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# The First Act

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The First Act

Thesis submitted to the Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts in English

by

Angela Hunt

Dr. Chris Green, Ph.D., Committee Chairperson  
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Marshall University

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## ABSTRACT

### The First Act

By Angela Hunt

The First Act is a creative thesis which explores the boundaries of biography and autobiography, fact and fiction, as the life of my mother, Deborah Wolfe, and my own, intersect in prose and drama. My purpose in writing this thesis was to examine and seek an understanding of my own relationship with the past and the present, as I explored the roots of my family history, specifically through the eyes of my mother, while using aspects of my family's West Virginian and Mormon heritage. By reading the following story, you will, in a way, go on that journey with me and my mother, and will provide us with an audience to listen to the voice of the hidden feminine psyches found within my mother and within myself.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Chris Green for being there whenever I needed him. He guided me throughout this entire process, and encouraged me when I thought I couldn't go on anymore. He inspired me to take risks in my writing, and he allowed me to find my own creative way of telling this story. Second, I would like to thank my husband Adam and my sons, William, Ethan and Benjamin for their patience and support during this project. And finally, I would like to thank my mother for all of the time and emotional energy that she spent with me as we journeyed into her past; without her help, this project would not have been possible.

## Introduction – The First Act

My creative thesis began with several goals in mind: I wanted to use aspects of my family's cultural and religious heritage in my writing, and I wanted to look for ways that "fictional" practices could be used, such as in the structure of the text, the ordering of events, using poetry or poetic descriptions of the events or people found with the text, as well as standard biographical techniques. I was not exactly sure how this would be accomplished. However, keeping these goals in mind, I set out— notebook and tape recorder in hand— to learn about and to understand my mother's (Deborah Wolfe's) life and how her life has affected my own.

As I wrote my mother's story (thus also writing the story of my ancestors and my own), I wanted to strive to be truthful and ethical as I reconstructed this family history. I wanted to remember that I have been given the privilege of writing about others' lives, and I recognized that with this honor comes much responsibility. I knew that many sensitive themes could come up during my thesis, such as sexual and physical abuse, mental illness, etc., and I wanted to work carefully to render these issues in an artistic but appropriate way.

I wanted to experiment with my writing, and like Paul Auster and Annie Ernaux, I hoped to find a balance between the biography and autobiography. In the tradition of Suzannah Lessard, Pat Mora, Margaret Forster, Henry F. Mays, Michael Ondaatje, and James Elroy ( to name a few), I wanted to search for my identity through a journey into my own family history. Also, as I constructed my piece, I wanted to find ways to borrow from other genres (memoir, poetry, biography, novel, drama, etc.) thus creating a hybrid creative nonfiction work.

As I pieced together the events of my mother's life, I wanted to use research methods

that would draw from various fields, including sociology, history, anthropology and psychoanalysis. Specifically, I planned on using personal interviews, newspaper accounts, journal entries, letters, photographs, television interviews/programs, and creative works by family members to uncover my mother's story.

My purpose in writing this thesis was to examine and seek an understanding of my own relationship with the past and the present, as I explored the roots of my family history, specifically through the eyes of my mother. I knew that the events of my mother's life story were those which could fill many novels, yet they were all true, and she was the one who experienced it all. I hoped that I could present her story using a mixture of creative writing techniques, creating an end product which could be both entertaining and inspirational to the reader.

My mother has overcome many trials throughout her life, and she has received many awards, but what I found most inspiring of all is that, in the end, she chose to live and devote her life to raising eight children on a mountaintop in West Virginia (as un-glamorous as that may have been). She gave birth at home to each of her children with one of the last remaining midwives in our region watching over her. My mother also homeschooled each of her children, and gave my siblings and I many opportunities to travel around the world with her to many parts of North America and Asia, and to study within many different fields, especially within the performing arts.

When the time came for me to leave home to pursue my studies on my own, I left with the skills necessary to live an independent and successful life away from my mountain home.

Like my mother, after I had lived away from West Virginia for five years, I realized that the hills were in my blood, and although many regions of the world have many things to offer, they could not take the place of my true home.

When I became pregnant with my first son, I felt the pull of home drawing me, and—desiring to give birth with the midwife who delivered me, on the mountaintop that I took my first breath on—I returned home. A few months later, in the room where I was born in, my son came into the world. Because of events such as this one, my mother and I share a bond that extends beyond a normal mother/daughter relationship.

However, with all that my mother and I have shared together, many questions regarding our family history and her life still remain unanswered. Within my mother are memories of events and family members which she has tried to push away because of the emotional turmoil that they have caused her. She has never gone very deep into these matters, but she has always told me that someday she would tell me everything as best she could.

For many years, writers have come to my mother, wanting to write her story, and she has always refused, planning one day to write this story herself. She had never given anyone permission to write her story—until now. Because of the special bond that I mother and I share and because of our joint desire to understand the intricacies of being part of our family (which involves the genetic connections that we share, especially in regards to clinical depression), my mother chose to let me write her story.

By choosing this topic for my creative thesis, I followed a line of writers who have made the decision to write on the lives of their parents while using a postmodern belief that the genres of autobiography, memoir and biography are, as Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir, a professor of Comparative Literature from the University of Iceland, states in *Borderlines: Autobiography and*

*Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, “fertile ground for experimental writing” (1). As I investigated my mother’s life, I explored how a writer must constantly encounter “borderlines between fiction and autobiography” when writing about the past (Guðmundsdóttir 6).

I hoped that the nature of my thesis project would allow me to create something which would demonstrate what I have always wanted to do: place myself as an active participant within my own text. I wanted to be the explorer of my own background, and I wanted to allow others to experience the emotions surrounding the discoveries I hoped to make as my mother and I journeyed deep into the recesses of the mysterious world of our family and our relationship with one another.

The genre that I most often find myself writing generally falls under the umbrella term of creative nonfiction, and the genres of my thesis oscillate between biography, memoir, and drama. I did not really become familiar with the term “creative nonfiction” until the beginning of 2007; however, from the beginning of my writing career, I have been driven to tell the stories of those around me and those who have come before me. In my previous work as a playwriting student (recreating scenes from my family’s life for my plays) or in my short story writing (where I have based many of my fictional characters around immediate family members), I have observed a fine line between autobiography and fiction. This “borderline” between fictional and autobiographical writing seems located in many areas of autobiographical writing. According to Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir,

...the relationship between the fictional and autobiographical aspects of life-writing can be a close one, as can be seen for instance in the close relationship between memory, writing and fiction, so that one would be hard-pressed to define



them as two distinct (and opposing) modes of discourse. The (trouble causing) form, the biography, and its sister genre, autobiography, seem inevitably to oscillate between facts and fictions (263).

The question of how the past is written or recreated caused me to search the world of contemporary creative nonfiction to examine how other authors have treated this subject of representing their past, or the past of their ancestors in current life writing. During this search I found that life writing (i.e., autobiography, memoir and biography, etc.) often addresses many significant issues, including gender, ethnicity, memory, family relationships, etc., and perhaps most importantly, it addresses and questions an individual's relationship with the past. I believe that by coming to a better understanding of the past, we may be able to prepare and embrace our present and future selves and lives.

Although my writing has been influenced in some way by all the books and plays I have ever read, there are some writers specifically, that have make me excited about the possibilities of writing within the "creative nonfiction" genre. Michael Ondaatje is one of these writers. For example, in his text, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje write about Billy the Kid's life in a way that was not limited to prose, or to poetry, but utilized many literary techniques, thus creating what Ondaatje called a work of "half theater, half film, half book, half music hall" (Caldwell 41). Although I did not blend together as many genres as Ondaatje has, I did find a way to combine the factual and imaginative worlds surrounding my mother's past, and my collection of this past, through memoir and drama. The facts of my mother's story are surrounded by the emotions that they dwell within, just as they are surrounded by the objectivity of concrete documents and the subjectivity of human memory.

By reading and writing creative nonfiction I feel that we may, as Robert L. Root, Jr. and Michael Steinberg state in the introduction of *The Fourth Genre*, “find a place to connect to the personal voice, to connect not to art or knowledge alone but to another mind” (xxxix). I chose to write in the genres of memoir, biography and drama, because I wanted to be open not only to myself, but to my readers. I wanted to open myself up emotionally in ways I had never done before—because I felt like if my mother was willing to then I should as well. Root and Steinberg express well the feelings I had when I entered into my thesis project hoping to use the genre of creative nonfiction:

This genre grants writers permission to explore without knowing where they’ll end up, to be tentative, speculative, and reflective. Because writing creative nonfiction so often reveals and expresses the writer’s mind at work and play, the genre permits us to chart the more whimsical, nonrational twists and turns of our own imaginations and psyches. More frequently than not, the subject matter becomes the catalyst or trigger for some personal journey or inquiry or self-interrogation.(xxv).

Indeed, I did not know where I would end up, or what my final product would look like. I only knew that I wanted to be open to these “twists and turns” of my imagination and psyche (Root and Steinberg xxv). What did occur, in the end, was a personal journey which was much more difficult, more emotionally taxing, and more rewarding than I had ever expected.

Although I read diaries, newspapers, baby books, looked through photo albums, watched clips from television interviews, etc., for the content of my thesis, I really felt that because of the nature of my project, the majority of my primary research would be dependent on interviews with my mother. I had done some previous oral history work in the past, but this had not

prepared me for the difficulties that arose from being dependent on someone besides me to complete this work.

Writing my mother's story was a struggle. She lost her job a few months after I had committed to this thesis project, and as she sunk deeper and deeper into her depression, I found myself questioning why I ever thought it was a good idea to do this type of project. I had wanted to write my mother's story for many reasons, one of which was in hopes of improving the relationship that I had with my mother, but this constant need to interview her started to damage it even more.

I wanted to excavate her past, but this history of hers was filled with pain. I hoped to record the truth—to dig into her memories and extract interesting details and vivid stories—what I got instead was, for the most part, tears. These people—these family members of mine—they were buried in her mind, and when she uncovered them, they came back to life in ways that I still don't completely understand. They were like characters on foggy stage, and I was their audience, unable to see them clearly.

One night, my mother's past appeared to me in a dream. My mother, in all of her different periods of life, appeared on a stage with these characters, and I watched the events of her life from the house of the theatre. The inspiration for much of the text within my creative thesis comes from this dream. I had not really considered writing my mother's story in play form, but in the end, it helped me to do exactly what I had wanted to do. And it made perfect sense—after all, I had grown up watching my mother on stage, and it felt right to return the essence of my mother to a stage.

I began this project determined to keep an open mind and an open heart throughout the process. I did not know what my final project would look like; I only hoped that it would be an

honest reflection of the journey I would take with my family, and with myself. I wrote this piece you are about to read to fulfill my thesis requirements, but mostly it is for my mother and for myself. Although this text began just as a thesis project, it ended up being a life-changing event in my life and in my mother's life.

When I started this project, I think I did so with a pre-conceived notion of how it would all play out: my mother and I would sit by the pool of New House, sipping lemonade, while she spoke about the past, the tape recorder working hard to document everything. But at that point I had no idea that she would lose her job of twenty-four years; I didn't know that much of her identity was wrapped up in a job she had received shortly after winning Mrs. America, and that without it, she would sink into a deep depression that would scare all of us.

As I worked to construct her story of what happened before I was born—of what happened in her young life that pushed her to the point of suicide—I watched her being pushed to that point again. Many nights went by during the course of this project where I would find myself dreaming of my mother's young self, and in these dreams I tried to protect my mother from her past. My mother's memories became my own nightmares, and my brain wrestled to find a way to make everything right. This is where the idea of my play—my “closet drama” of sorts—really came from.

One of my main goals for this thesis project was to find ways to have my family and cultural background be reflected in the writing. My mother, my brother John, my sister Mary and I have always found each other best when we were on the stage together. The theatre (any theatre) has always brought us closer and has given us a place where we feel connected, bonded, free to be ourselves—part of me wants to say that the theatre gives us a release from the real world, but perhaps, for us as a family, it is our real world. By placing my mother's story on a

stage, I was able to incorporate this family tradition into my writing. Now, looking back, I truly don't think there would have been a better way to write her story.

Another goal was to incorporate by religious background into my writing. I am a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (otherwise known as a Mormon), even if I rarely go to church these days. And one of the significant beliefs of my church is that there is a pre-existence—a place where we all exist before we come to earth. Now, although this is not exactly church doctrine, many within my church share the belief that family groups have been decided before our mortal existence, and that before we are born, we may be able to look down upon our family members as they prepare the way for us. I centered the structure of my play on this belief. I saw the stage as our mortal world, and the audience members as the numerous spirits which have yet to come to this earth. Throughout the characters interact with the technical crew of the theatre. I felt like this world would not be complete without these important characters (like the Stage Manager) who keep the “acts” moving along as smoothly as possible (even when future “performers” decide to interfere).

