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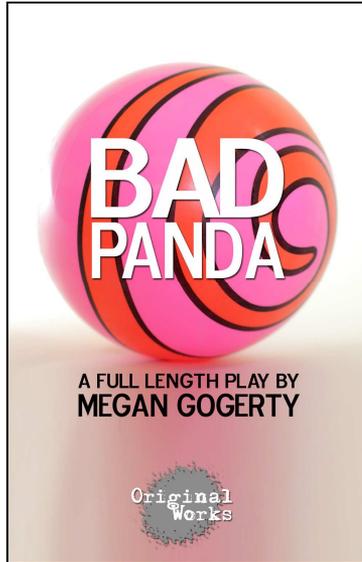
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Save Me, Dolly Parton
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*Also Available By
Megan Gogerty*



BAD PANDA

Synopsis: They're the last two pandas on earth. It's mating season. One of them falls in love with a crocodile. Who is gay. And then the baby comes. In this sweet celebration of non-traditional families, Gwo Gwo the panda must balance his newfound desire for Chester the crocodile with his obligations to his prescribed panda mate, Marion. The animals eat, mate, splash around in identity politics, wrestle with the ambivalence of parenthood, and love one another as only families can.

Cast Size: 2 Males, 1 Female

SAVE ME, DOLLY PARTON

A MONOLOGUE

BY MEGAN GOGERTY

**This play is dedicated to my mother,
who is tired of me writing plays about her.**

Character

Megan. W, 30s. Friendly and kind of a spaz.

SET AND TECHNICAL ELEMENTS

Set: A more-or-less bare stage. Two kitchen step stools, preferably of different heights, that get moved around quite a bit. Perhaps there is also a window with curtains, out of which a person might gaze wistfully.

Notes

There is one intermission, useful for selling things like beer and season passes.

Running time is approximately 90 minutes (45 minutes per act.)

Save Me, Dolly Parton (originally entitled Feet First In The Water With A Baby In My Teeth) received a rolling world premiere in 2011 with productions at Riverside Theatre (Iowa City; Artistic Director Jody Hovland) and Synchronicity Theatre (Atlanta; Artistic Director Rachel May). Alexis Chamow directed both productions.

SAVE ME, DOLLY PARTON

(Megan takes the stage. She wears a dress. She looks very nice and also non-threatening, and perhaps a little like a retro '50s housewife, although not so much it looks costume-y. She smiles warmly.)

MEGAN

So I have this kid. At the time of this story, he's three months old, a baby, and I am in love. He's a big baby – I mean big. Fat, tall, he has girth. He looks like Winston Churchill. He lies there on his back, waving his little fists, denouncing the Nazis.

Since he was born 12 weeks ago, I've been at home taking care of him. If I worked in an office, we'd call that "maternity leave." But since I'm a writer, it's just life. The baby spends all day eating and sleeping and passing gas, and I do the same.

But then I get a phone call – a job offer. Come to New York, do a thing, we'll pay you

money. Not a lot of money, but a gig's a gig. So my husband and I sit down and ask ourselves, What do we do with the kid?

In the next three years, this question will come to dominate our lives.

We work through the logistics. Husband can't skip work. He just took a bunch of time off when the baby was born. The grandparents live too far away. Plus, the baby's breastfeeding, and I plan to take my breasts with me when I go.

So what? I'll just bring him along! He's portable. Did you know airlines let babies fly free? They gotta sit on your lap so they don't take up a seat, but still! Free! And strollers and car seats? They don't count as checked bags. They're considered mobility aids, so they're free. AND, I can bring a diaper bag on board and it doesn't count as one of my carry-ons. The airlines have the greatest customer service ever!

We get to the airport. I check a suitcase, the stroller, the car seat. I've got the baby strapped to my chest, like in a papoose thing. Purse, diaper

bag, backpack, baby. It's like the baby's going on a trek across the desert. I'm the camel!

We go from Iowa to Chicago, Chicago to New York. The first leg of the trip is fine. Airport security? Fine. Flight to Chicago? Fine. Baby is laughing and having a great time. He's super cute, all the women on the flight give him googly eyes. I feel like a genius.

