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# Squaring the Triangle: Research, Experience, and Imagination in Biological, a Work of Dramatic Autofiction Focused on Adoption

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Squaring the Triad:

Research, Experience, and Imagination in *Biological*,  
a Work of Dramatic Autofiction Focused on Adoption

by

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A THESIS

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**ABSTRACT**

This artist statement describes the work of developing the theatrical script *Biological*, a process which included periods of research and exploration as well as writing and revision, all conducted during a global pandemic. The play—on themes of identity, family, motherhood, and the adoption triad—is a work of dramatic autofiction (from the French word “autofiction”, meaning autobiographical fiction) whose creation raised artistic, ethical, and practical concerns which this research aims to address.

Keywords: Adoption, feminist drama, autobiographical drama, the adoption triad, playwriting, Canadian plays and playwrights

**PREFACE**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the candidate, Leanna Brodie.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am hugely indebted to my supervisor Clem Martini for his patience, insight, and dogged persistence in getting me to the finish line of this thesis. I have been immensely enriched by the chance to study with such a distinguished artist-scholar as much as the lockdowns and other challenges would permit.

My MFA (Theatre) cohort has also been a massive source of encouragement and inspiration, as have the faculty of the University of Calgary SCPA, as well as director Jenna Turk and the actors who participated in my reading as part of the Alchemy Festival of student work.

I was able to hear some of my work read over Zoom by my former Vancouver playwriting group, The Pod—Carmen Aguirre, Elaine Avila, Lucia Frangione, Meghan Gardiner, Shawn Macdonald, and Jovanni Sy—in a final act of generosity. For ten years, by means of monthly meetings during which we read and discussed each other's writing, we became an indispensable part of each other's practice: we also became friends. To all of them, much thanks.

My fellow MFA candidate and Pod member, Jovanni Sy, is my also husband, partner, family, and first reader always. Even without the complications of a worldwide catastrophe, I could not have moved to a new province and embarked on a mid-career master's degree without his extraordinary emotional, intellectual, and practical support. This research has been another grand shared adventure, and I hope we have many more of them still to come.

**DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to the women to whom I owe both my play and my life.

Without my mom, Phyllis Brodie Lynch, née Madill, I wouldn't be here.

Without my birth mother, Sharon Neufeld, née Kelly, I wouldn't be.

The two of them could not be more different from each other, except insofar as their shared support for my right to write *Biological*—whose story derives from, but is not the same as, our own—is typical of their open-hearted and generous lives. They've always given me everything they had to give me, each in her own way. I am so grateful for them both.

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**EPIGRAPH**

You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.

– Anne Lamott, from her Twitter account

Don't dip your pen in someone else's blood.

– Kit de Waal, “Don't dip your pen in someone else's blood: writers and ‘the other’”

I think I came to theater because I can't face a field where there's a right answer.

– Paula Vogel, during her 2010 workshop at PWM (Playwrights Workshop Montréal)

## INTRODUCTION

In 2003, when I was first invited to a residency for American playwrights, my curiosity about the American theatre ecology was boundless. At one point I asked the very senior dramaturgs and literary managers assembled there: if I really wanted my plays to make inroads in your country, what would I have to do? After looking at each other for a moment, they agreed that I would need to start by getting a very expensive MFA through one of maybe a dozen nationally recognised American playwriting schools: Yale, Brown, Tisch, Columbia, Northwestern...

I realised then that in their community—broadly speaking, the mainstream/regional theatre system in the USA—an MFA was a playwright’s entry requirement, the equivalent of an actor getting their Equity card. I was startled, because when I began my work in the Canadian theatre as a young Toronto actress in 1989, the divide between theatre practitioners and theatre scholars could hardly have been greater. “You think too much” and “You’re in your head” were about the worst insults one could lob at a young actor, as wryly noted in Russell Smith’s Toronto-set novel *How Insensitive*:

You talk to fringe theatre actors and you find that they all seem to think that they are cut off from their bodies in some way by an unfeeling, uncaring world, and the mission of art is to reunite them with their own flesh ... Apparently, directors are constantly admonishing actors to ‘get out of your head’. There seems to be a tacit understanding that the cerebral is essentially patriarchal, racist and environmentally unfriendly. (65)

Within the Toronto theatre scene, respected senior artists like George Walker, Hillar Liitoja, Linda Griffiths, and Paul Thompson defied institutions and identified with the counterculture, while—inspired by Jacques Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier, or by the influential Canadian teacher Richard Pochinko—artists such as Mump & Smoot, Theatre Columbus, and Pochsy, with their improvisational clown-based approaches to performance creation, were very much on the rise. Factory Theatre artistic director Ken Gass’s faculty work at the University of Toronto seemed entirely separate from his leadership role within the theatre community, where it was spoken of almost as his “day job”. Playwrights Sky Gilbert and Judith Thompson had not yet transitioned into academic life. My teachers at the University of Guelph, including respected theatrical scholars such as Ann Wilson and Alan Filewod, might have directed the occasional departmental show but were otherwise expected to “stay in their lane” within the academy. “Real” artists like Guillermo Verdecchia, Daniel Brooks, and Peter Hinton<sup>1</sup> were allowed to be a bit eggheady, but they were outliers. You started your career in playwriting as a jobbing actor; you then did your strange autobiographical one-person show; and finally—if the critics blessed you, and if you weren’t writing solely to drum up acting work—you graduated to dialogue. If you really wanted to write and not act, you took playwriting at NTS. In short, anti-intellectualism seemed practically *de rigueur* for a life in the theatre: graduate school was the thing you did reluctantly, after 10 or 15 years, if your career was not going too well and you wanted to teach.

By 2019, I was a Vancouver-based playwright with some published and widely produced plays and a growing body of libretti, radio plays, translations, and other collaborations. The theatrical landscape had changed by then and so had I. For one thing, I had seen graduates of

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<sup>1</sup> Now known as Peter Hinton-Davis.

Canadian MA and MFA programmes like Martin Julien, Anita Majumdar, Tanja Jacobs, and David Jansen bring admirable depth and clarity to their creative work, while the University of Calgary's faculty of artist-scholars attracted mid-career MFA candidates like Jennifer Brewin and Beth Kates who were seizing the opportunity to deepen their practice, not retreat from it. As Jennifer explained to me, an MFA at our stage is also about "downloading your brain", sharing everything you have learned in a systematic way that might be useful to others. This appealed to me because I was starting to think about legacy. Thanks to my experiences of leading workshops at Acadia University and the Ryga Arts Festival, as well as the Block A emerging playwrights' units at Playwrights Theatre Centre, I had begun to see the teaching of playwriting as a fulfilling activity and one where I could make a real contribution to the art form I love.

Meanwhile, I found myself at a theatrical and personal crossroads. My most recent play *Turbulence*—my attempt to master the documentary play form—had vacuumed up several years of my writing life but ended up being rejected by all three co-commissioning theatre companies. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, the resulting self-doubt infiltrated every cranny of my writing life, making it impossible for me to even conceive of beginning a new solo project. Instead, I threw myself into more collaborative and interpretive forms: co-writing, adaptation, translation, libretti, acting, teaching. All the same, I yearned to once again be at the centre of a creative project. I knew I still had stories of my own to tell. Besides, how could I presume to teach a new generation of writers if I had let my own playwright voice be crushed by this one defeat?

I needed jumper cables for my will to write, so I applied to a graduate programme in theatre. For two years, I would put aside my thriving practice in acting and translation; move to a new province; and dedicate myself to writing, reading about writing, talking about writing, and

writing about writing. I would tackle a big, ambitious creative project without giving a second thought to the usual imperatives of who might produce it and how it might be received. For my pre-thesis project, I would put the incubus of my documentary play to rest. And as a necessary prelude to being able to teach with integrity, I would take another step that filled me with fear: a largely self-taught, instinctual writer, I would try to document and analyze my own creative process, blocks and inspirations and all.

As all drivers know once they've been stuck in the snow in a Canadian winter, sometimes to move forward you must first move back. Themes of identity and belonging recur throughout my work, which has always been centred on the stories of women. My thesis project, however, was an explicit return to a subject I had grappled with in multiple forms but never resolved: our entrenched discourses around motherhood and family, discourses which my own experience predisposes me to disrupt.<sup>2</sup>

My road to this project began at the aforementioned American residency, the ACT/Hedgebrook Women Playwrights Festival, where—while working on what seemed then like a dystopian play about state-controlled reproduction—I first encountered the American anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy. In her seminal book *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species*, Hrdy argues that across eras, cultures, and the animal

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<sup>2</sup> My first play, *The Vic*, includes a character who discovers an awful secret about her daughter that forces her to ask: are there, or should there be, limits to a mother's unconditional love? My next play, *For Home and Country*, presents an intergenerational friendship which takes on a mother-daughter quality as it develops in the context of a historically important maternal feminist organisation. *The Book of Esther* foregrounds the dysfunctional relationship between a fundamentalist Christian farm mother and her runaway daughter, who is drawn into an urban, secular, queer chosen family. Two unfinished plays also tackle themes of motherhood and maternal instinct: *One Woman*, *One Child*, which I was writing at Hedgebrook, is a post-apocalyptic tale of a woman who has to give up everything and fight her own government just to have a baby; *The Angel's Cradle*, which I worked on in the Tarragon Theatre playwrights' unit, is a sprawling, epic riff on Hrdy's "continuum of care", whose interlocking narratives range from the foundling wheels of medieval Europe to a dead baby in a Toronto high school washroom.

kingdom, there has always been a continuum of maternal investment ranging from infanticide to abandonment to termination of pregnancy to voluntary childlessness to all the way to total, self-sacrificing motherly devotion. She further demonstrates that, throughout human history, mothers and social groups have always found numerous ways to distribute the care of children: adoption is just one form of that distributed care. Her research concludes that a mother's response to her progeny is less dependent on her individual characteristics than on her circumstances: the same person, or langur monkey, can be a highly involved parent or an abandoning one, depending on her prospects and those of any one offspring at a specific time. Within this paradigm the primary determining factor is not moral or even personal, but rather, situational (79-95).

Hrdy's work created the conceptual space for me to address my own experience of motherhood and family. As an adult female who has not reproduced, I have often been told that I have missed out on the most important part of my life; that I am not a "real" woman; that my spouse and I are not a "real" family. As an adoptee, I have repeatedly been asked if I know my "real" mother. When I met my birth mother, I kept her at arm's length for a long time: partly, I think, out of defiance toward the way I was supposed to feel toward her; partly out of protectiveness toward the woman I have always seen as my "real" mother, i.e., the woman who raised me, who felt understandably vulnerable in the knowledge of this new relationship; and partly because my internalized patriarchal family template had no room for them both. Hrdy finally freed me from essentialist myths about mothers and families, leaving me with questions instead. For example: even in our "progressive" society, why are women still judged based on their reproductive status (Zarrinjooee 1)? Why are adoptive parents and adopted children still othered (Novy)? What is the relationship between "blood" and "family"?

As a playwright, my main strategy for resisting cultural misbeliefs is to create a new and better narrative. That is why I decided that my thesis play would explore themes of the adoption and relinquishment of children, and the implications of these phenomena for our received notions of women, motherhood, and kinship.

As soon as I read Hrdy's brief description (299-300) of Thomas Coram's original Foundling Hospital—where some 25,000 English mothers, spanning two centuries, had deposited their unwanted infants—I felt excited by its dramatic possibilities. In 2015, while in London to create a new opera, I made a pilgrimage to the Foundling Museum, which has inherited the Hospital's records and artifacts as well as some of its actual architectural elements. Stories practically leak from the walls there: while visiting, I had a strong image of a modern Canadian woman coming to this place and gaining insight into her own mother-daughter relationships through her glimpses into the distant past.

I often say that I write from curiosity, not confession. In the words of Québec playwright Olivier Choinière: “Si j'écris, c'est précisément pour écrire ce que je ne sais pas encore [The reason I write is precisely to write what I don't yet know]” (39). As a playwright, I am primarily known for combining artistic intuition with rigorous investigation to create compelling portraits of other times and places. Extensive research on historical subjects—Canadian one-room schools and training schools; evangelical Christians in rural Ontario circa 1980; a hundred years of the Women's Institute—gives me a solid evidence-based grounding on which I can then bring my writerly intuition to bear. In this case, I felt that juxtaposing a modern story with a larger historical framework would help me to illuminate the deeper truths within individual details. I therefore intended my primary source material to be the two major archival collections on the



Foundling Hospital, located at the Foundling Museum and the London Metropolitan Archives.

The other component of my source material would be my own story: for once, at least in part, I would be writing what I already knew.

My initial work plan for this thesis, then, had five parts:

1. **Identifying key elements in the depiction of adoption and abandonment**, particularly in dramatic literature
2. **Examining the two major UK-based archival collections of the Foundling Hospital** through the lens of those themes
3. **Reflecting on my own story** of relinquishment and adoption
4. **Synthesizing these elements** into an original play
5. **Creating an artist statement** that documents my process and results

As I will discuss in the following chapters, Part 1 of my plan posed challenges to completing the rest; the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 radically curtailed Part 2; Part 3 expanded greatly in scope and importance; and because of all of the above, Part 4—*Biological*—went in directions I could not have predicted.

In **Chapter 1** of the following artist statement, **Blood and Belonging**, I analyze the prevalent myths and tropes in adoption literature that have provoked me to respond in the form of a play. In **Chapter 2: Blood Will Tell**, I discuss the evolution of my thesis play from *The Foundling Wheel*, a historically based exploration of relinquishment and adoption, to *Biological*, a fictionalised version of my own life story with elements of history and fantasy. In **Chapter 3: Someone Else's Blood**, I work through the resulting questions regarding the authorship and ownership of autobiography, with reference to the early development of my pre-thesis play,

*Turbulence*. In **Chapter 4: Blood Lines**, I look at how the demands of the form, and of my own artistic sensibility, began to transform my own life story into a work of theatre. In **Chapter 5: Blood Relations**, I discuss the workshop and reading process. And in my **Conclusion**, I reflect on what I have learned so far during the evolution of this piece, and how these findings may be of use to others.

## **CHAPTER 1: BLOOD AND BELONGING**

### **(OR, THE STANDARD MODELS THAT I WANTED TO CHALLENGE OR DISRUPT)**

As reader, viewer, and audience member, I have spent a lifetime absorbing fictionalised perspectives on adoption, abandonment, and foster care, mostly created by people with no personal experience of any of them. My emotional responses to the inadequate representation of my lived experience in plays and stories—ranging from amusement to boredom to hurt to exasperation to outrage—have fuelled my desire to respond with a story of my own. Paula Vogel’s teaching practice draws on the concept of the “devil play”, i.e., an existing play which so infuriates a fellow playwright that she feels compelled to respond in the form of a new play. In Vogel’s view, “All art is in a conversation with the art that went before,” and the “devil play” is as valuable a source of inspiration as the “angel play” which is its opposite (PWM). In my customary playwriting process, I would simply allow such influences to work on me subconsciously. However, as part of this research, I decided to create a sort of mental map of what we might call *productive irritation*. I aimed to document tropes about adoption and motherhood that felt false and demeaning when I encountered them in drama, film, and literature, as well as stories which, while valid in themselves, were in no way reflective of my own experience. In this way, I could also identify any cultural gaps that my play might aim to fill.

I began this task by reading Marianne Novy’s *Imagining Adoption*, the first and only scholarly work I have discovered that tackles the theme of adoption in literature. Novy introduced me to key concepts with which to process my subjective experience, including the prevailing perspectives taken by adoption stories in Western fiction:

Many well-known works of literature have plots that turn on the definition of parenthood. After discovering birth parents, Oedipus thinks of them as his parents, and, less tragically, so does Perdita in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. But in such novels as *Silas Marner*, *Oliver Twist*, *Anne of Green Gables* ... the ending is the confirmation of adoptive parenthood. These examples suggest three mythic stories that European and American cultures have typically used to imagine adoption: the disastrous adoption and discovery, as in *Oedipus*, the happy discovery, as in *Winter's Tale*, and the happy adoption, as in the novels mentioned. (1)

I found Novy's taxonomy of adoption stories to be insightful, persuasive, and useful in organizing my own critical response to the adoption tropes that have become part of my emotional landscape.

### **1. The "Disastrous Adoption/Discovery" Story**

One of the earliest and most influential of Western plays is Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. On learning that he has killed his genetic father and fathered children with his birth mother, King Oedipus gouges out his own eyes. Although the king's downfall is usually attributed to his own hubris and the will of the gods, it is made possible by his adoption. The story implies that adoption is risky and unnatural; incest with the adopted is an ever-present danger; and everyone would have been far better off if little "Swollen-Foot" had been allowed to perish on the hillside. This framing of adoption as a ticking time bomb provides the title of Mike Leigh's adoption film *Secrets & Lies*, and finds frequent echoes in the culture, as in the plays of Wajdi Mouawad.<sup>3</sup> It's

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<sup>3</sup> Even though (like most of the writers under discussion) Mouawad is employing adoption as a device rather than exploring it as a subject, it occurs as a major plot point in at least three of his plays. *Incendies [Scorched]*, *Forêts [Forests]*, and *Tous des oiseaux [Birds of a Kind]* all involve an Oedipus-like revelation that transforms the lives of the characters. Mouawad blends stories of adoption and abandonment with those of bloodlines and blood feuds to

true that closed adoptions—which were once the norm—involve confidentiality. At the same time, I, who have always known myself to be adopted, have seen innumerable secrets and lies in so-called “biological” parent-child relationships, from affairs to addictions to unwanted births to closeted sexuality: yet my family structure is the one most often held up as a metaphor for dangerous concealment.

The Torah’s account of Moses is another foundational Western adoption story, and it is a catastrophe for both the adoptive mother and her entire nation. In contrast to Oedipus, Moses never attaches to his adoptive family. Many of them must surely perish in the ten plagues he unleashes once he has returned to his birth tribe and washed his hands of his upbringing, after which Pharaoh’s Daughter is never mentioned again (*The Contemporary Torah*, Exod. 2.2-10). Moses is thus the prototype of all the stories in which adoption or fostering is an emotional non-event, a mere precondition of survival in the time when an infant still required breast milk to stay alive. From tales like this I learned that allegiance is blood-based, and that the identity that defined your whole childhood can be swept away the minute your “real” family comes calling.

A highly popular motif in children’s literature<sup>4</sup> and in the novels of Dickens, the plucky orphan/displaced child who eventually overcomes a terrible childhood—often dominated by a cruel stepmother—is a lesson in resilience, resourcefulness, and finding one’s true place in the world. Even in these stories, however, the child’s “true place” is always determined by its birth.

Meanwhile, a slew of monstrous fictional adoptees and children in care have caused mayhem in their families or communities, whether due to inborn malice, defective genes, or the

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expose the self-defeating cruelty of racial hatred, the complexity of generational trauma and resilience, and the chaos and brutality of civil war.

<sup>4</sup> e.g., Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, the swans of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Wild Swans”, Cinderella (adopted by evil stepmother); the Ugly Duckling (abused by adoptive family), and more recently, Harry Potter.

insurmountable trauma of their early years. What the irrepressible orphan is to children's literature, Maxwell Anderson's *The Bad Seed* is to the horror genre, on which Hannah Moscovitch is riffing with Clare in *Little One*. From Abigail in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Mary in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*<sup>5</sup> to Damien in *The Omen*, from Heathcliff to Voldemort to *The Midwich Cuckoos* to Esther in the recent *Orphan* film franchise, these stories play to the popular notion that adoptees and children in care are damaged and alien and you never know what you're getting (Martin).

Finally, there is a growing genre of harrowing adoption stories which are *not* based on myths or stereotypes. As the real-life revelations of the Sixties Scoop and the Post-War Adoption Scoop have moved into the mainstream, and as the first generations of adult transracial and international adoptees begin to share their sometimes disturbing personal accounts, adoption has increasingly been portrayed as artifact or instrument of colonialism and cultural genocide (Drew Hayden Taylor's *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*, Megan Gail Coles' *Squawk*, Kevin Loring's *Where the Blood Mixes*) as well as religious and class-based oppression (George Walker's *Problem Child*, the films *Philomena* and *Stolen Babies*, the Canadian miniseries *Les orphelins de Duplessis* and *Butterbox Babies*). These works offer valid and powerful critiques of adoption which are, at the same time, very different from my own experience.

## **2. The "Happy Discovery" Story**

In nearly all "Happy Discovery" stories, a child's relationship with its genetic kin is understood to be the "real" and "natural" one. The universe is out of joint, and a child's fate depends on finding its rightful place in the sheltering bosom of its birth family.

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<sup>5</sup> The character Mary Tilford is understood to have been adopted, or at least fostered, by her grandmother. No other rationale for her malevolence is ever provided.

In most modern narratives, children are presumed to have been “adopted up” in status, brought into families that could give them opportunities their birth families could not. In older fictions such as “The Ugly Duckling”, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter’s Tale*, an infant is in fact “adopted down”, and the moral of those stories is a eugenic one: (noble) blood will tell.

In the stories we might call “Surprise! You’re Adopted”, the protagonist’s problems are essentially solved by the discovery of his “true” parentage: they include *The Comedy of Errors*, *Tom Jones*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and multiple works by Gilbert & Sullivan which, in turn, satirize earlier popular tales ending in rediscovered heirs and tearful family reunions. In the “Reunited” trope (*Anastasia*, *Philomena*, *The Parent Trap*, *Secrets & Lies*), the “true” family bond, based on genetics, must be (re)established by the efforts of someone raised apart from their birth family. In the case of *Anastasia*, the birth connection may in fact be an illusion.

“Happy Discovery” stories, despite their dramatic bumps along the road, are the stuff of non-adopted children’s fantasies, allowing them to dream that they, too, can surpass the limitations of their surroundings: like Luke Skywalker, you may be stuck on Tatooine for a time, but you were born to greater things. For an adoptee, however, these stories further reinforce the cultural hierarchy in which blood ties are the sole authentic source of identity. Once again, my family’s origin story is positioned as the obstacle to truth and harmony, not as an expression of them.

### **3. The “Happy Adoption” Story**

There is a cornucopia of children’s stories about plucky orphans who sail through their adoption experience—like Tom Sawyer and Paddington Bear—or win over reluctant or unfeeling guardians with their effervescent personalities, as with *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Story Girl*, and Little Orphan Annie. While tales of cruel fosterers highlight the unnaturalness of

the abandoned child's plight—since it is inevitably implied that the child's "real" parents would never have treated them this way—the happy-orphan story frequently smooths over difficulties, allowing non-adoptees to wistfully project themselves into simpler lives free of inconvenient family entanglements. This type of story asserts children's endless ability to bounce back, providing a measure of pathos while ultimately declaring that love conquers all. Of course, presenting a heart-tugging and grateful orphan who has securely bonded with their "forever family" is far less of a challenge to the status quo than portraying a child in the same situation who has a *living* genetic parent or parents. In the former situation, there can be no doubt in our minds about who the child truly belongs to, or with.

There is also an odd convention of popular romance, dating back even further than Jean Webster's *Daddy-Long-Legs* and at least as far as Molière's *The School for Husbands*, of depicting grown men who marry happily with their wards. As of Dec. 1, 2021, Goodreads.com's page of "Historical Guardian/Ward Romance Novels" had 77 entries, representing readers' favourites in a crowded genre. It is striking that these popular fictions target a primarily female readership. Placing one's male lead in loco parentis is undoubtedly a useful work-around when writing about sexually restrictive societies wherein it is challenging to imagine a wealthy and powerful older man plausibly spending time alone with an attractive and morally "respectable" young woman, as the genre demands. And yet for me, these fictions fly in the face of the reality that family, and therefore incest, has an emotional component that rivals or eclipses its genetic one. These men are shown enacting the role of father and protector to their younger charges during the formative years of their lives. Is it only the extremity of the age difference that makes *Sweeney Todd's* Judge Turpin such an unsuitable suitor for Johanna, or is it also the fact that he is functioning as her parent?



In all three of these primary categories of adoption stories in mainstream literature, drama, and popular culture—whether rosy or damning, realistic or preposterous in their depictions of adoption and adoptees—there is still someone missing: the “other” family.<sup>6</sup> As Novy observes in *Imagining Adoption*:

All three myths assume that a child has, in effect, only one set of parents. To many readers, this will seem like an inevitable axiom. But for others—including many adoptees—it is not necessarily so obvious... In each story, one set of parents is erased—either the biological parents, whose death generates the need for adoptive parents, or the adoptive parents, who are superseded when the biological parents return. (1-2)

Here Novy pinpoints a glaring absence in our dramatic literature which I ultimately seek to address in my thesis play: the depiction of *the entire adoption triad*—consisting of adoptee, birth parent(s), and adoptive parent(s)—which could invite us to embrace a more expansive and nuanced conception of identity and family.

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<sup>6</sup> Matilda, shamefully neglected by her birth family, gains an adoptive parent only in the final scene of the eponymous Roald Dahl book/musical, while Moses’ adoptive mother and (disguised) birth mother coexist in a mere few verses of Genesis before both unnamed women vanish completely from the story.

## **CHAPTER 2: MY OWN BLOOD**

### **(OR, HOW AND WHY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL WENT FROM SUBTEXT TO CENTRE STAGE)**

Writing a play, for me, often starts with a theme or subject which may develop and change over the course of the process. In this case, I knew that I wanted to explore motherhood, family, adoption. I imagined that the play would be informed by my perspective as a modern adoptee but would focus on London's Foundling Hospital, the UK's first child welfare institution and the English version of continental Europe's vast network of depositories for unwanted children. I intended to see what this kind of institution had to tell us about the true nature of women's relationship to the maternal instinct. After all, this was the place where 25,000 English mothers had opted to effectively stop being mothers—a role which has been popularly sentimentalised in our culture to the point that total, unconditional motherly love has long been synonymous with femaleness itself.

