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Christine Baniewicz

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PlayRight: A Portfolio and Reflection on the Craft

by

Christine Baniewicz

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Dr. John Fletcher

Department of Theatre

Submitted to the LSU Honors College in partial fulfillment of
the Upper Division Honors Program.

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Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

PART I

Portfolio

Home

Christine Baniewicz
West Lavoille Rm # 1129
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

Characters

JIM MILLER: 15 years old

JOEY MILLER: 8 years old, Jim's brother

CHERYL MILLER: early 30s, Jim and Joey's mother

JAMES MILLER SR.: 30s, Cheryl Miller's estranged husband

Setting

The upstairs bathroom of the Miller's home—there is a toilet, sink, shower and cabinets, as well as a small wastebasket near the toilet. It is a little after 5pm on a Tuesday in October, present day.

(Lights up on the clean, small upstairs bathroom of a suburban home. There is a sink, a shower hung with a cream-colored curtain and a toilet covered with a plush blue seat cover. There is a blue rug on the floor, and a small wastebasket sits beside the toilet. A mirror is suggested downstage.)

Jim enters and shuts the door behind him. He locks it. He holds a signed baseball in his hands, along with tissue paper, some ribbons and scotch tape. He lays everything out onto the counter. A short beat while he sizes things up.

There is a loud knock at the door.)

JOEY

(Offstage.)

Jim! Jim are you in there?

JIM

Yeah!

(Frantic, Jim begins opening drawers and cabinets, looking for a place to stash the ball.)

JOEY

Are you shitting?

JIM

No—

JOEY

Then hurry up! I have to pee.

JIM

Okay! Hold on.

(Jim opens a cabinet beneath the sink and removes a small handgun

from it. He holds it as if it were a dead mouse, between his thumb and forefinger.)

JOEY

What are you doing—

JIM

Hold on!

(Jim puts the gun back in the cabinet and crosses to the wastebasket beside the toilet. He stashes the baseball and wrapping implements in the bottom of the wastebasket, fluffing up the garbage around it and adding a few wads of toilet paper to cover on top.)

JOEY

I HAVE TO PEE—

(Jim flings the door open.)

JIM

Be my guest.

JOEY

Took you long enough.

(Joey enters dressed in soccer gear—shin guards, tall socks, shorts and a jersey. He crosses to the toilet. Jim moves to the door and hovers there. Short beat.)

JOEY (CON'D)

You gonna watch?

JIM

No, but, just pee okay? I'm not looking.

JOEY

That's weird, get out—

JIM

It's not weird! I was here first, and, I have to finish cleaning the shower.

JOEY

Finish cleaning it when I'm done.

JIM

No—

JOEY

Go!

(Jim closes his eyes tight.)

JIM

You go.

(Short beat.)

JOEY

This is weird.

(Joey angles his back towards Jim. He pees. He finishes, gives a shake or two, and flushes the toilet. He leaves the seat up. Jim's eyes are still closed.)

JOEY (CON'D)

I'm done.

(Jim opens his eyes.)

JIM

Good.

(Jim crosses to the shower and draws back the curtain. On his way he picks up the wastebasket, and takes it with him. He sets it near the shower, then crosses to the cabinets to retrieve cleaning agents and a scrub brush.)

JOEY

Mom said you have to clean the shower now?

JIM

Yeah.

JOEY

Where is Mom?

JIM

She's in her room. Don't bother her though. Eric's over.

JOEY

Oh. That's why she couldn't pick me up.

JIM

Yeah, probably.

(Jim begins to scrub the bottom of the shower with the brush. Joey squirts hand sanitizer into his palms and rubs them together.)

JOEY

I bet they're kissing—

JIM

Gross.

JOEY

I'm serious, I heard them once through the door—

JIM

Why were you listening?

JOEY

I wasn't trying to! I just heard them. They were being loud.

JIM

That's disgusting.

JOEY

What do you think they're doing now?

JIM

Stop, I don't want—

JOEY
Making love? Are they making—

JIM
Where did you hear that?

JOEY
I know a lot about it.

JIM
You do.

JOEY
Yeah.

JIM
Right.

JOEY
I do—!

JIM
--you're too young—

JOEY
--I know more about it than you.

(Very short beat.)

JIM
No.

JOEY
You hardly ever watch TV.

JIM
That has nothing to do with it—

JOEY
I don't think you even know what it sounds like.

JIM
You're retarded.

JOEY
You don't! You don't!

Shut up. JIM

What does it sound like? JOEY

Shut up! JIM

(Joey crosses to Jim, leans in, and does his best impression of a female porn star.)

Uh! Uh! Uh! Uh! JOEY

(Jim shoves Joey, and Joey shoves back. The shoving becomes a fight. Joey kicks and yells, but is overpowered by Jim.)

Stop! JIM

Okay okay okay okay okay! JOEY

Stop talking. JIM

Sorry. JOEY

(Jim draws the shower curtain closed and reaches in to turn the water on. The sound of the shower is heard. Short beat.)

Mom's gonna marry Eric. JOEY (CON'D)

I don't think so. JIM

He's over here a lot. JOEY

JIM

Yeah, but I don't think Mom wants to marry him.

JOEY

That would suck. He's sweaty all the time.

JIM

I know.

JOEY

Yesterday he asked me if I wanted to play catch. So we went outside for a little bit and he's good at throwing and stuff but he got so sweaty. His face was all red.

JIM

I hate him.

JOEY

Yeah, me too.

(Jim turns the shower off.)

JIM

He's always trying to watch TV with me—like hockey. Hockey is almost as boring as baseball—

JOEY

Baseball isn't boring!

JIM

On TV it is.

JOEY

Not the Yankees.

JIM

Even the Yankees are boring on TV. (Short beat.) Hey, Mom left some pasta thing in the fridge, she told me to tell you to warm it up when you got home and we can eat whenever—

JOEY

Okay. (Short beat.) Have you ever made love?

JIM

What?

JOEY
Have you ever made love with anyone?

JIM
Go heat up dinner—

JOEY
With Eve? You must have made love with Eve—

JIM
Stop saying that.

JOEY
Saying what?

JIM
“Made love.” It sounds weird.

JOEY
But that’s what it’s called.

JIM
If you’re in second grade.

JOEY
Did Eve yell a lot?

JIM
Go downstairs—

JOEY
Did you get a boner?

JIM
What?

JOEY
A boner—

JIM
What kind of TV are you watching?

JOEY
I have to learn about things—

JIM
Right now?

JOEY
Yes!

(Short beat.)

JIM
I never had sex with Eve.

JOEY
That's the same thing as...?

JIM
Yeah, it means the same thing.

JOEY
You never had sex with her.

JIM
No.

JOEY
You used to be in your room with her all the time, even more than Eric is in there with Mom—

JIM
I'm not Eric. We just played games.

JOEY
And kissed.

JIM
We only kissed that one time when you came in.

JOEY
You're lying.

JIM
Fine then, I'm lying. Go make dinner.

JOEY
So you did kiss her all the time—

JIM
No! I told you, we kissed once. She wanted to, so we did.

JOEY
I've kissed two different girls.

JIM

That's awesome.

(Jim starts replacing the
cleaners back into the
cabinets.)

JOEY

They were really hot girls, too. One of them, Ashley, is my
girlfriend.

JIM

What about the other one?

JOEY

She was just a girl I knew a long time ago, in third grade.
She goes to a different school now.

JIM

You miss her?

JOEY

No. She's just a girl. (Short beat.) So Eve's your
girlfriend, right?

JIM

She doesn't live here anymore, how could she be my
girlfriend?

JOEY

You talk on the phone sometimes.

JIM

Hardly ever. She's really busy.

JOEY

But you definitely like her.

JIM

She's my friend.

JOEY

But do you "like" her?

JIM

Like her how?

(Joey crosses swiftly to the bathroom door, which has been ajar since he entered. He closes and locks it. He turns and faces Jim.)

JIM (CON'D)

What are you—

JOEY

Are you adopted?

(Beat.)

JIM

I don't think so.

JOEY

We don't look alike.

JIM

We do, we have the same eyebrows.

(They cross to the mirror and stare into it together, comparing eyebrows.)

JOEY

I don't know, they're kind of different.

JIM

I'm your brother.

JOEY

Are you sure?

CHERYL

(Offstage.)

Joey? Jim? Boys!

JIM

We're in the bathroom!

CHERYL

(Offstage.)

Oh. Unlock the door, please.

JIM
We're having a conversation—

CHERYL
Unlock the door.

JOEY
Mom we finished cleaning the shower, okay?

(Short beat.)

JIM
We'll be out in a few minutes—

CHERYL
What's going on?

JIM
Nothing.

CHERYL
Eric is downstairs heating up dinner. Joey must be starved.

JOEY
I had a granola bar.

CHERYL
You're full of it, come on out.

JOEY
I'm not really hungry for pasta again.

CHERYL
That's what we have. Come on. (Short beat.) I mean it.

JOEY
Okay! Okay.

(Joey crosses to the door and opens it. Cheryl Miller steps in. Her hair is down and there is color in her cheeks.)

CHERYL
Life is tough around here, too much pasta. (To Joey.) Why don't you go on and help Eric? I'll be down in a minute.

JOEY

Yes ma'am.

(Joey exits.)

JIM

Can I go over to Kevin's when we're done eating?

(Short beat.)

CHERYL

I thought it might be nice to play some games together tonight.

JIM

So I can't?

CHERYL

I'd rather you stay. Why did you clean the shower—

JIM

I can play games with you and Joey tomorrow.

CHERYL

Eric won't be with us tomorrow, he's busy with work.

JIM

So?

CHERYL

So, I'd like all four of us to be together.

JIM

Oh.

CHERYL

We can play any game you want. Jenga.

JIM

I don't like Jenga.

CHERYL

Bologna, that's your favorite.

(Cheryl hops up onto the cabinet ledge to sit.)

CHERYL (CON'D)

Come on.

(She taps the ledge next to her.)

JIM

I'm too big.

CHERYL

You're never too big to sit with your Mom. Humor me.

(Jim sits next to Cheryl on the ledge.)

CHERYL (CON'D)

Did you have a great day at school?

JIM

It was okay. How was work?

CHERYL

Same old. Blood pressure, urine samples, sewing people up. Did you get that chemistry report back?

JIM

Yeah. I got an A.

CHERYL

I'm proud of you. Eric's proud, too.

JIM

Good for him.

CHERYL

Aren't you tired of pouting?

JIM

I don't like him.

CHERYL

Clearly.

JIM

He's annoying.

CHERYL

He's different than your father—

JIM
A lot.

CHERYL
And that's such a bad thing?

JIM
I don't like him, okay?