The second leg of the trip is longer. Baby is restless. We get in the air, and he starts to fuss. He keeps moving around. What with the seat back in front of me and the armrests where they are, there's not a lot of room for him on my lap. I try to stretch him out diagonally, but it's not working.

He's a big baby. He was ten pounds when he was born, and since then he's just been eating this whole time, so now he's – what? Thirteen pounds? Let me bring that home for you. Imagine you're in an airplane, and on your lap is a small to medium-sized Thanksgiving turkey. Who's mad at you.

When babies cry... Here's the good news. When babies cry, it's straightforward. They're hot,

they're wet, they're hungry, it's like one of five things. The baby's not crying because of the economy. You just go through the checklist until you find the thing. Then you fix it.

But the thing is, a baby's cry is...*difficult* to listen to. We are evolutionarily designed to hate that sound. When you hear a baby crying, your first impulse is to do whatever you have to do to get it to stop making that sound. It's a klaxon, and the longer it goes on, the harder it is to think straight, or stay calm, or fix the problem. Fix the problem!

Is he hungry? Maybe he's hungry. I fish out my boob. I used to think that when in public, I would want to drape a cloth for modesty, but let's not kid ourselves. This baby is so big, to cover him I'd need a quilt. And anyway, once he latches on, nobody can see anything. It just looks like I'm wearing a very fancy brooch. Made of baby.

He spits out my boob. I offer it to him again. He spits it out again. He freaks out, I mean freaks! Limbs akimbo, red-faced, the whole shebang.

You know those sit-coms with the perfectly swaddled baby in the arms of beautiful people, and all the beautiful people gather ‘round and do something cute like, (sings) “Good night, sweetheart, well it’s time to go!” and the baby just falls asleep? That is a lie. That does not happen. This baby is a pterodactyl. This baby is a tiny thunder god who is displeased. I have a flailing, caterwauling Thanksgiving turkey, and it is my job to shut him up. Shut up, Turkey!

The two people sitting next to me – oh, we’re in a middle seat – have politely turned their faces away. The man on my left? Turkey has been kicking him in the thigh for twenty minutes.

I try bouncing, patting, swaddling, rocking. Nothing! It’s gotta be the diaper. Right? I mean, what else is there? I grab the diaper bag and haul ass to the back of the plane.

Look. I know nobody likes to be on a plane with a crying baby. I know that’s one of the circles of hell. I have been on a plane with a crying baby, and I have thought black thoughts.

But believe me when I tell you: as bad as you are suffering, sitting on that plane listening to that sound, the woman with the baby is suffering more. “Hi! Sorry! - shut up shut up shut up – he’s really fussy for some reason! – shut up shut up shut up – excuse me, sorry, really sorry – shut up shut up please shut up they’re going to kill us, they’re going to throw us off this plane, shut up!”

We get in the little toilet closet and shut the folding door. There’s barely enough room for us to turn around. There’s no changing table. We can’t have a changing table on a plane. The terrorists could use them to change their babies! There’s no counter. I have to balance him on the toilet. Of course he is far too big, so I support his head with one hand and begin my crash course in one-handed diaper changing. And the baby is not lying there quietly, taking it. The baby is freaking out.

The problem is, Turkey here is sick and tired of being on a plane. He wants to go home. He wants to lie in his bed, somewhere familiar. But we’re stuck. (To the baby.) Yes! Aren’t we stuck! We’re stuck in a metal box somewhere over Ohio!

We careen back to our seats. Turk is so distraught, he knocks my glasses off my face into somebody's lap. They hand them back to me like a dirty Kleenex. All the women making googly eyes? Nobody's making any googly eyes. We are pariahs, Turk and me.

The flight lands, and we take off toward baggage claim, Turk not letting up for an instant. I catch a glimpse of myself in a window, I look like a crazy person. My hair is standing straight up, I have all these bags hanging off me. I look like I just robbed a luggage store.

We get to the carousel, and I am lasered into it, mentally sucking the bags through the conveyor belt. The suitcase. The stroller. Car seat, car seat, where is the car seat? See, the baby's too young to sit in the stroller, he has to sit in the car seat that sits in the stroller, so I have to get the car seat. Car Seat Car Seat Car Seat...

