Eddy, who turns his back to his friends to regain his composure.)

Eddy: I never thought about teaching, but when I did, I jumped at the chance. "Teach for America" changed my life.

Jack: (bitterly) Too bad your students can't say the same thing.

Eddy turns to face his friends.

Jack: (To Job, ignoring Eddy) Face it Job, you didn't play your cards right. Get out when the gettin's good. The fact that you lost your job is your own fault.

Eddy: Teach and then write a book about your experience. That's what I'm going to do. It's important.

Job: (bitterly) For whom?

Jack: Don't pick on the runt. At least, he's got a job.

Job: (Looks to Sam and Jack for support, but finds none.) With friends like these, who needs . . .

Sam: (interrupting) Admit your mistake and start over.

Jack: You should have bailed out.

Sam: You were an idiot not to take the offer.

Jack: Stupid.

Job: What does stupidity have to do with not working?

Jack: It you've got a job, you have respect, prestige, money, power. (self-importantly) I made myself. All you need is street smarts, discipline and a good mind. I earned everything I've got. Who's going to fire me? My employees?

Sam: First they'd have to learn to speak English.

Jack: If you were fired, maybe you needed to be let go.

Eddy: Or to learn from it.

Job, Sam and Jack look at Eddy as if he is a nut. Eddy smiles sheepishly.

Job: (Incredulously to Eddy) What?

Eddy: (Defensively, but attempting to be assertive and self-assured. He walks around the stage in a self-important manner as he speaks.) Sure. Maybe you screwed up because you didn't do enough to change the world. When was the last time you were part of a protest march or a sit-in? I bet you haven't been thrown in jail for protesting against unjust social policies. I'm doing my part to make the world a better place. If you were fired, it's probably because you haven't done enough to make the world a better place so that workers aren't fired for unjust reasons. (Confronts Job face to face.) Look at the mess the world is in. It's your fault!

Eddy has worked himself into a tizzy – as if he were having a temper tantrum. His friends find his behavior odd. Eddy goes to the back of the stage to calm himself, realizing that no one is taking him seriously. He turns his back to the audience. As the dialogue continues, Eddy, calm again, rejoins the group. Jack puts his arm around Eddy's shoulders for a very brief moment as a father would with his son. Eddy is comforted, but tries to pretend that he does not need such comfort and pulls away – but not very far. Jack, of course, is confident that his gesture of warmth and attention is what Eddy really wanted all along: to be acknowledged as an important part of the group.

Jack: (To Job) Not everybody was fired.

Job: And just what does that mean?

Jack: Some survived the cut . . .

Eddy: Merit still matters. Even in the inner city. The smart kids get out.

Jack: (Sarcastically) Dead or alive. (Eddy moves away from Jack.) (To Job) The best man always wins. (Pause) If government stays out of it.

Sam: (To Jack) No, if government stays in. There's nothing that a little government intervention can't fix.

Jack: Especially if it's not broken. Do you know how many taxes I paid last year?

Sam: Job, you just weren't the best man. It's as simple as that.

Jack: Spoken like a real winner.

Job: I don't believe it.

Sam: Who else is there to blame? God?

Job: Somebody made a mistake. I should not have been laid off.

Job's three friends laugh.

Sam: Tell that to God.

Job: Maybe I will!

Job exits stage left.

Eddy: Do you think we made him feel better?

Jack: Sure kid.

Job's friends exit stage right. Manny enters stage right, sits on the edge of the stage, takes an electronic video game out of his pocket and begins to play, totally absorbed. Job enters stage left carrying a city map which he examines intently. Apparently lost, he looks around not knowing which way to turn. He sees Manny and walks over to him with map in hand.

Job: Excuse me. I'm looking for Heaven's Gate Inn.

Manny: (Not looking up from his game.) Straight ahead two blocks, then take a right.

Job: Thanks. (Exits stage right.)

Manny continues to play. Job re-enters.

Manny: (Still not looking up) That was a quick trip.

Job: (Job, hesitantly, stoops down and looks at Manny. Manny looks up. Job, surprised, stands up abruptly and speaks.) It's you! (Manny stands. Job backs away even farther.) Manny Washington, chief executive officer and chairman of the board of American Inc.

Manny: (grinning sheepishly) Don't be silly. Do I look like him? I'm just a stockholder like you, going to the same annual meeting of America Inc. that you're going to.

Job: No. No. It's you. I know it is. It's you.

Manny: Don't be silly. There aren't even any images of the C.E.O. Nobody know what he looks like.

Job: (moving closer to him) I once saw you in the executive dinning room. The first black person I'd ever seen there. "Who's he?" I said to my friend. "Manny Washington," my friend said. "Our new C.E.O."

Manny: All right already. I'm him. I'm the man. Big deal.

Job is now furious and moves toward him with fist raised.

Job: (shouting) You bastard! Why did you fire me? (Manny steps aside as Job takes a swing at him. Job, losing his balance, falls. He speaks again, but now in utter despair.) Why did you lay me off, I didn't do anything wrong?

Manny: (almost compassionately) Wrong's not in it. The decision had nothing to do with you. We're in a growth mode. If we're going to keep growing and stay competitive with companies who use foreign labor, we have to cut our workforce.

Job: 50,000 of us?