The sense of curiosity that incites me to pursue a play is always accompanied, and sometimes preceded, by a visual image which becomes a touchstone for the story. In the case of *The Vic*, it was a vision of five women coming over the crest of a hill. For *The Book of Esther*, it was the setting of two nearly identical kitchens belonging to two diametrically opposed characters. And while I found Arthur Miller's memoir *Death of a Salesman in Beijing* compelling from its first pages, it wasn't until he recounted his horrified reaction to his Chinese actors impersonating his Western characters in wigs and whiteface (154-8) that I knew that his story had to be a play. My initial visual touchstone for *Biological* was the foundling wheel or *ruota* or *roue Napoléon*, that once-ubiquitous European apparatus—consisting of a sort of

rotating drum built into the wall of a nunnery or monastery—which, for a thousand years, permanently severed infants from the mothers who could not or would not care for them (Hrdy 304-6).

Even at the very initial stage of my research, then, I had subject matter, a location, and a central image: in the minus column, I lacked characters, a dramatic structure, a theme, and a story. In search of structural inspiration from plays that weave the historical (e.g., the Foundling Hospital) with the present-day (some kind of modern adoption story), I reread some of my favourite epic character-driven works that play with time and sequence, such as Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

With its seamless interplay of past and present—jumping through the centuries as easily as its characters wander in and out of the room—the framework of *Arcadia* has that typical Stoppard dazzle, to the point that the structure itself threatens to become the most memorable feature of the play. And yet it is a reminder of what you can achieve when you are intentional about your time structure rather than, as Paula Vogel calls it, “defaulting to linear” (PWM). Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* uses a less flashy, more intimate technique to move us back and forth through time: she makes Li'l Bit our guide to the events of her own life. While centring the narrator's relationship with the audience did not ultimately feel like the right fit for my story, I was certainly influenced by Li'l Bit's poetics and emotional directness as well as by her theatrical multitasking. Throughout the play, this character is variously observing the defining episodes of her abusive sexual history, reliving them, or sharing them unsparingly with the audience.

While Churchill's *Top Girls* is mostly linear in its narrative approach, its famous opening scene—which the playwright neither explains nor alludes to in the rest of the play—exemplifies the structure which Vogel describes as “synthetic fragment” (PWM), wherein all time periods exist at once. My takeaways from my recent re-examination of this work during my studies included the following:

- Churchill reinvigorates that staple of middle-class theatre, the dinner party, by populating it with a naturalistically impossible but metaphorically rich assembly of great women of history. There is a compelling theatricality to this juxtaposition, one which I seek to produce in reverse: *Biological* sets a naturalistic assembly of present-day women in a starkly metaphoric decor based on a work of art called *The Dinner Party*.
- Because Marlene's fantastical interactions with historical figures may clearly be understood as a product of her desires and mental state, Churchill doesn't need excess exposition for an audience to follow along.

There are numerous playwrights I turn to again and again, either to study how they handled some specific problem or because they dare me to do better: Judith Thompson, August Wilson, George F. Walker, Tomson Highway, Marie Clements, Michel Tremblay, Michel Marc Bouchard, James Reaney, William Shakespeare, and Paula Vogel, among others. However, having been forever changed by seeing the first Broadway production of *Angels in America* in 1993 and 1994, I go back to Kushner at some point in almost every process. As American playwright Itamar Moses puts it: “If you were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-six when that play was on Broadway, it's the reason you started writing plays” (368). The tentacular, sprawling, yet intricate structure of *Angels in America* is not one that I could emulate in a two-

year project, nor probably even in the six years it took him to work out. Nonetheless, I reread Kushner to be both humbled and ignited by his scope and ambition. *Perestroika* in particular reminds me that it's okay to be ambitious if you are also passionate; that it's okay to be pretentious as long as you are also funny; that you don't always have to be small to be truthful, you don't have to be tidy to be truthful.

David Paquet, whom I translate, has told me that before he begins writing, he needs to know the theme he is writing about and find the appropriate structure within which to write. You certainly don't get to the elegant ouroboros of his Dora Award-winning play *Wildfire* (much less the fiendish geometry of Frayn's *Noises Off!* or Ayckbourn's *House & Garden*) without careful planning. Some of my own work follows a similar path: I knew that *The Book of Esther*, for example, would be a two-act bidirectional urban/rural fish-out-of-water story whose second act was a near mirror image of its first. Accordingly, I relied on the time-honoured method of using index cards on a bulletin board to map out the parallel stories I intended to write. However, the more I looked to other writers for models for this piece, and the more I tried to game it out ahead of time, the more I shut down my ability to move forward. How was I going to incorporate the Foundling Hospital, the foundling wheels, and elements of my own story? After wrestling with this question for some time, I realised that the structure of this play would have to reveal itself to me as I went along. As Anne Lamott puts it in *Bird by Bird*:

E.L. Doctorow once said that 'Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.' You don't have to see where you're going, you don't have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you. (37)

In fact, this entire process has been very much about knowing when to make plans, when to alter plans, and when to wing it.

### **1. Writing into a Pandemic**

While it was not part of my research plan for the play that became *Biological*—or of anyone’s plan for anything—I need to discuss the advent of COVID-19 because it had a huge impact on the conception and execution of my piece. I also want to detail its effects and the strategies I used to cope with them, because I suspect that this is not the last time that artist-scholars will need to find ways to press on through social and environmental catastrophe.

#### **a) COVID-19’s effects on research**

My initial proposal to the graduate committee, in the fall of 2020, was to conduct primary archival research in London, England at the London Metropolitan Archives and the Foundling Museum—which house the bulk of historical holdings on London’s Foundling Hospital—and to develop a play based on this material. By Dec. 2020, when I submitted my proposal for graduate funding, we were nine months into the COVID-19 crisis—with its waves of infection and travel bans and shutdowns—but I was still just guessing what might be possible during the period allotted for my research. Given that both China and Russia were already on the cusp of a vaccine (Kramer; Zhuang), it seemed plausible that safe travel to London would soon resume. What I did not anticipate was that existing fault lines in our body politic, both nationally and internationally, would blow wide open, making herd immunity a pipe dream (Yan). Long-haul flights were technically possible by the spring of 2021, but I had no confidence that they were safe. Worryingly, the Foundling Museum staff had proved unresponsive to my numerous attempts to

contact them. I eventually learned from an archivist at Coram UK that the museum had been either closed or operating with a skeleton staff for this entire period:

I do know that the Foundling Museum and staff there have only been available sporadically, and have been operating at reduced capacity when they have been able to be on-site. (Blyghton)

As with every aspect of this pandemic, it was perhaps the universal uncertainty that was the hardest to navigate. What is this? How long will it last? What will it look like on the other side? Will it ever be over? Are we safe? Are we safe *now*?

#### b) COVID-19's effects on creative writing and mental health

There is a popular misunderstanding that the only thing standing between most people and their creativity is time. If that were true, 2020-2022—when we were all stuck at home, locked down, quarantining, with the theatres shut and all our creative projects dead or at a standstill—should have been a bonanza for playwrights. I am reminded, however, of a COVID-era cartoon about people in a rowboat during a storm at sea. In the background of the cartoon are sinking ships, giant waves, sharks, and bolts of lightning. In the foreground, one occupant of the rowboat says to the other: “Well, at least now you can finally finish that novel!” I have always thought of myself as mentally tough and dogged when it comes to working through crisis. I wrote a scene of *For Home and Country* on the day of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when everyone else at the Banff Centre was losing their mind: I finished my libretto for David Ogborn’s *The Translator* while my stepfather was undergoing brain surgery. I have always had a predilection for hyper-focusing on a work of art, whether creating it or engaging with it. Deep, obsessive, missed-my-bus-stop, didn’t-hear-the-telephone, just-poured-orange-juice-in-my-coffee kind of

focus. In this case, my grief and shock over five projects—representing years of work—that had been vaporized by the pandemic; my anger and sorrow at the depth of official disregard for our theatre community and its needs; my disgust for the mobs who marched freely under our downtown Calgary window every Saturday demanding their “freedom”; and my fear for the future of my family and friends, my art form, and my world, crashed through my concentration like the ocean storm in that cartoon. Under these circumstances, I found all other pursuits—my course work, my assistantships, my remaining translation contracts—more manageable than a first draft of a new creative work. Theatrical translation and graduate course work may seem like an odd “happy place” when one is undergoing a sort of existential despair about the survival of theatre: however, these types of writing share a meticulous, analytical component which I found easier to recover than the creative one. For me, writing a new play into existence requires a mindset of absolute freedom and play; an internal sense of purpose and meaning; and a certain measure of hope. For much of this process, all of the above were AWOL.

## **2. The Zeitgeist Around Adoption**

The 2021 discovery of 215 suspected unmarked graves behind the former Kamloops Indian Residential School threw a bright spotlight on all forms of violence practiced against Indigenous peoples by the churches and governments of Canada. These included the extensive seizures of Indigenous children by child welfare authorities now collectively known as the “Sixties Scoop”, which in turn led to wholesale adoptions of Indigenous children by white parents who were often devoid of meaningful connections with Indigenous peoples or cultures:

Even the best of these homes are not healthy places for our children. Anglo-Canadian foster parents are not culturally equipped to create an environment in which a positive



Aboriginal self-image can develop. In many cases, our children are taught to demean those things about themselves that are Aboriginal. (White 19)

In this case, “blood” clearly did matter. As visible minorities in white-dominated environments, these adoptees—like the new generation of international and transracial adoptees who are just beginning to tell their sometimes-painful stories—often found themselves negotiating a racist world without the mentorship of a family who understood what they were going through (Hatzipanagos). For Indigenous communities, as is now officially acknowledged, the Scoop—like the residential schools—amounted to cultural genocide. In this context, a story that took a largely positive view of a state-sponsored adoption seemed both disrespectful and doomed. The dread of perpetuating harm became one more set of hands holding me back.

### **3. Necessity: The (Adoptive) Mother of Invention**

When I was finally able to articulate my **sociopolitical concerns** to my supervisor, Prof. Clem Martini, he reminded me of one of the basic truths of the playwright’s life: you cannot write the story of everything and everybody; all you can write is your own. Thus, I could not and should not try to represent the experiences of all people touched by adoption, which had not been part of my original mission anyway. Theatre is meant to be specific, not comprehensive. Within the two hours’ traffic of our stage, or even the seven hours of *Angels in America*, all we can do is row our little boat into the swirl of a story and make it to the other side.

As for the **research** involved in setting my story at the Foundling Hospital: while I had access to some online materials about the Hospital in addition to my memories and materials from my 2015 visit, it was clearly impractical for me to conduct the depth of primary archival research that had served me in good stead for *Schoolhouse* and *For Home and Country*. I realised

that—to repurpose the most overused word in the performing arts in 2021—I needed to “pivot” to a new approach.

Which brings me to how I began to tackle the challenges in the actual **writing**.

To address my existential despair about the future of theatre and the world, I went back and reread favourite plays, rewatched the filmed versions of landmark productions, and took in some livestreamed Zoom and YouTube performances. I was grateful for the lifeline of those brave new works, which reminded me why I love theatre even as they reminded me that they were not theatre. In the theatre, we don’t have the magnificent vistas of a drone shot or the adrenaline-charged experiential focus of a video game or the infinite spaciousness and narrative omniscience of a novel. We can, however, create images with words: lush rivers of them, or only a few. We can make stunning soundscapes with an orchestra, or with a single actor and a drum. We can spend a million dollars to crash a chandelier, or five dollars for a flashlight that evokes the moon on a blank wall. We have intimacy. We have propulsion. Above all, we have *actual, physical, shared presence*. One or more humans performing in a space, for one or more humans in the same space watching, is a reasonable baseline for what constitutes theatre. However, even that much seemed unimaginable in those days of total lockdowns and digital performances. To restart the engine of my writing, I had to choose to believe that something I would recognise as theatre would be possible at some point in the future, and that I would be a part of that future. I was going to make an offering of my story; someone, somewhere, would take the offer; and someone, somewhere, would care. At the time, it was all a giant leap of faith.

To address my question of what I would write about without my research trip, I cast my mind back to a 2018 writing retreat with playwrights Lucia Frangione, Carmen Aguirre, Elaine

Avila, and Meghan Gardiner, all members of my Vancouver-based writing group The Pod. Together we read scenes from my new draft of *The Angel's Cradle*, my previous attempt to approach themes of the nature of motherhood, in that instance through the lens of infanticide. That play begins with an unseen girl giving birth in a high school washroom as her classmate prattles on obliviously at the sink: at the end of the scene, we hear some moaning from the toilet stall and then a repeated flush as red liquid begins to flood out from beneath the door. My Pod friends—all mothers—were appalled. They demanded to know why I wanted to write about this horror.

I told them about Hrdy's research on the normal continuum of maternal response. I told them that, as a feminist with no children, I am offended and repelled by the nauseating cant around motherhood: the drippy Mother's Day cards celebrating the charms of self-effacing, self-sacrificing creatures whose greatest dream is to fulfill their children's every wish; the Lifetime Channel ur-narrative of the citified career woman who realises that all she really needs is to make babies with the big strong hunk in her hometown; the astonishingly persistent conviction that all women, even highly educated and ambitious ones, really just desire more time with their children; above all, the lie that any other maternal response is a mere anomaly. I told them, finally, that a narrative in which womanhood is motherhood and motherhood is parturition leaves no room for my experience of femaleness or family. My birth mother didn't raise me; my adoptive mother didn't give birth to me; I have neither birthed nor raised anyone. In terms of the traditional narrative, that means that none of us is a mother, and therefore none of us is a

woman.<sup>7</sup> I told them that Mom, my adoptive mother, is my heroine and one of the great loves of my life, and any suggestion that she is in any way less of a mom than anyone else—or that I am less a part of my family than anyone else—makes me want to punch somebody. Carmen responded immediately, “Well, I want to hear more about *that*,” and everyone else agreed. They had no interest in my pronouncements on Motherhood or Adoption: they wanted my own perspective on my own story.

In thinking back on that conversation, I realized that I had been looking to write this new play, my adoption play, through the lens of History in part because History felt epic enough to be worthy of research support by a university for a whole two years, and worthy of an audience’s attention for a whole two hours. Although elements of my characters have always drawn from me and the people around me, albeit in composite and unrecognisable ways, I had heretofore avoided overt autobiography for the following reasons:

- I have never considered my life story to be particularly interesting.
- It seems to me that every female playwright not named Caryl Churchill keeps getting herded into the personal rather than encouraged to reach for the whole world.
- There are thorny questions of ethical responsibility and personal loyalty inherent in the autobiographical form.

My way forward, then, was staring me in the face. With no travel feasible, no libraries or theatres open, and no in-person classes to attend, I was basically stuck with myself. My main obligation for a master’s thesis was to stretch myself, experiment, take a risk, and document the

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<sup>7</sup> My birth mother later raised a child but I was speaking of her here in the context of my story, i.e., the adoption triad.

results. I had done history plays: I had done archival research. What I had never done was make any attempt to tell my own story.

When Prof. Martini talked to me in early 2021 about my right to write “your story”, I believe he meant both *the story you are trying to tell* and *your personal story*. He observed in that same conversation that, while you may not know all there is to know about a particular topic, it’s hard to rock you off *the story of your life*, the story of what you did and what happened to you. I was in no position to speak for all adoptees, but I could certainly speak for myself. Nora Ephron’s most famous dictum about writing from the personal is, “Everything is copy.” Or, as a close friend once put it to me: “Of course you own your life experience. You were *there*.”

Except that, as I shall discuss in Chapter 3, my previous attempt to write *Turbulence* had convinced me that I don’t. And I wasn’t.

**CHAPTER 3: SOMEONE ELSE'S BLOOD**

**(OR, HOW I HAVE APPROACHED MY RESPONSIBILITIES TO THE LIVING AND  
THE DEAD)**

I've discovered that there's something inherently hostile about having someone else write about your life, no matter how well-intentioned that other person might be. It violates [your] subjectivity. (Bechdel)

Writing a play is, in some ways, obtaining a series of permissions. As a playwright, you give yourself permission to take this time to create something without any immediate utility, something that may take years and the efforts of dozens of others to bring to fruition. You draft a plan and then give your characters permission to stomp all over it. You give yourself permission to confess truths about yourself that are ugly and unflattering, or to make up things so resonant and beautiful that they reveal their own truths. You give yourself permission to believe that what you're doing is good and even important, as well as permission to fail and fall short. Sometimes you must figure out how to get the audience's permission to tell them a tragic or disturbing story: in the first few minutes of any comedy, you need to give them permission to laugh. And of course, you must give yourself permission to write in the voices of your characters, or narrators, or however you choose to position the performers vis-à-vis the text you have written.<sup>8</sup>

My internal permission structure got short-circuited, in a way, by my work on a play called *Turbulence*. This was initially an unprecedented three-way commission between the Blyth Festival, Lighthouse Festival Theatre, and 4th Line Theatre for me to research and write a

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<sup>8</sup> This is the permission that has undergone some much-needed rethinking in recent years, as intellectuals and activists have probed the ethics and efficacy of writing outside one's own direct experience (Rekdal).

documentary play about the wind power controversy that tore the social fabric and rewrote the political map of rural Southern Ontario on the early years of the 21st century, dividing families and communities, including those in the areas surrounding all three of the commissioning theatres. From 2011 to 2013, I read thousands of articles, and conducted and transcribed hundreds of hours of interviews across Southern Ontario with people on all sides of this issue, ranging from a senior member of the Ontario provincial government to farmers and cottagers to a worker at the former Nanticoke coal plant, which was shut down as a direct consequence of the 2003 Green Energy Act. Virtually all that my interview subjects had in common was their fierce determination to convert me to their side of the question, and their skepticism—ranging from polite aloofness to outright hostility—that I would get it right. In fact, it is remarkable that interviewees from across the political spectrum invited me into their communities, their vehicles, their homes, to record their voices and represent their stories. At times, as I climbed into the pickup trucks or SUVs of the rural people I was interviewing, or sat in their kitchens, I felt their aggressive distrust as a physical force pressing inwards on my chest. After many years of living and working in rural settings, I believe that I was always ultimately accorded their permission to proceed for one or more of the following reasons:

- They knew of my work with, or at least the work of, one of the local theatres with whom I was developing the project, so there was a kind of built-in community accountability.
- At the beginning of our conversation or correspondence, many people—especially those who were against the wind farms—probed into my rural bona fides, delving into my village origins, country schooling, and connections to farm communities and the natural world until they were satisfied that I could understand their culture and worldview.
- I'm a good listener.

- They took a chance on me because they were so desperate to be heard.

Unfortunately, as I was working on this piece—which, due in part to the tremendous effort of securing and transcribing all of those interviews, took much longer than I had predicted—its three commissioning theatres went through a total of seven artistic directors. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that immediately after the workshop of my draft, the new leaders rejected it and cut ties with the project. I couldn't get their permission to seek extra help or dramaturgy, which I asked for at this juncture to protect their investment and my own: my work had stumbled, and despite having written three consecutive popular and critical hits for two of those theatres, I did not have permission to fail or fall short.

I still fervently believed that there was a great deal of power in this story, if only I could find the right shape for it amid the overwhelming chaos of my raw material. Above all, I did not want to let myself be defeated by the “doc play” form, which had initially seemed like such a natural evolution from my work on big historical projects for the Blyth Festival and the 4th Line Theatre.

It is difficult to explain how hot an issue the windfarms were in rural Ontario in the early years of the new millennium: there were sometimes life-changing repercussions for being on the wrong side of the question of their existence. When I told her what I was working on, my closest friend of many decades demanded, with surprising vehemence: “Don't put me in the play.” Then along came a second residency at Hedgebrook, where I heeded my dramaturg Christine Sumption's advice to “do everything wrong”: in other words, to burst through my writer's block and paralysing sense of rejection by giving myself every possible permission. Clashing forces were pressing me from all sides to write an infomercial for their point of view? Ignore them.



Seven artistic directors had come with their own aesthetics and priorities? Flout them. My friend commanded me to leave her out of it? Put her into it.<sup>9</sup>

I called this the “no-holds-barred draft”. It was tremendously liberating and injected freedom, life, and play into a piece that had become scrupulously measured and balanced and thunderingly dull.

I then made the catastrophic error of telling my friend what I had done. She responded with a meltdown to end all meltdowns. She explained that, in her view, this piece could ruin her relationship with her rural community. I replied that I would never let that happen; that I could easily disguise that character beyond recognition; that I would probably cut it in subsequent drafts anyway. For my friend, however, none of this was adequate and, as it turned out, all of it was beside the point. The real issue was that, in ignoring her express wishes, I had put my art before our friendship. I had betrayed her.

Speaking as a playwright, this situation, even more than the rejection by my main collaborators, was my worst nightmare. I had simply done what playwrights usually do—drawn on a mix of real influences and imagined dialogue to craft a story—and as a direct result, one of the people closest to me had cut me out of her life. People around the Blyth Festival and 4th Line Theatre communities, whom I interviewed for my plays, repeatedly entrusted me with their stories because—thanks to *Schoolhouse*, *For Home and Country*, and *The Book of Esther*—I had

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<sup>9</sup> The character I created in that draft was a sort of imaginary friend of the narrator, speaking invented dialogue and clearly presented as a dialectic device to help me work through the wind power controversy. As Christine Sumption understood, even a very bad idea can be useful when you’re trying to move past a writing block. You try it, you laugh about it, you don’t judge yourself for it, and you quietly delete it later. One of the things I learned from this episode, though: be extremely careful about when, and with whom, you share your very bad ideas.

built a reputation for integrity, fairness, and making compelling theatre out of material that everyone doubted could ever be a play. I frequently assured my interviewees: “I’ve been making these plays for over a decade now and no one has *ever* felt they were worse off for having talked to me.” Now that this statement was no longer true, who would or should confide in me? The failure of this project became like a shard of glass embedded in my foot: with each new step I tried to take as a writer, it cut further into me, reminding me painfully of where I had been. I knew that I had to dig it out before I could continue on my way.

This is why I spent much of the first year of my research working on the pre-thesis play I developed in Prof. Martini’s class: a wholly reimagined, fully fictionalised version of *Turbulence*. Once I made the decision to create a story about the wind power controversy in Ontario with fictional characters who had real-life antecedents and were placed within in a thoroughly well-researched environment with a strong community theme—in other words, once I decided to write the kind of play that I write pretty well—the whole thing came together relatively smoothly and I wondered why I had been punishing myself for so long. This incarnation of *Turbulence*, an excerpt of which was presented on Zoom at the 2021 Alchemy Festival, had the desired effect of laying the ghost of that earlier disaster and restoring my confidence in my writing. As I remarked to my classmates at the time, “This isn’t a draft: it’s an exorcism.”

While I was navigating what would become the most personal tale I have ever told, the turbulence around *Turbulence* greatly informed my approach to obtaining permission. On the one hand, it solidified my conviction that I have the right to draw on my own life and my own memories in my writing. On the other, it was an agonising reminder of how high the stakes can

be when you are bringing autobiography to the table. Here I was, proposing to delve into family secrets and ongoing societal taboos, when the mere hint that I might someday stage a character with a whiff of a recognisable voice had tanked a 35-year friendship. This did not stop me from writing, but it did increase my determination to carry out meaningful consultation with my adoptive mother and birth mother—the only living figures deeply connected to my narrative—before, during, and after the writing of *Biological*. I wanted to do everything I could to protect these crucial relationships while also telling this story. Most of our exchanges during this time were private and oral, but as is apparent in the Appendix consisting of selected correspondence from this period, the permission I obtained from my mothers was not a static or one-time agreement. Rather, their initial approval was merely the prelude to a series of ongoing conversations. Mom and Sharon were invited to witness and comment on the work in progress. And while I reserved to myself the rights and responsibilities of authorship—of decision-making and the “final cut”—I listened very closely for any discomfort with, or feeling of exploitation around, the work of dramatic autofiction that was evolving from our shared truths. As it turns out, the more they understood what I was trying to do, the more both Sharon and my mother volunteered about our family stories. I heard things I’d never heard before. Regarding the stories I thought I knew, I heard new, more complex perspectives. My mothers were not protecting their stories from me: they were offering them to me, the family griot, with hope and love, as heirlooms that belong to me as well as to them, now and forever.

There is another side to this question of my parents’ right to privacy versus my right to tell our story. Both of my mothers are in declining health. The fathers in this story are both long gone, with no other known descendants. I take the position that my fathers’ claim to control their stories died with them: in fact, much of their personal history has now disappeared forever. As an

only child with no children, I am well aware that if I do not pass on the stories of my family, then their memory, and memories, die with me. As both a loving daughter and a trained storyteller, I believe that *that* would be a serious ethical violation.

In the case of *Turbulence*, I had gotten bogged down in other people's opinions and agendas. Having been increasingly oppressed by the facts, I at last found freedom in fiction. By using composite characters, mixing and matching their circumstances, and allowing myself to fill in parts of the story to which I never got access, I could finally speak from my own perspective without fear of garbling anyone else's; without worrying about dire consequences for myself or my sources, or for my commissioning theatres, deeply embedded as they are in rural communities fractured by this issue; without this quixotic quest to maintain the appearance of objectivity. In a way, my substantial and hard-won store of knowledge had given me permission to make things up, even as making things up gave me permission to tell the truth. This is an insight that I took into the creation of *Biological*.

## CHAPTER 4: BLOOD LINES

### (OR, PUTTING PEN TO PAPER)

When you were born in Winnipeg, you know that, to begin a journey in winter, you don't just get in your car and drive. First you spend 10 to 15 minutes putting on your outer clothing so that the cold won't eat your face. Then you go out and warm up the car—assuming that you've remembered to plug it into the block heater. After that, there may be a fair amount of scraping and shovelling and sanding involved: if there's been a big snowstorm, the shovelling might be needed just to get out the door.

Thus far, I have been documenting the necessary preparations for writing *Biological*, like so much ice and snow that needed to be cleared out of the way before I could get anywhere. I've described my negotiations with emotional trauma, logistical snags, pandemic difficulties, and ethical quandaries. I am omitting other significant and ongoing challenges such as impostor syndrome, caregiving, finances, and time management, since they are as common as dirt in a writer's life and I have not much new to say about them.