Then finally it appears! Some helpful airline attendant has wrapped it in plastic. Not Saran Wrap, not a regular plastic bag, but industrial

strength, military-grade, Al-Qaeda-proof tarp plastic. And then duct taped it.

So I am standing in the middle of the baggage claim surrounded by a ring of my bags, this ruddy fire alarm strapped to my chest, trying to open this package. I can't bend over, or the baby will fall out of the papoose thing. I can't put the baby on the ground in this filthy New York airport, so I am squatting and ripping into this thing with my teeth! (Demonstrates.) Through some Herculean force of strength I manage to get the sucker open, I stick the baby in the car seat, the baby goes (big sigh)... and falls asleep immediately.

And I start to cry. Because it's not over. I have to put the car seat in the stroller and then get all the bags and get a taxi and put the car seat into the taxi then I have to go to Queens to the fifth-floor walk-up where I'm staying that has no elevator, and this stroller is enormous! It has, like, sixteen cup-holders! It seemed like such a great idea when we got it but now it just seems ludicrous that something this big exists to cart around a baby,

and how the hell am I going to get it on the subway? And I'm alone! There's only me!

And it's not just this trip. It's every trip. Every new excursion, every step forward is going to be this! Is going to look and feel like this! Weighted down by all this freight, with this person! With needs! That I cannot always anticipate or fulfill but I gotta find a way, I gotta do the impossible! It's my job now!

And I think, Whatever happened to feminism? I thought feminism had solved this problem. Do I need more feminism? I thought I had enough, but no! I need to join the Feminism club, I need to renew my Feminism subscription, I need to go to Amazon.com and type in Feminism and then click Add To Cart. Whatever it takes! Because feminism is supposed to make you feel liberated.

How do people do it? I see them do it. People walking around, having babies and living their lives like it's no big deal. I know it's possible.

Especially now. We have so many advantages now. We're living in the future. Modern times! We have science. We have epidurals and

latex pacifiers and papoose-things. We have rights, and child labor laws, and casual Fridays.

And some people have twins! That's two separate babies at the exact same time! And this has been going on forever. People! Having babies! Cave people had babies. A hundred years ago, people in covered wagons and, like, really long dresses were having and raising babies. Pushing out ten, twelve kids, then churning butter and, like, pickling things. With all their babies just around.

But they did it, those women. With far fewer privileges, they did it successfully for hundreds of years. We don't even have to go back that far. My own mother didn't have squat. She grew up on a chicken farm, slaughtering chickens.

Funny story: Here's how you kill a chicken. There's actually a couple different methods. Some people recommend the butcher knife, that's where you hold the chicken down and then cut its head off, but it's messy. Blood gets everywhere, on your smock, it's disgusting. And it takes two people, one to hold the chicken down and the other to kill it. And if you're a nine-year-old girl

responsible for slaughtering a bunch of these things on your own, it's just not practical. There's a far more efficient method.

You take a really stiff wire – a straightened out coat hanger is perfect – and you attach one end to a broom handle like you would a wire to a fence post – say a staple, or a U-nail. Something. Then with the other end of the wire, you bend that into a big hook. And you snake this along the ground, and this is what you use to capture the chicken. You jerk it toward you. It's like a horrible death vaudeville.

So you got this chicken and you grab it by its feet and hold it upside down. And this causes the chicken to get very still. Chickens are not the brightest creatures. They know they're in mortal danger, but they don't know what to do about it. So they think if they're still enough, you won't notice they're a chicken.

So you've got this thing by the feet, and then you gently lay the chicken's head on the ground, then you step on it. This does not kill the chicken. We are not Riverdancing our chickens to

death. But it pins it to the ground really good. So you got your foot on the chicken's head. And you've got a good grip on this thing's feet, and that's when you go, "One Two Three!" (Yank. Throws chicken aloft.)

Blood geysers out of the neck! And the chicken flops around, and if they flop in the right direction, they'll catch their feet and run for a bit. If there's any air in the caught in the windpipe, it'll emit a high-pitched whining or perhaps keening sound. Like a balloon leaking air. (Demonstrates. Chicken collapses.) Then while it's real fresh, you dunk it in a vat of hot water to loosen the feathers. Then you pluck it, gut it, and get it butchered.