The drama portion of my thesis is fictional, but it is largely based on factual information gathered during the long, tedious and emotional research process. The portions of my thesis dealing with the events surrounding the actual process of gathering this information come from what I recorded in my journal or on my tape recorder. I share this aspect of composition because I know there is often a debate about “truth” and “fiction” whenever a writer states they are working under the “creative nonfiction” genre. Memories are tricky—and when any moment has passed and is thought about or written about or talked about again—it becomes a reconstruction based on memories and perceptions and feelings all jumbled together. In the end, I tried to

create the most honest representation that I could: the thesis presents this story in a way which I feel most closely reflects the emotional truth of the past.

Each day, as I worked on my thesis, when my mother and I spoke (at least on the days where I could get her to speak on the topic of her past life) I felt like I was her constant companion guiding her on a journey through her own past, and because this past was so hard for her to talk about, I often felt like I needed to protect her, and to save her from it, even though I knew this was impossible. The characters of “Me” and “My Mother” represent the emotions that we felt during the writing process. By reading the following story, you will, in a way, go on that journey with me and my mother, and will provide us with an audience to listen to the voice of the hidden feminine psyches found within my mother and within myself.

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# THE FIRST ACT

My mother stood on the stage in a spotlight. She spoke and everyone listened.

I watched as she portrayed women from all walks of life—all beautiful, all coming to life on the stage, through her. I wanted to be with her there, in front of all of those people, but I was too young. My father brought me to all of her plays, and I sat in the auditorium, my feet dangling from the red, upholstered chairs, my hands twisting the program that the ushers had given me. I couldn't read yet, but my father showed me where her name was in the program. I stroked the letters with my finger as the orchestra started to play.

On stage my mother was happy; on the stage my mother could find happiness in these new worlds created by playwrights.

I wanted my mother to be happy.

At home, my mother cried. I never knew why, I only knew that I could not make her happy. I was two, and I stood in the kitchen, looking down upon my mother huddled on the floor, a washrag clenched in her hands. My mother worked so hard to fulfill the role she placed upon herself, but this life she chose was a far cry from the one she knew as a child. She knew her mother would never be proud of her for this life. Her mother could not forgive her for this life.

My family was poor, and my mother never knew what poor was until she married my father. He worked hard for her—he had three jobs at the same time and I hardly ever saw him. My mother made our clothes, our curtains, our bedspreads, and I didn't know that we didn't have a lot of money; I was happy enough running naked in our garden, feeling the dirt between my toes. But then I would turn and I would see tears running down my mother's beautiful face.

Please don't be sad Mommy. I brought you a flower, Mommy.

Her past weighs her down, presses upon her shoulders, pushes her toward the core of the earth where her family is buried, but I don't know any of this. I am only two. Her face in the spotlight is what I knew—her smiles and her tears.

When I grow up I will help her be happy.

I will.

But first I must learn *why* she is sad. What happened to my beautiful mother, so long ago, before I was even born?



### *Trying to Collect My Mother's Story- Part One*

I walk in through the back door of New House. New House, (as is so termed by my four year old son) is my family's new house by Ritter Park. The first time I came to this house, it was like an honest to goodness mansion to me—four levels, spiral staircases, servant's quarters, gardens and swimming pools and bath houses—but now it reminds me of some kind of fancy prison for royalty.

I hate this house.

It is a radical change from our house on Mt. Union.

My father built our house on Mt. Union brick by brick; who knows who built this house. Every day I wish my family could go home, back to the country, across the road from my husband and my children, just where they were when I moved back home to West Virginia, but my father has to run for mayor, and the only way to run for mayor of a city is to, well, *live* in that city. Thus, my family has found themselves renting and living in what my mother likes to call the "Mayor's Mansion," or what my children call "New House." I know that they can't afford to live here, and I always end up feeling guilty for all the money my parents spent on me growing up that could have gone towards paying rent in this house. If only I had never needed braces. If only I had refused to take all those ballet, piano and horseback riding lessons. Oh well.

I put my bag down (filled with protein bars, a tape recorder, my laptop and photographs) on the tiled floor of the entryway, and look around.

"Hello?" I yell out. Where is everyone? There are eight children in my family, two dogs, two cats, and Maw Maw, none of whom are in sight.

"Hello?" I ask again, "Where is everyone?"

Buddy, my family's German Shepherd puppy, comes running in from the kitchen and jumps up, his paws landing on my shoulders. I push him down, trying to keep from getting scratched to pieces by his giant puppy claws, trying to protect my pregnant belly. My father follows behind, wearing his worn jean overalls and muck boots. My mother always wants him to look more "mayoral" but I know my father would wear his overalls every day if he could get away with it.

"Where is she?" I ask him.

He sighs, and motions toward the spiraling staircase.

"Up there," he says. His body language always speaks more than words, and I can tell from the way his shoulders hunch, and by his eagerness to escape to the outside, back to our country road, that my mother has been inside her bedroom all day. I feel bad for my dad because he just wants to be able to retire—he wants to fish and garden and ride horses on the trails of Mt. Union—but he can't because my mom needs him to run for mayor. He's the county Sheriff right now, but he has to run for mayor because Sheriff's only have an eight year term. His eight years are almost up and he won't let mom file for bankruptcy.

Money is a bitch.

I walk through the foyer of this house—this house which stinks of money and which does nothing but create the façade of wealth within my family to be built up more and more, day after day—and begin my walk up the spiral staircase covered in thick, blue carpet. My mother loves the way this house is decorated in various shades of baby or powder blue—the walls are blue, the accents of the walls are shades of blue—and I swear she loves blue because her mother was obsessed with the color blue—but she would never admit to this. Admittedly, I too like the color blue, but I pretend that my favorite color is purple—close, but still deviating from the original.

I climb the spiral stairs to the second floor, keeping one hand on the banister and one hand underneath of my growing stomach (I will refer to it from this point as “The Belly”). At the top of the stairs I stop for a moment to catch my breath. (It always amazes me how hard it is to do simple tasks when I’m carrying a new baby in “The Belly.”) Hanging on a large (blue, of course) wall at the top of these stairs is a giant painting of my mother when she was Mrs. America.

In the portrait, my mother stands in a stunning, beaded evening gown (blue once again), clutching a mass of red roses (rather than the washrag which tormented her in her younger, married years). Her hair is a mess of black, thick curls, and large bangs. On her head is a rhinestone crown, proving that she is the epitome of 1980’s beauty. The portrait reminds us all that she could have been famous, if she had but chosen a different path—a path without children, a richer husband, and a more stereotypical religion. My mother says that pageants are terrible, that she wants people to stop dwelling on her pageant titles, that pageants promote superficiality and eating disorders and breast implants (the last of which my mother has always wanted, stemming mostly from a traumatic honey-moon incident in which my father, laying with my mother in the dark, thought he was stroking a mosquito bite on my mother’s back when really he was stroking her nipple which rested on a very flat chest) but we are all reminded of her pageant days every time we climb these stairs.

I walk to her bedroom, stopping outside of the closed door. I knock and wait for her response.

Nothing.

“Mom, are you there?” I ask through the door.

I turn the knob and walk into the room. Although there is still daylight outside, inside her bedroom I see nothing but shadows and figures. She has pulled thick blinds across all of the large windows, and her figure is hidden beneath a pile of blankets.

I sit down on her bed, remove my flip flops (the only shoes which still fit on my swollen feet), and get the tape recorder out of my bag. I push play on the tape to make sure it is in the right place, and lay down on the bed, my head falling into the mountain of pillows. I look over at the mound which is my mother.

“Mom?”

I gently nudge at what I think is my mother’s back, and instead of a human voice responding, I am attacked by our family’s freak of canine nature—the Chihuahua named Baby. Baby leaps from the blankets and proceeds to bounce up and down, her high voice piercing my ears, and her little feet pouncing against The Belly. I grab this hated family pet and put her on the bedroom floor. She continues to jump up and down, yapping non-stop.

“Mom?”

It is hard to be heard over top of Baby’s yelping. I am amazed that it doesn’t wake Mom up.

“Mom? You said you’d help me today.”

She stirs.

“Angie?” She says, rolling over and looking at me. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know. About six o’clock.”

“I’ve got to get up. I have to go to work soon,” she says. Mom works at a department store at night stocking the shelves and unloading the trucks. She worked as a spokesperson for over twenty years for a beauty and health company but was recently fired without any notice.

She blames this on the fact that the beauty industry is obsessed with young blondes blessed with large bosoms and small brains, which she, of course, has neither of.

I hate that company. I hate how for years they plastered her face on magazines and boxes and advertisements because she was young and pretty and a pageant queen. Now she thinks she isn't worth anything just because she doesn't have her twenty-year-old body any more. I think about how I've never had a body anywhere near her twenty-year-old body. I am twenty-five and on my third baby. I can't even see my own feet when I stand up and look down. I am not a beauty queen, but I am the daughter of a beauty queen and the sister of a beauty queen. Sometimes I have to try really hard to remind myself that I am worth something.

I sigh and nudge her blanketed mass again. She has to talk to me. She told me I could write her life story for my thesis, and if she doesn't, I might fail out of graduate school. (Graduate school for me is the equivalent of Miss America for my mom and my sisters. I want to win the crown—or well, at least that little cap thing they give you when they decide you are smart enough.)

“Mom, you said you would talk to me today.”

“I will.” She pauses, and looks at me. I feel like she is examining my face. “Just give me a minute. Okay?”

She rolls away from me and pulls the blanket over her head.

I start to have second thoughts on my decision to place the earning of my graduate degree on the memories of my family. I know the memories are there—I just don't know how to get to them.

“Mom, can you just tell me something? Anything, please? Make yourself wake up and remember.”

“I don’t want to remember,” I hear her say from beneath the blankets.

“Can we just start at the beginning? Tell me about *her*.”

“I don’t want to talk about her,” she says, “You already know everything anyway.”

“That’s not true. You know that’s not true.”

“I could tell you about what I should have done a long time ago. What I almost did—if your father hadn’t stopped me. If I hadn’t answered that damn phone.”

“All right. Tell me about that.”

She begins to speak.

## PROLOGUE

*(From the wings of the stage, I watch her. She is methodical in her movement—carefully folding her clothes, placing them in her dresser; sweeping the floor, dusting the furniture— her face is calm. As she moves about her apartment, her body movements demonstrate contentment and a commitment to these seemingly meaningless actions. Satisfied with the cleanliness and orderliness of the set, she begins the task of washing her body. Standing in her shower, upstage left, she lets the water flow over her body. She closes her eyes and the water mixes with the tears that escape from the lids. She dries her body and covers herself with a clean set of clothing. As she opens the medicine cabinet I can hear her heart beating—my own heart joins in unison, creating a pulse within and around me. She chooses a combination of pills, and fills a glass with water. She walks to her bed, and sits. She places the pills in her mouth and swallows them down, graceful, even as her body fights against and then relents to the objects as they slide down within her. Pause. She pulls the blankets back and lays down, her heart continuing to thunder in my mind. As a spotlight slowly comes up on the bed down stage center, and the lights fade out on the stage, the sound of a heartbeat is heard throughout the theatre. It is my mother’s heart—living, the blood pushing through the veins, fighting to survive. It’s pulse pounds and throbs within me, and the ringing of a phone—her phone—joins in. No answers. She can’t hear it—she will miss his call. She can’t hear the ringing!  
I can see the Stage Manager in the wings. I yell out to him.)*

ME

Tell the sound operator to turn the ringing up—she can’t hear it; she’ll miss her cue.

*(The Stage Manager signals for me to be quiet, and then, the beating stops—her heart—and the ringing—stop and the audience gasps.)*

*(Silence.)*

STAGE MANAGER

*(The Stage Manager sighs, then turns to the Curtain Rigger)* All right, close the...

*(I reach out and stop him. I cannot let him close the curtain on her. I don't understand why they are ending the show before the second act.)*

ME

*(To the Stage Manager)* Please, don't do this. I have a feeling that it's not supposed to end this way.

STAGE MANAGER

She has made the decision that the play will conclude here. We won't stop her.

*(The Stage Manager signals to the Curtain Rigger that the curtain should be brought down.)*

ME

Where is the playwright? Where is the director? Tell them what she is doing to the play!

STAGE MANAGER

They won't prevent her from doing this.

ME

Why not? They must! What about all of us? We haven't even gone on yet!

STAGE MANAGER

She has decided that the play will end with the death scene. The script has already been revised.

ME

Why weren't we informed of this? Her choices will affect us all.

STAGE MANAGER

You will just have to live with it.

ME

But we can't live with it. That's the whole point. We will never really live until we have the chance to play our roles. *(I gesture to the stage.)* Out there—that is where life is born. We are only shadows until then.

STAGE MANAGER

Even if you were the playwright, you aren't the director. You don't have the authority to tell me what to do. We already have all of the lighting directions written into the script, and the sound board operator is waiting for his cue. And what will the audience think? We must be concerned about them. The finale is coming up, and the actors are putting on their mourning costumes.