So, having received the enthusiastic blessing of my mothers (see the Appendix) to tell a fictionalised version of our families' stories; having extensively researched the history and current practice of child relinquishment and adoption in Canada and in the West; and having reflected on the limitations of existing images of fostering and abandonment in Western culture, it was time to turn my attention to the main elements that—once I have a subject in mind—are always central to making my play: **characters, images and moments, and action and structure.**

## 1. Characters

In working with Prof. Martini as instructor and supervisor, and in reading his seminal text *The Blunt Playwright*, I have enjoyed his clarifying focus on what Joseph Campbell called the monomyth or—more androcentrically—the Hero’s Journey. The solo protagonist can provide an effective focus for the audience’s engagement with the dramatic action, moving us forward through time as we become emotionally invested in their central quest. In any type of theatre other than in its most ritualistic and rarefied forms, the central commandment is Thou Shalt Not Bore the Audience. The Hero’s Journey form ensures that we want to know what happens next by getting us to emotionally invest in the actions of one individual. While my play *The Vic*, inspired by Chekhov and Kushner and Judith Thomson’s *The Crackwalker*, juggles multiple storylines, my other plays have one or two characters at the centre and the others arcing around them. Once I knew that I wanted to explore the adoption triad through a personal lens that expanded into historical antecedents, the three central characters became obvious: I needed a birth mother, an adoptive mother, and an adult adoptee. Other characters would illuminate, challenge, or support their arcs.

### a) Benita

Although I cribbed her name from an earlier unproduced work—in part because my character sees her story as a blessing, whereas others frequently see it as a curse—this Benita’s characteristics are entirely new. Sarah Levy has stated that the quirks and neuroses of David Rose, her brother Daniel Levy’s character in his series *Schitt’s Creek*, are a very dialed-up version of his own personality: “David is a 10, 11, 12, 13—and Daniel is a three or four.”

An intensification of one’s own natural traits can be a good recipe for a dramatic

character as well as a comedic one, and that's how I approached Benita. She and I share a basic outlook on adoption, on family, and on where our allegiance lies. In terms of personality, she is me at "10, 11, 12, 13": she is also impulsive where I am cautious, brave where I am scared, enraged where I am annoyed. She charges into messes I would avoid, reacts with thoughtlessness and immaturity where I might reflect, and sometimes says the quiet parts out loud. This directness makes her much more interesting to watch than a more accurate version of me would be, allowing me as the author to move situations along with alacrity where I, in real life, might dither and temporize. Making my lead character much younger than I was when I went through my adoption discovery allows me to keep her believable and sympathetic despite her hot-headedness and heavy-handedness: she is still very much figuring things out. Benita's age also increases the stakes of her quest for identity. Determining who you are and where you belong is most properly the work of youth, during which one's answers are much more far-reaching in their effects. If you want your story to have adventure, movement, and change, then you need to centre a character who really needs that change.

Meanwhile, if you want to make sure that your audience understands certain realities so that they can fully enter the world of the play, that, too, can figure into how you choose to shape the characters. Some of the exposition in this current draft will doubtless drop out of subsequent versions, or else get imparted more artfully. This year, while teaching playwriting at UBC, I told my students: "Research like hell, and then resist the urge to share it: in fact, share as little of it as humanly possible!" That advice was about making sure that all information is firmly sewn into the fabric of your story. If you must drop knowledge, it can be effective to get a character to share information with another character who truly needs to know. When Benita encounters the Foundling Museum, she is on an urgent quest to place her own family structure within its larger

sociological context: for example, how our society deals with its “surplus” children; the evolution of our attitudes to such children over time; and the reasons why a mother might give up her child. Thus, her interactions with Walter et al. are grounded in her own deep-seated desire to understand.

There’s a definite chicken-and-egg aspect to the shaping of your protagonist(s) in a narrative piece: a character is largely uninteresting without a compelling dramatic action—even if that action is simply to wait for Godot—and a dramatic action is seldom compelling without a character whose pursuit of that action commands our attention. Sometimes, as with *Schoolhouse*, I find myself setting up a dramatic situation—e.g., the unfolding of one year in a little country school—and then start asking myself who would be the most interesting person to navigate that situation. Sometimes, as with Spud from *The Vic*, the basis of a character or a bit of her dialogue occurs to me and I start sketching her out, waiting for the right environment in which to place her. At other times, as with Benita, I start with a theme; ask myself what kind of person has an urgent relationship to that theme; then consider what actions that person needs to take to reach some kind of resolution, and how those actions help me explore that character and that theme. Dramatically, Benita’s most important attribute is that she urgently needs answers about her origins and about where she belongs... whereas I, at her age, was quite content with the answers I had, and simply wanted to get on with my life.

Benita is unique among the characters in her ability, at the beginning and end of the play, to directly address the audience. Everything about her is different in these sections: her diction, her demeanour, her rhythms. I wanted to get the sense that this version of Benita is reflecting on a seminal period in her life from a very different time and emotional place. This duality is not innovative—it exists for Gilles in Fanny Britt’s *Benevolence*, Tom in Tennessee Williams’ *The*



*Glass Menagerie*, and Ouisa in John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*, among many others—but it is effective, allowing me to access Benita's thoughtful side in a way that would not be realistic for her impetuous younger self *in medias res*.

b) Ethel, Fredy, Colleen

Ethel and Colleen have obvious models in my actual adoptive birth mother and birth mother, from their distinctive syntaxes to many details of their stories. As with Benita, it was dramatically helpful to punch up certain facets of their characters, so I made Ethel pretty hostile towards Colleen and obdurate toward her daughter's attempts to unify her families, whereas Colleen became cluelessly optimistic and very determined to (re)insert herself immediately into Benita's life. This allowed me to intensify the conflicts that would heat up their eventual scene together.

Initially I resisted having a scene between Ethel, Colleen, and Benita because their real-life analogues have never met. Once I remembered that fiction is freedom, however, I realized that I could easily imagine an encounter which—due to their failing health, among other barriers—will never happen in real life. This draft posits one of the worst possible versions of how such a meeting might play out, but it is emotionally plausible.

Like Ethel and Colleen, Fredy has a functional dramatic role in relation to Benita, yet I wanted her to be more than just a foil. Fredy reflects elements of a few individuals I have known, but above all she represents aspects of me: she has my sense of humour, for example, and a certain feral quality that I sometimes evince, as someone who left home very early—in my case, simply because it was necessary to further my education. It was important to me that the character of Fredy resist stereotypes around children in care. Her positive outlook and

determination to put her awful childhood at the service of others mirror some of the trauma survivors in my own life who blow up society's low expectations for them. At the same time, I didn't want to soft-pedal the significant deficits she is working with. In fact, Fredy is a kind of vision of what Benita's path in life might have been, since for many children in difficult family circumstances the alternative to adoption has historically been either institutionalisation—as experienced by Walter—or a series of foster homes. Fredy's enormous victory is that she acknowledges her precarious start in life but—by drawing on every resource she can possibly get her hands on—manages not to let it define her. Fredy can laugh at Benita, speak truth to her, and rescue her from herself, yet she is also her own person with her own life going on. Furthermore, I wanted her to have a different relationship to maternity than Benita has, and one which will ultimately manifest itself in very different choices.

### c) Kayla

This character entered the story as a way of facing one of my biggest dilemmas head-on. I wanted to explore a positive adoption narrative without ignoring the checkered history of adoption in North America, its relationship to race and class, or its weaponisation as an agent of cultural erasure used against many marginalised people.

In recent years, some adoptees have become militant proponents of the theory that adoption per se is trauma, a primal wound from which one never recovers. When I have objected—whether in person, or on chat boards for adoptees, or in the comment sections of general interest magazines—that I show none of the effects they mention and neither do any of the adoptees I know, they tend to retort with research about suicide attempts among adoptees, etc. Given that many struggling adoptees have experienced traumatising pre-adoptive home

situations, either with their birth parents or in care; and given the possibility of self-selection by the unhappiest adopted individuals, and of confirmation bias among researchers from “normal” genetically linked families, I have serious questions about the methodologies used for such studies. Above all, though, I object to the special kind of missionary arrogance inherent in anyone, even a fellow adoptee, thrusting a paper at me and telling me what I feel.

There has incontrovertibly been a massive amount of disclosure in recent years about harms caused by certain adoptions, notably:

- Interracial or international adoptions into families and social circles (predominantly white, well-to-do, and Western) that are in no way prepared to navigate the complex layers of belonging that their children will experience.
- Coercive, even deceptive adoption practices led by moralising religious organisations, as well as profit-driven baby trafficking by private companies such as Georgia Tann’s infamous Tennessee Children’s Home Society and Nova Scotia’s Ideal Maternity Home.
- The Sixties Scoop of Indigenous children into white families by agencies of the Canadian government.

In the late Eighties, when this story is set, we in non-Indigenous Canadian society weren’t yet talking about the Sixties Scoop or the other horrors I have just mentioned. And the whole drive of this piece is to tell my own story. Yet it felt mendacious not to represent the views of those whose adoption has filled them with a sense of deprivation. While both international and interracial adoptions—except for the Scoop—were very uncommon in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s, Montréal’s idealistic and groundbreaking Open Door Society (Dubinsky 57-92) was active at this time and tracks with Kayla’s age and background. Given my personal history, I felt

confident in writing through the POV of a bright, blunt, no-nonsense Asian Canadian woman from my own generation. Kayla provides a counterpoint to my own generally sunny view of my family situation. Moreover, she acts as a catalyst who jolts Benita out of her complacency and ultimately sets her on a path of discovering her own truth.

d) Daniel and Alon

[I]n writing the play “The Piano Lesson,” one of the characters, Berniece, says something to Boy Willie, her brother, and he talks about how “Sutter fell in the well.” Well this is a surprise to me. I didn’t know that. Then I say, “Well, who is Sutter?” (Wilson 356)

Daniel’s arc came as a complete surprise to me. His role was initially quite limited: for reasons of stagecraft and producibility, I wanted one actor to double some or all of the male characters. Since Daniel is based on my own father, I didn’t overthink his genesis, confident that I could summon a version of Dad whenever the story required. His character was meant to disappear early on, his death a shared source of grief that would further weld Ethel and Benita together. But late in the writing process—in February of 2022—I had a flash of a scene between Benita and Daniel, a scene that would express aspects of their relationship that I had never approached before, thus throwing a new light on the whole play. I brooded for a day or two about what this scene would be and what a scene with a dead father could possibly have to do with a story about mothers and daughters. Then I decided to just lock myself in my office with a meal bar, a water bottle, and a box of tissues, and see what happened. I sat quietly, summoned Benita, and almost immediately, Daniel came into the room. I honestly didn’t know what either of them was going to say or do: it was a very August Wilson moment.

A few hours later, by the end of my writing session, I had realised something about Benita's arc. Culturally dominant narratives about the nature of family have left no space for her to name, and therefore process, the actual paramount trauma in her life: the slow, inexorable, agonising loss of her father. For all that she strives to shield her mother from the disrespect and ignorance of others, her unresolved grief for her father is just as much a source of her fury.

Once I understood Daniel's place in the story, the decision to double the actor in other male roles became richer, more evocative. In Walter and Alon and Solomon and possibly even the Overseer, Benita is encountering different aspects of her absent father, which becomes apparent when she finally "sees" Daniel face-to-face. With this revelation in mind, I went back and looked at all the sections of the play that featured male characters—especially all the ones where Daniel appears or is referenced—to see how I could set up Daniel and Benita's relationship as powerfully as possible.

Alon may be the least successful character at this stage of the development process, and for an admittedly petty reason: I'm still angry at him. While I've had decades to process the posthumous revelations of my adored adoptive father's feet of clay, I only found out about "Alon" while working on this play. Playwrights cannot be kind to their characters—that's not our job—and I am always looking for any chance to throw humour in the mix. However, I have taken someone who, although undeniably irresponsible as a youth, is remembered fondly by his nephews and nieces, and turned him into a one-dimensional joke; a jerk; a loser. While I hint in his scene that he may be suffering from a serious illness, I don't reveal the truth: that this illness was real, fatal, and may have been responsible for at least some of his objectionable behaviours. As currently written, Alon is a fun contrast to Daniel, especially when they are both performed

by an actor as intelligent and versatile as David Sklar,<sup>10</sup> but there may well be more to mine from “Al” if I grant him a greater touch of dignity.

e) Additional roles

I tend to put a village on stage—my smallest play is *The Book of Esther* with a cast of five—and this one is no exception. As is usually the case in this kind of narrative drama, an assortment of supporting characters represents aspects of Benita, poses challenges to Benita, and helps her collect pieces of the puzzle she is trying to work out. They also—almost to a person—have been touched in some way by issues of relinquishment, adoption, fostering, and the many ways in which we create or reject family. That is why, when added to the non-appearing characters who are mentioned in the script, they have initials that span the alphabet from A to Z: it’s my way of suggesting that our views on and experiences of these supposedly universal “motherhood” issues run the gamut. One letter is conspicuously missing: X. In my first attempt to tackle some of these themes—the unproduced and unpublished play *The Angel’s Cradle*—there was the character of an underground artist, a sort of feminist Banksy known as XX. In this play, on the other hand, “X” represents the unknown or unknowable, i.e., all the perspectives on my subject matter that I do not intimately know through either research or lived experience, and therefore did not write about.

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<sup>10</sup> David Sklar read all the male roles in the workshop and reading of *Biological* as part of the University of Calgary’s Alchemy Festival in April 2022.

## **2. Images and Moments**

I tend toward a magpie-like approach to research materials, gathering the glinting items that catch my eye—visual references, snippets of dialogue—without necessarily having a plan for where or how they will fit together.<sup>11</sup> Long before I set out to tackle this play, certain elements struck me as theatrically promising: foundling wheels (Hrdy 304-306); the Foundling Hospital’s appalling billiard-ball entrance lottery (Howell 20-21); the infancy of Moses. Often, in writing, I will start sketching out a context for these snippets and proceed from there.

As someone whose entire adult life has been spent outside the academy, I had a notion that a thesis play should be much grander in conception and execution than this seemingly disjointed and aleatory process would allow. I got stuck on that grandeur, paralysed by the perceived need to create an imposing and intellectually cohesive theatrical framework for it all, and consequently produced nothing for the longest time. It was once again my supervisor Prof. Martini who came to my rescue by proposing a series of discrete, manageable writing assignments during our independent study together. One of these assignments was to document my own earliest feelings and impressions regarding my own adoption, in whatever literary form occurred to me. Like Anne Lamott’s *One-Inch Picture Frame* (37), the small scale and specificity of this assignment, as well as the lack of pressure to create anything good or “usable”, unlocked a sense of ease in my writing. I produced several pages of prose, free verse, and quotations: documenting my teenaged fantasy that my birth mother was Joni Mitchell, for example, and

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<sup>11</sup> The magpie’s established reputation as a thief of sparkly things may not reflect the latest scientific knowledge: however, as I am not pursuing a Master’s in ornithology, I am invoking its folkloric image instead.

relating my garbled childhood understanding of my adoption story in an anecdote which now anchors the opening monologue of the play.

At this point, as with my reimagining of *Turbulence*, I had to remind myself that I was not here to become some other kind of writer, but rather to stretch myself by tackling a big ambitious piece and analysing/documenting its creation process in a way I've never done before. I decided to continue pursuing the moments and images that fired me up to write; to keep generating these moments and images without questioning their worth or pertinence, without worrying too much about how they would fit together.

In my early years of professional practice, I was involved in several collective creations. The troupes of performers we now call “devisers” generate endless amounts of improvisational dross out of which a small store of useful material may eventually emerge. In teaching playwriting over the past couple of years, I found myself repeatedly advising floundering playwriting students: “Just keep throwing that spaghetti against the fridge and see what sticks.” The most important thing is to stop judging and start writing. I feel the strain of that deceptively simple dictum with each new project, which at least allows me to approach students' difficulties from a place of deep empathy.

My renewed openness to the intuitive—to seemingly disparate shiny things—had allowed an unexpected yet satisfying scene between Daniel and Benita to emerge. Once I knew that the adoption triad would be at the heart of my story, I flashed on the image of a seminal feminist artwork that I had read about in my college years but never seen in person: Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. Rather than feeling obligated to plumb the depths of scholarship on this artwork's full significance, I refreshed my memory of Chicago's work and then allowed its lush imagery to



inform my penultimate triangular confrontation. Unlike our colleagues in more empirical fields, I was at liberty to let my writing lead the research, rather than letting the research lead the writing.

Have I created a big staging challenge for future productions here? Possibly... although for an arena stage like Regina's Globe Theatre or a traverse like Pacific Theatre in Vancouver, this three-sided table sequence would be very easy to block. In any case, in the absence of a concrete production plan, I don't ever want to default to a mental proscenium. As a Québécois colleague once told me at Playwrights Workshop Montréal when I was anxious about the scenic demands of an early draft: "Mais c'est de la mise-en-scène, ça!" Loosely translated: that's the director's problem.

With all my flashes of inspiration gathered together on Post-It™ notes and index cards, in notebooks and files, I was ready for the stage of creation that is the first port of call for many playwrights but often the last one for me: building out the spine of the play, also known as the action and structure.

### **3. Action and Structure**

My plays to date have followed a two-act structure with an implied intermission (although I am interested in experimenting with the long one-act that has become increasingly favoured in recent years). This means that I'm always looking for a good act break. In this story, having taken her interactions with her family and friends as far as they could go, I knew that I wanted to get Benita to London. Since I also knew that this big change of locale would be potentially time-consuming to achieve, it was practical to have it bracket the intermission. Therefore, the action just before the act break had to provide Benita with a big enough challenge to catapult her clean across the Atlantic.

The first act has a straightforward quest structure with Benita at the centre, largely moving forward through linear time interspersed with time-travelling episodes of embodied memory from her two mothers. Taking inspiration from plays such as Lauren Yee's *King of the Yees*, Sondheim and Lapine's *Into the Woods* and *Sunday in the Park with George*, Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, I allowed the dramatic action of the second act to venture through the looking glass of Benita's increasing distress into wilder and stranger territory, thus shattering the aesthetic rules established in the first act. Benita encounters Walter and the historical occupants of the Foundling Home—who may or may not be “there”—because she has a growing need to grasp the context of her present-day investigations of family and belonging. The second act—with its Georgian and Victorian episodes, an adult Benita meeting her father as a near-contemporary, and a young main character who jumps into the future as an older narrator—exists within the time structure which Vogel calls “synthetic fragment” (PWM).

Thus far, I have been discussing the evolution of the subject, characters, images, structure, and action of *Biological*. Of course, there are other aspects which a playwright must consider, from the play's language and style to its political and philosophical underpinnings. For me, these elements emerge naturally from those described above. Dialogue emerges from character and situation; politics derive organically from my relationship to the subject; theatricality comes in instinctive flashes of lateral thinking, like King Solomon speaking in doggerel or the adoption triad coming to physical life, as an installation à la Judy Chicago. One important aspect that I have not yet discussed is the *theme* as distinct from the subject. The subject of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the rise and fall of a Scottish tyrant, while its theme may be expressed as, “To what extent do our actions determine our fate?” When writing *The Vic*, I began with a theme: the exploration of cruelty and responsibility, as told through the bodies of women.

Nearly all of my subsequent plays have begun with a subject, from which the theme—the proposition that I wanted to explore—has emerged *au fur et à mesure* [as we go along].

Unlike the subject of a writer's play—which is often apparent from the outset and may be proposed by an outside commissioning body—the theme can be slippery, elusive, hard to articulate, which is why, once I have it solidly in mind, I tend to write it out and hang it in my workspace like a magic charm. In this case I am once again indebted to Prof. Martini, who pressed me to define my theme until I finally blurted out: “The theme is, ‘Who the fuck are you to tell me what being a woman is? And who the fuck are you to tell me who my family is?!’” While not the sort of research focus one can confidently proclaim in a SSHRC proposal, that is in fact the motto that I wrote down and hung up in my workspace, and which kept me on track until the end.

With a first draft in hand, it was time at last to initiate that form of collaboration, unique to playwrights, which involves testing the work with actors and others, reshaping it, and beginning to give it away. This is the workshop and public reading.

## **CHAPTER 5: BLOOD RELATIONS**

### **(OR, BEGINNING THE PROCESS OF SHARING AND STAGING)**

In the teeth of the Omicron wave of early 2021, Clare Preuss had directed a surprisingly kinetic and productive Zoom workshop and reading of *Turbulence* with a spirited bunch of student actors, most of whom I have unfortunately not met in person to this day. As discussed earlier, however, digital readings also serve to remind me why live theatre is irreplaceable. I was grateful that *Biological* would have its first reading in person, as part of the 2022 Alchemy Festival at the University of Calgary.

As I was strategising with director Jenna Turk, I realised that the intergenerational dynamics of this story were of paramount importance and that I simply would not be able to properly hear the play with a cast made up entirely of young undergraduate actors. Fortunately the producer of Alchemy, Christine Brubaker, supported our request to cast age-appropriate actors as Colleen, Ethel, and Daniel, which meant that I had access to the skills and invaluable perspectives of stage veterans Valerie Planche,<sup>12</sup> Jane MacFarlane, and David Sklar, as well as to the youthful verve of our student cast, Stephanie Alexandre, Amber Billingsley, Alison Bloxham, and Quinn Smith.

The other key decision I made at this point was to have the actors read the whole play. The Alchemy Festival—back when they needed to make programming decisions and I was not yet able to deliver a script, much less production specifics—had given us a slot that would have

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<sup>12</sup> When Valerie Planche was unfortunately unable to participate in our readings due to a COVID exposure, Calgary theatre veteran Shawna Burnett stepped in at a few hours' notice. This had the unexpected advantage of giving me two very different takes on the same character, which proved highly informative.

accommodated a 45-minute excerpt of *Biological*. For a while, I tried diligently to hack the script down to that size for the purposes of sharing it with the public. In the end, in consultation with my director, supervisor, and producer, I decided that I would derive greater benefit from being able to hear the draft in its entirety, even if that meant that fewer people decided to see it.

I stand behind that decision, although it came with a cost.

The work the actors did was of a high calibre: they all brought acute analysis to their characters, jumping into performance in a way that clarified issues of pacing, stakes, and narrative economy, and taking direction with ease. I would posit that having seasoned professionals in the cast raised the game of the students.<sup>13</sup> I also was able to debrief with Jenna Turk after each rehearsal, which helped me prioritize changes to be made before our next session. This is why I am always in favour of leaving a break of a few to several days in between workshop rehearsals: to leave time for rewrites.

The readings themselves, through no fault of the performers or director, were of limited usefulness to my research: at least, they did not add much to the great usefulness of the rehearsals and workshop process. Because there were only about five attendees per night, I never reached anything like the critical mass that would give me a realistic sense of audience response, whether to the humour or the more provocative moments of the story. Since only two of my fellow MFA (Theatre) candidates—one of whom was my husband—came to any of my readings, I had little opportunity to get feedback from my peers. Finally, the schedule of my participation

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<sup>13</sup> Québec playwright Sébastien Harrisson, whom I translate, likes to point out that, in writing intergenerational stories, one is encouraging a rather beautiful performance dynamic in which senior actors are mentoring junior ones. If you cast generous veterans rather than toxic ones, of course.

in the festival—three public readings, with no time in between them to accommodate revisions—proved challenging in terms of what a writer needs to move a script forward. After the first reading I had no chance to apply what I had learned, or to test out new material before seeing the same work again. My sense is that playwrights would be better served by a single reading which would consolidate audiences into one, or else by two readings at either end of the festival dates, which could potentially allow for the script to evolve between presentations.

As a veteran theatre practitioner, I would posit that multiple factors impacted the attendance for my readings. These include my own decision to have a longer reading than initially scheduled; the post-lockdown audience malaise affecting our entire theatre sector; my relative newness to Calgary; and the dampening effects of nearly two years of stay-at-home orders and campus shutdowns on my ability to form bonds with fellow students in the SCPA.

Perhaps the most significant script change that occurred at this stage was that, immediately on hearing the first reading in February, I realised that the material about the founding wheel—which had provided the original title and symbolic touchstone of this whole project—had to go. I am no less fascinated by the thousand-year career of this massively popular pan-European mechanism for child abandonment, with its modern analog in the present-day “baby hatch” or “angel’s cradle” now seen from Vancouver to Italy to Japan. It may yet recur in another piece. Ultimately, however, setting the prologue of the play outside of a nunnery in Renaissance Italy created multiple beginnings—as deadly in the theatre as multiple endings—and there was no room for it any longer. The play had moved on.

Our workshop process was not noteworthy or ground-breaking: rather, it proceeded in all the usual helpful ways. While the readings themselves, as discussed above, had their limitations,

the workshop period was an invaluable opportunity to hear, examine, prune, and otherwise improve my script. After a final new draft to incorporate the dramaturgical insights of my supervisor and everything I had learned from the workshop process, I had a text that I was ready to present for the purposes of this thesis.

In this statement I have alluded to future drafts, describing a “text that was ready to be presented” rather than a text that is finished. That is because this iteration of *Biological* is not, cannot be, and is not intended to be, a finished play. The text of a play always functions as a blueprint for, or record of, a live performance (Brown 13-16) and has done so ever since the Noh theatre and the festivals of Dionysus bequeathed the written remnants of their rituals to history. However, a blueprint is not a house, and a play cannot ever be said to be finished without at least one full production, wherein the performer(s) and audience—along with their customary partners the director, designers, dramaturg, et al.—may have an effect on the text that is as profound as the effect it has on them (Warner 229-236).

Some years ago, my publisher emphatically rejected my suggestion that he consider putting out a chapbook version of my play *For Home and Country* in time for opening night:

...[I]t's just another way of "shopping around a (the) script." Before it's professionally produced by a theatre. And before the substantial and substantive changes to the script have been made that inevitably arise from such a first professional theatrical production. These artifacts are ephemeral and temporary and constitute a work in progress -- precisely all those things that a professionally published book is, by definition, not. (Siegler)

The revised editions of seminal works from *Angels in America* to David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* trouble Karl Siegler's categorical declaration that even a play that is the object of a "professionally published book" is no longer a work in progress. Nevertheless, Siegler is speaking from his vantage point as a respected veteran of drama publishing in Canada<sup>14</sup> when he asserts that a performance text which has not yet been through the crucible of performance is inevitably nowhere near its final form. Instead of inviting *Biological* to be seen as a finished play, I would characterise it as a text which has achieved significant milestones. It has a coherent form and well-defined characters; it has advanced my research and allowed me to stretch my artistic practice; and as playwrights often declare during a play's development, "I've gotten as far as I can on my own." That is our way of saying, "I've done some things I'm quite pleased with, enough to warrant other people's time and the theatrical resources needed to take it to the next stage."