Boy, if that doesn't make you want to go to college.

The chicken farmers, who were not her biological family, they just raised her from the age of seven, didn't think a girl needed education. But she wormed her way into high school and then snuck her way into a scholarship, and she never went back to that chicken farm again.

My childhood memories of my mother are all that of grim exhilaration. She was a relentless locomotive, barreling her way toward her goals. A single parent, she raised three kids on a teacher's salary, no grandparents, no relatives to baby-sit. And not only did she cook and clean and pay the bills, she went night school. She earned her masters, then her doctorate, never taking out a loan, paying for it all one class at a time. It took her eleven years.

That's the thing about killing chickens – everything else is easy by comparison.

And where did she learn this drive, this will to succeed? From the women who came before her, of course. From her grandmother who raised her until her death, Grandma Ronan.

Grandma Ronan ran a boarding house in her older years, but when she was sixteen, she worked in a kitchen on a steamboat on the Mississippi River. She'd had her baby by then – paternity uncertain – and made her way scrubbing out pots and pans. The story goes, one night there was a fire on the boat. Grandma Ronan couldn't swim,

had never been in water deeper than a bathtub, but she grabbed that baby and jumped overboard feet first, where she dogpaddled a good half mile to shore, all the while clutching that baby in her teeth by the diaper.

Can you imagine being that baby? You're hanging out, doing your baby thing. You're on a steamboat, so it's not like you're in a well-appointed nursery. You're probably in a dresser drawer. But it's cool, you're a baby. And then suddenly you're flying through the air, all this noise and commotion, then you're in the river, which is cold and muddy, waves hitting you in the face, getting a colossal diaper wedgie. For a half mile.

And let's talk about the neck muscles on my great-grandmother. A baby is a good seven to ten pounds or so. Are you gonna lift ten pounds by your teeth and swim across the Mississippi River? And you know that baby's not being exactly cooperative. He's not saying, "Hey, mom, I can see you're in the middle of something here, why don't I just hold still and let you take care of business, and when you're finished saving both our lives, maybe

you can attend to some of my needs? When you get a sec, no rush. I can see this has been a very stressful night for you, you might need a little You Time."

No, she muscled that kid over the waves through sheer will. Who does that? How does somebody do that?

But when I ask my mother, she tells me the same thing: You figure it out. You just get in there and wing it. And women like my great-grandmother did it with no money and no help – hell, she didn't even have the right to vote.

This is my lineage. All these women, stretching back to forever, scraping by. Their whole life's work amounted to nothing but pennies in a jar. But like pennies in a jar, it kept accruing, passed up and up through the generations. So by the time it got to me, it was heavy and full and I was rich!

(Sudden samba music.) I went to college! I shop at Costco! I have a Roomba! I check my email and get a little yawny around nine o'clock

because I've had such a hard day. I am blessed – no. Not blessed. I am loaded.

I grew up confident that the only limits on me were self-imposed. I could grow up to do anything I wanted. I could be an astronaut. I could be an artist.

I could be Dolly Parton!

Dolly Parton is the... I don't want to overstate. Dolly Parton is simply the greatest woman alive. For pity's sake, she wrote "9 to 5" on her fingernails! (*Demonstrates.*) And listen to this lyric: "Tumble out of bed, stumble to the kitchen. Pour myself a cup of ambition." That's clearly genius! Not just the rhyme, but the pairing of "kitchen" with "ambition" thematically... I mean, men tumble out of bed and drink coffee in the morning too, but you'd never see that rhyme in a song about a man.

The first time she came into my life, I was in college. I was preparing to go on a road trip with my boyfriend in his jalopy of a car. How old was this car? It had a tape deck. Talk about Antiques Roadshow. We were going to drive twelve

hours to Alliance, Nebraska to pay homage to Carhenge. It's a local art sculpture, an exact to-scale replica of Stonehenge, only with cars. We thought it sounded kitchy and stupid, so we were fired up about it. It's the kind of kitchy, stupid thing you do in college, drive a solid day in a crappy car for the privilege of feeling superior.

