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NURTURE

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*Also Available From
Johnna Adams*

COCKFIGHTERS

5 Males, 2 Females

Synopsis: *Cockfighters* takes place in a lonely West Texas town where vengeance and violence come more naturally to the Fowler family than to the gamecocks they fight.

SANS MERCI

3 Females

Synopsis: Tracy and Kelly, young students at UCI, are determined to make a difference by helping the U'wa Indians in Colombia organize a resistance campaign to protest the a large Petroleum Corporation's plan to drill for oil on the tribe's sacred sites.

Three years later, a no longer idealistic Kelly is the crippled survivor of a brutal attack, and Tracy never returned from the ill-fated mission of mercy. One rainy day in Los Angeles, Tracy's mother Elizabeth shows up unexpectedly at Kelly's apartment. This is their first meeting. Slowly, the two women dance through their grief, while negotiating the truth of what brought the two young women together, why they undertook their dangerous humanitarian mission, and what happened on that final day.

NURTURE

BY JOHNNA ADAMS

The world premiere of **NURTURE** was produced by the Cockroach Theatre Company in Las Vegas, NV as winner of the Sin City New Play Contest and opened on September 21, 2012. The set design was by Darrel Garnette and Scott Fadale, light design was by Jessica Betts, sound design was by Arles Estes, costume and prop design was by Lee Ludwig Meyers, stage managers were Melissa Webb Finley and Natalie Senecal.

The production was directed by Jason Aaron Goldberg.

The cast was as follows:

CHERYL COOPER – Francine Gordon

DOUG GIVENS – Erik Amblad

Cast of Characters

CHERYL, 30s-50s

DOUG, 30s-50s

Settings

Backstage at a children's dance recital.

DOUG's dining room

An elementary school classroom

DOUG's living room

Time

The present.

Playwright's Note

When a character name is followed by an ellipsis, as such:

CHERYL:

This indicates a non-verbal response to the previous line.

The ellipsis line may be played in many ways: as a pause, a beat, a look, a movement, a silence, a smile, a sudden thought, or it can just be used to give the scene some air, some room, some tension, etc.

A slash (/) in the middle of a character's line indicates an interruption. The next speaking character should begin her line where the slash appears.

NURTURE

1.

(Backstage.

A children's dance recital.

We hear happy ballet music. A dance is in progress on stage.

CHERYL clutches a dance recital program and speaks to her daughter, Becky, who is hiding behind a curtain. The curtain is shaking and we faintly hear Becky crying.)

CHERYL: Okay, honey. . . . Okay, now. Go on! You can do it! Go on! Becky. Becky, listen to me. You can do this. See, all the other girls went out there and they're dancing! Yea! Look at them! Join them! Becky. Becky, damnit, try! Try!
Plumpkin, you are going to regret it if you don't try.

Listen to me. Listen! If you don't go out there and dance right now, trust me, Becky, it will open a crater in your memory. A crater. . . A huge hole blasted out of the earth by scary, radioactive meteorites. A crater that you will spend your whole life trying to walk around. But, Becky-- Becky, you will never, ever be able to walk all the way around the crater. Your feet will fall off first. It will have no end, the path you are walking.

Do you want that? Huh? Do you want to be a 40-year-old woman with a memory full of deep, dark pits of self-betrayal?

I don't want that for you, plumpkin.

Let go of the fucking curtain and get out there! Oh, god! Becky. Becky. Every time you disappoint Mommy now, it will feel like a hot knife shoved up under your breastbone for the whole rest of your life. Mommy knows, because Mommy had a Mommy, too. We just never talk about her. We never, ever talk about her.

But, you know what, Becky? One day you'll be in the grocery store. A long, long time from now. In fact you'll be post-menopausal and wearing a house dress and sandals with support hose. You'll be standing there in the frozen food aisle, and then-- pow! Bam! You'll find yourself back in this very moment, pained beyond belief thinking about how you disappointed your mother.

I can't let that happen to you! It's my job to protect you from just that sort of thing!

Plumpkin. Plumpkin. . . . Mommy would kill and maim for you. Mommy would tear other children apart with her teeth if that is what she had to do to keep you safe. And then she would eat them. Mommy would set herself on fire to--!!

Oh. No-- no no no no-- no. Honey, baby, tweetie, tweetie, Mommy's not really going to set herself on fire. It's okay. Mommy's not going to set herself on fire. Don't cry. . . . Don't cry.

(DOUG enters, also holding a dance recital program. He stands to the side and watches.)

CHERYL (Cont'd): Oh, it's okay. It's oooooookay.
There now. Now.

Do you want to try again to go out and dance with the other girls? For Mommy? . . . Yes, you can! Yes, you can! . . . Damnit! Damnit! Yes, you can!

You would know everything! Avoid everything! Walk through fire and devastation unscathed if you would listen. I'm trying to help you.

Let go of the curtain. You are going to feel so good when you do this. You love dancing. Plumpkin loves dancing!