CHERYL
You have no reason—

JIM
How about he sweats a lot? And watches hockey and makes me sit with him?

CHERYL
You don't have to watch TV with him—

JIM
Mom?

CHERYL
Yes?

JIM
Does Eric like guns?

(Short beat. Jim hops off of the ledge and opens the cabinet door below. He withdraws the handgun.)

CHERYL
God, here—

(Cheryl takes the gun from Jim.)

JIM
(Overlapping.)
Why is there a gun in the bathroom?

CHERYL
Jesus. I put it there, this morning.

JIM
In me and Joey's bathroom—?

CHERYL

I keep it in mine, but Eric thought I should throw it out. He hates the idea of a gun in the house.

JIM

So you put it in our bathroom—

CHERYL

Just this morning until I could think of something to do with it.

JIM

I never knew we had a gun.

CHERYL

That's exactly how I wanted it. I'm gonna toss it.

(She tucks the gun into her waistband.)

JIM

You should keep it.

CHERYL

There's no need, we have a good security system.

JIM

What if a robber came into the house and he had a gun and you didn't?

CHERYL

I'd call the police.

JIM

And what if he has Joey at gunpoint? And you don't have a gun because Eric doesn't like them?

CHERYL

Now you're just picking on Eric.

JIM

He doesn't make sense.

CHERYL

What if Joey accidentally hurt himself—

JIM

Then he deserves it.

CHERYL

Anyone could have an accident.

JIM

Maybe Eric accidentally shoots himself—

CHERYL

You've got to warm up to him eventually.

JIM

I don't.

CHERYL

You do.

JIM

He's not my Dad.

CHERYL

No, but... (Beat.) You should sit.

JIM

You're not serious.

CHERYL

I think you should sit down—

JIM

You're serious.

CHERYL

I haven't said anything yet.

(Jim crosses to the toilet, puts
the seat down, and sits.)

CHERYL (CON'D)

Thank you—

JIM

Are you marrying Eric?

(Short beat.)

CHERYL

He asked me to marry him, yes, over dinner last night—

JIM

What did you say?

CHERYL

I said yes.

JIM

God.

(Jim stands.)

CHERYL

We've been seeing each other for a long while—

JIM

Eric?

CHERYL

I've known him for years.

JIM

That doesn't make him my Dad.

CHERYL

Of course not, he's not trying to replace your father—

JIM

He tries to every day.

CHERYL

That's not fair. He's been kind, and given you personal space—

JIM

Yeah, just enough not to notice he's tricking you into marrying him.

CHERYL

I'm a competent human being. This is right for me.

JIM

This is wrong for me, and Joey and you.

CHERYL

It's been years, Jim.

JIM

It's been three years—

CHERYL

I know how long. (She stands.) It's been long enough. You need a role model.

JIM

I have one. He's a pilot.

CHERYL

He was a horrendous father.

JIM

He was better than Eric.

CHERYL

You're right, Eric doesn't take nearly enough "business" trips.

JIM

Dad's job was demanding—

CHERYL

How many baseball games did your father take you to?

JIM

I don't like baseball—

CHERYL

I know, everyone knows that you don't like sports. But did he take you to the science fair instead, or the history museum?

(Short beat.)

JIM

So.

CHERYL

So I took you.

JIM

He took Joey to games.

CHERYL

He did. He took Joey to tons of games, and played catch with him and helped him with his card collection. Then he left us for a stewardess. (Beat.) Eric loves museums.

JIM

So that means he won't leave you for a stewardess, because he loves museums.

CHERYL

It means he'll care for you—

JIM

By forcing me to watch hockey and sometimes he'll take me to a museum?

CHERYL

Tell him you don't like hockey! And he'll take you to museums every day if you want.

JIM

I don't give a shit about museums—

CHERYL

He'll impress you, I promise—

JIM

Cause he's impressive in bed?

(Beat.)

CHERYL

Excuse me.

JIM

The walls are thin.

CHERYL

I don't know what you're talking about—

JIM

I'm talking about you and Eric screaming in the next room—

CHERYL

You're exaggerating.

JIM

That's why Eric's a better father, isn't it?

CHERYL

Go to your room.

JIM

I can still hear it from there.

CHERYL

You're grounded until further notice—

JIM

You're punishing me because of your own behavior—

CHERYL

I'm punishing you because you're rude.

JIM

I'm rude—

CHERYL

You're blowing everything out of proportion—

JIM

Why don't you raise your voice a little more? I know you can.

(Cheryl slaps Jim. Beat.)

CHERYL

No more long-distance phone calls to Eve.

JIM

For how long?

CHERYL

Six months.

JIM

That's not fair—

CHERYL

Tough.

JIM

Who am I gonna talk to? Eric?

CHERYL

Watch it.

JIM

He's always busy when he's over—

CHERYL

No friends at the house for the next six months, add that to the list. No more Kevin's every afternoon—

JIM

Kevin is my best friend—

CHERYL

Eric is my fiancé.

JIM

You're ruining everything.

CHERYL

You'll thank me someday—

(Joey bursts through the
bathroom door.)

JOEY

Have you seen my baseball?

(Short beat.)

JIM

No.

CHERYL

It's not in your room?

JOEY

No, I looked everywhere I can't find it.

CHERYL

I'm sure it's just fallen behind your bed somewhere.

JOEY

I looked under my bed.

JIM

You left it outside probably—

JOEY

I never take it outside, it has to be in here.

(Joey begins opening cabinets and drawers. Jim slams them back closed.)

JIM

It's not in here.

JOEY

You don't know—

JIM

Why would your baseball be in the bathroom?

CHERYL

Did you check in the TV room? You had it down there last night.

JOEY

I looked everywhere and it's not anywhere!

CHERYL

It's somewhere, things don't disappear.

(Joey has crossed to the shower, drawn the curtain and stepped in.)

JIM

You just watched me clean the shower.

(Jim shifts the wastebasket to the other side of the toilet and stands in front of it.)

JOEY

I'm double-checking.

CHERYL

Come on, honey—

(Joey slides the curtain open. Still standing in the shower:)

JOEY

It's not in here.

CHERYL

Take a deep breath, I'm sure you'll find it.

JOEY

Eric took it, didn't he?

CHERYL

He wouldn't take your baseball.

JOEY

He likes baseball, we played catch—

CHERYL

He's an adult.

JIM

Joey's got a point.

CHERYL

That's absurd, he knows how valuable that ball is to you—

JIM

Exactly, it's a signed Yankees game ball, worth a lot on the internet—

JOEY

He stole it!

CHERYL

Both of you stop, Eric is not a thief.

JIM

He's stolen things before.

CHERYL

(To Joey.)

He's lying—

JOEY

Then how come Eric's always asking me about Dad and baseball all the time?

CHERYL

He wants to know about the things you like—

JIM

So he can steal them.

JOEY
He's probably stolen lots of stuff—

CHERYL
Jim I want you out of here now—

JIM
He's already stolen things for sure.

CHERYL
—I'm counting to three—

JOEY
(Overlapping.)
Like what?

JIM
You should ask Mom—

CHERYL
One—

JIM
Mom, tell Joey the news.

CHERYL
Two—

JIM
Mom's getting married to Eric. (Short beat.) Right Mom?

CHERYL
This is not the way I wanted to tell you—

JOEY
He took my baseball.

CHERYL
He absolutely did not.

JOEY
Then why is it missing?

CHERYL
It's missing because you misplaced it, we'll find it—

JIM
Unless he's sold it already.

CHERYL

Jim!

JOEY

Mom are you really marrying Eric?

(Short beat.)

CHERYL

I wanted to tell you tonight. Yes, I'm marrying him.

(Joey pulls the shower curtain closed.)

CHERYL (CON'D)

He wants to build a family with us.

(Cheryl pulls at the curtain, but Joey yanks it back closed.)

CHERYL (CON'D)

Will you come out?

JOEY

No!

CHERYL

We can talk about this—

JOEY

Do not disturb!

JIM

Maybe you should go.

CHERYL

(To Jim.)

You're being selfish.

JIM

And you're what? Forcing a father onto us? We already have one.

CHERYL

You haven't had a father for years.

JOEY

He's coming back!

CHERYL

No, honey. James is gone.

JOEY

You don't know that!

CHERYL

He's not coming back because things haven't changed.

JIM

How could you know that—?

CHERYL

Because some things don't.

JIM

Maybe he's changed.

JOEY

Yeah!

CHERYL

You don't know everything about your father.

JIM

I know even less about Eric.

CHERYL

That's why we're having game night! But we can't if Joey's in the shower.

JOEY

I'm not coming out.

CHERYL

I have some snacks downstairs—not pasta—and if you come out of the shower we can talk about exciting things.

JIM

Like how Eric's gonna start selling off his card collection next?

(Joey pokes his face out from behind the curtain.)

JOEY

He's not.

CHERYL

He's not. He is going to be joining our family in another important way.

JIM

Besides marrying you?

CHERYL

Yes. Joey could you please step out?

JOEY

No.

CHERYL

I would much rather discuss this downstairs—

JIM

Discuss what?

JOEY

Yeah, discuss what?

CHERYL

Boys, you'll be getting a new little brother or sister soon.

(Beat.)

JIM

Real classy, Mom.

CHERYL

It'll be a challenge if we make it one. I think this can be an opportunity—

JIM

Getting knocked up?

CHERYL

It wasn't an accident.

JOEY

Mom's gonna have a baby?

CHERYL

(To Joey.)

And you're gonna be the big brother.

JOEY

Is Eric the dad?

CHERYL

Yes, Eric and I made this baby together—

JIM

That doesn't make it a part of the family—

JOEY

How did you make a baby if you're not married?

CHERYL

I can answer your questions, anything, if we're sitting in the living room. With snacks.

(Short beat. Joey steps out of the shower towards Cheryl.)

JIM

Hey!

CHERYL

(To Jim.)

Breathe.

(Jim grabs Joey's arm.)

CHERYL (CON'D)

Don't paw at Joey.

JOEY

Let go—

JIM

(To Joey.)

Stay.

CHERYL

You're hurting him.

JIM

(To Joey.)

I need to tell you something.

JOEY
So does Mom.

JIM
Mine is important.

CHERYL
Not more important than this—

JIM
We were having a conversation before you got here.

CHERYL
That conversation is over.

JIM
Not yet. Joey—

CHERYL
—Jim stop badgering him—

JIM
(Overlapping.)
—I know you think Mom will answer everything but she won't—

JOEY
—Mom?—

JIM
—You're my brother and I can tell you, I can't tell anyone else—

CHERYL
(Overlapping.)
—Jim is being hysterical—

JOEY
Stop.

JIM
Listen—

JOEY
Stop.