ME

You must understand—this is not the way it should be. I'm here, aren't I? Look at me, look at them. *(I motion to my siblings waiting in the wings behind me.)* She can't poison herself. For our sakes, you must listen to me. If we go back to the beginning, perhaps we can change the end. I'll go with her. She'll see for herself. I'll tell her. I'll explain it all. Please, just let me take her back.

STAGE MANAGER

But what will the audience think? They came to watch this play, and you want to change it? They won't stay for an entire revised version.

*(My Brother John, wanting to help, comes forward.)*

MY BROTHER JOHN

We will be her audience. Let us watch for ourselves from the front of the house.

ME

Yes, yes, of course. *(To the Stage Manager)* You see? She will have an audience. Let me lead her through her play, until the time comes, and then we will have her choose. I know it is her choice.

*(The Stage Manager looks at Me, and then My Brother John.) My brother and I are hopeful, but not yet fully relieved. I can feel my chest start to ache for the beating of my mother's heart to return. And then—)*

STAGE MANAGER

All right, fine. But they *(He motions to my brothers and sisters standing behind me)* must take their place in the audience.

ME

*(I turn to My Brother John, saying)* Go with the others and watch the performance. Give her encouragement at the right moments and I will try to help her see why the play must end differently.

*(My Brother John nods his head and he leads our family to the house of the theatre. After the last of my siblings disappear into the darkness of the house, I turn to the Stage Manager.)*

ME

May I go out to her now?

STAGE MANAGER

You can try. But remember, you can't change the story completely. She must still play the part that was destined to her.

*(I nod and then begin my journey onto the stage. The lights are dark and it's hard to find my way across, but I make it to her. I stand by her bed, looking down at her dim figure, still covered by blankets.)*

ME

*(I yell off into the wings to the Stage Manager) Could you turn on the back work lights? It's hard to see her clearly.*

*(The back work lights pop on, and there she is, close to me at last, her black hair falling across her face. Sitting down on her bed, I place my hand upon her chest and it begins to rise and fall again. Her eyes slowly open and then come to rest on me.*

MY MOTHER

What is this? Who are you? Is it time for the curtain call?

ME

No. There is no curtain call. Not this way.

MY MOTHER

I don't understand. I thought this is how they all wanted it to end.

ME

No. You made that decision. But it doesn't have to be like that.

MY MOTHER

I don't understand. I followed the script I was given—I tried to play my part correctly.

ME

We're going back to the beginning. *(I offer my hand to her.)*

*(She considers it for a moment, and then takes my hand. I lead her up the stage right staircase for a better view of the action. I call down to the Stage Manager.)*

ME

Start at the beginning again, please.

## Scene One

### **A Doctor's Office in 1956**

Huntington, Cabell County, West Virginia

*(My Grandmother sits in a chair, facing the audience. Because of this, we cannot see her face. We can, however, see how the back of her hair is done up—black as coal, each hair seeming to glisten as the lights shine down on her. She has placed a comb in her hair, decorated in diamonds. In this scene she has a fury which is directed at a doctor who believes that the child within her womb is dead.)*

DOCTOR

*(Addressing My Grandmother) I'm very sorry Ma'm, but we are unable to find a heartbeat. And there is no fetal movement. ( Pause. The Doctor places his hand on my Grandmother's shoulder. The sympathy in his eyes is plain to us. ) Your baby's not alive Ma'm.*

*(As the Doctor informs My Grandmother of this, My Mother and I watch as her nails begin to tap the arm of the chair she is sitting in. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. Her body is still, except for the tapping of her long nails. The Doctor looks at My Grandmother for a moment, and realizing that she does not want sympathy, quickly removes the hand. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, Tap, Tap. The Doctor and My Grandmother stare at one another for a moment, and then the Doctor pulls a prescription pad from his lab coat pocket. )*

DOCTOR

Now I understand this comes as a shock to you. But I can offer you ways to ease the pain.

*(The Doctor begins to write out a prescription, and offers it to her.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

I don't need any of your damned pills. Don't you think I'd know if my baby is dead?

*(My Grandmother stands at this, and, taking the prescription form from the Doctor with her right hand, lifts up her right hand at an angle, and crumples up the form. She begins to make her exit Up Stage Left, dropping the prescription form in a trash can as she passes by it. The lights fade to black and then come up on another doctor's office. My Grandmother is arguing with the second doctor, who pushes a pill bottle into her hands. She keeps the pills. I go over to her on the stage, and try to convince her to get rid of the pills.)*

ME

Don't take those. You're not crazy, she lives in you.

*(But My Grandmother can't see me, and she walks right by me as she exits the stage. My Mother comes to me, and places her hand on my shoulder.)*

MY MOTHER

It's all right. I'll be okay.

ME

No. Those pills—they poison your fetus. They will make you sick forever. I don't want you to be sick.

MY MOTHER

I know.

Scene Two  
**The Birth- 1957**

*(The lights fade up on a hospital room. A nurse helps My Grandmother into a bed, while several confused Doctors look on. This was not supposed to happen.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

*(Looking and screaming at the Doctors) Get my baby out!*

*(There is a flurry of activity mixed with blood and obscenities. I watch My Mother, watch herself be born on the stage, and My Grandmother, exhausted, reaches her hand out to the baby, which is white and limp, but fully formed. The Doctors lay the baby aside and tend to My Grandmother who is hysterical at this point. No one is checking the baby. They assume the lifeless baby is dead. My Mother and I walk over and look down at the baby. My Mother as a Baby is so small, so innocent. I place my hand on the top of her little head, and as I do this, her eyes open.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER, CONT.

Give me my damn baby.

*(Cries of an infant are heard throughout the theatre.)*

*(Blackout.)*

Scene Three  
**Afterbirth Pain**

A DOCTOR

*(To My Grandmother) You must understand that the chances of this baby surviving are very slim. And even if your baby does live, she will never lead a normal life. The drugs that were taken during your pregnancy will no doubt cause many healthy problems for the rest of her life—that is, of course, if she does live.*

*(My Grandmother looks as if she might slap this Doctor at any moment.)*

THE OTHER DOCTOR

What I don't understand is, what could have possibly compelled you take those drugs when you knew you were pregnant?

*(My Grandmother stands and stares at The Other Doctor for a moment. She calmly slaps him across the face and begins to exit upstage center with a baby stroller.)*

Scene Four  
**Florida**

*(My Grandfather waits for My Grandmother Stage Right with flowers. She looks at him for a moment and pushes the flowers away. )*

MY MOTHER

My father is handsome, isn't he?

ME

Yes he is. I wish I could know him—even if he is a crook.

*(My Mother and I watch as My Grandmother and My Grandfather walk about the stage pushing a stroller. My Uncle Scott at Four chases after squirrels, and My Grandmother blushes at his screams and laughter. A Passerby tips his hat to My Grandfather, and they shake hands. A spotlight follows them as they circle about the stage.)*

MY MOTHER

Look. Everyone loves him—even the people he cons. No one can resist him—even Mother—especially Mother.

*(After making their way around the stage, My Grandmother and My Grandfather come to a nursery, with a crib and a rocking chair, with a four-leaf clover on it and a big bow. My Grandfather takes the baby out of the stroller and motions for My Grandmother to have a seat. He hands her the baby and kisses her on the forehead. We watch as each morning he dresses for the office, picks up his briefcase, kisses her on the forehead, and then heads for the golf course. He never goes to work. Sometimes he goes yachting, sometimes he flies planes, but he never works. He just writes bad checks, charms people over, and My Grandmother, she sits, and stares at herself while My Mother as a Baby cries. My Uncle Scott at Four tries to get My Grandmother's attention, but she completely ignores him. I go over to the baby, and I try to cheer her up by making funny faces at her.)*

MY MOTHER

It doesn't seem to be working.

ME

No it doesn't. I think she just wants her mother.

*(I go over to My Grandmother and try to get her to take care of the baby.)*

ME (CONT.)

Grandmother, please, just pick her up. She wants you.

*(My Grandmother ignores me, and she continues to brush her hair and put on make-up.)*

MY MOTHER

It's no use. She won't hear you.

*(I try and try to get My Grandmother's attention, but nothing works. Finally, My Grandfather returns from wherever he's been. He places his briefcase by the door, and kisses My Grandmother on the forehead.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

*(She looks with disdain at him from her vanity mirror)* I don't want to live here anymore. How am I supposed to further my modeling career if I am stuck in here all day with *her*?

MY GRANDFATHER

Well, what do you want me to do about it? The doctors told us that she needed to be in this environment or she would have to stay in an oxygen tent.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Well that wouldn't be that bad for her. We could get my sister Josephine to entertain her if we went back to West Virginia.

MY GRANDFATHER

I like it here. I don't understand why you don't.

MY GRANDMOTHER

I don't like it here, because I am forced to be here because of *her*. It's not fair. How can I be expected to be happy with this situation?

MY GRANDFATHER

I didn't do this to you. You did this to yourself. You were the one who took all of the pills when you were pregnant. What compelled you to do something like that?

MY GRANDMOTHER

You know I didn't want to take them. The doctors made me.

MY GRANDFATHER

Oh, the doctors—can't you just stop with the doctor talk. It's your own fault and you know it.

MY GRANDMOTHER

How dare you say that. How dare you say something like that! I can't stand this anymore. I can't stand being stuck in this place while you get to go out every morning. It's not fair. I'm taking Debbie and I'm leaving. You can stay behind if you want. I just can't handle this anymore.

*(I hear some yelling from the audience, and the actors freeze onstage.  
I can't understand what they are saying from the audience)*

ME

*(To the audience)* What? I can't hear you.

*(I shade my eyes from the stage lights with my hand, and try to pinpoint where the yelling is coming from. I see a figure stand, and then I hear My Brother John's voice)*

MY BROTHER JOHN

Take the baby. Take her out of there. They don't even want her.

*(But then he is silenced by someone from the tech crew. They lead him to the back of the house and make him sit down there. I walk over to the baby and start to get her out of her crib, when I am stopped by the stage manager's command off stage.)*

STAGE MANAGER

Don't touch the baby anymore.

ME

Why not?

STAGE MANAGER

Because you're interfering too much. The path of the play depends on the child going to West Virginia with the mother—with your Grandmother.

ME

Yes, I suppose you are right. I just wish I could *do* something.

STAGE MANAGER

You can let the play continue on to happier times. But you must let this scene play out for now.

ME

Can we move on to Nana's house?

STAGE MANAGER

Soon, very soon. This scene is almost over.

*(The actors unfreeze and begin the argument from where it left off.)*

MY GRANDFATHER

Well, I'm not leaving. I like it here. The ocean suits me.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Well, I'm not staying.

MY GRANDFATHER

Very well. I was getting tired of your selfish ways anyway. But be sure to take the child. I'm busy enough as it is, tending to my own business.

*(My Mother and I watch the scene, and as My Grandfather starts to leave, she pulls me toward him.)*

MY MOTHER

No, don't do this. I won't be trouble. Daddy don't leave us.

*(I take MY MOTHER'S hand, and I lead her away from the scene. We stand off in the wings as the stage is set by the deck crew for the next scene. )*

ME

*(To the STAGE MANAGER)* Can we please go to a scene from Nana's now? She will be happier there.

STAGE MANAGER

Not yet. There is still more to play out between your grandmother and grandfather.

## Scene Five **AWOL in West Virginia**

*(My Grandfather knocks on the door to the house my Grandmother shares with my Aunt Jody. My Grandmother opens it, sees who it is, and begins to shut it. He puts his hand out to stop her.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

What? What do you want? What are you doing here?

MY GRANDFATHER

I need your help. Some people are looking for me, and I need to hide out here for a few days.

MY GRANDMOTHER

And you thought I would help *you*. Why would you think that?

MY GRANDFATHER

Ann, please. Just for a few days. Here, I brought you some chocolate.

*(My Grandfather offers a box of chocolate to her.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

What, you thought that after all this time, you could fix everything with chocolate?

MY GRANDFATHER

You were the one who wanted to leave. Not me. Why do you keep punishing me? Just let me in, okay? If you let me in, maybe we can work things out.

*(My Mother at Two comes running into the scene and stands behind My Grandmother.)*



MY GRANDFATHER (CONT.)

Is that her? Is that the baby? She's gotten so big.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Yes, well, children do tend to do that. Although the bigger she gets, it seems, the more trouble she is worth.

MY GRANDFATHER

Please, just take the chocolate and let me in. You should let me get to know my little girl.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Fine.

*(She opens the door wider and he starts to come in.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER (CONT.)

But first, the chocolate.

MY GRANDFATHER

Ah, see? I knew it would work.

MY GRANDMOTHER

You're still a bastard, aren't you?

MY GRANDFATHER

*(jokingly)* Now, Ann, not in front of the baby.

*(My Grandfather kisses My Grandmother on her forehead.)*

MY GRANDFATHER

I knew you still loved me.

MY GRANDMOTHER

I never said that.

MY GRANDFATHER

You didn't have to. I knew by the way you said my name.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Which one? Bastard or Son of a Bitch?