*(CHERYL dives behind the curtain and tries to manhandle Becky onto the stage.
We hear a scuffle.*

Becky scampers away.)

CHERYL (Cont'd): Becky!

(CHERYL comes slowly out from behind the curtain and sits down on the floor.)

DOUG: Aww. She won't go out there?

CHERYL: I wouldn't mind her running away. That's a survival instinct and should be honed. It makes me feel good that she has that, at least.

DOUG: She's adorable.

CHERYL: But she hides so well. She crawls into a tiny place and stays so quiet. For hours. Sometimes it takes hours to find her.

DOUG: Doug Givens.

CHERYL: What?

DOUG: Doug Givens.

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL: Oh. . . . Cheryl. Cooper.

DOUG: You're a dance class parent, too?

CHERYL: No. I just wrestle midgets in a tutus. Professionally.

DOUG: I'm one, too. Dance class parent.

CHERYL: I hate labels.

DOUG: My little Suzy's out there.

CHERYL: Suzy?

DOUG: The blond. Second row. Bun. Hair bun.

CHERYL: Suzy.

DOUG: She's mine.

CHERYL: She's a bully.

DOUG: Excuse me?

CHERYL: Suzy. Your Suzy. She's a bully.

DOUG: Oh. . . well--

CHERYL: Becky says she stalks the other girls. Like a wolf on wounded fawns. If they lie down on their backs to do stretches, Suzy kneels on their hair and keeps them pinned there. Until they say 'uncle' and kiss her ballet slippers. The soles of her ballet slippers.

DOUG: Well . . . she lives with her mother.

CHERYL: She's a terrible human being. Suzy.

DOUG: My ex-wife. My ex-wife has custody. You know.

CHERYL: Becky says that some of the girls lie down at Suzy's feet as soon as she walks in the room. Because its futile to do otherwise. And because they like to have her kneel on their hair and then to kiss her feet.

I think Becky's one of them.

DOUG: Married?

CHERYL: What?

DOUG: Are you married?

CHERYL: I thought that's what you said.

DOUG: So. Are you? Married?

CHERYL: Why?

DOUG: I'm divorced myself. I think I mentioned my ex.

CHERYL: I've never been married. Becky's a bastard.
And adopted. She was probably a bastard before she
was adopted and was adopted into being a bastard.

DOUG: Stop me if I'm being inappropriate, Cheryl, but--

CHERYL: I'm not sure if it's going to work out.

DOUG: Oh. Well, don't be hasty. I think we really have a
lot in common.

CHERYL: No. The adoption.

DOUG: When did you adopt her?

CHERYL: She's not really adopted. I went to sperm
bank. I adopted sperm.

DOUG: Gosh. I'm not good at this. I get awkward around
women at times like this. When I like a woman. Like
a school boy.

CHERYL: I don't think it's working out.

DOUG: But, I'm wondering if maybe you and I, Cheryl--

CHERYL: I can't give her back.

DOUG: Could have a play date for the girls?

CHERYL: If you're a woman, you can only make withdrawals. From the sperm bank.

DOUG: My ex-wife tells me I should arrange play dates for Suzy when I have her. Weekends.

CHERYL: No deposits.

DOUG: Play date for the girls. Deadly, serious first date for the parents. Heh.

CHERYL: Maybe I can find someone to take her. Someone better. And then move. Is your wife a good mother?

DOUG: Ex-wife. No.

CHERYL: It would be best if someone took her. Someone better.

DOUG: She's turned Suzy into a clone. Judith replicated like a virus. She split in half.

CHERYL: That's what I don't want! I tell her that every night when I tuck her in! "Honey, plumpkin, you can be anything you want to be. Anything in the whole, wide world you want to be! Except like me. You can't be that. Mommy will despise herself and pity you if that happens. It would destroy our relationship, because if you ever hold a mirror up to me and I see myself in you, I will crack. I will leave you. Abandon you in a parking lot in front of a mall in Cleveland or Ohio. But, I will be running from myself and not you, Becky. Okay? Not from you. But it will amount to the same thing.

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG: I haven't really dated since the divorce. I don't have weekends free. You just have the one girl?

CHERYL: Yes.

DOUG: Us, too. I think she gets lonely. She needs a little friend. Girls have their girlfriends. Their little friends around them. So, I'd like to-- Gosh, we just met, didn't we? Stop me, if I get too personal. What I would like one day-- ideally-- is to be in a long-term relationship with a woman like myself. Who has a child or children who can be friends with Suzy. Because Suzy is an unavoidable part of my life. Is this too much, too soon?

CHERYL: Yes.

DOUG: Cheryl, I feel this thing happening between us. Maybe I shouldn't say all this.

CHERYL: I wish you wouldn't. But you will because I deserve it. I deserve to have things like this happened to me. I'm bad.

DOUG: Maybe you and Becky could come over for dinner Saturday night? The girls can play in Suzy's room.