In my Conclusion, I propose to evaluate what I have learned from this research process, how my work has responded to my initial goals for it, and how those goals have shifted.

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Siegler was, until his retirement, the publisher of Vancouver's Talon Books Ltd.



## CONCLUSION

At the very beginning of my graduate work, I didn't really understand what a master's thesis in playwriting was. I vaguely thought that I would be expected to conduct some sort of scientific experiment, beginning with a hypothesis about my subject matter—the Foundling Hospital, for example—and leading to a definitive proof, like the Philosopher in Brecht's *The Messingkauf Dialogues* who is determined to use theatre as a sort of social laboratory. Instead, I realised that many of the questions I went in with—Why are women still judged based on their reproductive status (Zarrinjooee 1)? Why are adoptive parents and adopted children still othered (Novy 1)? What is the relationship between “blood” and “family”?—were questions that I wanted the audience to carry away with them, rather than questions that my play would seek to answer. Instead, my central inquiry became: What happens when, for perhaps the first time in Canadian drama, you depict all three of the figures in the adoption triad—birth parent, adoptive parent, and adoptee—onstage at the same time? And how has my practice changed in the course of developing this work of dramatic autofiction?

### 1. Depicting the Adoption Triad

Based on my own observation (as detailed in Chapters 4 and 5) and on feedback from the director, actors, and audiences of my readings, *Biological*—by staging a semi-autobiographical adoption triad, as well as by situating modern adoption in its social and historical context—succeeds in challenging popular shibboleths (as described in Chapter 1) about blood ties and the nuclear family. It explodes the notion that the relinquishment of children is some sort of modern aberration rather than a widespread cross-cultural and historical phenomenon. Furthermore, the competing claims and insecurities of Benita's two mothers invite reflection on the often-

unexamined nature of the bonds between parents and offspring. One non-binary actor in our workshop particularly identified with the theme of who gets to determine what kind of family, or identity, is “real”. While loss is inextricably linked to the phenomenon of adoption, the actors also appreciated that adoptees and individuals in care were not being presented primarily through the lens of trauma and victimisation, but rather with an emphasis on children’s flexibility; on the many forms of being a caring parent; on the complexity of belonging.

## **2. Articulating Practice**

During this research, I was also able to define and test core principles that guide me in my playwriting: work with your **voice**; negotiate the balance between **freedom** and **permission**; seek **clarity**.

### **a) Voice**

By “voice” in this case I mean the writer’s distinctive authorial perspective, that unique combination of instinct and craft that is almost a biometric scan of one’s hippocampus. Working with it can be much harder than it sounds, and comprises three entwined steps: **find your voice**, **understand your voice**, and **embrace your voice**.<sup>15</sup>

#### **i) Find your voice**

Like most North American actors, I was trained to inhabit character through a combination of researching the world of the play, analysing the language, unearthing intention, developing a movement vocabulary, and interacting with my fellow performers in the moment.

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<sup>15</sup> Yes, there are a lot of three-part structures in this thesis. Given that I was born into a triad, one might say that I come by it honestly.

Like most actors who have become playwrights, I have brought that character-based orientation to my writing practice. In addition, I have read thousands of plays in English and French. I have seen thousands of productions in several countries, imprinting on the imagistic flair and physicality of Robert Lepage, the Electric Company, Ariane Mnouchkine, Théâtre de Complicité,<sup>16</sup> and Paul Thompson and all of the great collectives of the 80s and 90s. My work in translation, opera, and other disciplines has further motivated me to develop underused aspects of my writerly craft: to translate David Paquet or Rébecca Déraspe, or to give words to a love duet for sopranos, requires a kind of poetic compression, wordplay, and lyricism that would seem bizarre in the mouths of the modern rural Ontario characters who have populated most of my plays.<sup>17</sup> When I return to the stories I want to tell on my own and the stories that I have been asked to tell, they are most often about the kinds of people I live with or grew up around, the people whose speech patterns and thought processes I know very well, even when, as in *The Vic*, their lives are in some ways very different from my own. My work for, say, Boca de Lupo's *Red Phone* has been in an experimental and interactive container, but even there, my contribution proceeded ultimately from my understanding of character, and depended on what August Wilson identified as a core skill of the playwright, i.e., listening:

The more my characters talk, the more I find out about them. So I encourage them. I tell them, "Tell me more". I just write it down and it starts to make connections ... I used to

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<sup>16</sup> That was their name when I saw them at the World Stage Festival: they are now known simply as Complicité.

<sup>17</sup> The nineteenth-century Ontario farmers of James Reaney's Donnelly trilogy are both lyrical and heightened in their diction, and yet there's something very natural and unforced about their dialogue. Of course, Reaney was an actual poet, writing about the history of his own Souwesto region. One might surmise that the Donnelly plays were written in his authentic writerly voice and truly represented how he saw the world around him.

hang around Pat's Place [a Pittsburgh cigar store] through my twenties... that's where I learned how black people talk. (356-7)

ii) Understand your voice

To salvage something from all the investment of time, money, and research that I and my supporters had poured into *Turbulence*, I first had to come to the humbling realisation that I am not Annabel Soutar or Christine Beaulieu: I do not sculpt masses of verbatim text into gorgeous arcs of dramatic truth; I do not smash mountains of taped interviews into mosaics of meaning; I do not investigate or expose. Instead, I immerse myself into the world of a play until I can start to hear the voices, see the most resonant images, understand the actions. I create or excavate the story that will compel the audience to follow it forward through time, illuminating the themes, the characters, the question or problem that drove me to explore that world in the first place. I flesh out characters I would find it enjoyable to act. I take something that I think people should pay attention to and I shine a bright light on it. While conducting this research, I finally reached the conclusion—to use a dangerous word in a piece based on bastardy—that this is perfectly *legitimate* territory to explore.

iii) Embrace your voice

Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,

With what I most enjoy contented least... (Shakespeare, Sonnet XXIX, lines 7-8)

Artists often pursue growth and chafe at limitations. Arthur Miller, who wrote plays for decades, fretted that his reputation rested on a few scripts from his early youth, disregarding everything he had created since (*Arthur Miller: Writer*). Certainly, those of us who write primarily text-based work for the theatre are sometimes treated, at least by those who work in

post- or neo- or post-post-dramatic forms, as if we were merely the custodians of an antiquated art, the backwards cousins of screenwriters or even the artistic agents of colonialism:

Living in Poland, I know that many feel that the traditional "play" is a form better utilized in film, and theatre makers are expected to be more of what in Canada we might define as "experimental". In Canada we've built up this reverence for the well-written play that is a product (not entirely but mostly) of British colonialism. And we use words like "devised" as a form of theatre making where in truth, devising is the norm here and the way we make theatre in Canada would be considered very strange and I think "old-fashioned" to many people here. (Rubinfeld)

Beyond fearing the vagaries of intellectual fashion and the withering pronouncements of critics and peers, we as artists are innately drawn to stretch ourselves, to question, to renew. Initially I had the gall to believe that my experience as an actor, deviser, and playwright qualified me to undertake a radically different task: the shaping of hundreds of hours and thousands of pages of raw material into a satisfying theatrical experience *which stuck exactly to the words that other people had written and spoken*. This method of play creation requires journalistic rigour; a searchable database of a mind, abetted by fearsome organisational abilities; a team of helpers; and—a prerequisite for making sure you are asking the right questions, which I didn't understand until too late—the prior development of a theory of the case. As described in Chapter 4, my usual *modus operandi* is that of the magpie: I do meticulous research, yes, but I am primarily looking for shiny things (theatrical images, dramatic actions, intriguing bits of dialogue, riveting traits of character) that I can pluck out, fly away with, and rearrange to build my nest.

In conceiving of *Turbulence* as a documentary play, I had been responding in part to the white-hot partisanship endemic to the issue at hand. I felt at the time that only by representing the direct speech of people on both sides of the conflict could a piece of theatre hope to reach them all, creating community dialogue where there had been only divisiveness and rage. I was ready to try something new to me, influenced by my admiration for the work of documentary playwrights such as Soutar, Moisés Kaufman, and Anna Deavere Smith. I was also spurred by the example of Caryl Churchill, who seems to invent and detonate theatrical forms with each new endeavour. However, once hopelessly lost at sea with my ill-starred verbatim experiment, I had to search out the beacon of my own writerly voice so that I could get back home.

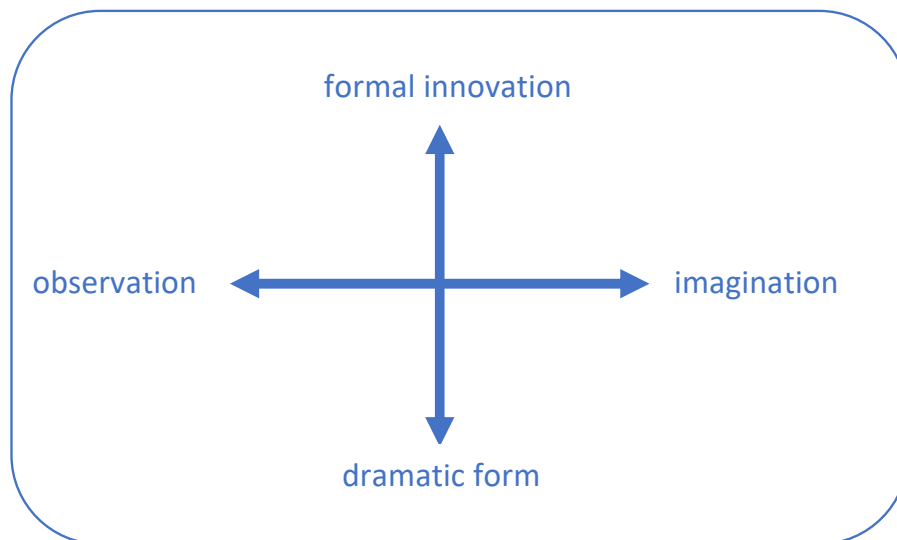
As I was constructing *Biological*—and reimagining *Turbulence*—for my MFA research, I was also (re)learning to trust myself, my own methods, my own voice. I learned that “doing what comes naturally” can be a sign of complacency, but also of mastery. Mastery of your own creation process permits a state of flow that allows you to go further in some areas because you’re not working so hard in others. It’s rather like trying new things on the erhu, if that is your instrument, instead of feeling compelled to switch to the trumpet. Popular culture rewards novelty, and the performing arts currently put a premium on youth and innovation, yet the great blues, country, and rock musicians spend their lives on the same instrument, investigating the same few chords. I would even offer that, as a mature artist, writing in the way that feels most authentic to you—that proceeds organically from your own experiences, your own evolving aesthetics, your own sense of wonder and dissatisfaction—may be the surest way to avoid obsolescence and resist appropriation. Artists seek growth, risk, and development: at the same time, perhaps the ultimate antidote to failure is to learn to love your own voice... or at least, to stop listening to yourself and *sing*.

The ability to accept and articulate my own writing practice, extracting principles from it which could be passed on to others, proved crucial to my ability to fulfill the other role which has prolonged the period of my graduate work: serving as Assistant Professor (Playwriting) at the UBC School of Creative Writing.

#### b) Freedom/Permission

The topic of free expression has been discussed ad nauseum in recent years, but much less has been said about permission. As discussed in Chapter 3, the permissions we need as writers can take many different forms, including—for women and caregivers perhaps especially—the permissions we must give ourselves. For both of the major creative projects of my graduate research, *Turbulence* and *Biological*, permission from the people who were in some way portrayed in my story became a sine qua non of the work. I would evaluate *Turbulence* as a cascade of failed permissions which I eventually rescued through radical revisioning, and *Biological* as a product of permissions done right.

FIGURE 1: The Freedom Scale



I developed this simple visual aid to help me think about the different components of my writing practice and evaluate my responsibilities to the people involved in my projects. Along the X-axis, the further to the right a project is (i.e., towards being generated purely from my own imagination, as opposed to being based on research into/prior experience of real-life circumstances), the more creative licence I have and the less duty to obtain permission. Along the Y-axis, the further up a project is—steering toward formal innovation and away from the appearance of psychological reality or “real life”—the less beholden I am to notions of fairness or responsibility to people or groups depicted. The documentary play version of *Turbulence* went as far as I have ever gone into the lower left quadrant, implying minimum freedom and maximum ethical responsibility to people who were bitterly at odds with each other: I think this is partly why I felt such extraordinary pressure and so little joy while writing it. As I worked on *Biological*, I developed a variation on this graph: in the case of autobiographical work, one might replace the word “observation” on the X-axis with the word “memory”.

This mental map is not meant to serve as a comprehensive ethical compass. For example, it would be theoretically possible to create a highly innovative and imaginative work that is also virulently anti-Semitic. We are all subject to systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, and cognitive bias: whether one’s work skews more towards observation or imagination, it is always useful to scrutinise it, and consult with others, to ferret out the effects of prejudice and ignorance. Naturally, work that is overtly satirical or polemical in nature will have a completely different ethical calculus to make.



c) Clarity

I have found that the states of *connection with* and *perspective on* my creative work, though frequently at odds with each other, are equally essential to the creation of a play.

When it comes to first drafts, I tend toward binge-writing—i.e., pouring out the bulk of the story or at least of one act in a gush of non-stop generation, pausing mainly to eat and sleep. This is a state of profound immersion in the world of the play, an onrushing slope whose topography becomes clear to me only as I ski down it. The state of *connection* allows me to engage with many aspects of story at once, while speeding away from the forces that impede creation: distraction, self-doubt and indecision, perfectionism, and the relentless responsibilities of daily life.

However, there comes a point in any process when doubt and perfectionism can be positive factors, and that is the rewriting phase. Those playwrights who eschew revisions—I know a few of them—miss out on this crucial element of the playwright’s craft and can unknowingly get stuck in either the shallow or the bizarre. The heat of inspiration is all very well, but sometimes in the bright light of day we realise that our first instinct was crude or florid or conventional, and a sober second look invites us to do better. This analytical and dramaturgical phase requires artists to put some daylight between themselves and the thing they are creating. Perhaps Sondheim summed it up best in “Finishing the Hat”:

Studying a face

Stepping back to look at a face

Leaves a little space in the way like a window

But to see, it’s the only way to see (94)

“Perspective”—from the Latin for “to look through”—involves a certain distance from the material. There are two principal ways I have found to achieve this. One is **time**: stay away from the draft, ideally long enough that you can cut the umbilical cord of ego involvement, so that it almost feels afterwards as if you are coming back to a piece that was written by someone else. The other is **feedback**, and involves getting other people’s eyes on your text. A dramaturg, a director, and performers will reflect your work back to you in a new way: the moment you hear the play read in the room, you will begin the necessary transition from experiencing it as the creator to experiencing it as the audience. Both tedium and excitement are contagious in the theatre: if you, as the writer, can maintain a state of relaxed awareness during the reading, you will reliably be excited when others are excited and bored when they are bored. The exception to this, I would say, is when you are different enough from your workshop audience—culturally, for example, or generationally—that you and they are receiving the material in very distinct ways. In that case, you can derive useful information from treating the audience as a sort of focus group, observing their collective reaction rather than participating in it.

My experience of the play development process is that I am perpetually commuting back and forth between the intuitive stage, wherein I try to get inside the work as if seeing through its eyes (connection) and the evaluative stage, wherein I strive to see the piece from the outside (perspective).

### **3. Developing a Dramatic Autofiction**

I eventually settled on the term “dramatic autofiction” for the piece I was writing. I didn’t want to evoke the journalistic exactitude of documentary theatre or the frequent *lourdeurs* and psychic baggage of autobiographical drama. The term “autodrama” is generally used for a highly

autobiographical solo piece performed by its author (Badie 24), whereas I was interested in exploring my own perspectives on my life story through a company of actors, all while reserving the right to intensify, confabulate, discard. Therefore, the French term “autofiction”—a portmanteau of “autobiography” and “fiction”—fit perfectly. Autofiction is normally disseminated in print: “dramatic autofiction”, on the other hand, implies not only a dramatisation in theatrical form but also the extra layer of remove from one’s own life story that is inherent to that form. Whether or not a playwright is performing her own material, her play will necessarily be filtered through the sensibilities of its director, designers, and perhaps other actors. Theatre is a medium of collaborative interpretation, not of total control.<sup>18</sup>

It is impossible to overstate the invigorating effect of this new form on my work. For a couple of decades now, I have been immersed in the kind of historical and intercultural writing that requires years of painstaking research and relationship-building to earn permission to speak in the voices of my characters. My translations, too, are built on a labour-intensive foundation of reading, thinking, watching, questioning, and listening until I have unlocked the right to write another author’s voice into a brand-new language. My traumatic experience with drawing on my personal history in even the most tangential way (as described in Chapter 3) had convinced me that my own life was forbidden territory, walled off from me as a source of art: now, however, I have developed a process of permissions that allow me to access my lived experience without fear. Just as I have earned the trust of strangers by showing care and concern for their stories, I

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<sup>18</sup> Unlike a film with its layers of post-production, live theatre imposes significant limitations on even a director’s ability, never mind a writer’s, to dictate exactly what the actors say or do onstage during a given performance. In my early years as an actor, it was well-known that many top directors would get around this by terrorizing or manipulating their actors. Due largely to the efforts of feminist, BIPOC, and queer activists, we are now in a period when toxic behaviour on the part of directors has become an extremely risky career strategy.

realised that I could broach the most difficult personal material—even when it deals with topics still shrouded in stigma—in a transparent and loving way that builds, and builds on, the trust I already enjoy with those closest to me. The key was to never assume that our intimacy would allow me to take shortcuts in terms of obtaining their meaningful consent.

I continue to write from “curiosity, not confession”, calling on empathy, research, and the imagination to stretch my writerly scope beyond the stuff of my daily existence. At the same time, this period of graduate work has allowed me to expand and articulate my creative process; to reclaim my own life and my own memories as wellsprings of inspiration; and to proudly, publicly, honour both of my mothers through an artistic representation of our remarkable three-cornered story.

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BIOLOGICAL

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A Work of Dramatic Autofiction

by

Leanna Brodie

**CAST LIST**

BENITA

ETHEL

DANIEL

FREDY

COLLEEN

KAYLA

PROFESSOR MACIVOR

QUINN

ALON

SISTER HELEN

SOLOMON

VASHTI

TIRA

SISTER URSULA

GERT

THOMAS CORAM

WALTER

NETTY

GEORGIAN LADIES

THE OVERSEER

ISADORA

THE CHILDREN

Characters may be doubled and tripled: the play may be performed by as few as five actors.

This is a play of memory, history, and family. Fluidity is key as the characters move through time and space.

The main action plays out over a single academic year at a major Canadian university, from the fall of 1989 to the spring of 1990.

*For my loving and beloved parents, Phyllis and David; for my courageous and generous birth mother, Sharon; for my chosen family of friends; and for Jovanni, who is my home.*

**ACT I**

**SCENE 1**

*BENITA—calm, measured, grown—welcomes us to her story.*

BENITA

Who am I? Where did I come from? Where do I belong?  
If you're a simple person  
a profoundly incurious person  
or living in the woods in a sustainable community  
with well-defined roles and a compelling origin story  
you probably don't ask yourself those questions.  
The rest of us are asking them our whole lives long.  
Except babies, who  
through the swirling fog of need  
begin to formulate a simpler question:  
"Who can I trust?"

*We see a family tableau, as if for a portrait  
photograph: ETHEL, DANIEL, and baby.*

ETHEL AND DANIEL

(singing the lullaby "All Through the  
Night")

Sleep my child and peace attend thee  
All through the night  
Guardian angels God will send thee  
All through the night...

BENITA

My favourite song when I was a child?  
Whatever my parents sang me the night before.  
Skates, cakes, mudpies, toboggans  
boxes of hand-me-downs from twelve older cousins  
a pony, a puppy, a kitten, a kite  
wild hair, wild berries, wild woods, wild me.  
And books. Oodles of books.

## DANIEL

(reading, with an impeccable English accent)

“But what are you going to do now?” said Mr. Brown. “You can’t just sit on Paddington station waiting for something to happen.”<sup>19</sup>

## BENITA

I have never not known that I was adopted.  
 As far back as I can remember  
 I knew that I was special.  
 Other kids came from their mommy’s tummies  
 but I came from a hospital.  
 My mommy and daddy irrefutably  
 Yes, even back then I would have said “irrefutably”  
 Wanted me.  
 “We chose you,” they said.  
 I pictured them choosing me from a smart shop window.  
 The kind my Nana might have designed  
 for her stylish little dress shop  
 on the cold streets of my birthplace, Winnipeg.  
 In my head, there was a sweet boutique  
 in the lobby of the St. Boniface Hospital.  
 Its window display featured a board set at a jaunty angle  
 and covered with soft purple velvet, like a jeweler’s.  
 We babies were set there in squirming rows  
 gently affixed by means of satin sashes  
 with our names printed on them  
 draped over one shoulder like pageant contestants.  
 From there we’d stare out at potential families  
 with wide smiling eyes  
 like chubby little puppies:  
 “Pick me! Pick me!”  
 And one by one  
 the winning candidates  
 would be deftly plucked from the casement  
 boxed up with a soft flannel blankie  
 and sent home with the ideal family to be petted and adored.

---

<sup>19</sup> Bond, Michael, and Peggy Fortnum. *A Bear Called Paddington*. Dell, 1958, p. 10.

“Every child a wanted child.”

It made visceral sense.

A compelling story.

Surely that must be the way it had happened.



**SCENE 2**

*A university classroom. KAYLA, a 20-something Asian Canadian student, is concluding her oral presentation. Benita – now a restless young woman – is glowering at her, as PROFESSOR MACIVOR beams in the background. A transparency is up on the overhead projector:*

WS479 Honours Thesis

**Escaping “The Fog”: Adoption Trauma as Primal Wound**

by Kayla Price

Nov. 15, 1989

KAYLA

...And I'd like to end on a positive note. The post-WWII adoption boom is over. In the 1980s, women have a wide range of reproductive choices; the stigma around single mothers has almost disappeared. Society may at last start to recognize the importance of keeping biological families together, and dismantle its racist, classist, paternalistic structures of adoption once and for all.

PROFESSOR MACIVOR

Thank you for that enlightening presentation, Kayla.

KAYLA

Thank *you*, Professor MacIvor.

PROFESSOR MACIVOR

On a personal note: may I say, you're very brave to share your story with us. I'm so glad you found your real mother at last. Does anyone have any questions?

(Benita's hand shoots up)

Benita?

BENITA

Yeah, one.

(to Kayla)

Where the hell do you get off?!

KAYLA

Excuse me?

BENITA

“The Adoption *Fog*”?

KAYLA

It's a well-established phenomenon –

BENITA

– So let me get this straight: I’ve been “traumatized” by my adoption; if I say otherwise, I’m deluding myself; and one day I will wake up from my “fog” and see that my happy childhood was a sham?

KAYLA

That’s not exactly –

PROFESSOR MACIVOR

(checking her watch)

– Sorry, girls: I’m afraid that’s all the time we have for this week. Thank you everyone: see you Monday!

*She hurries out.*

BENITA

Bravo, A+, gold star!

KAYLA

What are you –

BENITA

Bullshit, Kayla!!! What I find traumatic is people pathologizing my family! Bad enough some idiot like MacIvor – but you should know better!

KAYLA

Do you maybe want to dial it down a notch, Benita, or –

BENITA

So easy for us to play the victim, though, right? Collect their pity like a consolation prize for comprehension? “Oh, you’re so brave...” Amazing to have something to blame for all your shit, right? Some mythical loss you can’t even remember that magically shaped your future anyway.

KAYLA

You don’t know what you’re talking about.

BENITA

Enlighten me.

KAYLA

I do not need to be told that I should feel grateful to be adopted –

BENITA

– I never said that –

KAYLA

– because I’m not. My adoption was a nightmare.

BENITA

Really.

KAYLA

Ever heard of the “Open Door Society”? White families in Quebec who believed in adopting babies of colour. I grew up in an English-speaking suburb of Montreal.

BENITA

Lucky you.

KAYLA

I was one of two non-white kids in my entire school. The other one barely spoke English, but everyone assumed we were friends. I had no friends who looked like me. The people who adopted me had no friends who looked like me. When they tried to be culturally sensitive, they just made me feel exotic in my own home. They had no clue how other people treated me because they’d never lived through it. The first time I felt like someone understood me, was when I met my real mother.

BENITA

Okay, sure, that must have been challenging –

KAYLA

That’s just it. I felt like a *challenge*.

BENITA

– but I resent you pushing this stereotype that we’re all damaged goods with some mystic longing to rejoin our gene pool. I expected more from you.

*Beat.*

KAYLA

Yeah well. I guess it’s different if you can pass.

BENITA

Excuse me?

KAYLA

This has always been abstract for you, right? You can blend in –

BENITA

I’m not trying to pass. Why should I go around telling people I’m adopted? It’s irrelevant. It’s none of their business –

KAYLA

I'M SAYING, I NEVER HAD THAT OPTION.

(beat)

My parents loved me too. I think they even thought they could love my Asian-ness away... When you were a kid, how often did someone say, "You look so much like your mother"? No one said ever that to me. Did you tell them, by the way? Or did you keep your mouth shut?

BENITA

Just because I have a sense of –

KAYLA

When you were little, they told you that you were chosen. You were special. Right?

BENITA

That has nothing to –

KAYLA

*"Being special" is no substitute for belonging.*

(beat)

Have you ever tried to contact your birth family? Or are you more comfortable pretending they don't exist?

BENITA

Alright, I'm outta here –

KAYLA

– Aren't you even curious about –

BENITA

– Not really, no. My family is my family. I have zero sense of connection to –

KAYLA

– Or, you're too chicken to find out that you do.

(laughs)

But I'm the one who's got issues? Still, I get why it's so hard for you be objective about the inherent violence of the state-created family. My parents saw me as a project: yours saw you as a blessing. It's right in your name.

(she grabs Benita's notebook)

By the way, what's your thesis topic, again?

BENITA

Gimme that!