James Robert Miller—

CHERYL

JOEY
(Overlapping, a scream.)
HEY. (Beat.) I just want to know who took my baseball.

JIM

I didn't.

CHERYL

Maybe this can be an opportunity for you to let go of that ball.

JOEY

I have to find it.

CHERYL

You don't.

JOEY

I have to—

CHERYL

Pretend it's gone.

JOEY

But it's not.

CHERYL

But pretend if it was.

(Short beat, Joey tears up.)

See? You're fine.

JIM

This is not okay—

(Jim crosses to Joey.)

JOEY
(Overlapping.)
I'm not fine I need it!

CHERYL

You're a grown boy. You don't need to sleep with a toy every night.

JOEY

It's not a toy.

CHERYL

Give it a little bit of time for the idea to sink in.

JOEY

It's not sinking anywhere!

CHERYL

Because you won't let it go for even a second.

JIM

(To Cheryl.)

Why don't you let it go?

(Short beat.)

CHERYL

This does not concern you.

JIM

It doesn't concern Joey, either. It concerns you.

CHERYL

Don't be like this.

JIM

"Don't be like this."

CHERYL

Get out of the house.

JIM

We're talking—

CHERYL

Go downstairs and out the front door and onto the lawn—

JIM

(Overlapping.)

I'm not afraid of you.

CHERYL

—and across the street to Kevin's if you want, okay—?

JIM
Why don't you go across the street? Why don't you go?

CHERYL
I don't deserve this.

JIM
Why don't you go?

JOEY
(An echo.)
Why don't you go?

JIM
Why don't you go?

JOEY
Why don't you go?

(Rising, a chant.)

JIM
Why don't you go?

JOEY
Why don't you—

CHERYL
Because you're my sons!

JOEY
I wish I wasn't.

(Beat.)

CHERYL
I'm going to heat up the pasta.

JIM
I'm not that hungry.

CHERYL
Then don't eat.

JOEY
(To Cheryl.)
I love you.

I know.

CHERYL

You can stay.

JIM

I'm hungry.

CHERYL

(Short beat.)

Okay.

JIM

CHERYL

If you change your mind about eating, I'll be downstairs.

(Cheryl exits.)

I'm gonna help Mom.

JOEY

That's a bad idea.

JIM

She's sad.

JOEY

I think we should let her be alone.

JIM

But she's sad.

JOEY

I know but sometimes you want to be alone for a while when you're sad.

JIM

I don't ever want to be alone, especially not if I'm, you know.

JOEY

Yeah, but I think girls are different.

JIM

JOEY
Are they?

JIM
Yeah. I think when they're happy they like to get all crazy
but when they're sad...I know Eve never talks to me.

JOEY
Oh.

JIM
Yeah.

JOEY
That's weird.

JIM
Yeah.

JOEY
So we should wait.

JIM
For at least ten minutes.

JOEY
Okay—

CHERYL
(Offstage.)
Boys!

JIM
Wait. Let's see what she wants.

CHERYL
(Offstage.)
Boys, come down.

(Joey is about to shout down to
Cheryl but Jim grabs him from
behind and covers Joey's mouth
with his hands.)

JIM
No.

(Jim swings Joey away from the door and shuts it. He locks it and releases Joey.)

JOEY

She wants us to come downstairs she said so!

CHERYL

(Offstage.)

Boys!

JIM

She's okay, she's gonna be okay—

JOEY

She sounds sad.

JIM

She gets sad, sometimes.

JOEY

Not like this.

JIM

I've seen her like this and she wants to be totally alone even though she doesn't sound like it.

JOEY

Are you sure?

CHERYL

(Offstage.)

Please come down!

JIM

I'm positive—

JOEY

(To Cheryl.)

I'm coming—

JIM

No!

JOEY

What's your problem?

Did you take it? JOEY

I found it. JIM

Oh. JOEY

I'll show you a in a minute. JIM

Why don't you show me first? JOEY

Listen. JIM

Mom! JOEY
(To Cheryl.)

If Mom comes into the room I'm never gonna give you back your ball. JIM

So you did take it! JOEY

It doesn't make a difference. JIM

It's in the house, right? JOEY

It's in the house. JIM

It's protected? JOEY

From what? JIM

From, water and stuff. JOEY

JIM

Yeah, it's fine.

CHERYL

(Just outside the door.)

Everything okay in there?

(Joey looks about to speak.)

JIM

(Sotto voce.)

Sh!

(Cheryl's voice continues to come from just outside the door through the following.)

CHERYL

Why is the door locked? (Short beat.) I know you're in there. (Beat.) Eric left. It's just us tonight. I love you.

(Beat. Jim crosses to the bathroom door, gets on the floor and peers through the crack beneath the door.)

JIM

She's gone.

JOEY

Okay. (Beat.) What did you want to tell me?

JIM

Oh. Um, Kevin... you know how... I like Kevin.

JOEY

You like him, you "like him" like him?

JIM

A little. Yeah.

JOEY

Like a girlfriend?

JIM

Like anyone you "like" like.

Since when? JOEY

A while. JIM

That's why you and Eve didn't have sex. JOEY

I guess. JIM

(Beat.)

Let's tell Mom. JOEY

No. No way. JIM

She'll think it's cool. JOEY

You think it's cool? JIM

It explains a lot. JOEY

I'm not telling Mom. And you can't either. Promise. JIM

Promise. (Short beat.) Is that it? JOEY

Yeah. JIM

So, where's my baseball? JOEY

That's the other thing— JIM

(A gunshot fires outside the door.)

JAMES
(Offstage.)
Jesus! Cheryl it's me—

CHERYL
(Offstage.)
James, God are you okay—

JAMES
(Offstage.)
—what'd you shoot me for—?

JIM
Dad?

CHERYL
(Just outside the door.)
Boys open up. Your father's been shot.

(Jim unlocks and opens the door. James Miller Sr. enters, clutching his left shoulder. He is wearing an old parka and a pair of worn-in jeans. He is unshaven. Cheryl enters behind him.)

JAMES
Hi guys.

CHERYL
How bad is your arm?

JAMES
Skin deep.

(James lifts his hand. Stuffing has been blown out of the shoulder of his parka, and it's flecked with blood.)

JOEY
You're bleeding, Dad.

JAMES
That's what I get for startling your mother.

CHERYL

Take that jacket off and I'll clean you up.

(Cheryl goes to the cabinets and removes a bottle of rubbing alcohol, cotton balls and q-tips, gauze and a roll of beige stretchy bandages. James gingerly removes his jacket. Blood has soaked through the sleeve of his white T-shirt.)

JIM

Mom shot you?

CHERYL

It was an accident. See how dangerous guns can be? Can't tell you how many wounds like this I see a day.

JAMES

I should have called.

CHERYL

A couple years ago, maybe.

JAMES

You didn't use to pick up.

CHERYL

Because you left me in the night. This might sting.

(Cheryl begins dabbing James's shoulder with cotton balls soaked in alcohol. A beat.)

JAMES

The house looks nice. Geraniums, that's new.

CHERYL

The boys put those in last fall.

JAMES

They did?

CHERYL

Yeah.

(Beat. Jim and Joey are sitting side by side on the lip of the bathtub.)

JOEY

Is Dad staying for dinner?

CHERYL

He's gonna have to get this looked at by a doctor. I can clean it, but I don't have any suturing supplies at home—

JOEY

But he's probably hungry for pasta!

JAMES

My favorite.

CHERYL

James you are not staying—

JAMES

Of course. Just having a quick checkup then I'm on my way.

JIM

Did you come in through a window or something?

JAMES

I came in through the front door.

JIM

So much for security.

JAMES

No, the system is good. It doesn't protect against people with keys.

CHERYL

You still have a key to the house?

JAMES

I always kept it, just in case.

CHERYL

What was today's emergency?

JAMES

I missed you.

CHERYL

I want that key back.

JAMES

You had three years to change the locks. (Short beat.)
Besides, it's the last key I've got. I'd like to have one
key to my name.

JIM

How'd you get here?

JAMES

Taxi.

CHERYL

Where's the car?

JAMES

I lost it.

CHERYL

You lost the car.

JOEY

How did you lose the car, it's so big?

JAMES

I didn't lose it that way.

CHERYL

I'll bet you didn't.

(Cheryl throws the dirty cotton
balls away and replaces the
rubbing alcohol into the
cabinet.)

CHERYL (CON'D)

You're gonna need a few stitches, so you better get to an
emergency room before long. Can I have the key to my house
back, please?

JAMES

It's our house, technically.

CHERYL

You gave it up three years ago.

JAMES

Not officially. Paperwork-wise, I'm still on the deed.

CHERYL

Because you never signed what I sent you.

JAMES

That's some of the reason.

CHERYL

You're claiming the house?

JAMES

I'm ready to come back.

CHERYL

You're late.

JOEY

(To James.)

You're coming back?

JAMES

I'd like to.

CHERYL

(To Joey.)

He's not.

JAMES

Can we go downstairs and discuss this?

CHERYL

You can go downstairs and out the door if you'd like.

JAMES

I'd like to speak with you.

CHERYL

You have a hole in your arm—

JAMES

I don't need a lot. Ten minutes. Five.

JOEY

He can eat and then go.

CHERYL

He can go now.

JAMES

I'm out of cash, I used everything I had to get here—

CHERYL

Then walk.

JAMES

I'll sleep on the lawn. Ten minutes.

(Short beat.)

CHERYL

Five. Jim, call a cab, you can use the phone book.

JIM

Okay.

(Jim exits.)

JOEY

Can I stay?

CHERYL

This is between your father and me.

JOEY

Don't be mean to him.

CHERYL

I'll be exactly as nice as he deserves.

JOEY

(To James.)

I'm glad you're okay.

JAMES

Never better—

CHERYL

There's some blood on the carpet by the stairs, Joey, will you make a bucket of warm soapy water? I don't need any more stains in this house.

JOEY

Do I have to?

CHERYL

Just wear the yellow gloves by the sink, and throw away the sponge when you're done. Chop chop.

(Joey exits. Cheryl shuts the door.)

CHERYL

You have five minutes.

JAMES

Jim is tall.

CHERYL

He's grown a bit since you last saw him.

JAMES

You look wonderful.

CHERYL

If you want money, you're out of luck, I've got barely enough for us—

JAMES

I'm coming home.

(Short beat.)

CHERYL

So it's decided.

JAMES

I've decided.

CHERYL

And I guess my opinion is unimportant—

JAMES

What's your opinion?

CHERYL

You're not.

JAMES

I think we can reach an agreement.

CHERYL

No—

JAMES

Compromise. That's what the counselor used to say.

CHERYL

Would you like to hear what my counselor's been saying the last few years?