CHERYL: I'm a bad person.

DOUG: Well, I don't want meet a good person, then. Obviously that's not where it's at, huh?

CHERYL: Thank you. You're very accepting.

DOUG: She almost convinced me to stick a fork in an electrical socket.

CHERYL: What? Who?

DOUG: Suzy. She's a bully.

CHERYL: Did you do it?

DOUG: Sometimes it's easier to just give them what they want.

CHERYL: That's always easier.

DOUG: I mean, I didn't actually stick the fork in the socket. I pretended to. Pretended to--

(DOUG mimes sticking a fork into an electrical socket and being electrocuted.)

CHERYL: Good.

DOUG: She was fine with that. She liked it. She didn't push it.

CHERYL: Good.

DOUG: I put the fork maybe half way into the socket. Half inch. Didn't do more than jolt me. It made her happy. Made her laugh. That's a good thing and there was no lasting damage.

CHERYL: Good. She would have regretted it if there was lasting damage.

DOUG: Maybe. It's not a good thing to give them everything they want sometimes.

CHERYL: Sometimes no.

DOUG: People say that at least.

CHERYL: They say that in books. Talk shows.

DOUG: You can't give them everything they want.

CHERYL: They don't want right. They're stupid and vicious. They don't want the right things. You would have to pry open their skulls and put the right things to want into their heads, and even then they wouldn't want the right things, because how the hell would you know what to tell them to want?

DOUG: Absolutely.

CHERYL:

DOUG: So. Dinner? Saturday night?

CHERYL: No.

DOUG: It'd be good for the girls, too.

CHERYL: No, it wouldn't.

DOUG: You said they were friends, right?

CHERYL: No.

DOUG: They could do the hair kneeling thing.

CHERYL:

DOUG: You said they have fun with that.

CHERYL:

True.

DOUG: Okay!

CHERYL: And I would be forced to watch. And have my nosed firmly rubbed into my complicity in Becky's humiliation.

DOUG: I really think you'd have a good time. You and Becky.

CHERYL: No. We wouldn't.

DOUG: I know I'd have a good time.

CHERYL: But Becky will have to face it sooner or later.

DOUG: Face what?

CHERYL: A situation like being trapped at Suzy's father's apartment with a girl like Suzy. Where there is no possibility of escape or intervention. This will help ready her for middle school, where girls like Suzy walk the halls unchallenged with blood in their braces. Blood they've sucked from girls like Becky.

DOUG: Let me give you my phone number.

(DOUG writes his phone number on a corner of the dance recital program, rips it off and hands it to CHERYL.)

CHERYL: Okay. Fine. I need to find Becky and take her home. Maybe she crawled under the stage hoping to die and is huddled there crying listening to the other girls dancing and leaping inches above her tear-stained face.

DOUG: She'll show up.

(They look out at the stage.)

DOUG (Cont'd): Looks like they're winding down. This is the big finish it looks like. Is that gap on the left where your girl would be?

CHERYL: Yes. That's her empty space of air. Between Suzy and Melanie Miller.

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG: Melanie /Miller.

CHERYL: Melanie Miller.

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG: Bob Miller's girl. Right.

CHERYL: Melanie Miller comes to dance practice every week straight from the food bank where her family volunteers ten hours a week serving food to the homeless. She has pool parties in the summer and invites all the children in the school. Even Becky.

DOUG: The mom was a swimsuit model. Really kept her figure, too.

CHERYL: The Miller woman. Yes. She's lovely.

DOUG: Great people. The Millers.

CHERYL: Earth salt.

DOUG: Judith put Suzy in the dance class, hoping she could be friends with Melanie Miller. Great kid. Well-adjusted. Judith thinks Suzy could learn a lot from her.

CHERYL: She's very coordinated. Little elfin princess.

DOUG: Yep. Melanie /Miller.

CHERYL: Melanie Miller. She and Suzy are friends?

DOUG: That was the plan, but, well--

(A squeal and a shout onstage. Crying. Sounds of a fight breaking out.)

CHERYL: I guess not.

DOUG: I think it was an accident.

CHERYL: Is Melanie Miller bleeding? Bleeding?

DOUG: No. Suzy kicks her foot out sometimes. Suddenly. A reflex disorder. We need to get that looked at.

CHERYL: Yes. It keeps happening out there. The reflex disorder.

DOUG: Oh, Jesus. It's like a bench fight at a little league game. All the girls are getting in on it now.

CHERYL: They're all ganging up on Suzy.

DOUG: That's what happens. The oppressed rise against dictators. Inevitable.

CHERYL: Are you going to break it up?

DOUG: She's holding her own. No bones broken. A little blood on the dance floor, but, come on, they're kids.

CHERYL: I should find Becky.

DOUG: Good thing she didn't go out there after all. With all this, huh?