*We see a projection of a long hand-written list of edited and crossed-out topics. The words*

*“Adoption” and “Evolution” recur multiple times.  
Kayla looks at Benita with concern.*

KAYLA

(sincere)

Is this as far as you’ve gotten? This is not good, Benita. I’m serious. I mean, this is senior year. Aren’t you applying for that research prize to go to London or something? How are you supposed to make a compelling case for your thesis when you can’t even describe it to yourself?

*Beat.*

BENITA

You can pimp your sob story to MacIvor all you want... but I’m looking at a well-fed keener who’s probably gonna earn in the high five figures until she drops a bunch of kids for her banker husband. And yet you’re one of life’s victims, just cuz it wasn’t your birth-mommy who wiped the poop off your ungrateful little ass.

*Beat.*

KAYLA

(evenly)

Thank you so much for your feedback. And thank you for demonstrating that some adoptees would rather hide from their own emotions than face the truth. You are the “Adoption Fog” personified. Maybe that’s why you don’t want kids: they’d see right through you.

BENITA

You take that back.

KAYLA

Make me. Wow! Now I understand your little anger management problem.

BENITA

I DO NOT HAVE A – I’m not gonna sit here and let some goddamn self-involved drama queen tell me that my love for my mom is delusional. Okay? I may be wrong about a lot of things, but I am not wrong about how I feel!

KAYLA

(chuckling)

Yep. Textbook.

*She leaves. Benita yells after her.*

BENITA

PISS OFF.

KAYLA

(off)

SEEK HELP.

BENITA

...Shit.

**SCENE 3**

*Benita comes home to her apartment and throws down her knapsack. FREDY is in her fuzzy pyjamas, eating KD and watching The Nature Channel.*

BENITA

Hey, Hoser.

FREDY

Hey, Dork. How was Reading Week? How was your first day back?

BENITA

Kayla is a stupid cu... Cow.

FREDY

Nice save, there, "Women's Studies".

BENITA

She's a total suck-up and her thesis is bogus and even her voice is annoying.

FREDY

You know, you should probably cut her some slack, she had a –

BENITA

We missed you, by the way. Back home.

FREDY

(by way of explanation)

Capstone project.

BENITA

I know. We visited Dad's grave. Then Mom made a huge spread. Your care package is in the fridge. She says "Hi, Fredy."

FREDY

"Hi, Mrs. Simon." Did you hear from Zach?

BENITA

I am so over Zach. Did you hear from your foster family at all?

FREDY

(A) Which one; (B) no.

BENITA

Bummer. You shoulda come, Mom loves spoiling you. We had so much food.

FREDY

Did you get your grant application in?

BENITA

(nodding)

London, baby. Fingers crossed. Watcha watchin'?

BENITA AND FREDY

The Nature Channel.

FREDY

New show. *Extreme Mothering*.

*They watch for a minute.*

BENITA

EW. Fredy, what the hell.

FREDY

Mother Nature, Benita.

BENITA

Is that sow trying to eat her own –

FREDY

Farrow. Yeah. Just the runt. It never really had a chance anyway.

BENITA

Then why –

FREDY

Why'd she have it? Kind of a side bet. If things are going great, keep 'em all. If the good ones don't make it, you got spares. If things are real bad... cut your losses, reclaim the calories. It's all about the calories.

BENITA

They eat from a trough.

FREDY

Mother Nature's a slow learner, right? In terms of, you know, evolution, the trough wasn't there yesterday... could be gone tomorrow. She's not taking any chances.

*They continue to observe Mother Nature in action:  
then...*



BENITA AND FREDY

(grimacing)

UGH

BENITA

That's disgusting.

FREDY

*You had bacon for breakfast.*

BENITA

Yeah. Don't tell Zaida.

FREDY

This next segment is on the wolf spider.

BENITA

Does she eat her babies too?

FREDY

Nope. They eat her.

BENITA

Seriously?!

FREDY

Yeah, check it out. After her eggs hatch, she makes all this yummy protein, stores it in her belly like a Cadbury Creme Egg, and then they swarm all over her and –

BENITA

EWWWWWW nope nope nope nope –

FREDY

Come on, Benita. You despise the pig, yet you're grossed out by the spider? That's a good mama, right? That's unconditional love; that's –

(looking back at the screen)

That's disgusting.

BENITA AND FREDY

(riveted)

UGH

BENITA

...And now I want bacon. You want any b –

(she grimaces in sudden pain)

Motherfu...

Cramps?  
FREDY

BENITA  
(nods, then clutches her abdomen)  
Do you need the bathroom or –

*She runs off. We hear a door slam. Then a groan.*

FREDY  
(calling)  
No, I'm good. Lemme know if you need anything. Chamomile? A joint? I don't have to leave until –

(she looks at the time)  
Oh shit... See ya later, Dork!

*She rushes out. Silence. Then we hear Benita in the bathroom. Flushing. Flushing. Weeping.*

**SCENE 4**

*Early morning. Fredy is at a nondescript work desk with a mug of coffee, wearing a headset, yawning, beginning to jot in a notebook even as she answers the phone.*

FREDY

(to herself)

Okay, Fredy, home stretch. Stay awake. Whatever it takes.

(she picks up the phone and speaks in an oatmeal-thick Scottish accent)

Helloooooo. Crisis Line, Morag speaking.

*We see Benita, at home.*

BENITA

That really your name?

FREDY

Och, noooooo.

BENITA

Okay. I'm Benita.

*Fredy spills her coffee. As Benita continues, Fredy tries to get the hot liquid off herself, wipe up the coffee, and salvage her notes.*

BENITA

(as it comes tumbling out)

I'm in my last year of my Honours BA, so stressful, also, this morning I think I was a little tiny bit pregnant and now I'm... not.

(beat)

Funny thing is, my boyfriend just left me... over kids! I told him I don't want them. So then Zach goes, "I wouldn't want them with you," and I go, "What's that supposed to mean?" and he goes, "You don't have a clue who your real parents are, I wouldn't have a clue what I was dealing with", and I go, "My 'real parents' raised me. Yours raised a prick." And now...

(laughs)

I don't even understand how I feel about it all, you know? A little stupid that I didn't even know? Or relieved? Or... a bit of a, you know... Failure? Like... my body hates me, like my body's a freak... Which is it, "Doc"? What am I feeling, here?

FREDY

(lowering her voice to further disguise it)

Could it be all of the above?

BENITA

I guess. Yeah. I guess, when I say it out loud, I do know what I'm feeling.

(it bursts out of her)

What if it ever happens again? I always thought, "Not me! I'm smarter than that," except clearly I'm not, so... What would I do? Would I get rid of it? Would I keep it and ruin my life? Would I give it away, knowing that it might grow up like Kayla, and hate me?

*Beat.*

FREDY

Is there anyone you can talk about all this to? In your life?

BENITA

My roommate. She's badass. She won't even ask questions if I don't want her to.

FREDY

Good idea, Benita: I –

(muttering, in her own voice)

Nope, can't do this.

BENITA

Huh?

FREDY

(normal voice)

It's me, Dork.

*Shocked beat.*

BENITA

You?! You volunteer at the Crisis Line?! And you didn't think to mention it to –

FREDY

(in her own voice)

Shut up, okay?! They'll have a shit fit if they realize I'm –

BENITA

THEY'LL have a – ?! I just told you about my –

FREDY

– Yeah, and I woulda hoped you'd tell your "roommate" who's also your best friend, instead of some stranger, but whatever.

BENITA

Maybe I didn't want to burden you with my icky breeder stuff, okay? Have you judge me because I messed up my pills? Maybe for one moment I thought about whether I could even have kids someday. Why would I go to you about something you know nothing about.

FREDY

What makes you think I don't want to have kids?

BENITA

Because –

FREDY

– I'm a lesbian? Pretty disappointing, Benita. I've been nonstop watching shows about mothers!

BENITA

Yeah, shit mothers! Cannibal pigs?! And you wonder why I didn't tell you I just had a miscar –

*It finally breaks over her. Hard. Fredy feels bad.*

FREDY

Hey. Sorry. I'm really sorry that happened to you.

BENITA

(a purging)

There wasn't even anything... recognisable, you know? Just... so much blood and... and... it felt like... tissue? Nope. Can't. You know when there's something... and you have no reason to feel shame about it, you know that, but there's something in you that just... does?

FREDY

Yeah. I came out.

BENITA

Right. Sure, okay. I'm glad it's you. That I'm talking to.

FREDY

Me too.

BENITA

I don't want kids, Fredy.

FREDY

I know.

BENITA

They suck. Gerny, needy little narcissists who shred women's dreams. That scene in *Aliens* when the thing bursts out of her chest –

FREDY

“Please k-kill me.”

(she mimes a baby xenomorph ripping through her sternum)

BENITA

– That's how I imagine childbirth. So... why do I feel so... what am I trying to...?

FREDY

Dude. Your body just went through a pretty major thing. Plus you're a pro-choice, pro-adoption, sex-positive feminist and you're making yourself nuts trying to fit all that together. Plus, you go ballistic whenever someone insults your mom in ways that only you seem to understand: like, when Darth Vader goes “I am your father, Luke”, that is not an attack on –

BENITA

That whole movie is such thinly veiled George Lucas eugenicist bull –

FREDY

Yep, just like that. And then there's this whole thesis deal. Benita, you're writing about adoption. You need to be able to honestly discuss your own location inside that subject without throwing a giant hairy fit... Once you're there, then you can zoom out.

BENITA

Zoom out?

FREDY

Use your personal connection as a springboard to explore the wider historical, cultural, gender-related –

BENITA

Oh. My. God. That's...

(she trails off for a moment... then seems to snap out of it)

Hey, Fredy: I gotta – See ya at home, okay. Don't forget: dish soap.

*She hangs up. She paces around for a moment, then opens a banker's box and takes out a small book.*

BENITA

(reading the title)

“The Passover Seder: My First Haggadah.”

*She reads from the page that falls open.*

BENITA

“Blood. Frogs. Lice...”

**SCENE 5**

*Early 1970s. Benita is now a little girl at Passover, holding a wine glass and flicking a drop of wine with each plague she names.*

BENITA

“Wild beasts. Pestilence. Boils. Hail. Locusts. Darkness. The death of the first-born.”  
Daddy, I’m only supposed to ask four questions at Passover... but can I ask another one?

DANIEL

In this house, Benita, you can always ask questions.

BENITA

Why was Moses so mean to his mommy?

DANIEL

What do you mean?

BENITA

Moses’ mommy, who raised him – that’s Pharaoh’s daughter, right? So, how come he’s doing all these really bad things to her people.

ETHEL

You see, honey, Pharaoh started it –

BENITA

Well, that’s not very mature. Plus, isn’t he Moses’ Grampa? So, why couldn’t Moses just say, “Hey, Grampa –”

DANIEL

I don’t –

BENITA

So, did Moses give the blood and boils to his mom, too? Um, why would he take sides with some lady he never met, over his own mommy?

ETHEL

Benita –

BENITA

(her face darkening)

Moses sounds like a really bad man.



ETHEL

BENITA! Let's... just... get back to the Seder, alright. And we'll see if it answers your questions.

(to their unseen guests)

It's her first time. Sorry.

*Benita puts down the Haggadah and picks up a photograph, which we see projected: her graduation photo from high school.*

BENITA

(to herself, uncertainly)

I am not... angry.

**SCENE 6**

*Early 1980s. A high school counsellor's office.  
Benita, as a teen, fidgets. QUINN waits.*

BENITA

I'm not an angry person.

QUINN

Okay.

BENITA

I'M NOT.

QUINN

Benita, why do you think you're here?

BENITA

Cuz I got arrested. I mean, warned. That's what nice middle-class girls get instead of arrested.

QUINN

And why were you warned?

BENITA

Some idiot was standing on the sidewalk in front of this poster with this giant stunned-looking cartoon baby saying, "Breast is Best!" Passing out this revolting breastfeeding propaganda: bottle-fed kids are gonna be these immune-deficient psychopaths, or something. So I ripped up her flyers and told her to shove them up her – Aren't you supposed to stop me or whatever?

QUINN

I'm not here to stop you.

BENITA

Twat. I told her to shove them up her desiccated twat.

QUINN

...Okay.

BENITA

Maybe I should have said "capacious twat". Or... "high-traffic twat"? Help me out here, "Doc".

(beat)

I guess that critiquing her level of vaginal activity might possibly be viewed as less than feminist.

QUINN

It might. Why are you angry, Benita?

BENITA

I dunno, I... Oo, you're tricky.

(beat)

I look at that stupid poster and I think, "How dare you." You know? Like, what about all the parents who can't breastfeed? Like what if your grandma's raising you, or your dad, or your two dads, or your working mom, or...

*Beat.*

QUINN

Or you're adopted.

BENITA

Or you're adopted. You think our folks don't get judged enough? You think they've never heard of breast milk? But instead of saying, "Hey, parents, thank you for doing this really hard job", it's just "Here, let me give you one more thing to feel like shit about." And you know what? I never got breast milk a day in my life and I'm *fine*. I didn't want my mom to have to see that garbage: I shut it down.

QUINN

You got angry because you were defending your mother.

BENITA

I...

(she leaves it there)

QUINN

Protecting your mother.

BENITA

Aren't you gonna say "your adoptive mother"?

QUINN

Do you want me to call her that?

BENITA

No. She's my mother. That's the point.

QUINN

And therefore, you experienced this public health campaign as a personal attack on your family. On the value or validity of your family.

BENITA

BECAUSE IT WAS.

QUINN

Benita, I'm not here to take away your anger. Anger can be righteous. Anger can spark personal growth... Let's talk about how you can channel your anger into changing your situation. Instead of just getting... warned.

*Benita, back in the present, returns to her high school photograph with new eyes.*

BENITA

Well, shit.

**SCENE 7**

*Benita is at her family home. ETHEL, in gardening gloves, is potting a baby spider plant.*

BENITA

Mom... Mom, can you just maybe sit down and stop working for two minutes? I need to –

ETHEL

– I'm listening, honey. No point just sitting there doing nothing.

(beat)

You girls need some plants. I worry about what all that smog is doing to your lungs...

BENITA

I can't keep them alive, though –

ETHEL

You forget to water them, that's all. Then you feel bad, so you try to make it up to them, and then they drown. That's why you need spider plants. They're almost impossible to kill. Mine are always propagating, so... We'll just keep trying. I've also got some noodle kugel in the fridge for you, don't let me forget. Oh, and I fixed your blue sweater, and I got some cortisone cream for that little rash on your arm, should clear it right up.

BENITA

You're the best, Mom.

ETHEL

(warmly)

I'm just so proud of you, honey. You're getting your degree! First one in our family!

*Ethel slips off a glove and caresses Benita's face with her hand. They smile at each other.*

ETHEL

You're my special girl.

*Benita winces, just for a moment.*

BENITA

(quickly)

Mom, I need to tell you something. I... uh... I changed my mind about the Post-Adoption Registry. I decided to sign up after all... and they found a match right away. With my, um, birth mother.

(beat)

I wanted you to know.

*Everything still seems perfectly normal. It's not.*

ETHEL

Oh. Okay.

*She continues doing what she's doing.*

BENITA

Or, I guess, I didn't want to hide it from you? And she wondered if we could meet. She's flying into town tomorrow.

*Ethel finally sits down.*

BENITA

Would you like to... come with me?

ETHEL

Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. No, thank you. You go ahead, though.

BENITA

Thanks.

*Ethel goes back to her planting.*

BENITA

You do know you're my mom, right?

ETHEL

I know that, dear.

BENITA

This doesn't change anything. Like, you're my mom: that listing has been taken down. The position has been filled.

ETHEL

I know you're my daughter and I couldn't love you anymore if I'd made you myself.

*Beat.*

BENITA

I just... suddenly realized... there's things I don't know. About myself. So, why not find out. Right?

ETHEL

Certainly. You're young, you're figuring things out. Just... Be careful, honey. We don't know what kind of person she is.

BENITA

Huh. You've never had one bad word to say about her. You always told me, to do what she did, she must have been very selfless, very brave.

ETHEL

I know.

BENITA

You said, "They were college sweethearts, but from different worlds, and not yet ready for the responsibilities of parenthood."

ETHEL

Yes, that's the kind of story you tell a child. Benita, she clearly had a rough start. We don't know what she's been through since then. You may not have been thinking about her all this time, but as a mother, I can tell you, she's been thinking about you. She may want things from you... that you can't give her.

BENITA

Like?

ETHEL

Like your childhood. For example.

BENITA

You think I shouldn't go?

ETHEL

No, no, dear. You should go. Get to know her. Reconnect.

(her voice has wobbled a little, just for a second)

BENITA

Mom. She means nothing to me. I'm just... curious.

ETHEL

Of course you are. I am, too.

(her tone hardens)

Ask her if she smoked.

BENITA

What?

ETHEL

During her pregnancy. Did she drink? Did she take folic acid? Because, you know, when you were born, you almost had spina bifida. They said there was a bulge in your spinal cord that could have –

BENITA

– Jesus, Mom. I am not going to walk in there and go, “Hi, I’m the daughter you never met, did you give me spina bifida?”

(beat)

Come with me tomorrow. Come and meet her and let’s talk. Not about folic acid. Just... talk.

ETHEL

(firmly)

I don’t think so, Benita, thank you. What could we possibly have in common?



**SCENE 8**

*We hear Joni Mitchell's "Little Green".*

*Benita approaches the café table where COLLEEN is already seated, with two champagne flutes in front of her. Colleen immediately leaps up and enfolds her in an enthusiastic hug, which Benita neither rejects nor reciprocates. Colleen then holds Benita at arms' length and looks her up and down, warmly.*

COLLEEN

(beaming, meaningful)

Hello.

BENITA

(with a casual little wave)

Hi.

COLLEEN

You're here. It's really you.

BENITA

Yyyep. Nice to meet you.

COLLEEN

And you're... so...

(lifting her glass)

I took the liberty of ordering champagne... or, ginger ale in a champagne glass for me...  
To us! Reunited!

*Clink. Sip. Sit. Silence.*

COLLEEN

There're so many things I want to ask you, I don't know where to start.

BENITA

Same.

*Pause.*

COLLEEN

You're in school?



COLLEEN

After I had you, I was determined to... work on myself. Moved to Calgary. Went back to school and finished my degree. Art history. Useless, and glorious. Then I met Keith, we had Janice, and... after a while I went back to university, eventually started doing some teaching, a bit of art therapy, and I've been juggling all those little coloured balls ever since.

BENITA

So... you got your shit together in less than five years.

.

COLLEEN

Because I had the chance to. Yeah.

(looks at her closely)

Oh. You're a little annoyed with me about that.

BENITA

No, no, no.

(with genuine surprise)

I mean... yeah. I guess I am. Yeah. I guess I am, a little bit. Yeah.

*Awkward beat.*

COLLEEN

(brightly)

Anyway, enough about me: we want to hear about you! How is school going? Do you have any plans for –

BENITA

– Excuse me, but... Colleen. I do have another question for you.

(beat)

Is there anything you can tell me about... him? Like, who was he?

*Beat.*

COLLEEN

We were college sweethearts, but from different worlds, and not yet ready for the responsibilities of parenthood.

BENITA

Colleen... I'm not a kid. I think I need the real story. Of how I... happened. You really don't owe me anything, except maybe that.

*Beat.*

COLLEEN

Yes. Okay. I'm willing to dig deep for you, Janice –

BENITA

Benita.

COLLEEN

Benita. Yes. Your birth name was Janice. I'm going to tell you my... our story. But I need you to understand that, when you came along... some things were already broken.

**SCENE 9**

*Late 1960s, late fall. University of Winnipeg. Two underfed college students: ALON, a dramatic young man with a restless brain and trembling hands, and Colleen, an intense-looking Celt in a flowing peasant dress.*

I'm going to kill myself.

ALON

No you're not.

COLLEEN

Colleen, if you don't take me back, I swear to God I am.

ALON

How?

COLLEEN

How?! That's your reaction, Colleen? Not, "Oh my God, Al, don't do it, I'm begging you, I'll –"

ALON

You hate pain, Al. You hate needles, guns... You won't even take your meds – because of side effects, or the pharmaceutical-industrial complex –

COLLEEN

THEY ARE MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE TOBACCO LOBBY

ALON

You've tried before.

COLLEEN

That wasn't really trying.

ALON

No kidding. Jumping off a bridge. Into a river. When you used to be a lifeguard.

COLLEEN

That was... making a point.

ALON

And the point was?

COLLEEN

ALON

That if you ever do leave me I will kill myself.

COLLEEN

I am leaving you.

ALON

No.

COLLEEN

I have left you.

ALON

No.

COLLEEN

No? Then why all the whining, Al? Why is there snot drooling so attractively out of your nose? If you're not begging me to take you back? Which –

ALON

– which you will –

COLLEEN

– which I absolutely will not anymore under any circumstances do.

ALON

Why not?

COLLEEN

Why not.

ALON

Why won't you take me back?

COLLEEN

I –

ALON

(realising)

There's someone else.

COLLEEN

Yes.

ALON

Damnit. I knew it. Damn damn damn. It's Arnie, isn't it.

COLLEEN

Arnie.

ALON

The other Jew. The rich Jew. That rich pre-med shmuk jock. I knew it. I knew it. You're the kind of little Catholic girl –

COLLEEN

Not little. Not Catholic. Not a “girl”.

ALON

– You're the kind of little Catholic girl who probably took her first communion with the taste of cum still in her mouth.

*Beat.*

COLLEEN

I'm pregnant.

ALON

You're what?!

COLLEEN

And there it is. The “Winnipeg marriage proposal”.

ALON

Is it mine?

(beat)

Do you want me to –

COLLEEN

I want you to piss quite comprehensively off, Al. I can't play games anymore, I can't float. This baby is real. This –

(she indicates the connection between them)

– is not. Never has been.

ALON

(realizing, in a series of small detonations)

Oh my God, Colleen – you're not even coming to me for help, are you... You're not trying to punish me or trap me or... You don't want me to stay with you... You think I'm useless... that I can't even be there for my own child... You never loved me...

*He collapses, weeping. She softens, although she does not budge from the door.*

COLLEEN

“O fair Colleen, whose eyes are pools in which I drown,  
Come hold my hand...”

No one’s ever written me a poem before. I think I’ll know it off by heart until the day I  
die. You’re very intelligent, Al. Sometimes very sweet. Increasingly unwell.

(she considers him, not unkindly)

And I do love you. But that’s my problem now... and you... aren’t.

*She is putting on her outer things, preparing to  
head into the Winnipeg winter.*

ALON

YOU... HEARTLESS... BITCH.

(as she heads for the door)

I SHALL LEAP ONCE MORE FROM THE MARYLAND BRIDGE INTO THE  
FREEZING FLOW OF THE ASSINIBOINE... Wilt thou gift me any syllables, love, to  
ink upon my heart, ere I sink into the tumult of waters?

COLLEEN

(as she goes out)

Yeah. “Jump harder.”



**SCENE 10**

*The front foyer of a large home. Colleen is in her winter coat, shivering and dripping. A small, battered suitcase is on the ground beside her, and an unsmiling nun, SISTER HELEN, in front of her.*

SISTER HELEN

You're late.

COLLEEN

(confused)

Really? I –

SISTER HELEN

We didn't think you were going to show up.

COLLEEN

But...

(she checks a clock on the wall)

I'm five minutes early.

SISTER HELEN

You were due here last week.

COLLEEN

What?! No no no no...

SISTER HELEN

Your chores had to be done by the other girls. They are not happy.

COLLEEN

But –

SISTER HELEN

– Your fees are overdue.

COLLEEN

But Miss –

SISTER HELEN

– Sister.

COLLEEN

I'm positive I said the 15th. Whoever talked to me on the phone must have written it down wrong.

SISTER HELEN

I talked to you on the phone.

COLLEEN

(muttering)

Oh crap.

SISTER HELEN

Pardon me?

COLLEEN

Nothing.

SISTER HELEN

In 25 years at the Misericordia Home for Unwed Mothers, I have never misentered the intakes. Never.

(beat)

We provide shelter and rehabilitation to the most despised segment of our society: pregnant teenage girls. Two things we do not tolerate: laziness and lying. Now, I was about to call the next girl on our very long waiting list. I'm sure she will appreciate our assistance. However, if you need somewhere to stay the night –

COLLEEN

(quickly)

– Yes, please! –

SISTER HELEN

– you should head over to the Salvation Army. I hear they still have a bed or two.

COLLEEN

I already tried the Sally Ann!

(beat: she struggles with herself)

I'm... sorry. I'm very sorry I'm late. The truth is, I had to save up so I could afford this place. I'll take double chores every day until I make it up to the other girls.

(beat)

My family's a mess. The Sally Ann is a Dickensian dump. Landlords won't look me in the eye. My baby didn't do anything wrong. She just needs a place to come into the world.

(struggling to summon the requisite  
humility)

A decent, Christian place... Sister.

*Beat.*

SISTER HELEN

Come in, child. You're dripping all over the linoleum. Let's get you settled in so you can come back and mop that up.

**SCENE 11**

*A month later: Colleen, now very pregnant, is talking to her belly.*

**COLLEEN**

Well, kiddo, them's the breaks: not much to read around here except Bibles and Reader's Digest. That's what we gets when nuns are calling the shots. Huh... "Illustrated Bible Stories for Children".

*She picks up a white picture book and begins flipping through the pages.*

**BENITA**

(in the present)

Wait – Mom used to read me that book.

*We see a younger Ethel, holding the same picture-book as young Colleen.*

**ETHEL**

Look at this pretty book the nuns gave you, Benita! The nuns Mommy used to work with at the hospital, yes! Oh! This is a good one:

**ETHEL AND COLLEEN**

"The Judgment of King Solomon."

*Two Israelite women, VASHTI and TIRA, stand before SOLOMON.*

**SOLOMON**

So: ye cannot by any means agree which of ye is the child's true mother.

**THE WOMEN**

No, Sire.

**SOLOMON**

Then ye must learn to equals be, and raise him jointly with each other.

**THE WOMEN**

No, Sire!

**VASHTI**

This girl's a whore!

TIRA

A whore says so!

THE WOMEN

A whore's word leads to naught but woe!

SOLOMON

SILENCE!

Since no side bends, the whole must break.

And so, for sacred justice' sake,

Thus doth King Solomon decree:

(to Tira)

You win.