And our music! Our music made us feel worldly, which is quite a trick, since neither of us had ever left Iowa. We felt sophisticated, my boyfriend and I. We didn't go to football games and get drunk. We went to rock shows and got drunk. We went to fencing demonstrations and DIY craft fairs. We were smart and privileged and in on the joke.

And we were young. Marvelously so.

To prep for my road trip, I went to this place called a Record Store. I was looking for groaners, you know? Terrible, ridiculous music. Kitchy. Stupid. Camp.

They had this barrel in the back full of these old cassettes that were on clearance – four

bucks a pop. I found some real gems in there. Some truly silly haircuts.

And then – the masterpiece.

There she was, splayed out on the cover of this thing. She looked like a clown. This too-blonde wig, these curls, these painted lips and nails. Oh, and of course – the boobs. Who on earth could take this woman seriously?

The tape had maybe 10 songs on it. I showed my boyfriend the cover art before we left the driveway. We howled.

And then we put the tape in.

We played side A, then side B. Then side A. Then side B. Then side A. We couldn't turn it off. The rolling farmland of Iowa melted into the flinty rock of western Nebraska and still we couldn't turn it off. We tried, once. Got through a song and a half of the old stuff before we both agreed to eject it and go back to the first tape. We didn't want to break the spell.

It was her early stuff, we found out later. Her hits from the '70s. It was like music from another world to us, because it was.

You've got to understand, nobody we knew listened to country music. Country music was for rubes and rednecks and racists. There was music, and then there was country music.

And it wasn't just the demographic stuff, either. Country music, to my ear, was terrible. I mean genuinely terrible music. With those hokey poky fiddles and put-on twangs and achy-breaky hearts? It was like a costume party.

But this! This was different. Her twang wasn't store-bought, it wasn't phony. It was just her natural voice – her mountain stream of a plaintive croon. High and sweet, it cut through the din and fog. Even on the crappy car stereo speakers, she rang out with chilling clarity. Songs about love, and jealousy, and family and being poor and loving someone new after being kicked around and butterflies. Butterflies! And it all just felt so true and real. I recognized it. And it was like the scales fell from my eyes.

When we got to Carhenge, we walked around in a trance. We went looking for kitchy-stupid, but instead we found cock-eyed brilliance,

holy ground. The cars were hoisted vertically, buried into the ground up to their windshields, looking majestic and intimidating. We paced around like American druids, dumbstruck, in wondrous awe.

Our friends back home did not get it. But I didn't care. Something had shifted in me with this music. Here was this woman, coming up from hardscrabble beginnings, who made this simple music about adult problems. And she was doing it during a time when married women couldn't get their own credit cards. When marital rape was still legal. When being pregnant while on the job was in itself a fire-able offense. She did it. On her terms.

Her original 1974 version of "I Will Always Love You"? I dare you to listen to it without breaking into tears. No, forget Whitney Houston. Please. The way Dolly does it, it's simple and direct. When I'm having a bad day, I turn the lights down, I put on her music, and she makes me feel better. I can't explain it. Even when I'm at my low-

est, Dolly Parton pulls me up and inspires me. It's like she understands.

And my boyfriend? Well. We had to get married after that. How could we not get married, after the Dolly Awakening?

We decide to start a family, and it's easy. Natural. I've got a husband who loves Dolly Parton - and also me. I have a burgeoning career, a supportive partner, a life, and I want to share that life with a child, I want to show him all the beautiful things in the world. Husband and I walk hand in hand into that bright future, smiling, eyes open, armed with education, supported by the belief we are ready for anything.

See, where a lot of parents go wrong is, they're not organized. They let the baby-ness overtake them. That's why I bought seven diaper bags - well, two of them were gifts. A large one, a medium-large one, an extra-large one, a small one that will live in the car and is eternally stocked, and then this regular one for everyday, which I'll keep by the door. Then when it's time to leave,

you don't have to hunt for things. You just scoop it up.