Manny: (Stoops down next to Job) We wanted to show compassion. (Manny stands again and walks over to the table and sits, noticing that his cards have been disturbed.) We could have cut another 10,000 --- easy. (pause) But we do have civic responsibilities. We'll ease out the rest over the next three years. (He puts away the deck of cards.)

Job: (Job, angry, stands and moves toward him.) You've ruined my life.

Manny: Give me a break. With your stock options and other investments, you have some distance to go before you're out on the street. (pause) And besides, your wife works. (pause) If anything, you should be grateful to me. I increased the value of your stock. American Inc.'s stock value soared when the layoff announcement came out.

Job: (bitterly) Thanks.

Manny: Ingrate! (Peeved, his voice booms) Do you know what it means to compete with businesses using foreign labor that works for 28 cents a day? Can you number the months they can work for that wage before they quit or die? And do you know the time – the number of hours they can work without a break? Do you observe the rate of reproduction of the poor? I determine these measurements. I have to figure out how to keep profits high and costs down and how to break unions. Where were you when I established the foundation for the new strategy for America Inc.? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? You're not on the street. You're not homeless. Be grateful for what you've got.

Job: (outraged) What do I have? My job was my life. I put in 15-hour days at work. I saved America Inc. millions. And what for? I put my marriage in jeopardy. My kids don't even recognize me. I haven't had dinner with them in months. My six-year old asked me if I was a houseguest. Our kids have everything they want but nothing that they need. I did all this for you.

Manny: (smiling) Ah! A total quality man.

Job: Now I've got nothing left.

Manny: Financially, you'll be fine for now.

Job: (to himself) We're a family of strangers in a community of strangers. I committed to you.

Manny: (diffidently) I've made billions for the stockholders.

Job: (pause) These layoffs are going to turn this city into a ghost town.

Manny: Don't blame America Inc. We don't own this town. We pay taxes here just like every other property owner.

Job: But you're not like every other resident. You hire and fire the rest of us. You create and destroy, condemn and reward without giving a tinker's damn about the consequences to the people and communities involved.

Manny: That's not my job.

Job: Then whose job is it? (Manny does not respond. Job is silent for a long moment. When he finally speaks, he is deeply reflective, speaking more to himself than to Manny.) I've always believed in individual responsibility. Every man for himself. Somebody's going to cross the finish line first. So the sole purpose of the game is to finish first. Nothing else matters. That's what American Inc. is about.

Manny: That's right, Job. Most people are losers. The winner takes all.

Job: Everybody knows that.

Manny: So what's your complaint?

Job: I'm a loser.

Manny: (Smiling, slaps Job on the back.) That's right. Everything that's wrong with your life is your own fault. Your family, your community, your kids, their future, crime -- all of it -- it's your fault. Face it Job, you don't have what it takes. You're a born loser.

Job: (confused) How can all of this be my fault? I don't have that much power? You're the all-powerful one. How can the fact that you laid off 50,000 workers be my fault?

Manny: Am I to blame that your kids think you're a stranger in their midst? That you don't know your neighbors, that you've gutted your family life? That your first marriage didn't work and your second one is on the rocks?

Job: Don't confuse the two issues. My public and private lives are not the same.

Manny: That's news to me.

Job: I committed my life to America, Inc.

Manny: True, but it doesn't belong to you. America Inc. is mine -- at least for the moment.

Job: I was so afraid of losing my job, I gave up everything else in my life.

Manny: You're not poor, hungry or homeless. Count your blessings.

Job: That's not enough. It never was.

Manny: For four-fifths of the people in the world, that would be enough.

Job: (angry) Don't lecture me. I'm not a C.E.O. I don't fire thousands of people with a stroke of a pen; relocate to Third World countries so I can pay the workers slave wages. I don't buy and sell government officials. I don't do insider trading.

Manny: Don't curse the hand that feeds --

Job: (bitterly) fed. . .

Manny: . . . fed you. If you didn't like the system, you should have left a long time ago. Bailed out. Stop wallowing. Gird your loins like a man. Don't curse the company you keep.

Job: I was a kept man.

Manny: Did you complain? (Job is silent) Your price was high but you did have a price. Financial gain.

Job: (more to himself) I was afraid. (pause)

Manny: For good reason. You just don't have what it takes to stay on top.

Job: Nobody does. I've known that since I was a kid. (Pause) I hated my job. It's a rigged game. If you don't fit in, God help you. My life hasn't made any sense to me in years.

Manny: (silent)

Job: I've never been important.

Manny: By whose standards?

Job: Yours. Mine. What's the difference? None of it makes any sense to me.

Manny: It's always made business sense and that's the bottom line.

Job: I bottom-lined my own life.

Manny: So what are you going to do about it?

Job: I wish I knew.

Manny: (Manny offers job Prozac.) Here. Prozac. This will help. Take the pills and get over it.

Job: (Job slowly takes the bottle of pills from Manny, opens it and pours the pills on the floor.) I have a right to be upset. (He walks toward stage left.)

Manny: Where are you going?

Job: To talk to my minister.

Manny: Why?

Job: Why not?

Job exits.

Manny opens the chessboard and sets up the chess pieces for a game. Sandy enters and sits across from Manny. Manny smiles and extends his hand, palm up, to Sandy.

Manny: I won. Pay up.

Sandy: Not so fast. I need to know what his minister will say and do. You can still lose this wager, you know.

Manny: (Moves the king's pawn forward.) (To Sandy) Your move.

SLOW FADE TO BLACK