MY GRANDFATHER

Now that's the Ann I know and love. *(He sees My Aunt Jody and goes over to her.)* And how are you doing Josephine?

MY AUNT JODY

What have you gotten yourself into now? Is it gambling this time? You con some more people?

MY GRANDFATHER

Now Josephine—who do you think I am? I would never do anything like that.

MY AUNT JODY

Oh yes, I forgot. You're the Irish lad sent by St. Patrick himself to bless all the women in the world. How is that going for you?

MY GRANDFATHER

My, my. Aren't we all feisty today? You must have been telling her stories Ann.

MY GRANDMOTHER

I didn't tell her anything she couldn't figure out on her own.

MY GRANDFATHER

Ladies, let's settle down, make peace, and let me see my little baby. Come here, Betty.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Her name is *Debbie*.

MY GRANDFATHER

That's what I said, isn't it? Come here Debbie— come see your Pop.

*(My Mother at Two hides behind My Aunt Jody. She doesn't know what to make of this strange man.)*

MY AUNT JODY

She doesn't know you. How could she know you?

MY GRANDFATHER

Nah, she knows her old man. Don't you Debbie? Here—want some chocolate?

MY GRANDMOTHER

She's barely two, and you already want to win her over with chocolate?

*(But it works. My Mother at Two goes to My Grandfather and takes the chocolate. He picks her up and puts her on his lap. She smiles at him. My Grandfather looks at My Grandmother and gives her an "I told you so" look. Time passes, and My Mother and I watch as My Mother at Two grows to know My Grandfather. We walk in and out of these scenes of father/daughter bonding, but it does not last long. There is a knock at the front door, and My Grandfather looks scared. My Grandmother goes to answer it. She opens the door and finds two men dressed in army uniforms. My Grandfather rushes out the back door, and My Grandmother watches as the two men in uniform take off after My Grandfather. My Grandfather is gone.)*

MY MOTHER AT TWO  
Daddy?

*(My Mother at Two starts to cry, as she stands on the couch,  
looking out the back window, trying to see My Grandfather)*

MY MOTHER  
He just...He just keeps leaving.

ME  
*(To Stage Manager)* Can we move on to Nana's now? Please? Has it been enough now?  
*(The Stage Manager nods. The deck hands rush to place the white rocking chair stage right.)*

**Scene Six**  
**Nana and Pop's 1960**  
Hurricane, Putnam County, West Virginia

*(Nana's is a large house in Hurricane, West Virginia. It is surrounded by wooded forests, streams, and best of all, it has a pony. My Mother at Three loves it here. Nana and Mother at Three position themselves on the stage—Nana is sitting in the rocker and Mother at Three in her lap. Nana begins to rock her slowly. The lights and the sound effects which create the illusion of a place in the country come up slowly. Nana is telling Mother at Three a story.)*

NANA  
Once upon a time there was a pony named Buddy, and every morning he would come to visit his favorite friend.

MOTHER AT THREE  
Like my Buddy?

NANA  
Yes, like your Buddy exactly.

MOTHER AT THREE  
Who is his favorite friend, Nana?

NANA  
Who do you think?

MOTHER AT THREE

Me? Is it me? He's *my* favorite friend.

NANA

Yes, it's you. And do you know where he comes in the morning?

MOTHER AT THREE

He comes to the kitchen door, and then you tie me onto his back.

NANA

And why do I do that?

MOTHER AT THREE

So that I can spend all day with my favorite friend.

NANA

And why does Buddy come to see you everyday?

MY MOTHER AT THREE

He comes to see me because he loves me. Nana, if Buddy comes to see me everyday because he loves me, why doesn't Mommy ever come to see me?

NANA

She does.

MOTHER AT THREE

She doesn't. She never comes. She doesn't like me.

NANA

Of course she does.

MOTHER AT THREE

No. Mommy doesn't like me, 'cause if she did, she would be like Buddy, and I could be with her all day.

NANA

Your Momma just wants to be a big-city model. It's her dream.

MOTHER AT THREE

A dream like how I dream I'm a pony like Buddy?

NANA

No, not quite a dream like that. A dream where you want to go away and be different than the people you knew growing up.

MOTHER AT THREE  
Why would she want to do that?

NANA  
Because home just isn't enough for some people.

MY MOTHER AT THREE  
I'm not enough for Mommy?

NANA  
None of us are enough for your Mommy, honey.

*(My Mother and I walk onto the stage, and watch as Nana strokes My Mother at Three's hair. My Mother closes her eyes, remembering that feeling. We hear a neigh from outside, and we see Buddy the pony, trying to poke his head inside. My Mother at Three hears his neigh, and she goes running to the door to greet him. Nana lifts My Mother at Three onto his back, and ties her to him. We watch as he takes My Mother at Three off into the yard. My Mother turns and looks around the room, touching the figurines above the fireplace, breathing in the smell of fresh bread. My Mother sits down on the couch and turns to me.)*

MY MOTHER  
I think this may have been the only happy, well-adjusted time in my life—even if I was mostly baby-sat by that pony out there. But soon *she'll* come and tear me away. I don't want her to come. Does she have to come? Do you know?

ME  
I don't know. Let me ask. *(To the Stage Manager)* Is there any way we can stop the play here?  
Can My Mother stay here forever?

STAGE MANAGER  
If we do that the play will end. Do you want that?

ME  
I want my mother to be happy.

STAGE MANAGER  
Even if that means that you might never get to play your part?

MY MOTHER  
Why wouldn't you get to play your part?

ME  
Well, I know that much of it depends on you. What *you* choose to do. If you stayed here, then maybe we would never get to come on. I don't know. There is so much I don't know.

MY MOTHER  
I do love it here.

ME  
I know. I don't want you to have to be unhappy. I would never want that. But there is part of me that wants so much to play my own role someday. Do you understand?

MY MOTHER  
I think I do. Will you stay and watch if we continue on? It will be easier if you are with me.

ME  
Of course I will.

MY MOTHER  
Then let her come.

*(I look off stage and give the Stage Manager a nod. Immediately the door of the farmhouse opens, and in comes My Grandmother, dressed to perfection, and following behind is The Step Father. )*

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Mother?

*(Nana turns and is shocked for a moment to see her daughter standing there.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Well aren't you going to greet us or something?

*(My Grandmother removes her travelling jacket and hands it to Nana. My Grandmother walks about the room, looking for something.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER  
So where is she? Where is my baby?

*(My Uncle Scott at Seven runs in and hugs My Grandmother. She pushes him off.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER CONT.  
Watch the skirt, honey. We don't want your dirty boy hands all over it now do we?

NANA  
Ann, you didn't tell us you were coming home.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Of course I came home—why wouldn't I?

NANA

They like it here. They're happy here.

MY GRANDMOTHER

That's why I left them here, isn't it? Oh, and this is Jack. *(She motions to The Step Father standing behind her.)*

NANA

*(She shakes his hand, then says warily)* Nice to meet you.

*(The Step Father nods.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

Well, you can't say I didn't bring them anything. I got them a new daddy for goodness sake.

NANA

I didn't say anything, Ann.

MY GRANDMOTHER

You were thinking it, I'm sure. I know how you all think of me.

NANA

We just want what's best for Debbie and Scott.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Why don't you let me decide that mother? Can you just go retrieve her from wherever she's run off to? You didn't put her on that filthy pony again did you?

NANA

She loves Buddy.

MY GRANDMOTHER

I thought I told you that I don't like her getting dirty. And it's bad for her asthma. You know it is.

NANA

She hasn't had to be in the oxygen tent for a few weeks. She's doing much better.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Just bring her to me. Jack wants to meet her.

NANA

*(To My Uncle Scott at Seven)* Scott, run and get your sister off of Buddy and bring her in here. Your mother wants her to meet someone.

*(My Uncle Scott at Seven nods and runs outside.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

Jack is a businessman. We met in the city. He's really rich. Aren't you Jack? Tell mother how rich you are.

THE STEP FATHER

I make a decent amount of money.

NANA

Yes, well, isn't that nice.

*(The children come running in, and My Mother at Three is covered in horse hair and dirt.)*

MY MOTHER AT THREE

Mommy? You came to see me, Mommy? Just like Buddy does?

MY GRANDMOTHER

Look at you. You're filthy. You are not to ride that horse anymore, do you hear me?

MY MOTHER AT THREE

But Buddy is my friend, Mommy.

MY GRANDMOTHER

I don't care. I hate it when you're dirty. Here now, brush yourself off, and meet your new father.

*(My Mother at Three looks up at The Step Father)*

MY MOTHER AT THREE

You're my Daddy?

THE STEP FATHER

Yes, I am. And aren't you a pretty little girl? You want to come over and sit on my lap?

*(My Mother at Three goes and sits on his lap.)*

MY MOTHER AT THREE

But what about my other Daddy? Where is my other Daddy?

MY GRANDMOTHER

Now you know we don't like to talk about *him*. This is your new Daddy. You are going to come live with us. Would you like that?

MY MOTHER AT THREE

Can Buddy come?

MY GRANDMOTHER

Of course not.



MY MOTHER AT THREE  
But he is my best friend. I love him.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
No. Stop talking about that stupid horse. Go get your things together—we have to leave shortly.

*(My Mother at Three runs off to her room.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER (CONT.)  
And you too, Scott. Go get your things.

MY UNCLE SCOTT AT SEVEN  
I don't want to go with you. You're mean!

*(My Uncle Scott at Seven runs outside, tears streaming down his face.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Well, I suppose we can just leave him here, can't we mother?

NANA  
I don't think you should take Debbie. What are you going to do with her in the city? She only knows the country. Don't do this to her.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Do what, mother? Really, I don't know where these ideas in your head come from.  
*(My Mother at Three comes back into the room, a bag full of dolls and rocks and sticks trailing behind.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER  
What do you have there, Debbie? Why would you pack things like that? Where are your pretty dresses?

NANA  
She's only three, Ann. You can't expect her to write up a packing list of important items. Those are the things that are important to her.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
She can just leave them here. I'm not going to have any sticks or rocks or dirt in my house. I'm finally going to have my house in the city. I want it to be nice. Now put that yucky bag down, Debbie. We'll just have to buy you some new things when we get into Huntington.

MY MOTHER AT THREE  
What about Buddy?

MY GRANDMOTHER

I already told you—horses are stinky and dirty and... we don't have time for this. Say goodbye to your grandma and get in the car.

*(My Mother at Three goes up to Nana and gives her a hug.)*

NANA

I love you.

MY MOTHER AT THREE

I love you. Will you tell Buddy where I am, so he can come to me?

NANA

I'll try, honey. I'll certainly try.

MY MOTHER

*(My Mother tries to motion to My Mother at Three, beckoning her to join us.)* No, don't go with her. Come with us. You can stay with us.

ME

No she can't. She has to go on now. We have to watch her play her part—little as she is.

*(The lights on the stage fade as My Mother and I watch as My Mother at Three follow My Grandmother and The Step Father out the door. )*

## **When I Was Three My Mother Was a Princess**

When I was three, my parents needed a new car. We lived out in the country on Mt. Union Rd., and my dad needed a way to get to all of his jobs. My parents didn't know what to do. I played in the grass while my parents talked to one another on our front porch. My mother was once a beauty queen, and my father thought she could be one again. I didn't understand what they were talking about, but my father showed my mother a picture, and I went over to look at it. In the picture, my mother wore a beautiful dress and there was a crown of diamonds on her head. I wanted my mother to wear that dress again.

I never knew my mother was a princess.

Later on, when I am grown, I will learn that West Virginia had never won a national pageant title—until my mother. My mother was afraid of how pageants perpetuated an unhealthy preoccupation with packaging. She thought that pageants exploited women, but she also thought of the way our state was being exploited and stereotyped. She knew that some people didn't even know that West Virginia was a state.

So she made the decision to return to pageants, and to utilize the training her mother had forced upon her. She would return to the pageant stage, but this time she would use it to do some good. When she was crowned Mrs. America, West Virginians were able to be proud of where they were from—they were able to look at my mother and realize that our image can be glamorous and beautiful.

She prepared for the pageant with no money and was challenged in creativity and resourcefulness. She got things donated right down to the pantyhose and hairspray. On her bathroom mirror she cut the Mrs. America title and logo off the top of the flier sent by the pageant, and she taped it onto the bathroom mirror. When she looked in the mirror she

subconsciously was seeing herself as Mrs. America. She used visualization to prepare, rather than plastic surgery or cosmetic dentistry. She trained while she took care of my brothers and me. She worked out six days a week and her trainer trained her for free, just because he believed in her.

In the end, it was her answer to one question that gave her the title. Richard Dawson was the host, and he asked her the same question he asked all of the other finalists: “Define the role of the contemporary married woman.”