CHERYL: No. This makes it worse. Now she'll be left out. That's how girls are. The other girls have a bond now. She won't be part of that. She'll go back to class and they will all be bruised and glaring. She won't have any bruises. No one will glare at her. And as they get older and cross the great wasteland of puberty like refugees from war, with all their kindness and basic humanity packed away in bags they have to drag behind them through the desert but have no time to open, Becky's isolation will deepen. Eventually she will be a pariah.

DOUG: They're just little girls. They don't mean to be cruel.

CHERYL: Cruelty is a girl's only pleasure from the time she starts menstruating to the day she learns to have an orgasm.

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG: I never knew that. That explains a lot.

End scene.

2.

(A dining room.

DOUG and CHERYL sit at opposite ends of a table with plates of half-eaten spaghetti in front of them. There are two child-sized plates abandoned to either side of the table.

DOUG and CHERYL are laughing.)

CHERYL: Bass fishing?

DOUG: Yes.

(More laughter.)

CHERYL: Unbelievable.

DOUG: I know, right? Bass fishing!

CHERYL: Bass fishing.

DOUG: Yes! Yes, bass fishing.

CHERYL: Oh, my goodness. Bass fishing.

(Weak laughter. It trails off.)

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG: This isn't going well, is it?

CHERYL: No.

DOUG: Oh. I was hoping you'd disagree.

CHERYL: No.

DOUG: Is this going to be our only date?

CHERYL: Based on how it's going.

DOUG: I can't tell jokes. I shouldn't try. Bass fishing. Jesus.

CHERYL: You're not funny. I'm not funny either.

DOUG: But, you're not trying. You are self-aware enough to know you aren't funny and not inflict your lack of humor on others.

CHERYL: Thank you.

DOUG: You're amazing, Cheryl.

CHERYL: Okay.

DOUG: That's how I feel. And that's all I meant to express with the whole bass fishing thing.

CHERYL: Okay.

DOUG: Good. So, how were the girls getting on when you checked on them?

CHERYL: I didn't really check on them. I just locked myself in the bathroom and cried.

DOUG: Oh, was that it? Thank god! I noticed the red eyes. I thought Suzy might have sprayed you with that damned pepper spray. It was a gift from her mother before her first weekend with me.

CHERYL: No, just crying. Tears. Misery.

DOUG: Good. Good.

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL: She sprays you with pepper spray?

DOUG: No. Only when I make her angry.

CHERYL: Well, that's the ridiculous. You are the adult.

DOUG: That's what they tell me.

CHERYL: I was never one of those people.

DOUG: What people?

CHERYL: People who want children.

DOUG: But, you had yourself inseminated.

CHERYL: That was under duress.

DOUG: Oh . . . ?

CHERYL: I was forced.

DOUG: By . . . ?

CHERYL: My mother. She pulled a knife.

DOUG: I'm sorry.

CHERYL: A steak knife. I'm not sure it's legal.

DOUG: No. You can't pull a knife--

CHERYL: Not that. My maternity. I'm not sure it's legal.

DOUG: Oh.

CHERYL: It was under duress. . . . Maybe if I went to court.

DOUG: I never wanted kids either.

CHERYL: Did Judith pull a knife?

DOUG: No. She just . . . has her ways.

(There is an alarming noise from the girls in a separate room, elsewhere in the apartment.

CHERYL and DOUG look at one another. They both start to get up.)

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG: More wine?

CHERYL: Sure.

DOUG: So, Cheryl, what are your interests?

CHERYL: I have none.

DOUG: No hobbies?

CHERYL:

DOUG: Me neither.

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL: I like the internet.

DOUG: Yes. I watch internet porn. A lot. To cope.

CHERYL: I found an internet community associated with the sperm bank.

DOUG: That's what porn is there for. To cope.

CHERYL: A community where women who were inseminated find one another and compare sperm donor codes. Becky's father is SD846. Women compare these numbers to see if their children have half-siblings out there somewhere.

DOUG: Does Becky have siblings?

CHERYL: No. SD846 was an unpopular donor. The give you donor profiles. SD846 was underachieving sperm. Unemployed. Possible hereditary illness, bad vision, short, average to unattractive looks. I didn't want sperm that I thought was better than me.

DOUG: My marriage was based on similar principles. . . . and on genital insecurity.

CHERYL: Yours or hers?

DOUG: Thank you for asking. When I say that, people generally just assume. Mine. Cheryl, I know it's way too soon for this, and the date is not going well--

CHERYL: No.

DOUG: And I know that no matter how things turn out between us, eventually I'm going to wish that I had sliced open my stomach, sewn snake eggs inside and let a nest of snakes grow in there instead of starting this. That's where these things always end up. But, you really make me feel . . . Less bad. I'm not good with women. Even with Suzy, there's an awkwardness. We have this thing we do. I tuck her into bed and read her a bedtime story at night. And it makes me very anxious. I break out into a sweat. I sweat onto the pages of the book. I get ink stains. She's like a large cat watching a mouse and flicking her tail. And I'm the mouse, under her paw, and she's playing with me. Making me dance for her amusement, just out of reach of her teeth. Dance faster, Daddy, dance faster. So, I drink a lot after she's in bed. And I watch internet porn.

