

THE DEAD ZONE

"Acolyte"
(fka "Epitaph")

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Up til now, we've known Bruce Lewis as a care giver, a friend, a confidant and an advisor to Johnny Smith. Yeah, you could say they've just become buds but somehow it's more than that - Bruce sees that Johnny needs someone to help steer a course through a world that would exploit and even possibly destroy him.

Why would Bruce take on such a responsibility? In this story that takes us back to his hometown of East St. Louis and his family, we may begin to find out.

Bruce didn't even know.

Until Johnny told him.

Until Johnny saw the execution.

The slender, cold-eyed black man is being led into the small room by the guards as members of the condemned man's family weep and can't bear to watch through a gallery window... he is strapped onto a table where a lethal injection is administered. He never struggles, never shows remorse, never says a word.

You need to go home, Johnny tells Bruce. He's about to be executed.

Bruce reacts. He knows Johnny is talking about ZEKE MARTIN, an old friend who's been on death row for over seven years. He's surprised his father didn't call to tell him about the execution date. He tells Johnny that Zeke killed an off duty policeman.

No, says Johnny. He didn't.

As Bruce reacts...

End of teaser.

Our camera establishes the distinctive St. Louis arch, gateway to the west, but we're moving east, across the Mississippi River to East St. Louis.

East St. Louis and St. Louis are more than a river apart. For decades, this was one of the most severely distressed urban communities in the country. But in recent years, it has been the site of several successful revitalization projects - new housing, a library, a youth center and the extension of the MetroLink light rail line which connects the residents with jobs in St. Louis and surrounding communities.

So, this is a city that is somewhere between what it has been and what it's going to be... and right between them - with his wide arms outstretched - stands Bruce's father, an activist pastor at a local Baptist church.

Ray Lewis long ago declared war on the drug trade and violence that corrupted their neighborhoods and their kids. More than any cop or judge, Lewis has been their true enemy. Organizing families, neighborhood watch groups, bringing political pressure to bear, Pastor Lewis has drawn a line in the sand.

His greatest rival for the soul of this community has been an extremely well organized, modern, almost *corporate* version of a street gang which we will learn more about as our story continues. The young Zeke Martin was a charter member in this para-military organization. And, as we will discover, the teenaged Bruce Lewis almost became one as well.

Ray Lewis is not happy to see Bruce home... at least on this occasion. He had deliberately not told his son the news that Zeke was going to be executed. That's the past and the past is over.

He is equally unhappy to see Bruce has brought Johnny with him... an outsider and a white one at that. Bruce's mom, WENDY, welcomes Johnny to their modest home but she's dubious of him at best.

The moment Johnny enters the house, his visions take him back a few years... to see Bruce, looking pretty much the same as he does now, in a heated argument with his

father that leads him to leave the house, leave the family, leave Missouri. Like many arguments, it's not really about what it's about - there are unspoken secrets in this family - that won't surface so easily. We get the distinct feeling that Bruce left home because of his father and yet there's no question that he survived the streets because of his father's guiding hand.

Ray's more than a little upset when Bruce says he's convinced that Zeke is innocent...

Innocent?, says his father... how many people has he killed... how many kids have died in gang wars... how many drug o-rds have there been in the projects... Zeke is anything but innocent...

And there's always the unspoken: *and but for me, this could have been you...*

Our goal here is to paint a realistic portrait, in the tradition of August Wilson, of a distinctive American black family with strong characters in a personal conflict that all audiences can relate to. Bruce's old neighborhood is not downtrodden at all -- a middle-class neighborhood just a fence away from the projects. Over the years, kids from both areas mingled. Bruce's father was unhappy when his teenaged son developed a friendship with Zeke, a kid from the wrong side of the fence. Like so many families, Ray

Lewis looked upon Zeke as a bad influence and a serious threat to his son.

The pressure that Ray Lewis brought upon his son to succeed, 'to find his *place* in this world', may have had results but it left scars as well. Bruce was left feeling that he was never good enough for his father, never living up to his expectations, never earning his love. Bruce is holding on to a lot of anger toward Ray Lewis as he arrives home.

Johnny and Bruce investigate the circumstances surrounding the murder conviction and the crime story will involve police misconduct, a conspiracy and real jeopardy to our hero. It had been a high profile case, the cop had been white, and it had threatened to divide the city along racial lines. Pastor Lewis had supported the police and held the black community together by the force of his personality. Now that the execution has been set, those racial tensions are growing again.

Bruce takes Johnny to meet Zeke in prison but he doesn't get a warm welcome. Make no mistake about it: Zeke is not your typical television sympathetic African-American railroaded by justice. He was in his mid-twenties when he was convicted and by then he was a major player in the criminal hierarchy of the gang... he had run old timer

gangsters out of the community and used violence to solidify his gang's base of power...