My mother took a deep breath and said, “I believe that the contemporary married woman is literary the hub of society because the family is the nucleus of society and the mother or the married woman sets the tone of the home which should be such that it invites each member of the family including the mother to fulfill their greatest potential so she not only has a personal contribution to society but she has a part in the contributions made by her husband and children. I believe that the contemporary married woman has the broadest sphere of influence in the world.”

The audience was stunned. And then the applause began.

All I knew was that my mother was beautiful, and they gave her a crown of diamonds for her head. My father took me up on the stage with her and she held me while she waved at the audience. I loved feeling the warmth of the lights of the stage. This was the first time we were on stage together. It was to be the first of many times. The stage made me feel happy too.

After my mother was crowned, I was removed from her and she flew to New York to be on The Today Show with Connie Chung. I watched her on TV, and I didn’t really understand the interview, but the lady seemed like she didn’t like pageants or my mother, just because my mother was the queen of pageants. The president must have liked what my mother said in the

interview, because when my mother returned to her hotel, there was a message waiting for her from The White House—President Reagan wanted to meet her and her family.

My father had me pick out my favorite dress, and we travelled to Washington D.C. We stayed at the Watergate Hotel, and a limousine was sent to pick us up. The black limousine was the longest car I had ever seen. It seemed as though hours passed getting through security, and I was so tired. I must have fallen asleep, because when we woke up, I found myself in a palace. A nice lady—she was the wife of the president—carried me around when I woke up. The President spoke with my family, and we had our picture taken with him. I didn't understand why everyone laughed when I picked my nose during the picture. My mother gave the President scriptures with his name engraved on it, and he gave me jelly beans off of his desk. A few weeks after we went to The White House, a package arrived for me. Inside, I found a picture that President Reagan had signed for me.

Years past before I realized that most little girls don't get packages from the President of The United States of America.

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With my mother's crown, came lots of opportunities for her to be on the stage. Everyone wanted to hear her speak and sing, and it seemed like she was gone all the time. My Maw Maw watched me when my mother was gone, and I liked sitting out on her front porch, sorting the vegetables from my Paw Paw's garden to be sold. With my mother gone, I spent more time with my father. He let me ride on his tractor, and sometimes he would even let me steer.

Daddy had a big, brown horse named King, and he would lift me onto King's back, like I was as light as a feather. King's back was so wide that sometimes I felt like my legs might split apart, but he was warm and fuzzy and gentle, and I felt like a princess, so high above the world,

high above my big brothers, that I would cry and cry when daddy lifted me off of King's back. I wanted to stay on King forever, to bury my head in his scratchy brown mane, to feel the sun beat down on my back. One day, when I was lying down on King's neck, my eyes closed, and my arms flopped down by my side, I breathed in King's wonderful scent, opened my eyes and looked at my dad.

“When is Mommy going to come back? I want her to ride King with me.”

I missed my Mommy, but at least I had my daddy.

Scene Seven  
**Childhood**  
**Huntington, WV**

*(The lights come up on a new scene. A white Christmas tree decorated in blue glass bulbs is lit down stage right. Center Stage is a large, modern, black upholstered couch. Sitting on the couch is My Mother at Seven in a white dress. She is standing on the couch, looking out the window behind it, waiting. My Mother and I look down on the girl, waiting to see what will happen next.)*

MY MOTHER

Christmas— I always loved Christmas. My father came to see me one Christmas when I was five and he said he would come to see me every Christmas after that.

ME

Does he come?

MY MOTHER

I hope he does. He used to come, every Christmas.

*(As we watch My Mother at Seven, time passes, and My Grandfather doesn't come. My Grandmother enter from stage left, and she is not pleased with what she views is damage done to her new couch.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

What do you think you're doing?

*(My Mother at Seven turns away from the mirror and stares at My Grandmother. She doesn't know what to say. She feels fear grow within her as My Grandmother's red fingernails trace a line on the backdrop, then her precious upholstery, then finally the outline of My Mother at Seven's face. The young face drops down, hiding her eyes from My Grandmother. A red fingernail pulls the face upward again, and My Grandmother's eyes peer deeply into the blue eyes of My Mother at Seven. My Mother and I see a tear escape from the young eyes of My Mother at Seven, and My Mother's body tightens in expectation of what she knows is about to happen.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

I said, what do you think you're doing?

*(My Grandmother slaps My Mother at Seven across the face, leaving a red mark on her pale skin.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER (CONT.)

You know you aren't supposed to touch the new sofa. This couch is worth more than you.

*(My Grandmother pulls My Mother at Seven off the couch.)*

MY MOTHER AT SEVEN

I just wanted to see Daddy.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Why would that daddy want to see such a bad girl like you? Now run along—let your Daddy Jack give you a spanking.

MY MOTHER AT SEVEN

No Mommy, please, I don't like that. I don't like it when he touches me.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Run along. I don't want to see your face any more. It's giving me a headache.

*(Yelling from the audience):*

Grandmother is giving us a headache.

*Grandmother* needs a good spanking.

MY MOTHER

It is like this for too long. I am never good enough for her, but there is nothing to be done. Where could I go? I didn't have anyone. I didn't have Buddy, or Scott, Nana or Pop, and my father never came to see me ever again. I wrote letters but I don't know if Mother ever sent them. I never knew what was going on. I always made her angry, and I just couldn't behave correctly.

ME

It wasn't your fault. Look at you. You're so small. What could you have done?

MY MOTHER AT SEVEN

*(Writing)* Dear Scott, I want to come home and play in the woods. I want to see you and see Nana and Pop. I want my stick collection and I want my rocks. Buddy won't come here. Mommy won't let him and that makes me sad. I want to be good so that I can see you and be happy again. I wish I was happy and Mommy was happy and everyone was happy.

MY MOTHER AT NINE

*(Writing Cont.)* I wish I was happy and Mommy was happy and everyone was happy. I wish I could ride Buddy instead of my bike. I wish I could see my real Daddy and I wish he would give me chocolate again, and I wish my new Daddy wouldn't touch me. I wish I could cover myself in dirt and roll on Mommy's couch and keep her from getting angry after. I wish I was better.

MY MOTHER AT ELEVEN

*(Writing Cont.)* I wish I was better. I wish I was smarter and prettier. I wish I had friends at school, but they think I'm weird. Mom makes me wear fancy clothes to school and they all think I'm a snob. I'm not. I promise. But no one believes me. Mom tells me that if I'm prettier I would have more friends. Step-Dad Jack tells me I'm pretty, but I don't like it when he tells me that. I wish he wouldn't look at me.



*(All of these girls who are my mother stand in a row and read their letters and My Mother and I, we want to help them. My Mother goes up to each of them when they are done reading and gives them a hug. I look each of them in the eye and say one thing: You are good enough.)*

## Scene Eight **The Young Teen**

*(We watch My Mother at Thirteen as she watches herself in a mirror. Turning side to side, judging her reflection, wishing she could be taller, or shorter, thinner or more voluptuous. Her mind doesn't care, as long as she can just be different—better—enough. My Mother and I watch as My Mother at Thirteen goes over to a bookcase, stuffed to capacity with Trixie Belden and Nancy Drew books, and picks a few of them out. She rustles through their pages, trying to decide what she will read next. She chooses one, and then retreats to the sanctuary of her closet. In this closet, My Mother at Thirteen reads for hours, wrapping herself in blankets and living in the fictional lives of girls, not much older than herself, who are not afraid to be themselves—girls who solve mysteries and murders, reunite lost pets with their owners, and who all have the courage to stand up for themselves when needed.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

*(Bursting into the room and tearing the closet door open.)* What has been going on? You tell me right now what you did.

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

What do you mean? Momma, I don't know what you are talking about.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Oh, you know what you did.

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

Momma, really, what's wrong?

MY GRANDMOTHER

I just got a phone call from your cheerleading sponsor, and she is just furious with the way you've been treating the other girls. And now...I just can't believe you would do something like this.

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

Do something like what? I didn't do anything. I swear.

MY GRANDMOTHER

That's the problem. They offered to be your friend and you acted like a snob. Why? After all the work we've done, and you just throw it all away.

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

Momma, you have to understand—those girls don't like me. They've never liked me.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Of course, they don't like you. Not after what a disgrace you've become.

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

They didn't want me to talk to my old friends at school. What was I supposed to do?

MY GRANDMOTHER

Those friends were trash. You had the chance to be popular; you had the chance to actually be something. How could you throw it all away for a stupid group of children who don't even know how to dress properly? How could you do this to me? After all I've done for you?

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

I really tried—I promise I did.

MY GRANDMOTHER

I just cannot believe that you can't even stay on a cheerleading squad. It seems like a girl would do whatever she could to secure her place, but I guess you don't care about that.

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

I'll try to fit in. I will.

MY GRANDMOTHER

No, it's too late for that now. You are being dismissed.

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

Oh. *(Pause.)* Okay.

MY GRANDMOTHER

No, no, not *okay*. No. No. I'll fix this. This was not part of the plan. This was not part of *our* plan. Remember what it was like in elementary school? How many friends did you have there? Even with all the pretty clothes I bought you? Don't you want to be popular?

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

I don't know. Maybe not.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Of course you do. Everyone wants to be popular. You are nothing if you aren't popular.

*(Grandmother pauses and looks at my Mother at 13, studying her.)*

GRANDMOTHER

Mother's going to fix this. Mother's going to fix everything. But you've got to try harder to be good enough. I can't do everything you know.

*(We watch as MY GRANDMOTHER leaves My Mother at Thirteen alone in her room. My Mother at 13 sits for a moment on her bed, contemplating the situation, and then walks calmly*

*over to her floor length mirror. She stares at herself, and then, Slap, Slap, Slap, across her own face. Slap, Slap, Slap, her blue eyes never leaving her own reflection. As the lights fade out on the girl we hear a final slap and then blackout.)*

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*(My Mother and I hear tires screeching and the crash of metal to metal. The lights fade up on down stage right and the scene is revealed to us. My Grandmother's blue Cadillac has broken through the 8 foot chain length fence at Cammack Junior High. We watch as My Grandmother drives her broken car up to the gym entrance, and leaps out, looking frantic and crazed. She pauses for a moment to freshen up her lipstick and smooth her hair, and then she bursts through the doors of the school. The doors close behind her and My Mother and I are left outside the scene. As the dialogue continues below, My Mother at Thirteen examines herself in the mirror.)*

ME

Do you remember what happened?

MY MOTHER

Look in the journal. I wrote it all down.

ME

*(Reading)*At school, everyone was talking about her—about how crazy she must be. I don't even know what she did exactly, but the rumors were that she entered the school gym during cheerleading practice, walked up to my cheerleading sponsor, calmly slapped her across her face, and then left, without a word. My mother's car is broken, and she blames it on me—and instead of getting her car fixed, I think she has made it her goal to fix me—she wants to fix her image, my image, our image. Image is what she cares about most of all. But I will never be pretty enough for her. I am only pretty enough for him.

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

*(Looking in the mirror)* I am only pretty enough for him.

*(My Mother and I watch as The Step Father stands in the doorway, staring at My Mother at Thirteen. He has a cup of coffee in his hands, and he strokes the mug, up and down. He comes into the room and stands behind My Mother at Thirteen. He replaces the stroking of the mug with stroking her hair. She turns around and looks at him.)*

THE STEP FATHER

You are beautiful.

*(My Mother at Thirteen looks down at the ground and The Step Father lifts her chin up towards him.)*

THE STEP FATHER

You will always be pretty enough for me. But remember, you are only pretty enough for me.

*(Blackout.)*

### *When My Grandfather Re-appeared*

In 1985, around the same time my mother was discovering her new-found fame, she discovered something else—her father, and brothers and sisters that she never knew she had. My grandfather had been gone from my mother’s life for years and years, but she had never given up hope that he would re-appear. When she was a little girl, he told her that he would see her again soon, but she never saw his living face again.

On September Sixth, a few months before I turned four, my grandfather, John Francis Connolly, died in a plane crash. I never met him, but if this crash had not occurred, we may never have known our missing family—the family that he had always had across the country—his other wife and children. When my mother arrived at the Outagamie Airport in east central Wisconsin, she was greeted by a half-brother and half-sister she had never seen—but she immediately recognized them as sharing her own flesh and blood. They had her fair skin, her blue eyes, her dark hair—my mother knew she looked more like them than she did her brothers back in West Virginia.

At the time of my grandfather’s death, my mother had been acting in a play called “The Curse of the Sign of the Four.” Her role in the play was that of a heroine searching for her long-lost father. In the first act of the play, the character learns that her father had died many years ago. But my mother learned of my grandfather’s death the day following his death, from my grandfather’s second wife. She told my mother that my grandfather never contacted my mother—he never contacted any of us—because he was afraid we would hate him for all those years he was gone.

I only wish he had known that my mother had never stopped waiting for him to return. She never gave up on him—even to the very end.

Scene Nine  
**The Adoption**

*(My Grandmother enters My Mother at Fourteen's bedroom and forces her out of bed.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Get dressed. Now!