*Tira rejoices: he turns to Vashti.*

SOLOMON

And so do you.

*Vashti rejoices: Tira is aghast.*

SOLOMON

For I shall split the babe in two.

*He unsheathes his sword, and Tira screams.*

SOLOMON

Let none reproach for his decease,

For each shall gain an equal piece.

TIRA

NO!

VASHTI

Seems fair.

SOLOMON

(to Tira)

Woman, take care,

Halt kingly judgment, dost thou dare?

TIRA

I humbly beg thee, spare him now,

Let him but live, and this I vow:

That all my days, I'll praise thy name:

Give her the child: take thou the fame.

SOLOMON

(to Tira, as he puts away his sword)

Arise now, Eve's most glorious daughter:  
For in forestalling this babe's slaughter,  
Thou hast revealed thyself to be  
His one true dam, for all to see.

*Ethel smiles at her daughter. Colleen caresses her  
pregnant belly.*

ETHEL AND COLLEEN

And that's why Solomon was a wise king.

ETHEL

Because he knew that the baby's real mother was the one who cared about her. It had  
nothing to do with birth.

COLLEEN

Because he knew that sometimes the most loving thing you can do for your baby is to  
give her up.

**SCENE 12**

*Late 1960s. In the Labour and Delivery ward at St. Boniface Hospital, Winnipeg: a framed print of the Virgin Mary is on the wall. Colleen is in the later stages of labour. She is just finishing a contraction, panting with relief as the sensation subsides. SISTER URSULA, a young nurse, is taking her patient history as Sister Helen, off to one side, is discreetly taking notes of her own. While they are seasoned veterans of the birthing process, it imparts an urgent undercurrent to their conversations with Colleen.*

**SISTER URSULA**

...and when did your water break?

**COLLEEN**

(winded, irritable, hurting)

Can you give me a minute? That was –

**SISTER HELEN**

(stepping in)

– Last night around 10 pm, when you thought you'd wet the bed.

(to Sister Ursula)

We monitored her at the Misericordia until the contractions were five minutes apart.

**SISTER URSULA**

Thank you, Sister...

(to Colleen)

Any family history of heart disease?

**COLLEEN**

No.

**SISTER URSULA**

Stroke, cancer, diabetes, asthma?

**COLLEEN**

No, no, no, no.

**SISTER URSULA**

Alcohol abuse? Mental illness?

COLLEEN

We're *Irish*.

(beat)

I haven't touched a drop since I found out. I've been eating a balanced albeit stunningly insipid diet.

(looking at Sister Helen)

Thanks to her.

(she clocks that Sister Helen is taking notes, and turns back to Sister Ursula)

Look, do we really have to do this right now?

SISTER URSULA

We tried earlier, dear, but—

COLLEEN

— I'm not your “dear”, lady. And I'm tired.

SISTER URSULA

Maybe you should have thought of that before you went and got yourself —

SISTER HELEN

(quickly)

— Sister Ursula, would you mind giving us a moment? I'm sure you're run off your feet with all the spring babies, aren't you?

SISTER URSULA

(softening: to Sister Helen)

Nine months after the start of college. You could set your watch to them. And it's a full moon.

(to Colleen)

I'll bring Dr. Campbell as soon as I can.

*She goes out.*

COLLEEN

Thank you for getting her off my case —

SISTER HELEN

She's only trying to —

COLLEEN

— but why are you here?

SISTER HELEN

We always support our girls at the hospital.



COLLEEN

Uh-huh. Why are you making notes?

SISTER HELEN

Because we need this information too. The parents are wondering –

COLLEEN

– I’ve given you everything you asked for.

SISTER HELEN

Yes, but when it comes to your family, your background, you’ve always been... evasive. And the parents need to know. They need to know, Colleen. So they can do their job.

(softening)

Look: if we get these questions out of the way, I’ll talk to Sister Ursula so you’ll never have to answer them again.

COLLEEN

Fine. What do you want to know.

SISTER HELEN

Alcohol. Insanity.

COLLEEN

I come from a long line of fighters and drinkers. English and Irish. And on his side –  
(she shrugs)

I think he’s a... damaged... dreamer. Which was part of the attraction.

SISTER HELEN

I see.

COLLEEN

You’re not going to tell them all that, are you? I don’t think I want my kid to –

SISTER HELEN

(reading from her notes)

“They were college sweethearts, but from different worlds, and not yet ready for the responsibilities of parenthood.”

COLLEEN

Oh, you’re good. Go on. Let’s get this over with.

SISTER HELEN

Seizures? Tinnitus or vertigo?

COLLEEN

No.

SISTER HELEN

Eczema?

COLLEEN

Eczema? They want to know if my family has eczema?!

SISTER HELEN

Any mother would want a complete picture of her child's –

COLLEEN

OUR PEOPLE SURVIVED WAR, FAMINE, AND THE PATRIARCHY... and these jerks want to know if she might get a rash? Find someone else.

SISTER HELEN

This is a standard form, they didn't ask me to –

COLLEEN

Fine. Her father is smart, cute, and does not have an extra leg growing out of his forehead. Me, I'm just your average knocked-up co-ed. Beyond that: they're the parents. Let them work it o –

(she has a fearsome contraction)

AGGGGHHHH GODDAMN SON OF A BITCH

SISTER HELEN

Language!

COLLEEN

(still in the contraction)

– AH TAKE YOUR CHRISTIAN PRUDERY AND SHOVE IT UP YOUR ASS... IF THERE'S ANY ROOM LEFT UP THERE!

SISTER HELEN

COLLEEN!

COLLEEN

(still in the contraction)

I KNOW HOW IT WORKS, AT THE MISERICORDIA! THE MINUTE I DELIVER THIS KID, YOU KICK ME OUT ON THE STREET!

(she grunts in pain as the contraction intensifies then subsides, leaving her panting before she can continue)

You're not here for me. You're here for them. "The parents". To make sure I don't change my mind. You're afraid I might see myself in her little red face, grab her, and run!

SISTER HELEN

No. I'm not afraid of that.

COLLEEN

You think I don't have the guts.

SISTER HELEN

I think you're smarter than that, Colleen. A dropout with a baby, no friends, no prospect that a decent man would look at you? This way you get a fresh start, and so does she. Would you rather sink together into poverty and shame? Surely you want more for your child than that.

COLLEEN

YOU DON'T KNOW SHIT ABOUT WHAT I WANT FOR H—

(she begins another contraction)

WHAT THE HELL, I'M NOT DUE FOR ANOTHER —

(she growls in pain)

SISTER HELEN

(hurrying out of the room)

It's a baby, Colleen. Not a Swiss watch. I'll get the doctor. *Don't push.*

COLLEEN

(still in the contraction)

AND DON'T COME BACK. DON'T YOU COME BACK. I'D RATHER DO THIS ALONE THAN DO IT WITH YO —

(the contraction intensifies)

JESUS CHRIST I'M NOT READY FOR AAAAHHHHHHHH —

*She dissociates. Stands with Benita. Calm, now.*

COLLEEN

And there's only one way  
once the jaws take hold  
Something will be born or something will die

BENITA

And maybe it's both of us  
maybe it's both  
as this nameless beast of muscle and slime  
takes charge...

COLLEEN

(jagged inhale)

Now "I" is a gawker at the site of a crash  
helpless useless watching from the side

BENITA

as it bleeds you, breaks you, tosses you away

COLLEEN

And then I see: I'm no bystander  
I am the driver, dying  
I am the car, crumpled  
IIIIIIII

*Fully back in her body, in her experiencing self, her  
howl of pain merges with the cry of a newborn.  
Sister Ursula holds up the baby and brings her over  
to Colleen. Colleen holds her for a moment and  
looks into her eyes... then a door inside her closes.  
She gives the baby back to Sister Ursula and turns  
away.*

COLLEEN

Sister Helen promised me that the social worker would give me regular reports on how you were doing... which was a lie. All I ever heard from her was, "She is making a nice couple very happy." And man, that pissed me off! Because I didn't give a shit if they were happy! I only cared about you!

(beat)

Us girls at the Misericordia, we were the lucky ones – we had food and shelter, we could come and go – but we were still objects of charity, powerless and processed. So were your mom and dad. So were you. The state created mechanisms to deal with our messes... then God's handmaids turned the wheels.

(beat)

So. The door had closed behind you and I was expected to carry on as if you had never existed... which I couldn't... and reinvent myself... which I did. That was my salvation: willed amnesia. And finally, one day I...

(she shrugs)

moved to Calgary.

*Pause.*

BENITA

Colleen... did you ever regret having me?

COLLEEN

No.

BENITA

Did you ever think about... not... having me?

COLLEEN

Yes. When I saw that Sally Ann. This dejected pregnant girl opened the door and the whole place stank of boiled cabbage, musty carpets, roach spray... this end-of-the-line aroma. Some girls would drive down to Minneapolis for an abortion. I... I knew I couldn't keep you. But I wanted you. You know? I did what I had to do: other girls did what they had to do... We all deserve to make that decision for ourselves.

(beat)

You can't imagine the waves of confusion and hormones and panic, when you know you are on this road to pushing a life out from your body. Especially when that other unwed parent, the one nobody talks about, the one with a penis, is long gone, with no consequences whatsoever. Especially when it's just... not a good time.

BENITA

(quietly)

Yeah. I know.

COLLEEN

(waving it all away)

The important thing is, we're back together! And I can't wait for you to meet the rest of your family! Your aunts, your uncles... you have cousins all across the country, kiddo, and we loves ya already... Janice can't wait to meet her older sister... In fact, Keith and I have been talking about how we can help support you through your studies. From now on, he really wants to be like a father to you –

BENITA

(erupting)

– Yeah, see, you don't get to legislate that, actually. You don't just pick me up after all these years like a piece of left luggage. That train is gone, Colleen. It's just... gone.

(beat)

Besides, us getting together is making my mother extremely unhappy, and I wouldn't hurt her for anything, so... Let's just take a step back, okay? Thanks for coming, though. I'll call you.

*She leaves. Colleen stares after her, as we hear Joni Mitchell's "Magdalene Laundries".*

**SCENE 13**

*Benita bursts into her apartment. Fredy, in her PJs, is lolling on the sofa.*

FREDY

Hey, Dork.

(beat)

Hey, Dork.

(beat)

You alive?

BENITA

Yeah.

FREDY

How'd it go? What's she like?

BENITA

She's swell. Next question.

FREDY

Yeah, can you please pick up some of these photo albums you've been leaving all over the apartment lately? It's like a Ken Burns documentary in here.

BENITA

Sorry...

FREDY

I did enjoy seeing your parents' wedding picture though. I've never seen your mom looking so fancy.

BENITA

What wedding picture?

FREDY

I tripped over one of those ancient-looking boxes you left in the living room – ow – it kind of disintegrated, and... there it was.

*She brings a framed photograph over to Benita.*

FREDY

She's rocking the hornrims, and your dad is beaming! Look at that veil... Isn't she beautiful?

No. BENITA

No? FREDY

BENITA  
(quietly)  
Son of a bitch. I gotta go see Mom. See ya later.

FREDY  
Why are you so upset about your parents' wedding photo?

BENITA  
My parents eloped.

FREDY  
Huh? But that's your dad –

BENITA  
– yep –

FREDY  
– standing in front of a wedding cake... with your mom in a big white dress!

BENITA  
(going out)  
That's not my mom.

**SCENE 14**

*At Ethel's home. Ethel is polishing silver.*

BENITA

Mom, could you please sit down for two seconds?

ETHEL

Let me just finish this teapot, honey... Did you know this belonged to your great-grandmother on your –

BENITA

– Who is that?

*Benita thrusts the photograph at Ethel. Ethel freezes.*

ETHEL

Where did you find this?

BENITA

That is not the question, Mother. The question is, who is that woman who is clearly marrying my father?

*Ethel finally sits down.*

BENITA

Mom. Who is the woman in this picture?

ETHEL

Your father's wife.

BENITA

His wife?! So you're his... what? Girlfriend? Or... second wife? Or –

ETHEL

– No. That's his second wife. I was his third.

*Now Benita sits down.*

BENITA

Jesus. Do I even know you? Or, anything?



ETHEL

You know as much as any child ever knows about their parent.

(beat)

Your father and your Nana had a very... challenging relationship. They loved each other, but... Daniel ran away a few times. When he was sixteen, he lied about his age and enlisted. He trained to be a signalman in the Navy.

BENITA

(nods)

I saw the tattoos!

ETHEL

But you didn't know that he also got married then, did you. Your Nana tracked him down and got him out of the Navy, and the marriage. Years later, he got married again, to... the woman in the photograph.

BENITA

Who was she?

ETHEL

She was a bitch, is who she was. He got non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and they gave him six months to live, so she left him. I was his nurse. Even flat on his back, he swept me off my feet.

BENITA

I knew about the cancer. He always claimed that he was cured by your love.

ETHEL

We were in love, no doubt about that. Once he was out of hospital, we started dating; we got engaged; but we were a mixed couple and our parents didn't approve, so –

BENITA

– had to elope –

ETHEL

(simultaneously)

– we had to elope.

(beat)

It was a fairy-tale ending: I rescued my prince. But then I got sick.

**SCENE 15**

*Early 1960s. Daniel and Ethel in her hospital room.  
He is holding her hand: she is staring off.*

DANIEL

I'm just glad they caught it in time.

(beat)

You're my beautiful girl. You know that?

(beat)

We're going to be the best aunt and uncle anyone's ever –

ETHEL

– I'm not a wife, now, Daniel. I'm not even a woman. I can't... give you... a family.

(she is crying)

DANIEL

Ethel. Ethel, honey. No, look at me. We're a family. We're a family and we'll find – hey – we'll find ways to –

*She buries herself in his arms. After a moment,  
GERT appears.*

GERT

Knock-knock...

(Ethel pulls herself together)

Mrs. Simon? Is this an okay time?

DANIEL

No.

ETHEL

Yes.

GERT

Hi, I'm Gert Shnider. Dr. Hayakawa suggested I stop in at some point, just to...

(reading the room)

Here, why don't I leave you my card and you can –

*She holds out her card to Daniel. He takes it.*

DANIEL

“Winnipeg Jewish Child and Family Services”.

GERT

That's me.

DANIEL

I just assumed every woman in this hospital was a nun.

GERT

No, just a regular old social worker.

ETHEL

(smiling too brightly)

Well, Mrs. Shnider, there's no child here. There isn't going to be a child.

GERT

I see. I just wanted you to know... that's up to you.

DANIEL

What do you mean?

GERT

I mean, you have options.

*She passes a brochure to Daniel.*

DANIEL

"Adoption: Creating a Forever Family."

ETHEL

I don't think I –

GERT

Please, Mrs. Simon, don't decide anything right now. Once you're feeling better...

DANIEL

Ma'am, we've both been sick... I've gone from job to job, Ethel's the steady one and... Would anyone really give us a baby?

GERT

You're Jewish, Ethel is Protestant –

ETHEL

Not really, not anymore –

GERT

– and a mixed marriage widens your chances of finding a match. You obviously love each other. I think any little baby would be lucky to have you. I'll be honest: this is going to take a long time. You'll be screened and watched and screened again. The question is: how badly do you want to have children together? Can you wait?

*Ethel and Daniel look at each other.*

GERT

You have my card. When you're ready to start the process, call me.

ETHEL

"When"?

GERT

"When".

*She leaves.*

DANIEL

You know, honey... I always felt horrible that here you are, this... beautiful, perfect girl, and I couldn't give you children. I thought it would make me less of a man in your eyes...

ETHEL

The chemo saved your life!

DANIEL

But if I'd... said no, then at least we could have had a little baby together. And... after I was gone... you could have found someone else. Another knock-out like you.

ETHEL

Back when I still prayed, I wasn't praying for a baby. I was asking Him to give us twenty more years.

DANIEL

Dummy. You couldn't have asked for fifty?!

*She laughs, then winces.*

ETHEL

Ow, ow, you're going to make me pop a stitch. You... shmendrik. You've ruined me.

(she fingers a brochure)

What do you think? Are we doing this?

DANIEL

If there's a chance to see your smile on one more face in this world... We're doing this.

*They kiss.*

**SCENE 16**

*Late 1960s. Ethel is studying at her kitchen table, a pile of textbooks open in front of her. There's a knock at the door, then a pause.*

GERT

(off)

Mrs. Simon?

ETHEL

(calling, her mind still in her books)

Door's open!

(she is startled to see Gert Shnider step into her kitchen)

Oh, Mrs. Shnider! I didn't know it was you...

GERT

I know it's been a while –

ETHEL

– No, no: you told us it might take years –

GERT

– And now I've surprised you in the middle of... what is all this?

ETHEL

Oh, that's my good news: the Grey Nuns want me to teach at St. Boniface so badly, they're going to pay my way through university! First one in my family!

(she points at her piles of books)

Daniel says, if we do ever manage to adopt, we won't need a highchair: we can just sit the little muffin on a pile of my textbooks... and he can become a doctor by osmosis!

GERT

Ah. I have some good news, too. We've found you a baby.

*Ethel leaps up and throws herself at Gert, wrapping her arms around her. After a moment, Gert tries to detach herself.*

GERT

Mrs. Simon... Mrs. Simon.

ETHEL

(wiping away tears)

Call me Ethel. Please. Oh – I – don't have any champagne. Can I run out and get champagne? Is it a boy or a girl?

GERT

We don't know. The mother is still a few weeks away yet: apparently, the baby has a Jewish father and she really wanted a Jewish family to be involved, because she doesn't want it to be taught to hate any part of itself. So.

ETHEL

That's very... Here, let me clear you a spot.

(rapidly moving textbooks and papers  
off the chairs)

Sorry about this – I should – dear dear, I'm not normally this scatty, I – can I get you some tea, or...

(a sudden thought hits her)

Am I – I'm still allowed to go to school, right?

GERT

Mrs. Simon, there is a probationary period when I can conduct a home inspection at any time, to make sure that a healthy level of attachment is occurring. Our *expectation* is that an infant will attach primarily with the mother. Our *expectation* is that, from now on, this child will be your full-time job.

ETHEL

(devastated, but fighting it)

Oh. Oh.

(she looks at her books)

Of course. Yes.

GERT

I recommend that you start reading up on attachment theory. So important for adoptive mothers in particular.

ETHEL

(still struggling)

Mrs. Shnider... Daniel is a wonderful man... The thing is, he's always been... restless. He gets bored, and he tries something new.

GERT

A new hobby, you mean?

ETHEL

More like a new... life. Right now, he's a radio deejay, but before that he was a telephone lineman, stock car driver, dance instructor, used car salesman –

GERT

– I get the picture, Mrs. Simon –

ETHEL

– and life with him has always been very exciting, but... if I could just get my degree, then I would know that, no matter what... I can make sure we always come out alright. The three of us. Do you see what I mean?

GERT

Mrs. Simon –

ETHEL

– Please, call me Ethel –

GERT

Mrs. Simon, I'm not here to provide you with career counselling or marriage counselling. I am here solely to protect the interests of this baby. There is a long line of very deserving couples behind you who would be thrilled to be in your position. Do you understand?

*Ethel nods.*

GERT

As for your husband: he is about to be a father. He should maybe take this opportunity to grow up.

**SCENE 17**

*Sister Ursula holds up the baby and brings her over to Colleen. Colleen holds her for a moment and looks into her eyes... then a door inside her closes. She gives the baby back to Sister Ursula and turns away.*

*Sister Ursula then brings the baby to Ethel, as if for the first time. Ethel is speechless. She holds the baby in front of her and looks into her eyes. She then inhales the scent of her, deeply... and smiles as her whole body relaxes. Ethel holds the baby close to her, rocking gently, humming.*

*Over the above, we hear the voice of a child, reading, fluently: "...and so his mother put him in a basket of reeds that floated upon the water. And Pharaoh's daughter was bathing in the Nile. She found the baby, and picked him up, saying, 'Poor lost child! See how he smiles at me! I will take him and raise him as my own.'"*

*Daniel appears. He sees their child for the first time. He and Ethel embrace. Together they pose, beaming, for their first family portrait, the portrait from the beginning of the play.*



**SCENE 18**

*Benita and Ethel are back in the present, in Ethel's home. Benita is shaken.*

BENITA

Wow, Mom. I'm sorry.

ETHEL

For what?

BENITA

They took away your education, your career... If it were me, I would have resented the hell out of me.

ETHEL

(with the merest hint of effort)

No, no. We wanted you so badly, you see.

*DANIEL appears, softly singing the final lines of "Jamaica Farewell".*

BENITA

This is a lot to process, you know? I mean, the way I remember you and Dad...

DANIEL

So what are we going to read tonight, Kitty-Cat? *Cyrano de Bergerac*? *Don Quixote*?

BENITA

(as a child)

*Anne of Green Gables! Anne of Green Gables!*

DANIEL

Again?

(sighing)

Again. Alright, I'll make you a deal: this time, you read it to me.

BENITA

But you're so good at all the voices! I just have my one stupid voice.

DANIEL

Benita! You have a lovely voice.

BENITA

Everyone hates it when Mrs. Barrett asks me to read out loud, because I have a stupid ugly voice.

DANIEL

Mrs. Barrett asks you to read because you are a wonderful reader, and that makes some people feel bad about themselves, and they take it out on you.

BENITA

So I should stop reading out loud, right Daddy?

DANIEL

Kitty-Cat. Be humble. Give other children a turn. But never be ashamed of what you can do. Promise me that.

BENITA

I promise, Daddy.

DANIEL

So, let's hear your bed-time story... read by The Amazing Benita.

BENITA

(reading)

"It's lovely to be going home and know it's home. I love Green Gables already, and I've never loved any place before. Oh, Marilla, I'm so happy."

ETHEL

Benita? Did you hear what I just said?

*Daniel is gone. Benita is fidgeting absently with the wedding photo, turning it over and over... until she notices a note tucked into the back of the frame. She opens it and reads aloud:*

BENITA

"Dearest Daniel: I was wrong to let you go. Come back to me. She has her baby now. I only want you." Mom? What is... did you know about this?

ETHEL

I must have told you the story.

BENITA

Mom, you have never told me this story.

ETHEL

No? How we sat on Lake Winnipeg Beach for hours and hours... all the little boats came in, all the families took their beach balls and plastic shovels and went home, and you and I were still sitting there, waiting for Daniel to come and pick us up. But he was with her. She was trying to make him run away with her. Again.

BENITA

(suddenly)

Oh my God: I remember her! But not in a wedding dress. Green headband, long red hair. She worked at CJOB!

ETHEL

That's right.

BENITA

That party they had for Dad when we were moving to Toronto. She came up to me with this weird look on her face. She said, "You win." Then she walked out. I'd completely forgotten about that.

ETHEL

After the surgery, you see, I never quite had the same... drives as before. And your father was... a normal man. Maybe a little more normal than most. As soon as I was at home with you, the Bitch came sniffing around.

(beat)

When Daniel finally showed up that night, I told him: "You are the great love of my life. But you will never let our daughter down again. Ever."

BENITA

Well now I want to dig him up just so I can punch him in the face.

ETHEL

Why? You're the same: restless. And now you want to leave me behind, too.

BENITA

What are you talking about?

ETHEL

Why else are you suddenly interested in a complete stranger that you've never even mentioned in your life?

BENITA

Because she's, I dunno, part of my story, Mom! She's not you, I'm not looking for you, I have you! Do I not call you practically every single day –

ETHEL

– You haven't called for weeks –

BENITA

Oh Jesus okay but overall do I not – as college kids go... have I made you so insecure that you need to make me feel like I'm committing adultery just by seeing my own damn birth mother? How many times do I have to tell you... You're the one who fed me, bathed me, nursed me through the flu and a broken arm and that disgusting rash on my neck...

Meanwhile, she gave me half my chromosomes and assembled my body inside her body! Isn't that kind of cool, too? Doesn't that merit a few cups of coffee and the occasional Christmas card?

ETHEL

That's not what she wants.

BENITA

How do you –

ETHEL

BECAUSE THAT'S NOT WHAT I'D WANT. SHE WANTS YOU, BENITA. SHE WANTS YOU BACK.

BENITA

Mom, I'm just trying to find out –

ETHEL

You are a part of this family. Your grandma and grandpa, Nana, Zaida... we've always claimed you with pride. Her people were ashamed that you even existed... So, how much truth is enough, dear? Once you start looking for "the truth about where you came from"... where do you stop?

*A young Ethel is holding her baby. Daniel appears. He sees their child for the first time. He and Ethel embrace. Together they pose, beaming, for their first family portrait. Then Daniel kisses Ethel again, picks up his briefcase, and dashes out the door, leaving Ethel alone with the baby.*

*Sounds of waves, winds, and shorebirds. The sky darkens. Ethel is sitting on the beach, weeping, holding her daughter. Very much alone.*

**SCENE 19**

*Benita comes home. Fredy is in her fuzzy pyjamas eating KD and watching The Nature Channel. She holds up a thin white envelope.*

**FREDY**

Hey, Dork. You got mail. It's probably your research grant for London –

*Without a word, Benita snatches the envelope, tears it into pieces, throws the pieces on the ground, and rages out on whatever objects are handy. Fredy watches her until she sputters to a halt.*

**FREDY**

What did your mom say to you?!

**BENITA**

EAT SHIT, KAYLA! EAT SHIT AND DIE!

**FREDY**

That doesn't sound like your mom...

**BENITA**

Everything made sense, and then along comes that B+ bitch with her stupid "fog", so I just had to dig deeper to prove what a moron she is... and now everybody's like sad and broken. My mom is sad. My... Colleen is sad. I'm miserable. My, I dunno, "sperm father" was pathetic and my dead dad's a cheating asshole. I took a wrecking ball to my story and for what? "The truth"? The truth is bullshit. And now what am I supposed to do? Run around putting it all back together like Humpty frigging Dumpty?!

(addressing the world)

Well, PISS OFF, KAYLA: I'M NOT PLAYING!!

*She stands there, panting. Fredy pipes up.*

**FREDY**

(earnestly)

...So what I'm hearing is –

**BENITA**

– Don't you dare head-shrink me.