CHERYL: I buy explicit fetish magazines and leave them out for Becky to discover. Sometimes I pack them into her schoolbag as if by mistake. The school called once. I pretended I knew nothing about it.

DOUG: Why do you do that?

CHERYL: I don't want to teach her about these things myself. That would be a disaster. And children are like rabid ferrets when it comes to sex. No matter what you do, they chase it down and hold it pinned by its throat until they're old enough to straddle it.

DOUG: Well, sure.

CHERYL: They have their own fetishes and strange tastes lined up like ducks in their personal shooting gallery. Waiting until they are handed a gun. Becky likes plastics and rubber. We can't keep saran wrap in the house. And sometimes if I go into her room in the middle of the night and she's not there, I find her in the garage, underneath the car, furtively curling her body around the back driver's side tire.

DOUG: Suzy likes to give beatings. To men.

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG: Is it getting better? The date? I feel some thawing.

CHERYL: No. Not really.

DOUG: I can't read women's moods. Judith again. She was the Monet of moods. A little dot of this, a little dot of that. If you stand back far enough, there's a picture. But, get up close and it's all pinpricks of multi-colored anger.

CHERYL: Monet didn't do dots.

DOUG: I don't read tea leaves, Cheryl. I can't open a goat's entrails and learn from that what you are feeling.

CHERYL: He made little smears.

DOUG: I don't have a magic wand. Or a secret decoder ring. I guess I'm saying . . . I need a little help here.

CHERYL: Yeah. I need help here, too.

DOUG: Let's peel back an onion layer on one another.

CHERYL: I went through your medicine cabinet.

DOUG: Excuse me?

CHERYL: While I was in your bathroom, crying. I found this behind the Preparation H.

(CHERYL hands him a photograph.)

DOUG: Oh. . . Wow.

CHERYL: Where was this taken? Who are you with?

DOUG: Oh, gosh. I haven't seen this in ages. This was a lifetime ago. Look at that.

CHERYL: Who is that man? You have your arm around him.

DOUG: Oh, that. That's just a man thing. Platonic man thing.

CHERYL: You're kissing him.

DOUG: Affectionate man thing.

CHERYL: With tongue.

DOUG: I was young. That experimental phase. College-aged. You probably did the same thing. College.

CHERYL: I dropped out of college before anyone got to that stage. My stage was frigid. Is that your college?

DOUG: This is an institution I spent four years at.

CHERYL: College?

DOUG: Not college.

CHERYL: You're wearing an orange jumpsuit.

DOUG: It was a correctional facility.

CHERYL: Prison?

DOUG: Correctional facility or penitentiary. Prison is pejorative.

CHERYL: Why were you in prison?

DOUG: Oh, god. That was a lifetime ago.

CHERYL: Why were you in prison?

DOUG: Kid's stuff. You know. Things that dumb kids do when they're kids.

CHERYL: Drugs?

DOUG: No. Dumb things kids do.

CHERYL: Drunk driving?

DOUG: A phase.

CHERYL: Theft? Auto-theft?

DOUG: A phase of childhood. That you go through.

CHERYL: I'm leaving. I can't have my child in your apartment if I don't know what you did.

DOUG: Grave-robbing.

CHERYL:

DOUG: Just a dumb thing you do when you're a kid. Curiosity.

CHERYL: This is something you did?

DOUG: Well, sure. Where I grew up, we lived next door to a cemetery. So, it was just inevitable, you know kids. Christ, I used to sneak over there with my toy shovel and bucket when I was a toddler. Gosh, this is a trip down memory lane.

So, the first time I actually dug up a coffin and opened it, was, of course, because of a girl. A girl I had no chance with because she was a cheerleader, the mayor's daughter and, well, dead. Sandy Ann Houlihan. Way out of my league. Homecoming queen, straight A kid, all that. She died. Leukemia. The whole school devastated. Like a bomb hit the campus.

And, I was young. I was stupid. It was such a temptation. No kid at that age could have resisted. The cemetery was practically my backyard. She was out there. She was right outside my window. I could see the headstone. With binoculars. I would stand there looking at that headstone, the sheer curtains in my bedroom window wrapping themselves around me like a cocoon in the wind. Moonlight pouring down. Temptation growing.

What, was she going to say no? Say no to me now? Huh? Not out of reach now, is she? Ah, youth. I was a slow kid, socially. So, two nights after they buried her, I was out there with a big shovel. They found her the next morning and reinterred her. And, of course, I vowed an eternal vow to never do anything like that again. And wouldn't you know it, two nights after they reinterred her I was back out there with a shovel. Hormones. God, you can't recapture that. Viagra, whatever, nothing makes you feel young really. Not like that.