JAMES

No.

CHERYL

I'm better off, liberated, in control of my life, she says a lot of that.

JAMES

Bet she'd hate to know I was here.

CHERYL

She'd tell me to call the police.

JAMES

You wouldn't.

CHERYL

Try me.

(Short beat.)

JAMES

Still spicy. I missed that.

CHERYL

I missed the second paycheck.

JAMES

I could get my job back today if I wanted to—

CHERYL

You weren't fired?

JAMES

I resigned.

CHERYL

Maybe that's why you're out of money—

JAMES

I resigned because it was keeping me from my family.

CHERYL

An airplane scooped you out of my bedroom three years ago, that's it?

JAMES

You know why I left.

CHERYL

You evaporated—

JAMES

Are you sure?

CHERYL

Don't patronize me.

JAMES

You're right. We both know why I left, so let's not waste our time.

(Short beat.)

CHERYL

You should get your arm sutured—

JAMES

I'd rather ask why you never changed the locks.

CHERYL

I had other things on my mind. Like feeding our children.

JAMES

I'm sorry I didn't send money—

CHERYL

Like hell. You would have sent it if you gave half a shit—

JAMES

It reminded me of you, addressing an envelope to the house.

CHERYL

You're sentimentalizing this—

JAMES

It's sentimental.

CHERYL

It's financial. You left me with an unpaid mortgage, two boys in elementary school, a part-time job—

JAMES

I couldn't send the checks. I tried.

CHERYL

You should have tried harder.

JAMES

I can get my job back in a day, bring money in—

CHERYL

It's a little late for that.

JAMES

I couldn't have come back a moment before now. You remember the way I was.

CHERYL

Too clearly.

JAMES

I had to figure that out before I came back.

CHERYL

I can tell you now, you haven't figured it out. You've got that batshit thing going on, just like the old days.

JAMES

I'm off medication. Completely. For a year.

(Beat.)

CHERYL

No wonder you're batshit.

JAMES

I'm not! I'm Buddha.

CHERYL

I'm glad you feel better.

Thanks—

JAMES

You can go now.

CHERYL

I'm not leaving til we can agree.

JAMES

This is my house—

CHERYL

Our house.

JAMES

My house. I decide who stays. You go—

CHERYL

We have so much to build on—

JAMES

There's a reason people split.

CHERYL

We can work this stuff out—

JAMES

I'm engaged.

CHERYL

(Beat.)

JAMES

Where's the rock?

CHERYL

In a box in my room. I didn't want the boys asking about it.

JAMES

They don't know.

CHERYL

I told Jim, and he told Joey, so they know. As of the last hour.

(Short beat.)

JAMES

Engaged.

CHERYL

You might remember him from high school. Eric.

JAMES

Eric, trombone-Eric?

CHERYL

He owns an extremely successful insurance agency in town-

JAMES

You're engaged to Eric Mutz.

CHERYL

We're going to set the date in the spring-

JAMES

Has he lost the weight since I saw him last-?

CHERYL

He has, matter of fact. He lost a lot of weight.

JAMES

That's great, really, for him.

CHERYL

He's fantastic. He likes spending time with the boys-

JAMES

And I don't?

CHERYL

Both the boys.

JAMES

I didn't get along with Jim, I tried-

CHERYL

Until you stopped trying and left. Jim is brilliant.

JAMES

You think I forgot?

CHERYL

You never noticed.

JAMES

It was hard to bond with him, we liked different things.

CHERYL

He didn't like baseball, you mean.

JAMES

I mean we didn't get along.

CHERYL

Eric manages to get along with both boys.

JAMES

Good for him.

CHERYL

I'm sure your ride's here, it was good to see you—

JAMES

I'm not finished—

CHERYL

Yes you are.

JAMES

I've changed.

CHERYL

I don't see it.

JAMES

You're not looking.

(James wedges himself between Cheryl and the door.)

CHERYL

I see batshit, James. That's not new.

JAMES

This is different. No more drug trials, withdrawal. No more antidepressants.

CHERYL

But has anything really changed?

(Jim opens the door into James's back.)

JIM

Oh, sorry. The taxi's here.

JAMES

Run down and tell him we need five more minutes.

CHERYL

No I think we're done.

JAMES

We're not.

CHERYL

(To Jim.)

Thank you for letting us know.

JIM

Is everything okay?

CHERYL

Yes—

JAMES

We were about at an understanding—

CHERYL

We decided it would be best for everyone if he left now.

JIM

Okay—

JAMES

That's not true—

CHERYL

So let's all go downstairs together, (to James) I'll pay your cab fare—

JAMES

Thirty more seconds—

CHERYL

You're lightheaded from blood loss—

JAMES

I'm fine—

CHERYL
You've gotta get that arm checked out—

JAMES
Things have changed.

CHERYL
How could they?

JAMES
I'm cured.

(Short beat.)

JIM
Do you think the taxi's gonna charge for having to wait?

CHERYL
(To James.)
You are.

JAMES
One hundred percent.

JIM
Cured of what?

CHERYL
(To Jim.)
Nothing.

JAMES
(To Cheryl.)
Did you tell him?

CHERYL
(To James.)
This is our conversation, not his—

JAMES
Does he know?

CHERYL
No.

JIM
Know what?

Nothing important—

CHERYL

Isn't he old enough?

JAMES

Not tonight.

CHERYL

What's going on?

JIM

This is so typical, James.

CHERYL

Can I explain?

JAMES

Your son is in the doorway.

CHERYL

He should know—

JAMES

There's nothing to know, nothing is any different—

CHERYL

Everything is.

JAMES

It always seems to be.

CHERYL

I know, but trust me—

JAMES

Trust you.

CHERYL

The success rate with this procedure is astronomical—

JAMES

Don't you dare.

CHERYL

It's way less invasive than anything we've done before—

JAMES

CHERYL
I'm engaged—

JIM
What's going on?

JAMES
It's time to tell him.

CHERYL
No—

JAMES
(To Jim.)
Jim, —

(Joey enters with a bucket. He wears yellow kitchen gloves.)

JOEY
I got most of it, but some of it won't come out.

CHERYL
That's okay—

JAMES
Good, we're all here.

CHERYL
James you've got to see a doctor—

JAMES
(To Joey.)
I was about to tell Jim something important, but I'd like to include you, if you think you're old enough to handle it.

JOEY
I'm very mature.

CHERYL
He's eight.

JOEY
Is it about having sex? Cause I know about that.

JAMES
What kind of television is he watching?

CHERYL

I don't have seventeen eyes! I work full time, he watches what he wants.

JAMES

That's about to change. Boys, I'm back for good.

JIM

(To Cheryl.)

I thought he was leaving—

CHERYL

He is. For God's sake, James—

(Joey sets down his bucket and runs to James, hugging his legs.)

JOEY

I knew it.

CHERYL

That's enough. Your father's on his way out—

JAMES

(Overlapping.)

I missed you guys.

JIM

Then why did you leave?

JAMES

I'm getting to that—

JOEY

(To James.)

So are we gonna go to Yankee's games this season?

JAMES

You can bet your brains on it.

JOEY

I still have the ball you got me.

JAMES

With the autographs?

JOEY

Yankees 2006!

JAMES

There are some great names on that ball. Jeter, Giambi, A-Rod, the Big Unit himself. And it was hot that day, too, sweat running down, sticking to the seat. Couldn't stop thinking of you all cooped up at home with-

JOEY & JAMES

Strep throat.

JAMES

You were a mess of germs. But I had a feeling about that game, so I sat there next to the empty seat and good thing I did cause come the seventh inning that ball popped left and I thought, she's coming, and I nabbed her. Always bring your glove.

JOEY

I do-

JAMES

Never get another ball like that. Those kinda players just aren't around anymore, least, not all on one team. Matsui, Cabrera. Great names. Never mind it took a couple hours waiting outside the locker room, you'd be crazy not to, names like that. Plus your face when I gave her to you? I'd wait days in the sun for a face like that.

JIM

Joey tells that story all the time.

JAMES

(To Joey.)

You do?

JOEY

Not all the time-

JIM

Constantly.

JAMES

That's great-

JIM

Dad what did you mean by "less invasive"?

CHERYL

He meant he's ready to stop invading our space.

JAMES

Hilarious. Cheryl I think they're old enough—

CHERYL

I decide what's best for my sons.

JAMES

They're my sons, too—

CHERYL

Because you feel like it today?

JIM

(To James.)

Do you have cancer?

JAMES

No.

JOEY

Oh good I have a friend at school, Greg, his uncle has cancer and he's gonna die. Next week probably. So I'm glad you don't have that.

JAMES

Me too.

JOEY

What about Eric? Is he still gonna be our Dad?

JAMES

You've only got one Dad—

CHERYL

Enough. It was nice to see you again but let's not lose our heads. I'm marrying Eric. He asked me to, and I am.

JAMES

You don't love him.

CHERYL

Of course I do.

Liar.

JAMES

You're unbelievable—

CHERYL

Dad Mom loves Eric.

JOEY

I don't think she's sure—

JAMES

I'm sure.

CHERYL

Yeah cause they made a baby. Only people who love each other do that.

JOEY

(Beat.)

JAMES
(To Cheryl.)

Are you pregnant?

CHERYL

Yes.

JAMES

By Eric?

CHERYL

We're engaged—

JAMES

Jesus.

CHERYL

It's not the end of the world.

JAMES

How far along?

CHERYL

Six weeks.

JAMES

That's why you look so good.

CHERYL
I've gained a lot of weight.

JAMES
How does it feel?

CHERYL
Let's not.

JAMES
I bet it's great, complete—

CHERYL
This baby has nothing to do with us.

JAMES
Well said.

JOEY
Let's go eat.

CHERYL
Good idea.

JAMES
Absolutely. Forget me.

JIM
Are you addicted to sex or something?

JAMES
No, although it wouldn't be a bad idea—

CHERYL
(To James.)
You're a nightmare.

JAMES
--especially considering my condition.

JIM
What condition?

JAMES
I'm sterile. (Beat.) My body doesn't make sperm.

Any more?

JIM

At all, ever.

JAMES

(Beat.)

Great.

CHERYL

So, what am I?

JIM

Adopted.

JAMES

Wait what's sterile?

JOEY

I can't make a baby like Eric and Mom can. I have to have a doctor help me—

JAMES

I'm not related to you?

JIM

Not biologically. I didn't want to tell you tonight.

CHERYL

When were you going to—

JIM

Maybe when you weren't all worked-up by your father.

CHERYL

It would be difficult regardless.

JAMES

Oh shove it.

CHERYL

We shouldn't have kept this from them in the first place.

JAMES

They were too young—

CHERYL

JAMES

They would have understood. Lying is wrong, boys—

CHERYL

(To James.)