FREDY

Fine. Straight up? Your parents were shielding you from pain: their pain, not yours, nimrod. Because that's what good parents do. Now you've had your personal narrative disrupted, boo-hoo-hoo. My mom burned me with an *iron*. I just wish they'd yanked me away from her sooner, when I was still cute and adoptable like you and Kayla. The only safe place I ever had was my one foster dad... who *died*.

BENITA

Gee, you're gonna be a fabulous social worker, Fredy. Way to make it all about you.

FREDY

Go to hell. I'm gonna be an awesome social worker. You're a grown-ass woman, Benita. So go take your big research trip – which cannot come soon enough, by the way. Get some context for it all. And then, stop being a passive witness of your own story. Implicate yourself. Who knows: once you've finally got this thesis in the bag, maybe you'll stop being such a humungous douche.

*Fredy storms out. Benita, unsure what else to do, decides to pick up the scattered pieces of her letter and fit them back together.*

BENITA

(muttering feverishly as she works)

Great. Just great. Now she hates you, too. And you blew it with Colleen. And you hurt Mom... “The Adoption Fog personified.” Shut up, Kayla. Shut up, Zach. Shut up, everybody. “Grown-ass woman.” I hate babies, I'm thinking nonstop about babies, I'm turning into a giant baby. Can't have been more than a few weeks along, right: five, six weeks... how could there have been so much blood? You are an accidental pregnancy, dummy. *You* don't get to be careless. Ever. So caught up in your own garbage, you didn't even notice you were late late late. Stupid stupid stupid. Way to go, Benita. You total... reject.

*Benita looks down at her now-reassembled letter and reads rapidly aloud.*

BENITA

“Thank you for applying for the Georgia Young Bursary for Undergraduate Research” blah-blah-blah... “After careful consideration, your application for funding to travel to London to access primary archival material from the Foundling Hospital has been –”

*She is interrupted by a series of flashes, accompanied by a series of beeps, which Benita interprets as if suddenly lost in a dream.*

BENITA

(muttering)

H... E... L... P... M...

*She suddenly realises what she is doing... and as she does so, Daniel appears dimly at a distance.*

BENITA

(whipping around to try to see him)

Dad?

*But Daniel is gone. She looks down at the bit of paper in her hands.*

BENITA

“...your application has been deni –”

*Benita shatters. Then, by dint of will, gathers herself again.*

BENITA

No. You know what? No. The hell with you, all of you. I know who I am. I know what I'm trying to do. I'm just not good at explaining it yet.

(beat)

“Take your personal shit, use it as a springboard. Explore the wider historical, cultural, gender-related...” Yeah. Okay. Find another way. Go back to the beginning. Where it all started. London. 1739. The Foundling Hospital.

**END OF ACT I**

**ACT II****SCENE 1**

*Sounds of urban English birds in winter... and children playing and laughing. Benita is standing next to a lifelike brass statue of THOMAS CORAM, a male figure in Georgian dress, holding a charter and staring into the future. Meanwhile, we hear little London-accented voices singing "London Bridge Is Falling Down". An authentic London accent, meaning anything from Jamaican to Cockney to Pakistani.*

BENITA

London.  
 A name so old, no one knows what it means.  
 40 Brunswick Square.  
 Behind me, across the cobblestones, an urban park.  
 Playgrounds. Playing fields.  
 Just beyond them, Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*.  
 But I can't go through.  
 The park has a fence around it: the sign reads  
 "Coram's Fields. No unaccompanied adults."  
 To my right stands Thomas Coram, 1668-1751.  
 "Pioneer in the Cause of Child Welfare."  
 He looks... kind.  
 He's holding a scroll.

(to us, to herself)

Hey, sailor: whatcha got there?

CORAM

Our Royal Charter.

BENITA

(startled)

You can talk!

CORAM

So can you!

BENITA

You're a statue!



CORAM

I'm an echo.

Take care, Benita: this is London.

Our bricks, our stones,

Our trees, our very fog is full of whispers.

(he brandishes his scroll)

His Majesty has granted me permission to build  
an Hospital for Exposed and Deserted Young Children  
on these adjacent fields.

BENITA

You're not looking at the fields, though.

CORAM

No. Not yet.

BENITA

So whatcha lookin at, Tom?

CORAM

London.

Country lasses flocking to shops and factories in search of a better life, or any life.

The banks run on Orient spice, African sweat, American land.

The mills run on steam and little girls' fingers.

The gutters run with gin, piss, abandoned infants.

Their cries as they expire don't keep anyone up at night.

Only me.

BENITA

Why you?

CORAM

Others think it God's will, I suppose, for the tainted spawn of lust.

A drain on the state: a stain on the great.

But this old sea dog squints at these discards, sees...

BENITA

What do you see, Tom?

CORAM

Future sailors, soldiers, servant girls.

The nerves and muscle of the British Empire.

BENITA

Oh. Gross.

CORAM

Compared to what, Benita?  
Death on a dung-heap?  
Brothels? Workhouses?  
I set sail at 11 years old.  
Scaled rigging in all weathers, fought rats for my ration.  
These tykes – them that survive  
Will be fed, clothed, housed, taught their prayers, and made useful.  
What more does any of us get?

BENITA

(to the audience)

I broaden my attention to the reason I am here.  
Red bricks. White columns. Five steps up.  
The Foundling Museum.  
Formerly known as the Foundling Hospital.

*She tries the door. It's locked. She rings the bell. No answer. She knocks on the door with determination.*

WALTER

(OS)

WE'RE CLOSED.

*She stubbornly knocks again.*

BENITA

What? You're supposed to be – I need to do this! Please, please, please, you have to let me in!

*No response. In a fury, Benita begins banging and kicking one of the two front doors, until finally one of them opens and WALTER, a rumped older man appears.*

WALTER

Oy! What do you think you're doing? Are you mental?

BENITA

I am offended by that term.

WALTER

Well I am offended by some ignorant Yank vandalizing an historical establishment because she couldn't be bothered to ring first. We're closed. Clear off.

*He is already closing the door when Benita sticks her foot in it, so it bangs into her shoe.*

BENITA

Ow.

WALTER

Come on, love: piss off, there's a girl. Mind your foot.

BENITA

No.

WALTER

No?

BENITA

No. What's your name?

WALTER

Walter. Why?

BENITA

Walter: I'm Benita. I've been circling this block for days because somehow this place has kind of a Romanian orphanage vibe and I'm 100% not sure I can handle it. And now I'm about to go home to Toronto and I haven't done the most important thing I came here to do. Bottom line: I just met my birth mum and I'm spinning out. Do you know what I'm talking about, Walter? Because I have this funny feeling you know what I'm talking about. Adopted or fostered?

*Beat.*

WALTER

...We don't call it "fostered" no more. We call it "in care".

BENITA

You say "potato". The thing is, Walter: we always find each other. Don't we. Now, c'mon. Lemme in. It's starting to rain.

**SCENE 2**

*In the Committee Room. Thematically appropriate paintings: Moses and Pharaoh's Daughter, Christ receiving the little children, etc. Huge marble fireplace. Decorative white flourishes on the ceiling and walls. And a crummy little modern table and chair underneath them. Benita's mental motor is racing. As Benita speaks, Walter is bringing in stacks of papers and piling them on the table.*

**BENITA**

...and I've been grappling with my story, you know, how it relates to other stories, and how people have these rigid notions about a quote-unquote "normal childhood"... and how, it's like, giving up your children is a really widespread, accepted, ancient phenomenon, but talking about it is an Attack on Motherhood or something... Deep down, Walter, I want to finally be able to back up my gut feelings about all this with something other than my two fists and suppressed rage. Does that make any sense to you at all?

**WALTER**

Yeah, you said all this in your letter. I pulled these files from the archives for you last week. Seein as you never showed up, I was about to put 'em all back.

**BENITA**

Oh. Sorry. God, I'm a tool.

*Beat.*

**WALTER**

Well, I reckon you got enough there to be gettin on with.

**BENITA**

Yeah. Wow. It's hard to know where to start.

**WALTER**

Oh, I dunno. I suppose you should probably start with this.

*Instantly, a male OVERSEER appears, with a Georgian cap and a heavy cotton sack, bawling at an unseen line of women and girls.*

**THE OVERSEER**

**NEXT!**

BENITA

(jumping)

Jesus!

THE OVERSEER

(ignoring her)

NEXT!

BENITA

Who the hell are –

THE OVERSEER

NEXT!

*NETTY, a shy young woman in a servant's muslin cap, steps forward. Fine ladies in hoop-skirts titter behind their fans as she comes forward.*

THE OVERSEER

Right, you baggage. You know the rules?

(she shakes her head)

Oh, first time, eh? You seem that raddled, I'd'a thought otherwise.

(the ladies chortle)

What's your name, trull?

NETTY

(meekly)

Netty Hogg, sir.

THE OVERSEER

So here's how this works, Netty Hogg. These fine ladies and gentlemen have donated to provide for surplus riffraff like the little by-blow with which you propose to burden us. In return, all they ask is a monthly dollop of diversion in the form of this here highly entertaining lottery.

(proffering the sack)

A white ball means the Almighty hath smiled on you at last. Deposit your misbegotten tyke and depart a free woman! Red ball: wait, lest a first-choice nipper fail its medicinal examination. If it's black: Begone! The Lord in His wisdom hath ordained thou shalt pay ever for thy sin. In which event: the workhouse is thither; the whorehouse yonder; the madhouse, only a fair day's walk: all your future prospects very convenient!

NETTY

(confused)

But... but sir, I thought you take them all.

*The Overseer laughs, and all the ladies laugh with him.*

THE OVERSEER

All the unwanted newborns in London?! We'd close in a month, and they'd be dying in the streets like before, as plentiful as horse apples. Nah, your lottery's your only remedy for this endless epidemic of English urchins. If only you shopgirls wasn't so hot in the saddle...

(the ladies warble, titillated)

Besides, haven't you been paying attention, as you been stood in line all morning? Haven't you seen the lucky few skip gladly from the room, and all the black-balled minxes wailing?

NETTY

Not really, sir. I was so –

THE OVERSEER

Enough of your chatter. Take your chance, there's a hundred more behind you.

*Netty picks a ball. It is black.*

THE OVERSEER

(bawling)

APPLICATION DENIED. NEXT!

*Netty bursts into uncontrollable weeping and throws herself desperately at the Overseer. The ladies gasp pleasurably and applaud.*

THE OVERSEER

(fending her off)

Now then, you can't get round me that way: that's what got you into this mess! Get off me, and have some dignity.

NETTY

Dignity? How can I afford dignity, sir, with no lodgings and no food?

THE OVERSEER

Maybe you ought to have thought of that before you hoisted your skirts?

*Laughter.*

NETTY

(anguished)

My master hoisted them for me! And he never asked!

*Gales of laughter.*

THE OVERSEER

(privately, to Netty)

Oh, excellent show, darling. That was good sport, that was. Come next month's lottery, get to the kitchen door at dawn... I'll make sure you get one more chance. After you've done me service, of course. Meantime, sod off. NEXT!

*The Georgian contingent disappears, leaving Benita alone, capless, and thunderstruck.*

BENITA

Walter?! What the... what the hell was that?

**SCENE 3**

*A woman in Victorian dress appears at the other end of the room, weeping outside a closed door.*

**BENITA**

(to herself)

Now what?

(beat: she reflexively checks her head for a cap, and finds none)

Okay, I'm still me: that's something... I...

(she takes a deep breath and sprints over to the weeping woman)

HELLO!

*The woman screams.*

**BENITA**

Easy there, easy. Sorry I snuck up on you, Miss. Strange day. Who are you?

**ISADORA**

(Victorian, as aristocratic as her name)

My name is Isadora Fitzhugh-Tanqueray.

**BENITA**

Seriously?

(beat)

Whatcha doin here, Isadora?

**ISADORA**

Waiting for my interview.

**BENITA**

Like, for a job?

**ISADORA**

No, regarding my application to surrender my infant, of course. Isn't that why you're here?

**BENITA**

Nah, I'm just... waiting for a friend... Excuse me but... You don't sound poor.

**ISADORA**

One need not be poor to be unlucky.



BENITA

True.

ISADORA

My employment as a governess depends upon my... respectability. If I am unsuccessful here, I am undone.

BENITA

That's why you were crying?

ISADORA

We have no future, my child and I... and yet I should be sorry to lose him... Can you understand?

BENITA

Yeah.

ISADORA

(impulsively, holding out a sheaf of documents and letters)

Will you look over my papers?

BENITA

Huh?

ISADORA

It's only that... You're very kind... You don't look at me like...

(pulling herself together)

I think I have everything they asked for: letters from my friends and relations attesting that I have led a blameless life; the particulars of the "criminal conversation" –

BENITA

– The what, now?

ISADORA

(surprised)

The detailed account of my seduction and desertion. Surely your friend was not granted an interview without that?

BENITA

Right, of course, the "Seduction and Desertion" Form.

ISADORA

The doctor's certification that this was my first birth –

BENITA

Come on!

ISADORA

The governors wish to ensure that we are decent young ladies who have committed but a single injury to our virtue. Not harlots confirmed in a life of vice.

BENITA

So it's not even really about the kids anymore: it's about –

ISADORA

– The redemption of fallen women. Of course. That is why the gentlemen inside this door support the good work of this Hospital.

BENITA

You mean “the ladies and gentlemen”.

ISADORA

Goodness, no. There may be a Queen upon the throne of England, but there has never been a female governor of the Foundling Hospital.

BENITA

Okay... So you gotta walk in there and retail your intimate sexual history to a panel of old Victorian dudes who don't have the faintest idea what you're up against, begging for some tiny measure of control over your own reproductive... Oh my God: nothing has changed. I gotta split, Izzy. Good luck.

(as she leaves the room)

WALTER? WALTER!

**SCENE 4**

*Benita rockets into a room where Walter, wearing latex gloves, is arranging objects on a table. Projections magnify the display case or panel behind him, with an array of small antique objects mounted on it: beads, hair combs, coins with holes punched in them... The display area is surrounded by curtains.*

BENITA

WALTER!

WALTER

Steady on, Toronto.

BENITA

You wouldn't believe what I –

WALTER

Bet you I would, though. This place has no secrets from me. The room was talking to you, was it? I'm not surprised. There's generations of pain in that room. And it's bound to speak to you louder than most. But that's what you're here for, right? Perspective?

(she nods)

Here, put these gloves on.

(as she does)

Pick one. Look at it. Be very gentle: they're antiques, like me.

*Benita, with a gloved hand, picks up a small object and looks at it.*

BENITA

What are they?

WALTER

Back in the early days, the mother would sometimes leave a little token that she could describe when she came back to claim her child: a thimble, a playing card... or else something she made specially. A little poem, a hand-stitched heart...

BENITA

So all of these are...

WALTER

That's right. Every one of them tokens is one little baby... Every one that got in is maybe five or ten that didn't...

BENITA

How many mothers ever came back?

*Walter goes over to a shelf, takes a bottle of whisky and two mugs, and pours shots for himself and for Benita.*

WALTER

People need to see this, Toronto. They need to understand.

BENITA

Understand what?

WALTER

The scale of it, do you see. The truth about where we come from. People think it's a mother's nature to love 'em all and sort it out. Whenever a woman chooses to not be a mother, their worldview can't handle it. Nah, she's a monster, right? There must be something wrong with her...

BENITA

When you say, "where we come from", do you mean...

WALTER

All us "Old Corams". That's what we call ourselves.

BENITA

You mean you're –

WALTER

A former pupil of the Foundling Hospital, yeah.

(beat)

You know, when they came and fetched me from my foster parents', I didn't know they was my foster parents? I thought they was my family. The Foundling sent me to them as a babe in arms, you see, and they thought it was kinder to let me think I was theirs. The second I turn five years old, along comes the Foundling Hospital van, and the man says to me: "This ain't your family, you got no family, you need to come with us." And Mum is crying and Dad is crying but they don't say nothing so I know it's true.

BENITA

Jesus.

WALTER

I don't remember the first abandonment, you see. My first mum, she's kind of an abstract notion. Like algebra.

BENITA

Yeah.

WALTER

But that second abandonment... the second one took. My first night here, someone nicked Teddy One-Eye, my only mate. The next night, the older boys dangled me out the window by the scruff of my neck. And that was pretty much how it went after that.

*They drink.*

BENITA

Did you ever look for your birth mother, Walter?

WALTER

A while back, yeah. Looked. Found. Went round for tea, once... Far as she was concerned, she'd got rid of me fair and square, and then gotten on with it. Neither of us, to be honest, was quite sure why I was there.

(beat)

What about you, Toronto: what's your story? You're a long way from the colonies...

BENITA

My undergraduate thesis –

WALTER

Bollocks. Why are you here?

*Beat.*

BENITA

It turns out I have two mothers.  
One of them I thought I knew.  
One of them I don't know at all.  
My friend says I'm too chicken to deal with my story.  
My enemy says my whole life is a lie.  
Everyone thinks they know better than me:  
Who my people are, what I feel, what I should feel.  
And... my ex thinks I'm not fit to bear his children.  
With my morally defective mystery blood.  
Not that I want to! I just... hate how bad that felt.  
Go to hell, Zach Esposito, you knuckle-dragging pig! Go to hell.

WALTER

(derisively)

“Esposito”? That really his name?

BENITA

Yeah. He's like, mega-Catholic, obsessed with his Neapolitan bloodlines and stuff. Upholding the family name.

*Walter guffaws.*

BENITA

What's so funny?

WALTER

“Esposito”: “Little Exposed One”. A very popular surname around Naples... thanks to the nuns. It means your pureblood git of a ex is descended from a foundling.

*They laugh.*

BENITA

Thank you. That is oddly comforting. It's like, we're all foundlings together.

WALTER

“We”? Have you not been listening?! You're not a foundling. And neither am I.

BENITA

But –

WALTER

This place isn't about foundlings, luv. It never was.

BENITA

What are you talking about?

WALTER

Superman was a foundling. Your rubbish boyfriend's male ancestor was a foundling. A foundling has to be found.

(acidly)

You think my mum left me at Paddington Station? With a note saying, “Please take care of this bear?”

BENITA

Of course not.

WALTER

You, me, every kid that came through those gates, Toronto: we're all the same. Not foundlings: BASTARDS. But you can't exactly throw a gala bloody fundraiser for “Coram's House of Bastards”, can you?

BENITA

Walter, I... I don't think of myself as a bastard.

WALTER

Course not. You're "chosen". You're "special". We started from the same place, you and I, but you got a family that loves you... and I got this.

(beat)

Us "Old Corams", we're not foundlings. We're not waifs or strays. We are the firstborn of the broken-hearted, the original social experiment, the erased, the uprooted. Trained from birth to obey, by land and sea we exported our malleable blankness to the four corners of Empire, so others could weep as we had wept, so other babes could waste away in our colonial clutches. No surprise what we done to other people's children, when this is what we done to our own.

*He reveals the full display of tokens. There are many thousands of them. The cries of unattended babies begin to be heard.*

WALTER

You think I've come back because I love the place, Toronto? I'm here because I hated it. I want everyone to pass through this Museum of Bastards, so whenever some other codger goes on about the good old days when a man was a man, a woman knew her place, and a family stayed together, I can come here, take any number of these 18,000 bastard tokens, and shove 'em up his bastardly arse.

*The sound of wailing babies and children gradually fills the room – then suddenly cuts out. A man who looks very much like Walter has appeared at Benita's elbow.*

THE LIBRARIAN

(with an urban Canadian accent)

Excuse me, Miss? Miss?

*Benita, startled, looks up. She is sitting with her notebook at a table piled high with archival material. THE LIBRARIAN peers down at her.*

THE LIBRARIAN

Oh, thank goodness. You've been staring into space for over an hour: I was starting to wonder whether it was deep thought or hypoglycemia. I was just saying, the reference library will be closing in thirty minutes. You need to return all your interlibrary loans and archival material to the service desk.

BENITA

(looking around at the massive amount  
of printed material)

Oh. Thanks. I –

THE LIBRARIAN

– Or if you're done for the day, I can take care of it for you.

BENITA

That'd be great. Thanks.

THE LIBRARIAN

(as he begins wheeling out the table with  
all the boxes, books, and papers on it)

Will you be wanting to access our Foundling Hospital collection again tomorrow?

BENITA

You know, I think I'm good. For now. Thank you.

THE LIBRARIAN

(on his way out)

You are most welcome. I hope you found what you were looking for... Kitty-Cat.

BENITA

Pardon me? What did you just say?

*But he is gone.*



**SCENE 5**

*Fredy and Benita's apartment. Fredy is on the couch, in her PJs, and may or may not be eating KD. Benita comes in.*

BENITA

Hey, Hoser.

FREDY

(stiffly)

Hey, Dork.

BENITA

I am a dork, actually: sorry.

FREDY

(beat)

Accepted. Thanks.

(beat)

How were the archives?

BENITA

Fascinating, eye-opening, gut-wrenching, I over-identify with every single one of those people and there's so much ambient anguish I just want to strip off my clothes and run screaming in the streets. Fredy, I basically had a happy childhood, right? Is there something wrong with me that I feel that?

FREDY

I might not be the person to ask.

BENITA

But you talk to people on that Crisis Line who –

FREDY

– cuz I'm flashing back on my mom chasing me around the trailer with her boyfriend's silver-buckled rodeo belt.

BENITA

Okay.

FREDY

And my one foster dad who said he couldn't wait for me to start menstruating so he could –

BENITA

– Okay. Jesus.

FREDY

To this day, people look at me like some unexploded shell from WWII, instead of the awesome rock-solid human I am. This one kid calls our Crisis Line almost every shift, right. Rich boy, 15. His *biological mom* gives him a reverse curfew: “Here’s 50 bucks, don’t come back before 3 a.m.” I’m sorry you lost your dad, but... you have one of the best families I’ve ever seen. You weren’t abandoned: you went straight from one set of loving hands to another other set of loving hands. Anyone can see you’ve always been surrounded by love, Benita. It comes off you in waves.

BENITA

And now I feel guilty about that.

FREDY

‘Course you do. Cuz you’re a dork. I have an opinion.

BENITA

Hit me.

FREDY

Don’t feel guilty about your loving family. But maybe you can... open it up a little.

BENITA

Like... a Boomer marriage?

FREDY

(nodding)

Find a way to include Colleen. Don’t accept the boring little cookie-cutter shape they want to squeeze your family into; make your own weird-ass cookies. Hey, that could be a legit angle for your thesis! I mean, objectivity is a myth, right? The personal is political. Feminism is written on the body. Maybe your autobiography is NOT the springboard: maybe it’s the whole swimming pool. Analyze your narrative, contextualize it... maybe even work to transform it. Then it becomes something you can share with other people. Think about it: what else can you claim in life, if not your own story?

(slight pause)

Earth to Benita... Come in, please...

BENITA

Fredy, you are a goddamn genius.

FREDY

I know.

**SCENE 6**

*Spring 1990. A room at the university. A triangle-shaped table, with beautiful tablecloths, runners, and place settings on each side, and one chair placed at each corner.*

*Benita is setting up. Ethel comes in carrying a large food container, which she sets down on the table to hug her daughter.*

BENITA

Mom!

(they hug)

Thank you for doing this.

ETHEL

Sure, honey. Where should I put this coffee cake?

BENITA

Oh: uh...

ETHEL

You asked us to bring something to share...

BENITA

I was really thinking more like –

FREDY

(coming in with a tripod)

– Mmm, cake! Thanks, Mrs. Simon.

ETHEL

Fredy! I didn't know you'd be –

FREDY

– Yeah, I'm filming.

ETHEL

Filming?

FREDY

You know, documenting this piece. For her thesis and stuff.

BENITA

Mom, didn't you read the letter I –

– It was very long, dear.

ETHEL

But you signed it.

BENITA

Of course. It's for school.

ETHEL

Oh crap. I need my notes! Be right back.

BENITA

*She runs out. Colleen enters.*

Hello, so sorry I'm –

COLLEEN

*Ethel turns. Colleen sees her for the first time.*

My god. You look exactly like her.

COLLEEN

That's just what I was thinking about you.

ETHEL

*Colleen hugs Ethel. Ethel lets herself be hugged.*

Ethel. Thank you. Thank you thank you. She's a great kid.

COLLEEN

She's my girl. I mean...

ETHEL

Beer? Wine? Tea?

FREDY

Tea, please. Herbal, if you've got it.

COLLEEN

Red wine, dear, and bring the bottle.

ETHEL

*Fredy goes out.*

So. COLLEEN

So. ETHEL

*Beat.*

This is probably a terrible idea. COLLEEN

I was just thinking that. ETHEL

*Benita comes in with her notebook and is alarmed to see them alone together.*

BENITA  
Thank you both for coming. Can we please take a seat?

*She indicates the triangular table.*

Oh! Judy Chicago! COLLEEN  
(looking at the configuration)

“Chicago”? ETHEL

She’s certainly an influence – BENITA

Did *The Dinner Party* seem more germane to your thesis than *The Birth Project*? COLLEEN

BENITA  
Well, some would argue that *The Dinner Party* is the definitive artwork of Second Wave feminism: there’s also the iconography of the triangle; the shared –

ETHEL  
(confused)  
– This is a dinner party? But it’s only 3 o’clock in the –

FREDY

(entering with drinks)

– Personally, I find *The Dinner Party* problematic, starting with the monolithic heteronormative whiteness of the –

ETHEL

– Excuse me, but... what are you all talking about?

*Beat.*

BENITA

I think we were just about to have a seat. Mom, you're here; Colleen, you're there.

ETHEL

What about Fredy?

BENITA

(meaningfully)

Fredy is supposed to be filming.

FREDY

Right! Shit.

(she runs off)

BENITA

Anyway. Thank you all so much for coming. I've been on a real personal journey lately and it means a lot to me to –

(calling)

FREDY!

FREDY

(dashing back in with the camcorder)

Yep yep yep, cool your jets, here we go.

*She turns the camcorder on as Benita consults her notes, takes a deep breath, and plunges in.*

BENITA

Thank you so much for coming.

ETHEL

You said that, dear.

BENITA

(ignoring this)

It's not every day that your two families come together.

ETHEL  
(laughing nervously)

Two families?