*(My Mother at Fourteen is tired and dazed, but complies with My Grandmother's orders. As My Mother at Fourteen dresses, the setting is transformed into a court room in Cabell County.)*

MY MOTHER

I didn't know what was happening. I had no idea. I was put in that courtroom and no one told me what was going on until it was too late. They told me my new name would be Davis—he was adopting me.

THE STEP FATHER  
You're mine now, all mine.

MY MOTHER AT FOURTEEN

*(To the Judge)* I don't want to change my name. I have a father. He's coming for me. I know he is. He's coming back for me and he's going to take me to California and I'm going to ride horses with him and go surfing with him. He told me. He promised me.

MY GRANDMOTHER

He told you that seven years ago. When are you going to grow up Debbie and start living in the real world? You don't have a choice. If Jack wants to adopt you then Jack will adopt you.

THE STEP FATHER

We'll just be one big happy family. Won't that be nice, Debbie? We'll be one beautiful happy family—just as soon as your mother helps you out. Have you told her yet, Ann?

MY MOTHER AT FOURTEEN  
Told me what?

THE STEP FATHER

Your mother is going to buy you a brand new wardrobe to celebrate our new family.

MY MOTHER AT FOURTEEN  
But I like my clothes. They're comfortable.

MY GRANDMOTHER

But you just aren't very pretty in those old jeans and t-shirts. We want you to be pretty. Don't you want to be pretty?

ME

*(To My Grandmother and The Step Father)* She is pretty. What is wrong with you people? Why does beauty matter so much to you?

*(But they just turn and walk away from me. They lead My Mother at Fourteen off the stage)*

*(The lights fade out to black.)*

## *Trying to Collect My Mother's Story- Part Two*

I arrive at New House and find my mother fighting with her mother-in-law (my Maw Maw) in the kitchen, trying to get her to eat something. Maw Maw wants to go back to her house on Mt. Union, and she has decided that she will go on a hunger strike until someone takes her home.

“Mary Jane, please, just eat some soup for me,” my mother says, offering the bowl to Maw Maw.

“I won't eat nothing till I go back to my home. I haven't been there all night, and I want to go home!” Maw Maw says, pushing the bowl away.

Maw Maw thinks that she has only been gone from her house for a day, but in reality, she hasn't been home for months. Maw Maw fell at her house, broke her hip, and almost died, but doesn't remember a thing.

She thinks my family is holding her prisoner.

My sister Sara comes into the room, her latest boyfriend trailing behind her. Sara is fifteen, and her long, blonde hair and blue eyes must be irresistible to adolescent boys, because every day there is a new, pathetic (but rich) suitor outside the door of New House.

“Maw Maw's on hunger strike again?” she asks, while motioning to her new boy that he should go sit down in the dining room and wait for her there.

“She's done this before?” I ask.

“About every day,” Sara says.

“Why didn't anyone tell me? No one ever tells me anything in this family.”

“How could you *not* know? But she’ll start eating as soon as she forgets she’s on hunger strike. It never takes very long.”

Sara looks at Maw Maw for a minute, sighs, and then joins her new boy in the dining room. Mom hands the bowl of soup to me and leaves the kitchen as well.

Left all alone with Maw Maw, I do the only thing I can think of to do: I too offer her the bowl of soup.

“Who are you?” she asks, looking at the soup.

“I’m Angela, your granddaughter.”

She takes the soup.

The hunger strike is over for now, but where is my mother?

I walk into the foyer, and underneath of the crystal chandelier, on the thick blue carpet that my mother is starting to hate, is the largest pile of dog crap I have ever seen.

My mother is trying to scrape it up with a poster from dad’s congressional run.

“Can you tell me more about Grandma Ann trying to turn you into a pageant queen?” I ask in a nasal voice, pinching my nose closed with my fingers. The smell is terrible.

“I guess this is as good a time as any to talk about her struggle to make me glamorous,” Mom says, as she continues to scrape up Buddy’s poop.



Scene Ten  
**Such a Pretty Thing**

*(The scene opens on My Mother at Sixteen doing push-ups in her room.)*

MY MOTHER

I'm training to be a firefighter, but soon *she* will find out and will try to stop me.

*(My Grandmother comes in, holding some sort of uniform in her hand.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

What is this? What is this ugly uniform?

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

It's my Explorer Post uniform.

MY GRANDMOTHER

I thought we told you that we didn't want you mixing with that crowd at school. You know it's not appropriate to be with people like that—people who want to wear ugly uniforms and get all sweaty. You're a lady. You're supposed to be a lady, not a man. Your father doesn't like this one bit.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

He's *not* my father, and I don't care. I want to be a firefighter.

MY GRANDMOTHER

No. You want to be a model, remember?

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

No. *You* want me to be a model.

MY GRANDMOTHER

We have to leave soon. You need to get ready.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

I'm not going.

MY GRANDMOTHER

You'll go if you want to see Nana or Scott.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

Fine. I'm coming.

*(My Grandmother leaves, with My Mother at Sixteen following close behind. They walk across the stage and arrive at The Barbazon School of Modeling.)*

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
A school for modeling? You can't be serious.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
I thought you would want the chance to be at least a little bit attractive.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
Oh.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
The most important thing you will learn in life is that beauty is everything. Look at me. Look at what I have gotten for us. My mother told me I would never be able to have a man like your father—

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
He's not my father

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Or a nice house in the city, or a job for a TV station, but look at me now.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
You read the weather on TV. How exciting is that?

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Many women would love to have that opportunity. I get to be on TV and lots of people watch me. It will lead to bigger opportunities in the future.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
Like what? Like reading the traffic report?

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Why are we even talking about this? *You're* the one we are trying to help. And if anyone can help you, it will be my modeling coach.

MY MOTHER  
Oh no. The modeling coach. Beauty Extraordinaire. Her philosophy: Cover it up...

MODELING COACH  
...Cover it up and suck it in before it is too late. (*To My Mother at Sixteen*) But it might not be too late for you. You have some definite potential. So you want to be a model?

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
No. I want to be a firefighter.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
She's just kidding. Of course she wants to be a model.

MODELING COACH

Well, I'll warn you. Not everyone will make it in this business. It's very competitive.

MY GRANDMOTHER

But do you think that there is still hope for her? She is my daughter, after all. Maybe she just needs a little "fixing up?"

MODELING COACH

Don't we all? Well, why don't you come on over here and have a seat.

*(The Modeling Coach leads My Mother at Sixteen over to a chair that spins and has her sit facing away from the audience. The Modeling Coach and My Grandmother look at My Mother at Sixteen, facing the audience.)*

MODELING COACH

Now, what is such a pretty girl like you doing hiding behind no make-up?

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

Well, I don't normally wear make-up. I really do just want to be a firefighter...

MY GRANDMOTHER

Hush, Debbie.

MODELING COACH

Yes, definite potential. Yes, I see it. *(To My Grandmother)* I think you brought her here just in time.

*(I watch The Modeling Coach and My Grandmother put lots of make-up on My Mother at Sixteen while My Mother speaks.)*

MY MOTHER

There comes a time in some girls' lives, when they learn that to be one's self is not what is expected. One must evolve into a prettier self. Being "pretty" is what matters. No one wanted me to be myself. I began to think this was the only way to make them happy. I didn't want this, but I wanted to be good enough for them. As much as I fought it, I just didn't feel like I was strong enough.

*(The Modeling Coach and My Grandmother turn My Mother at Sixteen toward the audience. They have caked layers and layers of make-up on My Mother at Sixteen. She wears dark eye-liner and red lipstick. The Modeling Coach and My Grandmother each take one of her hands, and they present her to the audience. The audience boos and yells various phrases: Put her back the way she was, they yell. Stop trying to make her something she's not, they exclaim.)*

THE MODELING COACH

Now that's more like it. *(To My Mother at Sixteen)* How does it feel?

MY GRANDMOTHER

She thinks it feels wonderful. She thinks she looks pretty now. Don't you feel pretty?

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

Pretty?

*(The Step Father appears behind her, stroking his cup of coffee.)*

THE STEP FATHER

Yes, very pretty. You look so good I could almost eat you up. You'd like that wouldn't you? Of course you would.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

You all really think I'm pretty?

MY GRANDMOTHER

Remember, this is the only way.

MY MOTHER

It is the only way. She's right. I was so foolish to think that I could try to be something else.

ME

No, it's not. They lie. So many people lie.

*(From the audience voices are heard saying: They lie. Don't listen. Don't believe them.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

You're still missing something. What is it?

MODELING COACH

Does she have a talent?

MY GRANDMOTHER

Yes, a talent. We forgot about that. She needs a talent.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

I think I'm good at rock climbing. And I can do a lot of push-ups. Oh, and I like to write, and ride horses and...*(My Grandmother cuts My Mother at Sixteen off.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

If only she was good at something.

MODELING COACH

What about piano lessons?

MY GRANDMOTHER

Piano lessons. What a good idea.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
But I don't want to play the piano.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Of course you do. Every young woman wants to be refined.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
I won't be good at it.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
That may be true, but you will have to try anyway. If you work hard enough, maybe you will become good enough. Don't you think she could be good enough, Mr. Achsenhirt?

*(Mr. Homor Achsenhirt, the Music Teacher, appears on the stage.)*

MUSIC TEACHER  
Perhaps. But she is a bit old to be starting out.

MY GRANDMOTHER  
Of course she isn't.

MUSIC TEACHER  
*(To My Mother at Sixteen)* Do you really want to learn?

*(My Grandmother gives My Mother at Sixteen a look that says, "You will say yes or I will make your life miserable.")*

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
Yes, I guess.

*(A piano is rolled onto the stage, and My Mother at Sixteen takes a seat next to Mr. Achsenhirt. He tries to teach her scales on the piano, but her fingers are in knots.)*

MUSIC TEACHER  
I regret to inform you that you probably will never be a pianist. In fact, you are actually quite terrible at the piano.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
I know. I'm sorry.

MUSIC TEACHER  
Well you don't have to apologize to me. But I'm afraid your mother will have my hide if I don't find something for you to do on the stage. You are certainly pretty—you at least have that. Maybe you could sing in the pageants?

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
Pageants? What pageants?

MUSIC TEACHER  
Your mother told me I was to prepare you for the pageant season.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
But I hate being on stage. I wouldn't know what to do. Everyone will laugh at me. I know they will.

MUSIC TEACHER  
Let's just try your voice out, and see what happens.

*(The Music Teacher plays a song on the piano, and my mother tries to follow along.)*

MUSIC TEACHER  
Well, you aren't great, but you also aren't terrible. I think we may have found your talent.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
You really think so?

MUSIC TEACHER  
Just keep practicing. I think you will do well on the stage. And if you get nervous or frightened, just pretend to be someone else—pretend that you're someone famous, and that everyone in the audience has come to watch only you.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
But I don't think that would ever happen. No one cares about me.

MUSIC TEACHER  
I believe you can do it. And if it will make you feel better, I'll be in the audience cheering you on.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN  
I wish I didn't have to do it at all.

MUSIC TEACHER  
Just believe in yourself, and if that fails, remember what I pretty, young thing you are.

*(My Mother and I watch as My Grandmother leads My Mother at Sixteen away from the Music Teacher toward the pageant. As they get closer to the pageant, the stage becomes filled with the fumes of hairspray and the frantic cries of girls and their mothers. There is a rush to find beauty in a bottle. They all are trying their best to be good enough. The Step Father appears Stage Left with a dress. My Mother at Sixteen is transformed into My Mother at Eighteen.)*

THE STEP FATHER

Have you seen the dress your mother got you?

MY MOTHER AT EIGHTEEN

Yes.

THE STEP FATHER

It's going to look beautiful on you—truly beautiful. You'll be so pretty for me. You should try it on for me. I want to see how pretty you'll look in it.

MY MOTHER AT EIGHTEEN

I don't want to try it on right now.

MODELING COACH

Such a pretty girl. I've worked wonders with her.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Thank God. Remember how dreadful she was?

MODELING COACH

But now she can have everything. She's so pretty.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Debbie, go put your dress for us.

MY MOTHER AT EIGHTEEN

I really don't want to right now. Not in front of all these people.

*(The Modeling Coach, My Grandmother and The Step Father spin My Mother at Eighteen around in a circle, saying, "Put your dress on, you'll be so pretty, be pretty for us." Around and around she goes until she has been transformed into a pageant contestant. )*

MODELING COACH

How does that look?

MY GRANDMOTHER

Pull her dress in a little more.

MY MOTHER AT EIGHTEEN

But I won't be able to breathe. How can I sing if I can't breathe?

MY GRANDMOTHER

You're talking, aren't you? You have to breathe to be able to talk. Let's see, just a little more. There—perfect.

MY MOTHER AT EIGHTEEN

Mother, once this pageant is over, I really want to finish my training.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Oh no. You aren't still talking about being a fire fighter are you? It's so absurd.

MY MOTHER AT EIGHTEEN

I want to do it. I want to help people.

MY GRANDMOTHER

But it's a man's job. You can help people by being pretty for them.