DOUG (Cont'd): We had a little back and forth there for a while. I dig her up, they put her back. They put her back, I dig her up. Finally they cremated her. So, that was the end of that, I thought.

But then, I got another dumb kid idea. See there was a rich section of the cemetery and a poor section. In the rich section they buried a lot a people with their jewelry on. Like pharaohs or something. And, well, gosh, what use do corpses have for any of that, right? So, there was no ebay back then, and eventually they caught me at a pawn shop with a sack full of corpse bling. Heh heh heh. God.

And there you have it. Five years, out in four for good behavior. That's my cell-mate, Cipriano. Aggravated assault and grand theft. Behind the Preparation H, you say. Ha! Well

CHERYL: Maybe I should go.

DOUG: There's dessert.

CHERYL: I shouldn't leave Becky alone with your daughter any longer.

DOUG: I thought we could listen to some music after dinner. Do you like soft R&B?

CHERYL: There's something wrong with your daughter. And with you. Clearly.

DOUG: We could finish the wine. Get comfortable with one another.

CHERYL: You may be-- I don't want to alarm you,
Doug.

DOUG: Don't you sometimes need comfort, Cheryl?

CHERYL: I think there may be more wrong with you
than there is with me.

DOUG: I need comfort.

CHERYL: I never thought I'd ever say that to anyone.

DOUG: Well, thank you for saying it.

CHERYL: Because something's deeply, deeply wrong
with me.

DOUG: I never thought I'd feel again for someone the
way I feel for you.

CHERYL: There's something wrong with Becky, too. But
it's different.

DOUG: I feel frightened of you.

CHERYL: I'm frightened of Becky. And Suzy, of course.

DOUG: Tell me if this is too much, too soon.

CHERYL: Becky internalizes all the things that are
wrong with her. Suzy externalizes.

DOUG: Okay, Cheryl. I'm just going to lay it all on the
line here.

CHERYL: Becky is cruel to herself and I am proud of her for it. Proud of myself. I've directed her misery inward in order to protect everyone from the poison I've poured into her.

DOUG: It's a one bedroom apartment, Cheryl. Suzy sleeps in the bedroom when she's here. So, intimacy can be challenging.

CHERYL: She'll never walk into her school with a rifle and kill people. Herself, maybe. But not people.

DOUG: But right now, Suzy has a little friend in there to keep her company. Distract her.

CHERYL: Yes, I took Becky in there like a sacrifice to my own curious lust. An offering to your household goddess of torment. Suzy had her toys spread out. A GI Joe doll tied to the hood of a pink, Barbie corvette. A crowd of Barbie dolls with spiked haircuts standing over him. A roll of thin copper wire, duct tape and a cigarette lighter.

DOUG: I've been thinking about you and me a lot since we met.

CHERYL: A handful of thumbtacks. A cookie cutter held with a pair of metal tongs and an oven mitt.

DOUG: Obsessively. Compulsively. I don't know if you've been thinking about us, or if even there is or could be an us. But

CHERYL: Becky gave me one of her looks as I walked away. A sad, pleading look. The sort of look Chinese tourists give you when they are desperately asking you for directions. Directions to a safe, warm place, and you don't understand. And you think, goddamnit, do I look Chinese? But, still, you feel really guilty for a long time.

DOUG: God, I must seem desperate like that.

CHERYL: Because you're willing to settle for me?

DOUG: That. And I'm just really awkward here. I'm asking for sex is what it boils down to.

CHERYL: I'm frigid.

DOUG: Oh. Well--

CHERYL: Not medically frigid. Or mentally frigid. Mentally, I'm very sexual. Very sexual.

DOUG: Great.

CHERYL: Situationally frigid. Subject to total situational frigidity.

DOUG: I'm mentally very sexual, too.

CHERYL: It doesn't really have anything to do with me, my frigidity. It's imposed on me by others. By men.

DOUG: Well, I don't see why--

CHERYL: I wouldn't be frigid if I weren't, first, perceived that way.

DOUG: Well, I certainly don't--

CHERYL: It's a role they cast me in. Men. Some women they cast as nurturers or motherly types. Some women are cast as whores or wholesome girls-next-door. If I were a character in a film cast by men, I would be the iceberg in *Titanic*.

DOUG: No, no. Men aren't the same, Cheryl. Men are not created equal.

CHERYL: That's true. Men come in value ranges. It's the superior men who see me this way. I don't know what the bottom feeders think.

DOUG: Well, I think you're great.

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL: Where would we--? The girls are in the bedroom.

DOUG: The couch.

CHERYL: That shares a wall with the bedroom. I don't want the girls to hear. They'll make comparisons later when they have sex themselves. Both of them are likely to grow up to be better lovers than me. Suzy at least. When she's older she'll look back and sneer.

DOUG: I can clear off the table.

CHERYL:

(DOUG begins clearing of the table, quickly.)

DOUG: So . . . Good to go, here?