Johnny sees this in visions... but he also sees other visions of Zeke and Bruce as teenagers when *The Music Man* came to town. Street gangs were nothing to new to East St. Louis but what was new was the corporate mentality that outside organizers brought from the west coast. L.A.'s Bloods and Crips were expanding into new territories, franchising their names and colors like MacDonald's or Taco Bell. Reps from L.A. would arrive and train locals in the finer traditions of gang hierarchy to help control a new territory through violence and the crack trade.

In this community, it was a Blood from L.A. who had come to recruit them and he called himself The Music Man.

The Music Man, basketball in his hand at a park, is surrounded by kids, including teenaged Bruce and Zeke ... by his car, a red Corvette... lots of chatter...

"Shit yeah, L.A.'s a hot town... every girl looks like a movie star," says The Music Man.

"You ever fuck a real movie star?" asks Zeke.

"Bitch from Eddie Murphy's last picture... she had tits you wouldn't believe, man..."

Zeke doesn't buy it. "Why a girl like that fuck you...?"

“All the girls do the Blood... cause we get them pretty things... they ride in the best cars... eat in the finest restaurants. You ever been to a restaurant where a man takes your car and parks it for you?”

“Shit, says Bruce, “...if that was my car, I wouldn't give it to nobody.”

Laughter.

“Listen, this is what it's all about,” says The Music Man, “...the meek aren't gonna inherit shit in this world. Cause I'm gonna take it all. This is about get rich or die.”

Kids - whoa, all right... Bruce and Zeke listen, intense. The Music Man starts moving the group toward the court.

“You ever 'off' anybody, Music Man?”, asks Zeke.

“Got to, you want to survive in L.A., bro...”

A kid laughs, blows a friend away with his finger.

“I'll take you shootin'... with real guns...” The Music man says. “Right now, I'm into shooting hoops... who's on my team?”

Everybody calls out at once...

They were the closest of friends then but no more. Zeke is cool to Bruce now and is amused by this white psychic he's brought along to save him. But I'll take any help I can get, he tells his one-time friend.

As the story continues, Johnny gets other flashes of Bruce's youth, like scraps from a scrapbook - not told in chronological order - but the pieces add up to an

intriguing story. A story about two young men - one who escaped the streets and one who didn't.

Zeke is a casualty. Bruce a survivor.

With a survivor's guilt.

He admits to Johnny that Zeke and he were both caught in a petty crime as teens. Bruce, tired of being the Pastor's son, was attracted (like the other kids) to the Blood call of The Music Man. Zeke had already been in some trouble. Ray Lewis had pulled strings, used favors and gotten his son off with a slap on the wrist. Ray had done no favors for Zeke who wound up doing his first jail time.

Bruce tries to describe the relief and the guilt he felt but it still brings him to tears after all these years.

Change one detail and all of life changes, he murmurs to Johnny.

There's a girl he left behind too. A girl who loved Bruce a long time ago. And tried to love Zeke as a replacement after Bruce had left home and left her. But she couldn't follow Zeke down his road. No one could have saved Zeke by then, she tells Bruce, except maybe you - and you were gone. There's a trace of her own hurt when she says it. She's a city worker now and

divorced and there's a flicker of feelings between them... maybe even an attempt to recapture the excitement of youth with a sexual interlude. But it doesn't end well between them and it leaves Bruce feeling more than ever like an outsider in his own community.

Mid-way through the story, Johnny's visions unearth a reluctant witness that helps exonerate Zeke and stirs up a hornet's nest in the community. But Johnny also learns why the witness failed to come forward.

He's a member of the Baptist Church. Ray Lewis' church. And Johnny sees Bruce's father taking him aside after one Sunday service.

It leads to a bitter confrontation between Bruce and his father. Zeke Martin was destroying this community, claims Ray Lewis. I did what I had to do.

The fourth act explodes as Johnny's revelations force the truth to emerge and the police misconduct becomes clear... Ray Lewis, who is now seen as betraying his own people, has lost his ability to hold the Black community together... riots break out...

And worse...

In light of the evidence and to quell the unrest, the Governor orders Zeke released...

And Johnny has a vision of Ray Lewis dead...

He tells Bruce they have to find Ray immediately. Bruce stops him.

I have to find him, says Bruce. Trust me, you don't want to be the only white face on those streets tonight.

In the finale, Zeke moves through the street violence with a score to settle... seven years of prison hate to settle...

As Bruce converges on his father trying to control the violence...

And Bruce and Zeke's eyes meet through the crowd... and lead to a final scene between them...

Bruce tells Zeke that he now owes his life to him and Zeke is forced to acknowledge.

I'm trading your life for my father's, he tells Zeke.

Zeke may not understand. He never had a father in his life. And he knows or thinks he knows Bruce never felt close to his father. But he understands the debt. And so he walks away. This time.

Bruce finds his father at the church, praying for guidance. They have a final scene in which they attempt with some limited success to understand one another. At show's end, if true bonding is barely out of reach, Ray Lewis finally sees that his son has grown into a man, a man who has found his place in the world.

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