MY MOTHER AT EIGHTEEN

Please just let me try. I'm an adult now, you know.

MY GRANDMOTHER

You are still my daughter, and I will not allow it. Here, put your bosoms in. *(She hands My Mother at Eighteen a pair of fake breasts. My Mother at Eighteen places them in her evening gown.)* Now, Smile!

*(My Mother at Eighteen is pushed toward down stage center, where she is suddenly in the middle of her talent number. She sings the last part of the song with her hands clenched as if she was preparing to hit someone. Big tears well up in her eyes.)*

THE STEP FATHER (AS THE PAGEANT ANNOUNCER)

Well, wasn't that just great folks? She has such a pretty voice, doesn't she ladies and gentlemen? And my, isn't she a pretty thing. You gotta love a thing like that. You're such a pretty thing.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Yes, you're such a pretty thing. You will have everything you want now. It will be so easy for you.

MODELING COACH

You're such a pretty thing.

MY MOTHER AT EIGHTEEN

I'm such a pretty thing.

MY MOTHER

Such a pretty thing.

*(The lights fade to black as My Mother and I watch My Mother at Eighteen led off the stage by The Step Father and My Grandmother. )*



### *Trying to Collect My Mother's Story- Part Three*

I am at home, trying to work on my lesson plans for students teaching. I don't know why I decided to student teach the same semester I was having a baby which also happened to be the same semester I needed to collect my mother's memories from her locked and very stubborn head. I type away on the computer resting on The Belly (which has become quite a useful table). The phone rings and I hear my mother's voice.

"What's wrong, Mom? I can't hear you," I say.

"I feel strange," She says quietly.

"Strange how?"

"I just feel strange. I can't feel my fingers."

"Do you want me to come in?" I ask, wishing once again that my family didn't live in the city, but across the ridge on Mt. Union, where I could always keep a better eye on my mother. My mother has been depressed for as long as I can remember. Most people don't know this of course—my mother is too good an actress, and she has numerous characters she can call upon at any time to help her fulfill her public roles, but she is comfortable with us, and she is able to let her guard—and her demons—down and out when she is with family.

I am the same way. When I was growing up, I always told myself that I would never be like my mother. I was determined that I would always be happy in front of my children—I would never let them know that I was sad. But depression runs in my family's veins. I'm hoping that by somehow dissecting those veins, I can force some happy juice into them.

"I can come into town if you want, Mom."

"I don't want to bother you," she says, in that way she always does.

"You're not bothering me, Mom. Why do you always say that?"

“Can you come watch Maw Maw while I go to the Emergency Room?” she asks, her voice so hushed that I can barely hear her. I know that something is terribly wrong. The only time my mother has gone to the ER is when she worked there as a paramedic.

“I’m coming with you, okay? I’ll meet you there.”

I don’t know what is going on with Mom, but I don’t want her to be alone. Ever since she lost that job, she has been morbidly depressed. It’s like all of her self-esteem had been built up in her pretty face, and that company sucked it all out of her when they let her go for a younger, fresher, beauty queen. My dad stopped my mom from killing herself years ago, but that doesn’t mean that she isn’t going to try again.

We’re always afraid of that.

I make my husband go watch Maw Maw while I go to the ER with my Mom. When I get to the hospital, my mother is already in an examining room.

“That was fast,” I say to her.

“Your father put on his Sheriff’s uniform and brought me in.”

“Where’s dad now?” I ask.

“He had a speaking engagement.”

“He just left you here?”

“I told him to go. He needed to go to the dinner—it’s good PR for the mayoral race.”

I can’t believe my Dad would just drop my mom off at the ER, but at the same time I know he is only running because Mom wants him to. While I sit in this room with Mom, nurses and doctors take her blood and hook her up to machines.

My mother has had a severe panic attack.

She thought she was having a heart attack, and that is why she made Dad drop her off at the hospital. Mom never sleeps, but works constantly, trying to make up for having lost her spokesperson job. But this life she is living now—I'm afraid it is killing her. And as I pull the tape recorder out of my pocket, I feel guilty for what I am about to do, but I have her here, tied to medical equipment, and I know she cannot escape me. I push down the record button. Maybe I can get her to talk about something that will make her happier. Maybe.

“Mom, can you tell me about anything that happened before I was born, before you were with dad, that made you happy? Even a little bit?”

“I remember kicking butt when I had to pass my fire fighting test. They almost didn't let me take it. They thought I wouldn't be able to handle it.”

SCENE 11  
**The Fire Department**

*(The lights come up, and the stage has been transformed into a fire station. My Mother and I watch as My Mother at Twenty's frustration with the Fire Chief rises.)*

FIRE CHIEF

I'm sorry, honey, but there isn't a place for a beauty queen in a fire station. Unless of course you want to slide up and down that pole there for us.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

But what about all the training I went through?

FIRE CHIEF

That was before you decided to become a pageant girl.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

But I'm not just a pageant queen.

FIRE CHIEF

Of course you're not. You're a really pretty, young thing. But I can't let you take the test.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

Why not?

FIRE CHIEF

Well, you're just a woman, and you would never make it through. It wouldn't be safe for you.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

Just give me a chance. Please?

FIRE CHIEF

For you, honey, I guess I could give you one chance. But remember, I tried to protect you.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

Don't worry. I'll be fine.

FIRE CHIEF

All right, but don't say I didn't warn you.

*(The stage becomes dark, and smoke starts to fill the theatre. The deck crew packs the stage with debris that will get in My Mother at Twenty's way. A hose is wrapped around all of these things—it will be her life line. She is told to keep her hands on this hose—no matter what. It is the only way to get through. My Mother at Twenty is pushed into the scene and an oxygen mask*

*is placed on her head. She cannot see. She grips the hose, and tries to make her way through the obstacle course. A warning bell goes off in her mask, telling her that she is losing oxygen. She has to get out of there as fast as possible. She begins to push through the rubble, she leaps, she crawls, she dives, and climbs. The audience tries to cheer her on. "You can do it!" they yell. "Show them all that you can do it!" they scream. My Mother and I encourage her from the wings of the stage. My Mother at Twenty makes it through the obstacle course, and she leans over, trying to catch her breath. The audience continues to clap and cheer for her. They want her to know that she has done well. The Fire Chief comes up to My Mother at Twenty).*

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

Well, was that good enough for you?

FIRE CHIEF

I guess it was good enough. And it would be nice to have a pretty thing like you around the fire house.

*(My Mother and I watch as days and nights pass on stage, and My Mother at Twenty is taunted by the other firemen in the house. They never let her forget what a pretty young thing she is. They circle her, torment her, and see her only as an object of lust.)*

FIREMAN #1

Hey baby, why don't you come play with my hose?

FIREMAN #2

Hey sweetie, want to come put out my fire.

FIREMAN #3

You're such a pretty, little thing.

FIREMAN #4

What's such a pretty little thing like you doing in a place like this?

FIREMAN #5

It's dangerous for a pretty girl like you to be around all these men. Why don't you let me protect you? I'll show you what a real man should be like.

FIREMAN#6

I can show you things you never saw before.

*(They block My Mother at Twenty in, and she can't escape their words. She tries to escape this place, but she has no where to go. Finally, My Mother and I watch as she returns home to My Grandmother's house.)*

MY GRANDMOTHER

Look at you. Look what you've done to yourself. No one is going to want you now. You smell like those men. You dress like a man. Everything I put into you—just gone, like that. So ungrateful.

THE STEP FATHER

You never come to see us anymore, Debbie. Why don't you ever bring your pretty little face around here anymore?

MY GRANDMOTHER

You could have been something. You could have been good enough, but then you did exactly what I told you not to do. I told you, Debbie. I told you.

THE STEP FATHER

Whatever happened to those pretty clothes your mother bought you? Maybe if you wore those, you would be happier. Maybe you could get some more friends.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Maybe you should have listened to me, Debbie. I am your mother, and mothers know best. I'll always know what's best for you. You'll always be my daughter. Unless you continue to not listen to me. You know my nerves can't take this. My nerves can't take you.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

I'll always be your daughter.

MY MOTHER

Always.

*(My Mother at Twenty wanders around the stage, trying to find a place where she is welcome. She is invited in for her beauty and then shunned when she won't give them what they want. She is a pretty face—too pretty. Everywhere she goes, she sees her face in the mirror and she hates that face. She slaps it over and over again, but it never changes. She can't change. No one will take her seriously. The fire department keeps her around because she is a pretty thing, a novelty, but when bell goes off in the fire house, she is always ready, always prepared to fight through the fire to save someone. She fights to be respected. She fights to survive. She finds a new job working as a police paramedic. She hopes that by switching departments, she will be able to get away from the teasing and harassment. But it doesn't stop. She doesn't think it will ever stop.)*

MY MOTHER

No matter what she does, it will never be enough.

ME

That's not true. Don't say that.

MY MOTHER

All they see is a pretty face. All we are is a pretty face.

*(The stage is changed to a midnight motorcycle wreck. Body parts are placed about the scene, and the paramedics and the police are called. My Mother at Twenty arrives and begins to clean up the mess. The gore does not bother her. She likes it actually. It is real, and intense, and it is a far cry from her mother's pageant stage. The One Who Should Be My Father comes onto the*

*scene to write the police report, but he cannot take his eyes off of My Mother at Twenty. She has such a pretty face—like a tough angel. My Mother at Twenty knows he is looking at her and she sighs. She knows what is about to happen next.)*

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER  
Hey, uh (*He reads the badge on her shirt*) hey, Davis?

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY  
Yeah, what?

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER  
I'm Officer Wolfe.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY  
Okay.

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER  
I haven't seen you around before. Are you new?

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY  
Yeah.

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER  
So that guy really rammed that tree hard didn't he? I've never seen so many guts outside of a body before.

*(From My Mother at Twenty's expression, I can tell that she really wants to get the place cleaned up so she can get rid of this guy.)*

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER  
You know, you are really good at finding all of the pieces of that guy. I would probably miss some because I...

*(My Mother at Twenty cuts off The One Who Should Be My Father mid-sentence.)*

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY  
Could you just please be quiet?

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER  
You know, you have a really, really pretty face. Has anyone ever told you that before?

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY  
I do get that occasionally, yes.

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER

So, where are you from? You from around here? I'm from out on Mt. Union. It's pretty nice out there—I have a garden with my dad, and we've got some cattle and horses and...

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

What do you not understand about being quiet?

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER

I was just trying to make conversation, you know? Don't you like to talk to people?

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

Yeah, it just makes my day to have a conversation over blood and guts.

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER

Well, um...

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

Is there anything else?

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER

I was just thinking that maybe I would make up a roll with everyone's telephone numbers on it. That way if any of us want to do something when we aren't on a shift, we could, you know, call each other, and all that.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

I believe they already have one of those.

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER

Yeah, but uh, the thing is, I don't think your number is on there.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

Fine. If I give you my number will you leave me alone?

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER

Yeah, I guess. Oh um, could I have your address too? Sometimes our phone doesn't work out on the ridge, and maybe I could come by your house, or I could come pick you up and I could take you riding. I have this Standardbred named King—he's getting kind of swaybacked but he still works hard and he's been doing good, except lately he's been kind of favoring his left leg and...

*(My Mother at Twenty stops The One Who Should Be My Father's rambling by shoving a piece of paper into his hands.)*

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

Here is everything you want. Now please, just shut up.



*(The One Who Should Be My Father shuts up, but he doesn't give up on his chances with her. He knows that if she would just give him a chance, then he could win her over. He had seen animals with the same look in their eyes before—beaten down by the world. He had a gentle hand and he knew how to help them heal. And he couldn't get her out of his head. My Mother and I watch him as he watches her. He calls her on the phone and invites her to come out to Mt. Union, but she never accepts. She figures that someday he will give up, but he doesn't. He perseveres.)*

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

*(On the phone)* I'm just too tired right now. I don't want to do anything okay?

THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE MY FATHER

*(On the phone)* Just come out to the farm with me. You might like it out here.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

I just can't okay?

*(She hangs up the phone. My Mother at Twenty goes to work, and the harassment is especially strong tonight. My Mother at Twenty wanders around the stage after work, trying to find a place where she is welcome. She is invited in for her beauty and then shunned when she won't give them what they want. She is a pretty face—too pretty. Everywhere she goes, she sees her face in the mirror and she hates that face. She slaps it over and over again, but it never changes. She can't change. My Grandmother and The Step Father follow her, repeating phrases over and over again.)*

THE STEP FATHER

You are mine.

MY GRANDMOTHER

You will never be good enough.

THE STEP FATHER

Such a pretty, little thing.

MY GRANDMOTHER

You could have been something.

THE STEP FATHER

You are *only* pretty enough for *me*.

MY GRANDMOTHER

What happened to your pretty face? You were *only* a pretty face.

*(Others join in. All circling around My Mother at Twenty. They hold mirrors, and push these mirrors toward her.)*

MODELING COACH

What's a pretty little thing like you doing hiding behind no make-up?