CHERYL: Well, I do want to get home early.

DOUG: No problem. I'll be quick.

CHERYL: Thank you. I find premature ejaculation reassuring, actually. Otherwise I will just lay there a long time wondering, 'is he getting anything from this?'

DOUG: No problem. In and out. Quicky. Hurry things along. I got it. Absolutely.

(DOUG has the table cleared off. CHERYL gets onto the table.)

CHERYL: Okay.

DOUG: Wait. . . . Bread basket. . . . Uh, let me wipe that.

(CHERYL gets off the table so that he can finish clearing it, wipe off some spaghetti sauce, etc.)

DOUG (Cont'd): Okay. Okay. Good to go.

CHERYL: Should I?

DOUG: Yes. By all means. Yes.

(CHERYL gets back on the table. They find a position that might work and maneuver around or remove some clothing.)

CHERYL: Is this--?

DOUG: Yes! Oh. No. . . Okay Yes, this'll work.
This'll work.

CHERYL: Your elbow.

DOUG: Sorry. Good?

CHERYL: Sure.

DOUG: Okay. Okay . . . just a minute. . . .okay . . . oh,
sorry, just a-- . . . Okay! Nope, just a minute . . . Ah!
Yes, I think-- . . . no. . . just-- give me one second
here... jeez, this never-- uh--

CHERYL: It's okay. I deserve this.

DOUG: Okay, there! There! Okay.

CHERYL: Okay.

DOUG: Goddamnit. Goddamnit. Just a--

CHERYL: Okay

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG: Now! Now! Yes, good. Good to go!

CHERYL: Great.

(A few moments of awkward intercourse.)

DOUG: You know, I think we really have something here, Cheryl.

(Things hit a minor stumbling block.)

CHERYL: Well, not at the moment.

DOUG: No, sorry. One sec-- There! There! No, Cheryl, I meant us. Us. I've never met a woman like you--

CHERYL: What do you mean by that?

DOUG: Just . . . oh, uhn . . . I don't have to hide things from you . . . uhn All the monsters that I keep locked in my brain . . . oh. . . . In the back closet of my brain. Uh, oh . . . God. . . You know, the drooling, slimy, clawed freak part of me. Well, you have that too . . . hwooooo And you get all that.

CHERYL: Sure.

DOUG: The freakshow in our heads. We share that . . . uhn . . . ah . . . You and I. We gotta' get those freaks together, Cheryl. . . . hwooooo . . . uhn You get me. . . You really get me. I can . . . all out . . . you get... all out! All out!

(A meager climax.)

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL: Okay.

DOUG: That was--?

CHERYL: Yes. It was.

DOUG: Good. Good.

CHERYL: Yes. Okay.

DOUG: That's just-- . . . Wow, Cheryl. That's . . . You
just made me happy.

CHERYL: I know.

*(A cry of rage from the girls' room. Sobs. Loud crashes.
Screams.*

*CHERYL and DOUG look at one another. They both start
to go to the door.)*

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG:

CHERYL:

DOUG: Again?

End

3.

(A grade school classroom.

CHERYL and DOUG sit in child-sized chairs.

On a bulletin board in the room there is a poster reading: "MISSING, Melanie Miller" in large letters. The poster has a picture of an adorable girl with dimples.

CHERYL is crying. DOUG comforts her.)

CHERYL: I told her I would always have her back. I told her, 'Becky, plumpkin, chubbywubby, waddle-waddle, tub-tub, Mommy will always be there for you. Always. You will want to get rid of her at times. Often. But you will fail. Because Mommy will nail both of her hands to your shoulder blades while you sleep if that is what it takes to always, always be there for you.

DOUG: Sure.

CHERYL: Mommy has your back, has your back, has your back.

DOUG: Sure. You have her back. She knows that.

CHERYL: Mommy will help you lie to teachers, cheat on tests, plagiarize, steal other kids lunch money. She doesn't care. Mommy will drive with you into the desert to dump bodies into shallow, sandy graves.

DOUG: Well, sure. That's what you say.

CHERYL: I failed her.

DOUG: You say that. And when you say it, you mean it.

CHERYL: What do you mean by that?

DOUG: When you say it-- . . . it's just you know.

CHERYL: I mean it.

DOUG: No, no, you mean it. You mean it.

CHERYL: I mean it. Now. Today. . . . But I don't mean it, because I failed her.

(CHERYL cries again.)

DOUG: Oh, now, see, you did what you had to do. You get in these awkward social situations sometimes when you deal with people like teachers or doctors or auto mechanics. People who make their livings by making sure you know that they know more than you. And you know they know more than you and you're going to take their shit because they know more than you and they expect you to prove you know they know more. You did what you had to do. You rolled over like a burrito.

CHERYL: I would drive an ice pick through that teacher's left eye for my child. . . . I think. I don't know. The ice picking time came and I froze. Did you see Becky's little face?