Go to hell—

JOEY

Stop fighting.

JAMES

What kind of example does this set—

CHERYL

Don't even start with me, Commitment Man—

JOEY

It's okay—

JAMES

It's hard to sleep next to a wife who won't touch you.

CHERYL

There were other problems—

JAMES

Depression? Wonder what caused that.

JOEY

Hey—

CHERYL

Maybe I was depressed.

JOEY

--guys—

JAMES

Of course, you're the woman—

JOEY

Hey guys—

JAMES

—the only one with feelings—

JOEY

Hey guys Jim is gay.

(Short beat.)

JAMES

(To Jim.)

Good for you.

CHERYL

(To Jim.)

Do you have a cell phone in your pocket?

JIM

Yeah.

CHERYL

Call the police.

JIM

You want me to call the police?

CHERYL

This man has broken into the house.

JIM

(To James.)

I think she's serious about you leaving.

JAMES

(To Cheryl.)

Slow down.

CHERYL

Jim's right. (To Jim.) Dial the phone.

JAMES

You haven't even heard me describe the procedure.

CHERYL

I don't need to.

JAMES

I'm sorry, you must know everything about reproductive health now that you're a full-time nurse—

CHERYL

I know because we spent three years of our marriage watching testimonials and going to consults.

JAMES

I remember.

CHERYL

But did you forget how different each new treatment seemed? How cutting edge?

JAMES

No.

CHERYL

I remember every trial.

JAMES

Me too.

CHERYL

So how could you ask me to trust you?

JIM

Mom you don't have to listen to him.

(Jim crosses to the door and opens it.)

JIM (CON'D)

(To James.)

You left once already, so I figure you can find your way out.

JAMES

I've got to stay.

CHERYL

You don't—

JIM

You're lucky I'm not calling the police.

JAMES

I'm your father—

JIM

In the loosest sense of the word.

JAMES

I've made mistakes.

JIM

I haven't seen you in three years.

JOEY

He came back, though!

JIM

Joey you remember. Did Mom used to cry after Dad left?

JOEY

Sometimes. But she cries now sometimes—

JIM

When?

JOEY

Just sometimes.

JIM

Maybe when she's watching a movie. But she used to cry like everyday when I came home from school.

CHERYL

Not everyday—

JIM

A lot. (To James.) And it's your fault.

JAMES

You don't have all the information—

JIM

I have enough. (Short beat.) I'm sorry you're sterile, but that's not the problem.

JAMES

Alright marriage counselor. What do you suggest I change in my attitude or behavior?

JIM

Stop breaking into the house.

Okay.

JAMES

(James reaches into his pocket and removes a key. He tosses it to Cheryl. She catches it.)

JAMES (CON'D)

Anything else?

JIM

Leave.

JAMES

I raised you.

JIM

Barely.

JAMES

Joey you remember Yankees games, catch in the yard—

JOEY

Yeah all the time—

JIM

All the time for him. You hit me in the head with the ball like twice a year. The rest of the time you were with Joey or at work.

JAMES

I don't like playing dollhouse.

JIM

They were forts!

JAMES

I never told you to stop making them, but you can't stand there and tell me I should have understood what they were about.

CHERYL

You might have tried a little.

JAMES

I'm sorry, Jim.

Whatever. Goodbye. JIM

Cheryl— JAMES

She's engaged— JIM

It's a huge mistake— JAMES

Any bigger than yours? JIM

Yes. JAMES

How? JIM

She's about to marry a man she doesn't love— JAMES

According to you. JIM

According to her face. JAMES

I love Eric. CHERYL

You're lying. JAMES

I'm not— CHERYL

She's not lying— JIM

Don't yell! JOEY

She's full of pregnancy hormones. She's disoriented— JAMES

JIM

She's not. She wants you to leave and so do I.

JAMES

Because you never liked me.

JIM

Because you cheated on Mom with a stewardess.

(Beat.)

JAMES

I did?

JIM

Yes.

JAMES

I did.

CHERYL

(To James.)

We can talk about this—

JAMES

Talk about what?

CHERYL

Our issues.

JAMES

Do they include an imaginary affair?

JIM

Imaginary—?

JAMES

--cause I'd love to talk about that.

CHERYL

Jim give me your phone.

JIM

(To Cheryl.)

What's he saying?

JAMES

I'm saying I never cheated on your mother. Did she tell you I did?

JOEY

Yeah with a flight attendant bitch.

(Short beat.)

CHERYL

I didn't have a lot of options.

JAMES

You could have told them something true.

CHERYL

Joey was a toddler.

JAMES

You turned my sons against me—

CHERYL

Don't give me the credit.

JAMES

I'm not a sleaze.

CHERYL

Fine, you're just a deadbeat.

JIM

He didn't cheat on you?

CHERYL

What does it matter?

JIM

I don't know—

CHERYL

Whether he left me for a woman or his job or because he lost his mind he left us. That's not what fathers do.

JAMES

You are so full of shit.

CHERYL

Fuck you.

JAMES
What fathers do? What fathers do. What do fathers do?

CHERYL
Stay.

JAMES
Make babies. Right?

CHERYL
I loved you.

JAMES
I know.

CHERYL
You left me—

JAMES
That's not the point.

CHERYL
Could have been for a woman.

JAMES
It wasn't.

CHERYL
Made it easier.

JAMES
Yeah, I bet.

JIM
(To James.)
Why did you leave?

JAMES
I wasn't wanted.

(Beat.)

JIM
That's a stupid reason.

JAMES
You've never been married—

CHERYL
He's right.

JAMES
He's fifteen—

CHERYL
He's right, though.

JAMES
You know why I left? I couldn't remember the last time we played tennis. Or did the fucking dishes at the same time. I walked into a room, and you walked out.

CHERYL
It was complicated.

JAMES
It's simple. People in love do stuff. Sometimes, at least. Boring shit. Taxes. It had been so long since any of that, and I was far away, Xanaxed into Amsterdam and I figured what difference will it make? So I left.

CHERYL
Are you finished?

JAMES
No.

CHERYL
I will drag you to the airport by the ankle if I have to.

JAMES
You'll have to.

CHERYL
You're not wanted anymore.

JOEY
Dad's leaving, isn't he?

CHERYL
Yes.

JOEY
Jim—

JAMES

(To Cheryl.)

I've set up an appointment tomorrow afternoon at the clinic, a consult—

JOEY

(To Jim, overlapping.)

--Jim where's my baseball?

CHERYL

You made an appointment?

JIM

(To Joey.)

I'll give it to you after Dad leaves—

JOEY

No I need it now.

JAMES

(To Cheryl.)

It was free, just a preliminary step—

CHERYL

I'm not going.

JAMES

It would just be a discussion—

JOEY

Jim!

JIM

I can't give you the ball right now.

CHERYL

(To James, overlapping.)

No!

JOEY

Why?

JIM

Because.

CHERYL

Boys! (Very short beat. To James:) I'm going downstairs to call the police.

(Cheryl starts to exit.)

JOEY

Mom Jim stole my baseball and he won't give it back—

CHERYL

Jim give him the ball—

JIM

I can't.

CHERYL

Why not?

JAMES

Consider it, Cheryl, at least—

CHERYL

(To James.)

I won't.

JAMES

Why not?

CHERYL

It's absurd.

JOEY

Where's my ball?

JIM

You can't have it.

CHERYL

Jim give it back.

JIM

Mom I can't—

CHERYL

Sure you can—

JAMES

(To Cheryl.)

We can have it back, like before.

CHERYL
It was a disaster.

JOEY
(To Jim.)
I'm gonna kill you.

JAMES
(To Cheryl.)
I know.

JIM
(To Joey.)
I was trying to tell you before—

CHERYL
I love Eric—

JOEY
Mom!

JAMES
(To Jim.)
For the love of God. (Short beat.) Can I have a cup of
coffee?

CHERYL
There's pasta.

JAMES
Some of that?

CHERYL
Sure. Then you leave.

JAMES
Sure.

CHERYL
Alright.

(Cheryl and James make for the
door.)

JOEY
Dad—

Son? JAMES

No Yankees? JOEY

Maybe next season. JAMES

(James and Cheryl exit. Beat.)

No Yankees. JOEY

How. JIM

How what? JOEY

You knew. JIM

Knew what? JOEY

You knew about us being adopted. JIM

No. I just thought maybe. JOEY

How did we not figure it out? JIM

I know right? JOEY

We're totally different. JIM

Yeah. (Beat.) Can I have my baseball back? JOEY

No. JIM

JOEY
No—

JIM
You can't get mad, but I promised it to someone.

JOEY
You promised?

JIM
Like, as a gift. Don't be mad.

JOEY
You promised someone my signed Yankees game ball.

JIM
Yeah.

JOEY
Who?

JIM
Kevin.

JOEY
Kevin doesn't even like baseball—

JIM
He loves the Yankees, maybe even more than you—

JOEY
No way—

JIM
Yes way—

JOEY
Where is it?

JIM
Today's his birthday!

JOEY
Where is it where is it give it back!

JIM
(Overlapping.)
--he would be so surprised—

JOEY
It's mine! Dad caught it for me.

JIM
Fine.

(Jim crosses to the wastebasket
and fishes out the baseball.)

JOEY
You put it in there?

JIM
I didn't have a lot of options.

(Jim offers the ball to Joey,
who takes it. Beat.)

JOEY
Mom and Dad aren't okay.

JIM
No.

JOEY
Eric could take us to games, but he's stupid, so—

JIM
I don't care about baseball. You do. Dad does. Eric does. I
don't. At all.

JOEY
I know. It's cause you're adopted.

JIM
So are you.

JOEY
Oh, yeah.

(Joey tosses the ball to Jim.)

Catch.

(They play catch.)

What do you think Mom and Dad are doing?

Fighting. JIM

Maybe they're kissing. JOEY

Gross. JIM

(They continue tossing. Jim stops the ball and holds it.)

JIM (CON'D)
 Could I give it to him for a day? Just borrow it for tomorrow or something?

JOEY
 No. (Short beat.) Dad's probably never coming back and I'm probably never going to another Yankee's game ever and even if I did these players aren't on the team anymore so it wouldn't matter so I have to keep it.

Okay I get it. Fine. JIM

(Jim tosses Joey the ball and sits on the toilet.)

I bet they're kissing. JOEY

(Beat. Joey crosses swiftly to Jim and kisses him on the mouth, a fast peck. Then he wraps him into a tight hug. Beat.)

Boys! CHERYL
 (Offstage.)

(The two pull away.)

What? JOEY

CHERYL
(O.S.)

Pasta!

JOEY
Coming! (To Jim.) Hey.