THE STEP FATHER

Want to come over and sit on my lap?

MY GRANDMOTHER

That couch is worth more than you.

NANA

You are not enough for your mommy, honey.

MODELING COACH

Cover it up and suck it in before it is too late.

MY GRANDMOTHER

My damned baby.

THE STEP FATHER

We'll be one big happy family.

MODELING COACH

I've worked wonders with her.

MY GRANDMOTHER

Remember how dreadful she was?

THE STEP FATHER

You look so good I could almost eat you up.

*(As they continue to circle, the repetition of their lines gets faster and faster and they start to blend into one another. My Mother finds herself being pulled into the circle with My Mother at Twenty. I try to grab onto My Mother—I try to keep her from falling away from me, but I can't get a grip. Surrounded by these memories, My Mother and My Mother and Twenty become one, and My Mother falls down to her knees, covering her face with her hands. )*

MY MOTHER

*(Screaming)* Enough!

*(There is silence in the theatre. I try to push through the circle to My Mother, but she is surrounded by her characters. She stands up and start systematically punching each of the mirrors held by these characters. Her hands become bloody and drip down on the stage. The characters close in on her, and begin pushing her toward the scene in the bedroom. I try to stop them, but they are too strong for me. She is lost—My Mother is lost to me. I run, frantic, to the Stage Manager.)*

ME

*(To the Stage Manager)* Stop this. Tell them to stop.

STAGE MANAGER

I can't. She is doing this to herself.

ME

Please help me. I don't know what to do.

STAGE MANAGER

What can you do? Sometimes we can't do anything but watch. It isn't your story yet. You can't control the action. You knew that.

ME

No. I was going to change the story. I thought that if I took her back, if I went with her, I could help her change the story.

STAGE MANAGER

It's not over yet, you know.

ME

Tell me what to do.

STAGE MANAGER

I already told you. I can't.

*(I don't know what to do. My Mother's heart starts to beat faster and my own heart follows. Our hearts are joined together, and I know we are getting closer to the end. I look over at the bedroom scene, and I see her standing in front of her medicine cabinet. She hold her hands to her face, and these hands, still bloody, drip down her arms, causing her shirt to be drenched and red. All of my mother's memories stand behind her, enclosing her in this small space. She can only look at her own reflection in the mirror now, hearing all of the years of herself repeating these words of her life.)*

MY MOTHER AT TWO

Daddy?

MY MOTHER AT THREE

I'm not enough for Mommy.

MY MOTHER AT SEVEN

I don't like it when he touches me.

MY MOTHER AT NINE

I wish I was better.

MY MOTHER AT ELEVEN

I wish he wouldn't look at me.

MY MOTHER AT THIRTEEN

I am only pretty enough for him.

MY MOTHER AT FOURTEEN

I have a father. He's coming for me—someday.

MY MOTHER AT SIXTEEN

I am a pretty, young thing.

MY MOTHER AT EIGHTEEN

I'm such a pretty, young thing.

MY MOTHER AT TWENTY

All we are is a pretty face.

*(I try to get to My Mother, but the memories are strong, and they stand in my way. I watch as she removes her clothes and steps into the shower. My Mother lets the water flow over her body. She closes her eyes and the water mixes with the tears that escape from the lids. She dries her body and covers herself with a clean set of clothing. As she opens the medicine cabinet I can hear her heart beating—my own heart joins in unison, creating a pulse within and around me. I yell out to her, but she cannot hear me. She chooses a deadly combination of pills, and fills a glass with water. She walks to her bed, and sits. She places the pills in her mouth and swallow them down, graceful, even as her body fights against and then relents to the objects as they slide down within her. Pause. She pulls the blankets back and lays down, her heart continuing to thunder in my mind. As a spotlight slowly comes up on the bed down stage center, and the lights fade out on the stage, the sound of a heart beat is heard throughout the theatre. It is my mother's heart—living, the blood pushing through the veins, fighting to survive. I finally push through the memories that surround her, and I lay down beside her.)*

ME

Mother please, don't do this. I need you. We all need you. Without you we will never have a chance to play our own parts.

*(My brothers and sisters yell from the audience: "Make her wake up. Wake up our mother.")*

ME

I'm trying. *(I whisper in My Mother's ear.)* Don't listen to your memories, Momma. Listen to me—I love you. We all love you. Please don't leave us. You are strong. I know you are. You will always be good enough for us. You are my mother. You are *our* mother.

*(Her heart, still living, pounds and throbs within me and my siblings, and the ringing of a phone—her phone—joins in.)*

ME

Mother, you must answer that phone. For us all, you must answer it. Don't let the curtain close now. Don't make the play end.

*(My Mother's body stirs and a hand reaches out to pick up the phone. I hear The One Who Will Be My Father on the other line, asking what is wrong with My Mother. He knows something is wrong. She drops the phone, and I stay with her, hoping that this is not the end for us. Soon there is pounding on her door. )*

THE ONE WHO WILL BE MY FATHER

Come on, Debbie, open up. *(There is no response from My Mother)*

Come on Debbie, please.

*(The One Who Will Be My Father kicks in the door, and rushes to her side. My Mother's unconscious state fills him with terror that he has never before experienced. He does the only thing he can think of to do: he reaches down and picks up My Mother in his arms, and rushes off the stage. The lights fade out to black.)*

\*\*\*

*(I suddenly find myself transported into the audience. I look around and see that I am sitting next to My Brother John and my Sisters Mary and Sara. We have good seats—front row center. I look behind me and see my other siblings. My little brother Paul looks bored and draws on his program. I grab it away from him.)*

ME

Paul, this might be important. Pay attention.

*(He looks at me for a moment, and then leans back, putting his feet on the back of my chair. I start to say something again to him, but then think better of it; I don't want to interrupt the performance. Because the lights are still blacked out, I can't see that far behind me in the audience, but it looks like it's a full house. The lights start to fade up and I turn back toward the stage.*

*We watch as The One Who Should Be My Father and My Mother fall in love. He takes her to his family farm on Mt. Union, and he shows her the garden he planted with his father, and the plot of land he hopes to build a house on. They go horseback riding, and she loves riding King, even if he does have a swayback. She helps him feed the chickens, and when the sun sets, she likes to take her shoes off and feel the dirt between her toes. She has not been this happy since she was forced to live at Nana's when she was a little girl.*

*On Mt. Union she is still beautiful, but there, she is more valued for the help she offers around the farm—for the pats she gives to the animals, for the water she offers to the plants that are growing, for the friendship she gives to The One Who Should Be My Father and his family—rather than for her pretty face. We watch as The One Who Should Be My Father nervously asks My Mother to marry him, and we rejoice when My Mother says yes.*

*Then the Stage Manager appears on the stage.)*

STAGE MANAGER  
I need the actors for Act Two.

ME  
*(I turn to my brothers and sisters)* Do any of you know your lines?

*(The shake their heads.)*

ME (CONT.)  
Neither do I. *(To the Stage Manager)* We don't know what we are supposed to do.

STAGE MANAGER  
You'll all be fine. You've been watching this whole time—you've seen what to do.

ME  
But how do we know who's been cast into the second act?

STAGE MANAGER  
It goes by row. All of you in the first row—you are the players of the second act. And the second row—you need to be ready for the third.

*(A teenage boy, about ten rows back from where I'm sitting, raises his hand.)*

TEENAGE BOY  
And how many acts are there? How many of us should be prepared?

STAGE MANAGER  
The director and playwright have decided to have the play continue, as long as there are those willing to play their parts.

*(A Teenage Girl in the back of the theatre raises her hand.)*

TEENAGE GIRL  
You want all of us? Even me?

STAGE MANAGER  
Yes, the director wants all of you; He wants all of you to have your chance on the stage.

*(The Teenage Girl raises her hand again)*

STAGE MANAGER  
*(Starting to get annoyed)* Yes, yes, what is it now? We really need to continue the play.

TEENAGE GIRL  
I'm sorry. It's just... Well, I've got a dreadful case of stage fright. I don't think I would do very well.

*(The Teenage Boy looks behind him at the girl. She is the most beautiful girl he has ever seen.)*

TEENAGE BOY

*(to Teenage Girl)* I'll help you. *(to Stage Manager)* I'll help her. I'm not afraid at all.

STAGE MANAGER

Fine, fine. But now I really must insist that the players in Act Two take their places in the wings.

*(Those of us in the first row start to stand up and make our way to the stage. We walk up the stairs of the stage, and cross over into the stage left wings. As the lights start to fade up again, I look over at JOHN once again. He looks so excited, but for me, for the first time, I feel butterflies in my stomach.)*

*(To my siblings)* Cover for me if I forget my lines, will you? Especially since I don't think I even know them.

MARY

We'll try. And don't worry—we'll be right behind you.

*(The lights come up full, and then I hear her heartbeat again, louder and stronger than ever before. I didn't even feel it happen. As I wait for my turn in the world, I rest and grow within my mother. I feel the hands of my family on her womb and I know that we are part of one another. It soon will be time for me to play my part in the theatre known as life. And because she lives, I too will live. )*

## Epilogue

My mother and I pack up the car and place Scott's ashes between us. I belt my newest baby in his car seat in the back, and kiss him on the forehead. My mother and I are going to go to Grandma Ann's "Mystic Mountain" to finally put Scott to rest. As we drive, we talk about my latest home birth, Huntington Outdoor Theatre's next season, my dad's mayoral run, but mostly we talk about her family—my family. She speaks lovingly about Jody, about Nana and Pop, about Gary and even Stepdad Jack, but most of all she speaks of Scott—her eldest brother—the one who shared her mother, who understood her mother, the most. Scott wanted his ashes to be sprinkled at Mystic Mountain, and he has had to wait five years for this. We have decided that if Grandma Ann won't return our calls, then we will take Scott to her.

It's been long enough.

\*\*\*

Mom and I sit in our hotel room in Gatlinburg, TN. Peter, Grandma Ann's current husband, tells my mother on the phone that we will not be seen by Grandma Ann. She has her "Mystic Mountain" and she will not be disturbed—she cannot afford the loss of her peace and tranquility. For years I didn't understand what I had done to make my grandmother so angry with me—my mother had always told me that Grandma Ann wouldn't see us anymore because I had not sent her enough thank you notes for gifts over the years. But now, I know she must live her life, and we will live ours. We each have our parts to play, and the real magic of being human is the gift we have been given to play our parts how we see fit. We have been given the power to choose, for good or bad. My grandmother's life is here in the Smoky Mountains, and we will leave her to it. But first we must see to Scott.

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My mother and I hike up to the top of one of the Smoky Mountains, and sit down at an overlook. Mom pulls Scott out of her fanny pack (which I still try to get her *never* to wear). She opens up his zip lock bag, and we take turns sprinkling him over the edge of the cliff. The wind blows him away until finally, it is just the two of us again. (Well, the two of us, plus New Baby.) We sit there, and our silence is broken by the calls of some birds and thunder building in the distance. Rain drops start to fall, and we hurry back to our car.

We jump into the car, drenched from the rain. With Scott's empty, zip lock bag in between us, we start our journey back to our mountains in West Virginia. Mom cries, and I look at her for a moment.

"You are not your mother," I tell her. "You must let her go now. You are free." A few more tears escape from her eyes, and then a tiny smile appears on her face. She rolls down the window for a moment, and as she sticks her head out, the mountain rain mixes with her tears.

"Goodbye, mother," she says.

As the rain falls to the ground, we hear the applause of the mountains ringing out with each drop.

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It's time now to close the curtain on these characters from my mother's life. We will not forget them—they will live on forever in the blood that runs through our family's veins, and they will remain strong in the talents that are passed down, in the courage and the intensity that is passed down through the years—but my mother and I will no longer, can no longer, dwell on the past.

I wanted to create a perfect world for my mother. I wanted to take her past and shine it and put a pretty red bow on each of the characters. I know now, though, that the life I wanted to

erase, the life that haunted my mother, also made her who she is today. My mother may cry, and she may lose control sometimes, but she is courageous, and she is empathetic, and she is strong. Her character is strength, her character is devotion, her character has been molded and chiseled by her decisions and most of all, *her* character is *my* character's mother.

When I was young, so young that my feet couldn't touch the ground, I sat in the theatre with my father, and I watched my mother on stage. She stood in the spotlight and when she sang, joy came out of her mouth. Her past, her life she has lived, gave her the power and the ability to become so many different people on the stage, because she had to *be* so many different kinds of people. The theatre gave her permission to be happy through these people, to bring them to life, to give them a voice.

I wanted to give my mother back this voice.

And now, I offer your life back to you, mother; thank you for letting me in. Remember, mother, we don't need an audience to pretend to be happy. We will open our doors, breathe in the air of our mountains, and we will remember who we are and where we came from. Our roots our strong; we are strong. We can, and we will, be happy for our families, for each other, and for ourselves. Now the curtain will rise on the second act of our lives, and we will proudly play ourselves.