BENITA  
That's why the creation of this ritual of reconciliation and reunification will form the centrepiece of my undergraduate thesis deconstructing modern notions of the nuclear family. There was a long period in European history when a child's adoptive parents were, in effect, the church or the state.

FREDY  
Same shit, different day...

BENITA  
But adoption goes back even farther than that. Roman emperors were adopted. Romulus and Remus were adopted.

FREDY  
Oedipus was adopted.

BENITA  
(ignoring this)  
Yet there has never been a ceremony to mark the creation of this new family bond. A ceremony that proclaims this tripartite relationship proudly to the world.  
(beat)  
I've asked you to sit at the points of the triangle.

ETHEL  
Do we have to, honey? This table leg is poking right between my –

BENITA  
– This represents the conventional view of our shared relationship:

COLLEEN AND BENITA  
The adoption triad.

BENITA  
Exactly. Adoptive family, birth family, child. A triangle. The geometric representation of permanent conflict.  
(beat)  
Please stand up and move your chair to the middle of the table on your left.

*They do.*

BENITA

Now we are not points of a triangle: we are simply guests at the table.

ETHEL

(examining one of the plates in front of her)

It's a Seder plate.

BENITA

Yep: the Passover Seder was another of my inspirations. Everyone has a glass? Good. A toast. To the strength of women.

*They drink.*

BENITA

To a world where our wombs are our own damn business.

*They drink.*

BENITA

Because all children are legitimate.

*They drink.*

BENITA

Because "mother" is a verb.

*They drink.*

BENITA

I asked you both if you had something that you would like to share with each other. Colleen, would you like to start?

COLLEEN

Oh. Yes. I wrote down what I wanted to say: I hope that's okay.

*She starts to rummage through her purse.  
Meanwhile, Ethel leans over to Benita.*

ETHEL

(an urgent whisper)

Were we supposed to write a speech? I thought we were sharing *recipes*.

BENITA

(to Ethel)

It's fine, Mom: whatever you –



COLLEEN

I'm no poet, so I hope you'll be kind... It just sort of came out in verse.

ETHEL

(hissing to Benita)

She wrote you a poem?!

COLLEEN

Okay, here we go...

(she looks at her papers, collects herself,  
and addresses Benita)

I'd never made anything when I made you  
My family was not the making kind  
Damagers, destroyers, through and through  
My own escape was miracle enough  
When you slid out of me, slick with goo  
Tangle-limbed and glistening, bright-eyed, blind  
I felt exhausted and electrified  
My flesh was limp, but oh! that cord was tough.  
They strained and grunted just to cut our bond  
And severed it at last, and I could see  
I loved you, but I had to send you on.  
Could not be all you needed me to be.

(to Ethel)

I see my flesh and blood so filled with light.  
Please know I understand the debt I owe.  
I made her body: you made her future bright.  
I gave her life: you gave her all your soul.

*Ethel is utterly humiliated and deeply moved.*

ETHEL

...I made cake.

*Fredy, leaving the camera on its tripod, jumps in.*

FREDY

Yeah, if I may: I happen to know that this spice cake is an old family recipe from Benita's Nana. When Mr. and Mrs. Simon got married, Benita's Nana took this shiksa farm girl into her kitchen and into her heart. This recipe is a signifier of that ancient Jewish lineage, its acceptance of Ethel, and, by extension, its embrace of Benita. And plus it's really frickin delicious cake.

*Fredy swipes a huge chunk of cake and stuffs it into her mouth, then serves cake to all the others on the nice place settings. Ethel is verklempt.*

ETHEL

(to Fredy)

Thank you.

BENITA

Thank you, everyone. So now that we've exchanged the tokens, it's time for my mothers to light the Unity Candle.

ETHEL

(confused)

You mean like... a wedding?

BENITA

(a bit defensive)

Yes... The Unity Candle symbolizes the joining of two famil – Mom, did you not even look at that documentation I sent you?

ETHEL

I started to, honey, but it did go on –

COLLEEN

– and on and on –

FREDY

– I have to agree, it's kind of endless –

BENITA

So did nobody read it then? Does anybody have the faintest idea what I'm trying to do?

*Beat.*

COLLEEN

Benita, you wanted your two mamas to meet. Maybe we could just sit and talk, is that alright? We've barely had a chance to say two words to –

BENITA

The focus of my honours thesis is the creation of a secular ritual to deconstruct property-based kinship architectures and celebrate the fact that modern women get to make choices about our lives!

ETHEL

I didn't have choices, dear. I had cancer.

COLLEEN

Poor girls didn't exactly have a lot of choices either, Ethel.

ETHEL

You chose to have premarital sex. You chose to go through with the pregnancy. You chose to give her away.

COLLEEN

(bristling)

We were herded toward adoption like cattle into the abattoir, because rich white women wanted healthy white –

ETHEL

– We weren't rich! Certainly not after they made me give up my job to look after –

COLLEEN

– If you could afford to stay home with a baby, you were rich! My parents were –

ETHEL

– My father was a dustbowl farmer! We had no *shoes!* I'm not the one who got to go to university, with poetry, and free love. I'm the one who had to stay home and *raise your abandoned child!*

BENITA

Stop! Everybody please stop!

(to Colleen)

Colleen, don't you want to get to know the person who raised me?

(to Ethel)

Mom, don't you want to get to know Colleen? Don't you have any questions you would like to ask her at all?

ETHEL

Yes. I have a question.

(to Colleen)

Did you take folic acid? Because, you know, Benita was almost born with spina –

BENITA

MOM!

ETHEL

Also, did you smoke? She had childhood asthma, you know: that doesn't run in our family...

COLLEEN

Sure I smoked. Didn't we all?

ETHEL

I didn't get myself pregnant.

COLLEEN

Not "didn't". *Couldn't*.

BENITA

(desperately)

Mom, don't you want to know where I came from?

ETHEL

You came from me. And your father. The people who gave you everything they had. That's what I always thought, anyway. But I guess you want... poetry.

(to Colleen: with difficulty)

Thank you for... for...

*She flees.*

BENITA

(to Colleen)

I'm so sorry about that –

COLLEEN

– Benita, that woman loves you. And you just used me to, I don't know why, ambush her. We both deserve better.

*She leaves.*

FREDY

So should I keep rolling, or –

BENITA

CUT, YOU IDIOT! FOR CHRISAKES, CUT!

FREDY

Wow.

*She quickly picks up her camcorder and tripod and leaves Benita alone... until Daniel appears.*

DANIEL

What's the matter, Kitty-Cat?

*Benita makes eye contact with Daniel... and is rooted to the spot. Father and daughter take each other in.*

BENITA

Nobody calls me that anymore, Dad.

DANIEL

You don't seem very surprised to see me.

BENITA

I've been seeing a lot of stuff. And I've always kind of heard your voice in my head. "Way to go, Benita. Awesome job, Benita."

DANIEL

That... doesn't sound like me.

BENITA

You've been gone for so long. It gets harder to remember what you sounded like...  
(she looks at him)

Yep, I am definitely cracking up.

DANIEL

Why are you having such a hard time, honey? You could write a paper like this in your sleep.

BENITA

The paper's not the problem, Dad. God, I am so mad at you right now. How could you do that to Mom, you – It is so unfair that I never really got to be angry at you.

DANIEL

Now's your chance.

BENITA

Except, not. Because I miss you too much.

(beat)

So what are the rules with this, uh... like, can I hug you, or...

DANIEL

I don't think so. Lucky for me, you probably can't punch me in the face, either.

(beat)

Benita, what's going on?

BENITA

I... God, Dad. People say such stupid things, all the time. "I can't adopt: I want my *own* children". "Blood will tell"; "it's all in the genes"; "the apple doesn't fall far from the

tree"... like your identity is sealed before you get pushed out of the uterus, like there's only one thing that makes you... legitimate... I've always tried to protect Mom from all that, because... she's tough and she's strong but it's amazingly easy to hurt her.

(beat)

I don't give a shit about blood. Truly. 99% of the time I don't even think about this stuff. I don't feel any of those biological things I'm supposed to feel. My womb doesn't call to me to pop out a kid. I like Colleen a lot: I don't feel like our relationship is filling some gaping psychological hole. I just found my so-called real dad's obituary, and I felt... nothing. Maybe mild pity replacing mild curiosity. No effect on my core understanding of who I am.

DANIEL

So... why am I here, honey? Why make such a *tzuris*, if this isn't something you really care about?

*Beat.*

BENITA

Remember that story we read about the prince who went outside his beautiful palace and discovered that the people were unhappy?

DANIEL

(nodding)

And then he became the Buddha.

BENITA

I was a happy kid, Dad. I'm a fortunate person. That's not "fog": that's fact. But I stepped outside the beautiful palace of my story and saw other people's suffering. Mom's suffering, and Colleen's suffering, and... this long line of unparented children stretching back to the dawn of time, and I can feel the thinness of the veil between me and them... I want to be friends with Colleen. I want to release Mom from feeling like she has to cling onto me with all her might or I'll float away from her like a helium balloon, like...

DANIEL

...like me.

BENITA

Yeah. Like you. Except you were the slowest balloon in history. You floated away from us inch by inch.

*Beat.*

DANIEL

I wish I could have spared you that. I thought about ending it while I still could, you know, but... You were so young. I couldn't stand leaving you when you still needed me so much, and then...

(beat)

I mean, who the hell reads *Cyrano* to a nine-year-old? But I had to get you excited about what was out there. And I had to prepare you for what was coming.

**SCENE 7**

*Ethel appears beside Daniel, who is sitting slumped in a wheelchair. Whenever he speaks, now, he slurs his words like a drunkard: the middle stages of ALS. They stare intensely into the middle distance.*

DANIEL

(calling)

Come on... that's it... good girl... almost there...

*They suddenly react with dismay: Ethel moves as if to run toward what they are looking at.*

DANIEL

NO.

ETHEL

Daniel, she fell down again.

DANIEL

I know that.

(to Benita, off)

GET UP.

ETHEL

She scraped her elbow: it's bleeding.

DANIEL

I'm not blind. My *eyes* are still working fine.

(calling)

Remember, Benita: the wheels want to stay upright. The bicycle wants to move forward.  
NOW GET BACK ON.

ETHEL

Danny, she's crying, let me go to her –

DANIEL

NO.

ETHEL

(sharply)

Just because you can't run to her doesn't mean I shouldn't!

(beat)

Danny. She's not ready. She needs a little more time with the training wheels –



DANIEL

I don't have more time.

(he calls again)

Benita! Throw your heart ahead of you, and ride to catch up! Keep moving forward! No matter what. You can do this *and we are not leaving here until you do.*

(beat)

Listen to me. You can do anything you put your mind to. Because you're a Simon, and that's what we do. Stand tall; hold the handlebars; and p –

*He is overcome with a fit of coughing, which leaves him spent.*

ETHEL

Danny –

DANIEL

I need to start being the bad guy once in a while, because when I'm gone, you –

ETHEL

Danny, look!

(he does)

Oh, Danny... she's riding! Our little girl is riding a bicycle! You did it!

DANIEL

She did it.

(Ethel embraces him)

I'm so scared for her.

ETHEL

I know.

**SCENE 8**

*Daniel is lying on a hospital bed, seemingly inert, but with his eyes open. Benita, age 12, reads to him.*

**BENITA**

“Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know this of a truth – that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods; nor has my own approaching end happened by mere chance. But I see clearly that to die and be released was better for me; and therefore the oracle gave no sign...” Gee, Dad: *The Death of Socrates?* You always pick the light reading, don’t you?

(she looks at the wall clock and immediately begins preparing to leave)

Aw, heck, I’m late: Mrs. Little’s going to be out front already –

*Daniel makes an unintelligible moaning sound. Benita immediately stops moving and looks at Daniel’s eyes. He begins to blink, in Morse code.*

**BENITA**

“S... T... A... Y”. Dad, I can’t. Mrs. Little’s doing us a favour, and I – I’ll ask the nurse to look in on you on my way –

*Daniel makes the sound again.*

**BENITA**

(a little annoyed)

Okay, okay: I’ll finish the –

(she finds her spot and begins to read rapidly, one eye on the clock... but also seduced by the spell of the words)

“When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O Athenians, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue...”

(with a sidelong glance at her father, she skips ahead)

“The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our separate ways: I to d – “

*She can’t go on. Daniel moans again, and she looks him in the eye.*

BENITA

“H... E... L... P...”

(beat)

“M... E...”

(beat)

“D...”

(quickly)

Love you, Dad. Gotta go.

**SCENE 9**

*Benita comes back into her university self, with the presence of Daniel. And crumples into a sodden heap.*

DANIEL

I'm so sorry, Benita. It wasn't fair, none of it was fair... I loved Ethel so much, you know. When I was a young man, as soon as I beat that cancer, I knew I wanted to... see it all, do it all, feel alive, and... leave something of myself behind... but that was selfish of me, because I always felt like something was coming for me, sooner or later: I just never thought it would be... that. You would have been better off with your biological family, or –

BENITA

(still crying, not looking up)

SHUT UP.

DANIEL

I still can't stand to see you cry –

BENITA

It just hit me: in the whole history of the universe, there was this one tiny little window where I could possibly have been your daughter... and I made it! I threaded that cosmic needle! I mean, Mom is the glue that holds me together but anything that makes me original or ambitious or curious or *me*, was lit up by you... You and Mom and me, we *found* each other! Which is... astonishing! And nobody gets it! All this shit about “real” families and “primal trauma”... These assholes don't understand what you were to me... so they can't understand what I lost... That's why Kayla can shove it up her ass. You're gonna tell me what my trauma is, bitch? *This* is my trauma, and it would snap you in two. So go f –

DANIEL

Kitty-Cat... You do know it's okay to be sad, right? When you get mad, it's usually because you're running away from your sadness.

BENITA

Jesus, Dad: I'm not twelve years old anymore! I'm not sad, I'm *grieving*... and I *hate* it... I...

(realizes)

Oh my God. I *have* been running away. From... you. How it felt losing you. I'm a *coward*...

DANIEL

No, you were a child... You got thrown to the ground, really hard: you had to protect yourself. But now it's time to get back up again. You can do anything you put your mind to –

DANIEL AND BENITA

Because you're a Simon. And that's what we do.

DANIEL

Now: the next time this Kayla person tries to play you like a cheap harmonica, what are you going to do?

BENITA

I'm going to... I'm going to zoom out.

*A transparency comes up on an overhead projector:*

WS479 Honours Thesis

**From Foundling Hospital to “Forever Families”:**

**Western Notions of Maternity and their**

**Influence on the Evolution of Fostering and**

**Adoption in the UK and Canada, 1739-1990**

by Benita Simon

April 15, 1990

BENITA

(to Kayla)

Kayla: I owe you an apology. All of our stories are different. I had no right to assume I understand what you've been through. I do have room for your story. I hope you have room for mine.

KAYLA

Yeah. Okay.

BENITA

Within this context of mutual respect, I do want to push back on your critique of the adoptive family unit as inherently inauthentic, and my framing of it as naïve. And I strongly object to your use of the term “biological family” to distinguish a family bound by blood... Biology has always been more than genes and chromosomes. Biology includes all of the processes and relationships that are necessary for an organism to thrive. A baby left in a basket will not thrive... not unless somebody picks it up.

PROFESSOR MACIVOR

Thank you for that enlightening presentation, Benita. Are there any other questions?

**SCENE 10**

BENITA

(to the audience)

Now that I'm older  
the story I tell myself about myself  
looks different than it did when I was a child.  
In this story, I am an apple branch  
well-grafted onto my family tree  
yet bearing traces of the tree I came from.  
Grafting makes the sweetest apples  
but not every graft will take.  
Still –

*Her cell phone rings: she takes it out and looks at it.*

BENITA

Shit. Excuse me.

*She answers the call. We see a projection of Ethel...  
or at least, the top of her head, which is now very  
grey.*

BENITA

Hi, Mom. I'm kind of in the middle of something – you do know you're video-calling me, right?

ETHEL

(popping into frame)

Oh dear! I'm sorry, honey: could you maybe just help me download this new –

BENITA

Did you call tech support?

ETHEL

You have to press so many buttons...

BENITA

Mom, we're paying for three months of tech support, so – why are you rotating?

ETHEL

(who is, in fact, rotating)

Dear, couldn't you just help me with the –

BENITA

*I am paying them to help you with this so I don't have to.*

(beat)

Mom?

*Ethel lets out a sob.*

BENITA

Oh Jesus, are you –

(realises)

Wait... today's the anniversary, isn't it?

(sighs)

Mom? I'm sorry. I'm gonna finish what I'm doing and then we'll figure this out together. And tonight we'll light a Yahrzeit candle for Dad. Okay? Love you.

*Although Ethel's camera has stopped rotating, it has also drifted downward in orientation so that we now see only her neck: but we can hear that she is sniffing.*

ETHEL

Love you.

*ETHEL disappears.*

BENITA

In my new, revised story  
There is sorrow, there is suffering  
a large cast of characters  
and no certainty but this:  
love is more powerful than DNA  
stronger than separation  
yet love conquers nothing.  
Love opens you up to ultimate grief  
which floods your heart  
corrodes your veins  
settles into your fat cells  
Only to melt back into your bloodstream  
at intervals you cannot control.  
Still –

*Somewhere nearby, her tablet rings.*

BENITA

Oh my god.

*As Benita retrieves her tablet and picks up the videoconference call, Colleen appears, also much older.*

BENITA

Hey Colleen. I'm kind of busy right now –

COLLEEN

No problem, sweetie. That seat sale's ending today –

BENITA

I promise I am not gonna miss Janice's wedding.

COLLEEN

Perfect. By the way, one of the groomsmen is this really cute young guy from Toronto, a musician: Janice says his divorce just went through and I'm sure he'd love to –

BENITA

Okay, I'll be there in August, bye!

(she hangs up)

Now, as I was saying, I –

THE STAGE MANAGER

(over the God mic)

Benita: phone call.

BENITA

MOTHERFUCKER. Excuse me.

THE STAGE MANAGER

(God mic)

Fredy. Says it's urgent.

*Benita sighs. We hear the crackling sound of the STAGE MANAGER's cell on the God mic, overpowered by the din of banging, screaming children.*

FREDY

(voice)

Hey, Dork. Infanticide still illegal?

BENITA

In humans? Yep.



FREDY

(voice)

Damn.

BENITA

Tell them, if they smarten up, Auntie Benita's coming over tomorrow to take them to the zoo.

THE CHILDREN

(voice)

YAAAY!

BENITA

Love to Yolanda. Bye.

(as the God mic cuts out, she tries to collect herself)

Now, where was I? Uh...

Nope: absolutely no idea.

Let's see: where did we start from?

Oh yeah... the "Four Questions".

"Who am I? Where did I come from?"

I'll be asking those my whole life long.

"Where do I belong?"

That's easy: with the people I love, who love me.

The ones I care for, who have cared for me.

"Whom can I trust?"

With my life? Them. With my story? You.

And now this story belongs to you, too.

I have floated it to you, in a basket of reeds.

With a note saying, Please take care of this bear.

Like family.

**APPENDIX**

**1. Selected email correspondence between Sharon Neufeld and Leanna Brodie**

*[Leanna Brodie. "My Thesis." Sent to Sharon Neufeld, 31 March 2021, 10:52 p.m.]*

Hi Sharon,

Quick check-in.

So. Part of my challenge this year has been to really define my thesis. And I'm not there yet. I kind of sort of know what it is, but it's a gut feeling, and that's not good enough for an MFA.

I know that I want to talk about adoption. I want to start from the first person (which may morph into a character) and circle outward, to the Home Children, to London's Foundling Hospital, to Pip Estella and David Copperfield and Superman and London's Foundling Hospital, to the Ugly Duckling and Oedipus and Moses.

I want to talk about the Adoption Triad: that in every adoption there are three corners, and one is a birth mother, and one is a child, and the other one could be the state, or the nuns, or Angelina Jolie, or the Man in the Yellow Hat, or Pharaoh's Daughter.

I want to talk about the fact that in any of the stories that has ever been told, one corner of that triangle disappears. Because we have been trained not to hold the whole figure in our hearts. Because it doesn't fit into patriarchal notions of family.

So.

I would like to invite you and Mom to join me on that journey. In your own time and in your own way.

1. The first thing you need to know is that university ethics guidelines these days are really fucking strict. If, for example, you make an art quilt or send me a letter or photo, or if I record a Zoom session, I won't be allowed to use your words, objects, or images without your informed consent, and you will be able to revoke that consent at any time. **You will always be in charge. And they will get me to put those terms in writing.**
2. The second thing you need to know is that Mom is going to be involved, under the same terms. There will be no "gotcha" interviews, no Oprah moments, and no public surprises. You will be able to review my materials at all times.
3. The third thing is that I don't know much beyond what I've just told you: I am quite literally making all of this up as I go along. I don't know how I would incorporate whatever you want to share with me: maybe this'll end up as an interpretive dance with me throwing six boxes of Huggies in the air! But I think this is a piece about our notions of family, of belonging, of maternity, of women, and how adoption and abandonment challenge them all. (And, yeah, I would really love to hear more about those orphanages! And wasn't Olive Peel a Home Child?)

Finally: get back to me when you get back to me. But I've been thinking a lot about how much bullshit has been spouted on this topic my whole life by people who don't know the first thing

about it.

And I've been thinking about what a fateful coincidence it is that you and I are finally in the same city, though unable to meet... and that this might be a way for us to have a really meaningful exchange with each other.

And I've been thinking that, although I am a very private person, I am also an artist... and the more I go on, the more I think that being private just means that all my stories are going to die with me. Everything in my brain, that no one else knows, will just be gone. And I'm not sure that's what I want.

Anyway. Have a think about it. Would you be willing to take part in my thesis play... knowing that you can withdraw at any time... and see where it goes?

Any questions?

Best,

Leanna Brodie

*[Sharon Neufeld. "re: My Thesis." Received by Leanna Brodie, 31 March 2021, 11:17 p.m.]*

Quick reply.

I would love, be thrilled, to be a part of this.

(As long as it doesn't bother your Mom. )

I've over the last year or so been mentally, so far, assembling a quilt of 'moi'; what I've thought about, what I think, what I do, what I've learned. It's that time in my life if ever there is to be one. And most days I even remember a lot of it!

This couldn't be more opportune and the thought that this gathering is something for 'toi' – well – no words fine enough.

Would you like writings, interviews, flower arrangements (f-o bouquets are actually a thing 🤪), interpretations by Circassian dancing maidens, other?



*[Sharon Neufeld. "MFA stuff 1." Received by Leanna Brodie, 1 April 2021, 8:13 p.m.]*

My dear Leanna,

With this I give you consent to share anything I speak to you about and/or write to you on this topic, with whomever you choose, including but not limited to your spouse, your adoptive, real mom and family, your academic advisors, fellow students and anyone associated with the development, mounting or publishing of any drama or other writing you may create that includes or references these, my conversations and writings. (I know you may still need a legal thingy, but

this is enough for me to getting on with.)

That's out of the way. Movin/ on....

*[Leanna Brodie. "A draft." Sent to Sharon Neufeld. 9 March 2022, 4:59 p.m.]*

Dear Sharon,

I am glad that Garry is coming through with flying colours, and sorry for all the stress that you are under! And I hope we can see each other soon.

I have JUST finished a draft of my thesis play: BIOLOGICAL. As in, this morning.

I have incorporated elements of your story, and our story... but it's a fictionalized treatment, because that is what I do. And, trigger warning (which I hate, but I'm making an exception): it's hardcore in all sorts of ways, because I gave myself the challenge to be blisteringly honest rather than taking care of people's feelings as is my usual MO. But I think it's also written with as much love and empathy and complexity as I can muster.

That said, if there is any info in there that feels like a violation, I will remove or disguise it. And if you feel I'm way off-base in areas inspired by your story, I will listen hard.

And if this is a shitty time and you just want to be left in peace to take care of your husband and

knit, then that's okay, too. Your name isn't on this (unless you give your permission for a dedication, which I would love to do). You have to take care of your own self first.

With gratitude for all you have unselfishly given me and so bravely shared with me,

Love.

Leanna

*[attachment omitted]*

*[Sharon Neufeld. "re: A draft." Received by Leanna Brodie, 9 March 2022, 6:39 p.m.]*

HO-LY CRAP!!!

Thank you x 1,000,000.

This is excellent+++++++

More later when I calm down from having a very immersive experience and G doesn't need anything.

So much love to you, so much praise and so many medals for bravery under fire.

S.

## **2. Selected email correspondence between Phyllis Lynch and Leanna Brodie**

*[Leanna Brodie. "a draft." Sent to Phyllis Lynch, 9 March 2022, 5:06 p.m.]*

Hey Mom,

I have JUST finished a draft of the thing. As in, this morning.

I have incorporated elements of our story... but it's a *fictionalized treatment with fictionalized characters*, because that is what I do. WARNING: it is hard stuff in all kinds of ways, because I gave myself the challenge to be very dramatic and blisteringly honest rather than taking care of people's feelings as is my usual MO. It is inspired by certain times in our lives that you may not want to revisit, and you may find that too much to read about. But I think it's also written with as much love and empathy and complexity as I can muster.

That said, if you do want to read it, and there is any fact-based info in there that feels like a violation, I will remove or disguise it. And if you feel I'm way off-base in areas inspired by your story, I will listen hard.

And if you just want to be left in peace, that's okay, too. Your name isn't on this (unless you give your permission for a dedication, which I would love to do). You have to take care of your own self first.

With gratitude for all you have unselfishly given me and so bravely shared with me,

Love.

Leanna



*[attachment omitted]*

*[Phyllis Lynch. "re: a draft." Received by Leanna Brodie, 9 March 2022, 7:33 p.m.]*

Well done Muffin. I have always believed in you and your amazing talent. I will read it in the morning as I am weary and need a fresh mind. Thanks for letting me know and I will reply after reading if that's ok. I am very aware of the dark side of my life and I have to be honest with myself and realize that no one is perfect ! Will look forward to the morning. Good night sleep well. Mom 😊👍

Sent from my iPad

*[Phyllis Lynch. "Biological!" Received by Leanna Brodie, 10 Mar 2022, 3:01 p.m.]*

That's a powerful masterpiece!

Too overwhelming to discuss by email so when you are able could we talk?

Love mom 😊

Sent from my iPad