Here's the other thing I did: I made a flow-chart. For CPR. Because if your baby needs CPR, who's going to remember, you know, how many chest compressions? But this takes all the guesswork out of it. You just go to the flowchart. I got a flowchart for choking, a flowchart for swaddling, for how to launder cloth diapers – well, it's less a flow chart and more a decision tree. Here's my favorite: a flow chart for crying! It was husband's idea to put magnets on the back of this one. We'll just stick it to the fridge next to poison control. And then when we're like, "Oh no, baby's crying, we're new parents, what'll we do?" Flow chart.

The flow charts are a great idea. I got it from this book, *Welcoming Baby Home*. I got a book on sleeping, a book on eating, this book is just general parenting. This book is about how to have fun with your baby – in case you forget.

And look, this one lays out for you a typical baby's day. What time they eat, when they nap. They nap all the time. It's perfect – when the

baby's napping, that's when I'll do my work! The house will be quiet. It's ideal.

In my 20th week of pregnancy, I go to the doctor, and the Ultrasound says it's a boy. (*Disappointed face.*) That's fine. I read in this book, boys are just like regular people. I can raise a boy. The world needs more non-sexist, cool boys. (*Gasps.*) What if he's gay? Please be gay! I would be the best mother to a gay son. We'd play dress up. We'd get our colors done. If you are a gay baby being born in Iowa, this is the one you want. Think I could gay up his room at all? I mean, I know it's nature, not nurture, but still. I could hang up a couple Liza Minnelli posters.

Either way, I got this. Husband and I, we have got this!

(*Exciting 1920s-style party music.*) Won't it be great when he gets here! Think of the fun we'll have. We'll go to art museums. We'll travel the world!

The baby year flashes by. Standing here now, I can barely remember it. I just have this sen-

sory blur of sleep deprivation, diaper changing, and cuddling this soft, milk-fed little animal.

Mother Nature is very smart. She gives you this infant, this child, wholly dependent on you, with these big eyes and perfect mouth, and you fall in love with this creature. Head over heels. And it's good, and it's right, because if you didn't love your baby so deeply, so purely, to your bones, when he grows into a toddler, you would kill him. You would lock him in a closet with some Cheetos and a DVD and hit the road. You would change your name and sell jewelry on the side of the highway, if that's what it takes.

You need that first beautiful baby year to cement your bond, because he starts walking and talking and fighting and he won't put on his pants, and you cajole and you nag, and you reason, and you wrestle him to the floor, and still no pants! Put your pants on! Pants! On! Put your pants on!

And I think, at least we're in it together. Husband and me. True partners, fifty-fifty on all the big decisions. We start out great. And then something happens.

When I was pregnant, we got all this pressure to breastfeed. You're gonna breastfeed, aren't you? You know, breast is best! It's less expensive than formula and healthier! If you breastfeed, the baby gets all these immunities! If you breastfeed, the baby will have less gas! If you breastfeed, you'll lose weight super fast, you'll be a skinny, sexy mama, how's that sound? Sounds good, doesn't it? So, you gonna breastfeed? You gonna breastfeed? You're gonna breastfeed, aren't ya? You're gonna breastfeed?

And husband and I were like, "Pssh! Of course we're gonna breastfeed! You had us at 'less expensive'!"

And then we have the baby. And a baby needs to eat every couple of hours. But that's okay, 'cause I got the milk right here!

And when the baby cries, the first step is to give it to the mama, who's got the milk. And the mama becomes the expert on the baby. He's not hungry, he's tired. He's got gas. He's too hot in this coat, you gotta take the coat off.

And the other parent, he's in there doing it – he's changing diapers, he's giving the baby a bath, he's bonding with the baby. But he doesn't have the boobs. And eventually, through nobody's fault, that parent becomes the daddy. And the mama is in charge.

And now a precedent has been set. As the kid grows up, he skins his knee, he wants his mama. He gets scared at night, he wants his mama. He loves his daddy, but he needs his mama. Mama is on point. Mama is the primary caregiver.

Mama is me.

Husband and I, after years of road trips and candlelight dinners, it's like we're not even married anymore. We're like business partners. Ninety percent of our conversation is logistics. "Listen, I got a meeting, you need to take off work early and watch him. Well, I can't do it, I got a thing I have to do, they're counting on me. You can't do that, 'cause who's gonna watch the kid? Who's gonna take care of the kid? What'll we do with the kid?"