DOUG: Well, I didn't see blame or anything on her face. She looked like she expected you to--

CHERYL: Betray her! That's what I mean! She expected it.

DOUG: Well, if she started the fight--

CHERYL: That's terrific! Aggression! I support it. She'll be expelled. We'll have to home school her.

DOUG: We?

CHERYL: Or leave her home alone all day with some educational DVDs and a copy of Jane Goodall's *40 Years at Gombe*. She might turn out better that way.

DOUG: Wow. Cheryl. We.

CHERYL: Becky. Fighting. Becky. A fighter. She scratched another girl on the face with safety scissors. Permanent scar. She *scarred* someone. I thought she was a little pussy. Lifelong sniveling pussy. She *scarred* someone. I've never done that. Have you done that? Even in prison?

DOUG: No.

CHERYL: You've never done that. You're a convicted felon. Becky makes you look like a pussy.

DOUG: I'm glad you brought that up.

CHERYL: That teacher says Becky's been withdrawn and angry since Melanie Miller's disappearance.

DOUG: You don't go in much for labeling. Labeling me for instance. Labeling me, I don't know, boyfriend?

CHERYL: Since Melanie Miller became the seventh girl to go missing since summer.

DOUG: We never have relationship talks, Cheryl.

CHERYL: This is Melanie Miller's fault.

DOUG: I think something significant happened today.

CHERYL: If there were no Melanie Miller, then Becky would never have stood up on the arts and crafts table and told her home room that she was glad Melanie Miller was missing, would she?

DOUG: A significant thing happened in our relationship.

CHERYL: Then Sarah O'Connor wouldn't have told Becky she was going to hell. And Becky wouldn't have slashed her chin open with safety scissors.

DOUG: God, Cheryl. This is more than I ever dreamed I would find.

CHERYL: And I wouldn't have proved to myself that I am worthless mucus. I hate Melanie Miller.

DOUG: We've come to a relationship milestone.

CHERYL: Do you remember how perfect she looked at the dance recital?

DOUG: We just jointly attended a parent teacher conference. Don't you think that means--

CHERYL: Melanie Miller, Doug. In the dance of flowers. In her primrose costume with the green tutu. Her perfect parents looking so smug.

DOUG: Sure.

CHERYL: Melanie / Miller.

DOUG: Melanie Miller.

CHERYL: So perfect. Those dimples.

DOUG: Melanie / Miller.

CHERYL: Melanie Miller. Those dimples. Those dimples made me think of punctuation. Two periods. And she lived between them. Melanie Miller was a complete thought. Becky is the space after the period before the thought begins.

DOUG: Our relationship. . . .

CHERYL: Now someone interrupted Melanie's complete thought.

DOUG: Is changing.

CHERYL: Oh, god, what if that happened to Becky? She isn't even a thought yet. She wouldn't be interrupted. She'd never start.

DOUG: We're a couple. Do you feel that?

CHERYL: No.

DOUG: This is big. It's a big deal going through a parent teacher conference as a couple. You are so good for me, Cheryl. I find you so damned attractive.

(continued)

DOUG (Cont'd): And the things I find most attractive about you are your neediness, your insecurity, your poor communication skills, your hostility, and your brutal honesty about your incompetence at life in general and specifically parenting. These things makes me feel good. Good about myself. And you should feel good that I treasure you for your faults. Don't worry that I judge you or care that your child is disturbed--

CHERYL: Suzy is disturbed.

DOUG: Well.

CHERYL: Suzy is very, very disturbed. Suzy has scarred people, too.

DOUG: Who?

CHERYL: You. That time we woke up and she was standing over our air mattress with a letter opener. She got you in the side of the neck.

DOUG: What, that? Oh, that's nothing. It didn't scar.

CHERYL: But she did it three times. Three different nights.

DOUG: Sleepwalking.

CHERYL: And that time she put the razor blades in your bowling shoes. You have three quarters of a toe. That's permanent. That's amputation.

DOUG: Sleepwalking is a disorder. Like Asperger's syndrome. She isn't disturbed.

CHERYL: Yes, she is. Becky probably learned to maim from Suzy. Suzy is more disturbed than Becky.

DOUG: Not really.

CHERYL: Yes, she is.

DOUG: I don't know about that.

CHERYL: Yes, she is.

DOUG: It's a tossup.

CHERYL: No, it's not.

DOUG: We shouldn't make comparisons.

CHERYL: Becky's better than Suzy.

DOUG: They're both a little off.

CHERYL: Suzy's off-er.

DOUG: Okay. Okay. We'll get both the girls help. Because there is a 'we' now. And we are their parents. That's the important thing.

CHERYL: We aren't parents. We're like the team mascots for our children. We send them out to be defeated by life in every game while we do cartwheels in chicken suits.

DOUG: I want you to move in with me, Cheryl. Permanently. I want you to move in and do to my heart what the girls do with safety scissors and razors. Create something permanent.