JIM
What?

JOEY
Look.

(They both look into the mirror.
Joey smoothes one of his
eyebrows with a finger.)

JOEY (CON'D)
They're the same.

JIM
I know.

JOEY
Weird.

CHERYL
(O.S.)

Boys!

JIM & JOEY
Coming!

(Blackout.)

GALLIAGH LASS

A Forum Theatre Play

Produced as a part of ICAN's *Galliagh Stories* 2010

Christine Baniewicz

P.O. Box 17023

Baton Rouge, LA 70893

(337) 281-8630

cbaniewicz@yahoo.com

Characters

JOHN: mid-thirties, a truck driver.

JUDITH: mid-thirties, Mary's mother. Used to play in a rock band.

MARY: fifteen, Judith's biological daughter, John's stepdaughter.

BILL: mid-thirties, an old school friend and band mate of Judith's. Mary often refers to him as "Uncle Billy."

NEWS REPORTER

NARRATOR

Production Note

The original production of Galliagh Lass may be viewed on YouTube at the following address:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39XMHnQTNQ>

It is entitled "Galliagh Stories," uploaded by User Name "UriTrips".

Additionally, a video detailing the project in Galliagh/Derry may be viewed on YouTube at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRpgvdZrnpY>

It is entitled "ImaginAction and ICAN Derry Project," uploaded by User Name "UriTrips".

Scene 1: Paris

John proposes to Judith in Paris. Judith accepts and they dance. Judith sings "Down by the Salley Gardens" as they transition to...

Scene 2: DIY

Mary enters and offers tea to Judith and John. They watch a news program that details recent drug-related violence, as well as the top four most popular drugs in the region. Judith switches off the television and badgers John about the broken toilet seat. John agrees to go to the DIY Store and buy a new one, but says he'll be back in time for Mary's formal dance that night. He exits as Bill enters.

Bill and Judith get high, and are nearly caught by Mary, who enters suddenly asking for the hair straightener. Once she leaves, the Billy and Judith relive their high school days, playing wild air guitar.

John re-enters with the toilet seat and is shocked to see Billy. Billy leaves quickly. John discovers the cocaine on the table and argues with Judith, asking how long she has been using drugs without his knowledge. Judith attempts to escape by going to help Mary get ready for her formal, but John tells her to clean up in the kitchen, and goes to see Mary himself.

The narrator sings a song as they transition to...

Scene 3: I Found Condoms

John repairs the broken toilet seat in Mary's bathroom, and discovers condoms. He confronts Mary about them, and she says that she got them from "Uncle Billy." John doesn't believe her, and imposes an early curfew. Mary is irate, and calls Judith. Judith appears, still frazzled and under the influence, and Mary explains that John won't let her stay out late after the formal. John tells Judith he found condoms in the toilet. Judith takes Mary's side but John is resolute in imposing an early curfew. Mary exits in an angry huff and John goes after her.

The narrator sings a song as they transition to...

Scene 4: Fuck All

John re-enters and offers Judith some exotic drugs he bought, as an apology for their argument earlier. The two pantomime taking the pills, and drinking champagne. They reminisce about Paris, and Billy enters in the midst of it, reciting his poem "Fuck All." They all collapse, unconscious, when he's finished.

Mary enters. She attempts to speak to Judith, who responds to her in a daze with the first stanza of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Mary sees the drugs on the table, and inhales them all in a stylized rush. The narrator enters, sings, and catches Mary as she falls dead on the ground.

Scene 5: She's Cold

John wakes up and stumbles to Mary. He feels her arm, and notices that it's cold. He checks her pulse, and shakes her. When she doesn't respond, he calls out to Judith, who grunts in response. He calls out again, and both Judith and Billy spring awake and freeze in a tableau of shock and horror.

PART II

Reflection

Introduction

I wrote two plays this year. Despite their distinct dramaturgy and modes of composition, both plays represent the synthesis of my undergraduate training. For four years I attended acting classes, playwriting courses, and history lectures. From my education I amassed a dizzying collection of tools—some handed to me directly via handbooks and advice, others absorbed from encounters with literature and productions. With these tools in hand, I faced a challenge: maintain the integrity of my dramatic voice when working individually and when working collaboratively. The plays *Home* and *Galliagh Lass* answer this challenge.

I conceived *Home* in a playwriting course in Fall 2008. It resurfaced in several different iterations over the course of my studies; however, it did not begin to take earnest shape as a fully realized one-act play until July 2010. *Home* is about navigating roles within a non-traditional family, and tracks the journey of 15-year-old Jim Miller as he discovers more than he ever bargained to about himself and those who share his home. The play is set entirely in a bathroom and organized into a series of French scenes as characters enter and exit the room. Although *Home* grapples with issues in non-traditional families, I wrote it in a fairly traditional mode. I composed the play in a studio on my own, submitting each draft for feedback from a tiny pool of one or two readers. In this sense, I wrote *Home* in relative isolation as a personal opus.

Galliagh Lass is a different story. Written in an entirely collaborative mode, the play moved from inception to production over the course of three weeks. *Galliagh Lass* treats the issue of substance abuse through the lens of family. We built the narrative around Johnny, a working-class man, as he negotiates escalating conflict resulting from his wife's drug addiction. The play ends in tragedy when his teenage stepdaughter dies after overdosing on drugs left out on the kitchen table. I created *Galliagh Lass* with a group of community members concerned for

various reasons about the topic of substance abuse. Most had never been onstage before. Many were rehabilitated drug addicts, or had lost family members to alcoholism or drug-related violence. Drawing from everyone's individual experiences with the topic, I helped the group devise and shape the play. Unlike *Home*, *Galliagh Lass* is episodic, and features entirely improvised dialogue. The setting is fluid, alternately a kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. We delineated scenes via a singing narrator. While I held a leadership role within the group, all decisions about the play were reached via discussion and consensus.

Another important distinction between the plays is their respective intended audiences. I wrote *Home* for production as part of the LSU Lab Theatre season, and as such, I gave great attention to detail. I expected the audience to be composed primarily of theatre students, well versed in the canon of classics and equipped with knowledge of theatrical techniques. In this sense, I wanted *Home* to dazzle and entertain my peers.

Unlike *Home*, I wrote *Galliagh Lass* in Northern Ireland as a Forum Theatre play. Forum Theatre, a technique devised by Augusto Boal, creates dialogue within a community around a particular issue using theatre as the platform. The intended audience of *Galliagh Lass* was primarily working-class people living in a disadvantaged suburb north of Derry called Galliagh. For this reason, the play was written according to particular dramaturgical conventions (to be discussed in detail later in this essay) in order to provide opportunities for the audience to engage the issue of substance abuse in their community.

While they were written in completely different modes, both plays exercise the idea of family in contemporary life. Both feature slightly modified nuclear family units—a mother, a father, and a teenage child. Both incorporate coming-of-age sexuality issues in the teenage characters. Both include a father estranged by various degrees because of his job or infidelity or

marital separation. Thus, despite their different dramaturgy, aesthetics and compositional techniques, both plays are manifestations of similar cultural anxieties.

In this essay, I will analyze in greater detail the process of creating both plays. I will examine the distinctive form and aesthetics of each piece, and reflect on the challenges unique to creating them. Ultimately, playwriting both pieces led me closer to uncovering my voice as a dramatist. Certain tools acquired via my education are more helpful in freeing it than others, and by surveying the duo of plays I have created, it has become clear to me that I write with a voice that is playful and socially engaged. From my experience writing *Home* and *Galliagh Lass*, this voice is freed most readily via collaborative work, incorporation of rich aesthetics and a loose hand on the tether of realism.

The Process

1. Home

As an admittedly intuitive artist, I am guilty of irrational fear regarding discussion of my private writing process. Jeffrey Sweet aptly describes this phenomenon in *The Dramatist's Toolkit*, noting, “playwrights shy away from craft discussions with the same fear the primitive tribes of anecdote supposedly feel when faced with cameras they believe will steal their soul” (xii). In an effort to joust with my fear and share some insights, I invite the reader into my process for a brief tour, provided no one attempts to steal my soul.

The original idea for what would become my play *Home* encompassed a conversation between two brothers, one teenage and one sub-ten years old, about Santa Clause. The older of the two brothers (Jim) was naïve and sheltered, and by contrast his younger brother (Joey) was socially successful, robust and athletic. The inverted power dynamic fascinated me. In the

earliest iterations of the play, I explored the younger brother's embarrassment of his inept sibling. Ultimately, however, I scrapped the Christmas scenario but kept what I'd learned about the relationship, shifting the action into the older brother's bedroom and incorporating a charged object—the baseball.

At first, the introduction of the baseball was a purely technical choice. I wanted to encourage my characters to negotiate, and with only two of them onstage, I decided the most compelling way to craft a negotiation would be to introduce a powerful object. *Negotiating over an object* remains one of my most useful dramatic techniques. Jeffrey Sweet coined the technique, and its power lies in its ability to make invisible dynamics visible, because, “in contests over whatever is at hand, human beings often inadvertently reveal the deeper issues that lie between them” (Sweet 19). The baseball was a natural choice—it is an iconic symbol of American masculinity, and I strengthened this resonance by connecting the ball directly to the boys' missing father. Jim's burglary of the baseball heightens the potential energy for conflict between he and Joey, and serves as the inciting incident for the entire piece. I made a conscious choice to forestall resolving the conflict over the baseball until the very final moments of the play, effectively rendering it the primary engine of the piece.

However, the play was still falling flat. At this point, it was about ten pages long and crippled by mal-expressed back-story. I consulted with my playwriting instructor, PhD student and published playwright JP Bray. Bray prompted me to use another of my favorite techniques, something I call *impossible aesthetics*. “Impossible” aesthetic choices open a stagnating piece to new possibilities by incorporating absurd or unlikely elements. “Put the characters in a bathtub,” Bray advised. “It'll either solve your problems or give you a great new absurdist piece.” Taking his advice, I moved the play from Jim's bedroom to a bathroom. Immediately the dialogue

between brothers became more urgent as each attempted to leave in turn. Also, as more characters entered, the mood in the room became increasingly claustrophobic. Finally, the bathroom is a traditionally private place, and I found family members' repeated disrespect of this convention thematically resonant. It is important to note that I was not consciously aware of the ramifications of my impossible aesthetic choice at the time I made it. I chose to move the play to the bathroom on a technically informed intuitive impulse, and was pleasantly surprised to find the choice so rich with meaning. Such is the nature of impossible aesthetics. The technique requires the artist to relinquish control in exchange for fresh energy, and is particularly helpful in the early phases of creation or whenever the artist feels paralyzed by naturalism or back-story.

It was around the same time that I moved the play to the bathroom that I began to develop a regular *writing ritual* composed of breathing exercises and physical warm-ups. Over the course of four months I developed a regular practice, resulting in the most quantitatively productive period in my life. I wrote every night for 2-5 hours, beginning around 6 P.M. and stopping only when exhausted, usually around 10 or 11 P.M. I began each session with breathing exercises to sharpen my focus, followed by reading the manuscript in its entirety up to whatever point I stopped at the night before. I would almost always do a physical warm-up after reading, moving into a studio space to explore each character with my body. Often these warm-ups consisted of moving freely around the room as if I were a specific character, reacting to the space as I imagine he or she would. These improvisations led to insights about the characters and gave me an opportunity to find creative solutions to challenges in the writing. Armed with a fresh sense of each character's objectives, I would return to my studio, sit at my desk and write dialogue. Outside of the occasional snack or trip to the bathroom, I worked in a fully focused way until absolute mental fatigue each night.

The piece grew fuller and more complex at the receiving end of my creative attention—in fact, the story grew faster than my knowledge of the characters could support it. I had to do what I call *doubling back* again and again, tossing out pages of weakly supported dialogue and re-writing them after further developing the characters. This process of doubling back, which is more like painting over yesterday’s canvas than traditional rewriting, gave the piece a sturdy finish.

From inception to final draft, *Home* was a character-driven play. My understanding of Jim and Joey led to the development of the story, and the development of the story led to the emergence of themes. I dove into the story with a solid grasp on the two siblings—who they were, how they related, what they desired—and a very general prompt. I was fascinated by the opportunity to create a play in which it appears that the main character’s sexual orientation will be the primary issue; however, that issue becomes increasingly moot after revelations of other, more potent issues. Armed with this simple premise and two characters I knew well, I wrote *Home*.

2. *Galliagh Lass*

The process of writing *Galliagh Lass* differed substantially. Unlike *Home*, it was created with a specific thematic intention. From this theme (substance abuse) arose the story, and the development of the story led finally to the development of characters. However, despite the two plays travelling equal and opposite roads to fruition, many of the same techniques aided their creation.

I first arrived in Galliagh as a stranger, saddled with the task of connecting with the community and helping them develop plays about issues in their lives. In order to achieve this

end, my colleagues and I invited pre-existent community groups—a women’s organization, a Youth-in-the-Arts group, a collection of volunteers and social workers—to participate in a series of free workshops. We employed an arsenal of theatre games to democratize the room and encourage participants to feel comfortable and have fun. After conducting these initial workshops, we invited whoever was interested in continuing the work to join our Core Group. This core of twenty community members encompassed teens, adults, actors and non-actors, manual laborers, social workers and rehabilitated addicts. The core met twice a week, and through the guidance of my colleagues and I, we developed and performed three plays by the end of our three-week residency.

Hector Aristizabal, my mentor and colleague, led this process in Galliagh. Columbian-born, Aristizabal founded and now serves as the artistic director of ImaginAction, a Los Angeles-based organization focused on activism through the arts. He typically uses an arsenal of theatre games and exercises to work with communities on social justice issues, and most of his techniques take root in the work of Augusto Boal. In the 1960s, Boal pioneered new methods of using theatre as a platform for political dialogue and empowerment of oppressed peoples. He named this canon of techniques the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal xxx). I worked with Aristizabal and a team of three additional international artists according to Boal’s framework. We facilitated games and exercises in order to “help them shed their inhibitions” and “establish a form of theatrical communion with them” (Boal 2). Next, we staged improvised scenes about issues in the community, finally developing those scenes into complete plays. The core group presented the completed plays on our last night in Galliagh, and Aristizabal engaged the audience in dialogue via a Boalian process called Forum Theatre. I will detail the specific dramaturgical conventions of Forum Theatre later in this essay; however, it is important to note

that throughout the creative process, I crafted *Galliagh Lass* with the ultimate goal of engaging the community in dialogue, or forum, about its topic.

Once the core members established connections and familiarity with one another, they selected topics to create plays about. A game Aristizabal calls *snowball fight* facilitated the selection process. Everyone in the room, my colleagues and I included, wrote three different problems faced by the community on three separate slips of paper. Then, we crumpled our slips into round balls and began a mock snowball fight, hurling the paper balls at one another. This continued for several minutes. By the time Aristizabal called “Stop!” no one knew where his or her original slips of paper were. We then selected three paper balls at random from the floor and unwrapped them. Hector instructed us to select one issue with which we personally resonate and share it with the group. In this way, trends became apparent as many people shared the same topic. The three most frequently repeated issues were thus selected to build plays around. By playing snowball fight, topics that might otherwise have sparked conflict or disagreement were shared in a ludic and anonymous way. It also ensured that each member of the small group was personally connected to that group’s issue. In this way, the small groups “chose themselves” by both communal and individual consensus.

My group of six formed to create a play about substance abuse, and the first tool we used to craft it was Boal’s *image theatre* (Boal 2). Each group member sculpted the others into a frozen tableau of “substance abuse.” Many images involved people sitting, slumped, with their heads in their hands. Some involved people who appeared off-balance being supported by others around them. We shared these small group images with the entire core, who gave us both objective and subjective feedback: “It looks like that person’s sick,” “No one is making eye contact,” “I see a lot of fear,” etc. Hearing third-person observations opened our minds to aspects

of the topic that we hadn't considered. For example, in one image I was frozen in a position with my hand resting on someone's shoulder. The "sculptor," one of my group mates, had intended this position to communicate assistance, as if I was comforting the other whose shoulder I was touching. However, the core group saw something else. "I think that person [me] is pushing that other person down. It looks like she's holding him in place." Images are polysemous. Outside perspectives on our still images allowed my group to see an all-too-familiar problem in a fresh way, and acknowledge our complicity in its meaning.

After garnering feedback from the core, my small group began crafting the play in earnest. We used three techniques in tandem to induce its genesis—*improvisation*, *time crunch*, and Aristizabal's version of *impossible aesthetics*. By overwhelming the group with three massive tasks at once, we avoided endless conversation about the topic and were forced to begin creating a piece. The parameters of the *time crunch* were severe—in ten minutes, we needed to build a play with a beginning, middle and end. Immediately we began talking and moving. In thirty seconds we sketched a hasty vision of the piece: two parents and their toddler-aged child, a drug dealer, a huge party, then tragedy when the child ingests tablets left out on the kitchen table. Everyone agreed on the template, assumed roles and began *improvising* dialogue in character. About seven minutes into the process, Aristizabal approached our group and gave us three *impossible aesthetic* tasks. Somehow, we needed to incorporate poetry, song, and traditional Irish dancing into the play. The absurdity of these interpolations lightened the mood in the group and allowed the piece to drift away from strict, literal realism. When the ten minutes were up, each group presented their play. The plays were skeletal at best, but each contained a nugget of opportunity to expand. The aesthetic insertions were both comic and poignant in turn. In my

group, the death of the child was followed by an energetic group dance. The juxtaposition of moods was arresting and beautiful.

Over the next three weeks, my small group *doubled back* again and again, deepening the piece by asking questions about who the characters were and what they desired. We decided to keep some of the impossible aesthetics—poetry and song—but removed the elements that did not contribute to the arc of the play. We added structure where it was needed, building in a scene that depicted the parents in their early life, before the troubles of addiction began to creep in. We incorporated statistics on drug-related violence in *Galliagh*. At every turn, decisions were made about the play in an open and democratic mode. I served as the primary director, disseminating my knowledge of theatre but taking care to honor every idea from within the group. The final product, thus, was playful, socially engaged and magically realistic—trademarks of my personal style—even though it was a composite of six different voices.

Each play invites a view into the processes that create it. I wrote *Home* with meticulous attention over a period of two years, so it is long and polished to a clinical sheen. I wrote *Galliagh Lass* with haste, so it is short and rough around the edges. I approached *Home* with anxiety regarding its reception by my peers; this anxiety manifests in Jim's urgency to impress his boyfriend as well as the family's panoply of judgmental attitudes towards each other. Playful irreverence dominated when I wrote *Galliagh Lass*, so the piece slides through space and time freely with interpolations of song and poetry.

Dramaturgy

The dramaturgy in *Home* and *Galliagh Lass* differs as much as the compositional process. Written for different audiences with different goals, each play tracks a unique formal

path. Both plays tell a story in a linear format, and both follow an Aristotelian model of rising action, climax and denouncement. However, the similarities end there.

Home borrows much from the dramaturgy of Neoclassical French theatre. It is set in a single location, tracks a single action and unfolds in real time. Scenes organize themselves according to characters' entrances and exits. Even certain long-since abandoned neoclassical rules of decorum are observed, such as violence occurring offstage. In fact, there is an exchange at the conclusion of a French scene between Jim and Cheryl, his mother, which ends in a Moliere-esque rhyme:

JIM
Kevin is my best friend—

CHERYL
Eric is my fiancé.

JIM
You're ruining everything.

CHERYL
You'll thank me someday—

The play also nods to the contemporary canon. The general arc of the dramatic action follows Jim and Joey as they establish a relationship, are interrupted by an outsider—in the case of *Home*, their parents—and return to each other to assess the changes effected by the intrusion. James McClure's one-act *Lonestar* adheres to this formula, introducing two brothers who must tolerate the imposition of Cletis before returning to patch up their differences together. *Home* also nods to the farce in *Noises Off!* by incorporating comic “door bits” as characters alternately lock each other in and out of the bathroom.

Fantastic aesthetics are wholly absent, and in their place are naturalistic elements like Joey seeming to actually relieve himself onstage and Jim actually cleaning the shower. Scenes

are driven by individual characters' objectives. In this way, *Home* is a textbook example of 20th-century American realism. Its dramaturgy is largely dictated by such conventions.

Galliagh Lass was composed under very different dramaturgical strictures. The piece was created as a forum play, and as I crafted it according to specific guidelines. Dramaturgically speaking, a Forum Play can be broken down into three components: preamble, crisis, and “worst case scenario” (Boal 18-19). The preamble is the first section of the play. In this portion, the audience meets the main characters and their respective ideologies and desires. In *Galliagh Lass*, the preamble encompasses the scene “Paris”—the audience meets Johnny and Judith, and witnesses Johnny’s desire to create a family with her.

The crisis is the middle portion of the play, as the protagonist experiences conflict and oppression in pursuit of his or her desires. This section is crucial because it provides the opportunity for audience intervention. According to Boal, an intervention encompasses an audience member literally stepping onstage and taking the place of an actor in an attempt to change the outcome of the play (Boal 20). In *Galliagh Lass*, the crisis includes the scenes “DIY,” “I Found Condoms,” and “Fuck All.” These scenes all feature the protagonist attempting to change his situation—in the case of Johnny, he confronts his wife about her drug use, he imposes a curfew on his stepdaughter, and he offers exotic drugs to Judith as an apology.

Without these scenes of crisis, audience members would have no point of entry to try different tactics to change the final outcome, or worst-case scenario. For a Forum Theatre play to be successful, it must resolve in tragedy for the protagonist so that the audience will be “spurred into finding solutions and inventing new ways of confronting oppression” (Boal 19). When Johnny’s stepdaughter, Mary, overdoses on drugs in the final scene, “She’s Cold,” it is a

realization of one possible worst-case scenario. It is the goal of the community to avoid this outcome via their interventions.

My small group's first collaborative attempt at the play had a strong worst-case scenario, but virtually no preamble or crisis scenes. In our first presentation, the play consisted almost entirely of a wild, stylized party, ending with each parent unconscious. A child entered the stage, mistook the drugs on the table for candy, ate them, and died. Had we presented this version of the play to the community, they would have had no strong entry point for making meaningful interventions. All the characters onstage were already under the influence, and it was unclear whether any of them desired change.

The remainder of our time developing the script was devoted to strengthening the dramaturgy. Together, we decided to add a scene at the beginning of the play in which the two parents were introduced. This became our preamble. We then added the three other scenes for the crisis, constantly increasing the characters' complexity in order to fulfill the dramaturgical demands. For instance, in order to create scenes of crisis, we had to collaboratively decide what Johnny did for a living, how long he had been married to Judith, and how far her drug addiction had progressed, among other things. As the answers to those questions became increasingly specific, *Galliagh Lass* grew into a collection of improvised scene sketches according to the formulaic outline.

Once these sketches became fully realized, the group incorporated song and poetry to transition from scene to scene. In an attempt to weave regional culture into the piece, I composed a short song in the style of traditional Irish a capella performance. One of the group members, the man who portrayed Billy in the play, wrote a poem about loneliness entitled "Fuck All" and

Gina* (portraying Judith) memorized the beginning stanza of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." We wove these aesthetic elements into the piece to create fluid transitions between scenes, indicate time passing, and contribute to the mood and texture of the play.

As a result of these various dramaturgical conventions, the play more closely resembles magical realism than 20th-century American naturalism.

Bathroom Aesthetics

Both *Home* and *Galliagh Lass* involve bathrooms and bathroom-related aesthetics despite their different subjects and modes of composition. I set *Home* entirely within the confines of a small bathroom, and much of the stage action requires use of the utilities therein. Joey hides behind the shower curtain; Jim stashes a baseball in a wastebasket. The toilet flushes and the shower audibly sprays water. *Galliagh Lass* uses a real toilet seat to represent various props throughout the course of the show: an engagement ring, a television, and a condom. Outside of an empty plastic bag used to indicate drugs, the seat is the only prop used in the play.

The curious presence of bathroom aesthetics in both plays is a thematic signifier. In each play, the use of the toilet/toilet seat goes against convention. Even in gritty naturalism, characters don't usually urinate into a toilet in the first two minutes of a play. Likewise, expectations shatter when Johnny goes down on one knee to propose to Judith, and reveals a toilet seat beneath his coat instead of a ring. The placement of such a familiar object in unfamiliar contexts forces the audience to view the object in a new way. The polysemy of a toilet seat becomes apparent.

Bathroom items, specifically toilets and their seats, are symbolically charged objects. They can simultaneously connote health and sickness. They bring to mind taboo subjects—

* All names have been changed to ensure the privacy of participants.

bowel movements, vomiting, genitals. Most peoples' experiences with toilet seats are private, and when I betray that intimacy by bringing the object into a public viewing space, a whole panoply of emotional responses are invoked. Disgust, vulnerability, surprise, and shame are among the most potent.

For these reasons, the inclusion of bathroom aesthetics in both plays points to a shared thematic likeness. One of the few other similarities between them is the major role played by family. I believe these two factors are linked in parallel significance.

I posit that, in these two plays, both families and toilets share certain aspects. They are both items one typically encounters in private. Additionally, both can be associated with sickness and health. The toilet seat we used in *Galliagh Lass* was in the shape of a closed circle—a classic symbol of community, and by extension, family. By linking the idea of “family” with the visual of a toilet seat, I link the emotional resonance of the two. The audience transfers their feelings of vulnerability, disgust and shame onto the plays' representations of family.

I did not consciously choose to link these two ideas when I was creating the plays. However, I did want to portray family relations honestly, without idealizing or simplifying them. In retrospect, then, it occurs to me that including bathroom aesthetics answered this challenge. People use toilet seats every day in most industrialized Western cultures. They are practical, utilitarian and matter-of-fact—the opposite of glamorous. I think family relations are the same. In my experience family life is usually not glamorous (certainly in *Home* and *Galliagh Lass* it is not). By connecting the idea of family to the aesthetic symbol of a toilet seat, I highlight the aspects of family that are duty-driven, unavoidable and embarrassing.

Challenges

The process of writing both plays posed unique challenges, most of which I had never encountered before. *Home* is the first play I have written of any real length outside of a classroom setting. I have collaborated in duos with other artists to create theatre, but *Galliagh Lass* demanded that I work with a much larger group than I have ever before. Reflection helped me to locate the difficulties, strengths and weaknesses inherent to each approach.

Solo playwriting is equal parts exhilarating, thankless and lonely. I felt excited to sit behind my desk each night and plunge into an imaginary world, unsure of what lay ahead but sure that I would find it somehow. Stephen King wrote in his book *On Writing* that one of the most exciting aspects of writing mystery novels is that he gets to be their first reader (King xxx). I feel the same. I work intuitively, groping in the dark towards something that smells interesting or sounds meaningful. I had no idea, for example, that James Miller Sr. would appear onstage in *Home*. I developed his character primarily as a back-story for the mother and her sons; however, he literally blasted his way into the play on page 43. His appearance opened caverns of possibility for the play, and was as surprising to me as I hope it will be for my audience.

For every thrilling discovery, however, came at least thirty pages of doubling back. I wrote *Home* entirely by hand, and the play spans four college-ruled spiral notebooks. I wrote outside the lines, and beyond the margins. James Miller's first appearance so energized me, in fact, that I spent weeks slaving over a second act of the play, setting the characters in the waiting room of a hospital as physicians tended to James's gunshot wound. There are entire worlds I pored over that will never see the light of another reader's eyes. This is all a part of the territory.

I wrote *Home* for hours alone every night, and it drained me. As I worked on *Home*, an intense need drove me to give everything I had to the play—all my energy, focus, creativity, and

ideas. As Anne Lamott put it, “when you are giving everything you have to your characters and to your readers, [you] will periodically feel like the single parent of a three-year-old, who is, by turns, wonderful, willful, terrible, crazed, and adoring” (Lamott 203). Each night after writing for three, four, or six hours I crawled into my lofted bed and lie, a mass of languid, sapped muscle matter. At the time, I considered exhaustion the hallmark of a good workday. Now, I see it for what it was: the bi-product of an almost masochistic need push myself to the limit. I have since learned that, when working alone, I don’t struggle nearly as much with self-discipline as I do with knowing when to stop, take a break and let the piece breathe. This is my primary challenge with solo art making. Without proper balance and rest, my art becomes a reflection of my frazzled and compressed state of mind. *Home*, as a result, lacks some of my trademark playfulness.

Creating *Galliagh Lass* was an exercise in diplomacy. The pressure of the deadline demanded that decisions be made swiftly, but the culture of the process demanded they be made democratically, as well. Power struggles ensued, primarily between me and the two adult men in our group. These situations required utmost care. Kevin, one of the men in my group, lost a relative to drug-related violence and wanted us to include a masked gunman in the performance. However, when we rehearsed the play with this addition, the mask confused the audience and muddied our focus on the story. Discussing this issue required grace and tact. I told Kevin and the group that after watching the rehearsal with the masked man, I felt the concept wasn’t reading, and that instead of a mask and gun perhaps the character could simply sing.

“I don’t know,” said Kevin. “I think it’s a major problem in the city.” All eyes rested on me.

“Well, let’s include it in the news report then, yeah?” I said. “That would be a really good place for it.”

Some others nodded. “You could do a little report,” Said Gina. “‘More Drug Fueds, killing in the streets,’ that sort of thing.”

“Do you think they’ll get it?” he asked.

“Yeah, I think it’ll be much more clear,” I said. More nodding followed. I put my hand on Kevin’s shoulder, which required a little reaching. Kevin stood about 6’2” with arms as thick as my thigh with muscle. “Is that okay? Are you happy with that?”

“Yeah, that’s grand, if you think it’ll work, I’ll just add it to the news report, then.”

This kind of exchange recurred throughout the process. Because the primary artistic material I was working with encompassed the actual life experiences of those around me, I learned to honor every suggestion from within the group. The process challenged me to gauge each individual’s vulnerability and connection to the subject, including my own, as we navigated the creation of the piece. Ultimately, I was creating a play about the substance abuse in Galliagh, and without my sensitivity to the groups’ desires, I might as well have stayed across the Atlantic and written about the subject on my own.

The unpredictable nature of the project also confounded its creation. The other facilitators and I never knew exactly who would be at the scheduled rehearsals from night to night. Often, community members missed rehearsal to care for a sick child, or, in the case of my small group, to check in to drug rehabilitation clinic. As a result, I walked into the rehearsal space each night with an open mind, ready for anything. If actors were missing, we would borrow actors from other groups or I would play the roles temporarily. My colleagues and I shared the motto, “Whoever needs to be here will be here.” This open-minded attitude facilitated the group work

tremendously. No time was wasted sitting in a circle waiting for people to arrive. Every night we worked with what we had, even if that meant changing the gender of the character or the circumstances of the piece. The people who were most often present shaped the work the most; however, the plays inherited gems contributed by all who dropped in.

Although I primarily collaborated in *Galliagh*, my work there informed the way I will approach solo creative projects in the future. I spent so many hours aching in exhaustion when I wrote *Home*; however, just because I was working solo did not mean I needed to approach it without fluidity and fun. In the future I will also be wary of my tendency to limit myself to strict realism. The freedom I felt working with bold aesthetics in *Galliagh Lass* opened my eyes to their expressive potential.

My experience writing *Home* influenced *Galliagh Lass*, as well. I learned by fire how important character development was to a successful play, and encouraged my group members to constantly delve deeper and ask questions about the characters they were portraying. I also brought my knowledge of playwriting techniques, such as negotiating over an object, into the space. “I Found Some Stuff” is a prime example, as Johnny argues with Mary about the condoms he found in her bathroom.

Stravinsky, Pearls, and the Work that Awaits

Russian composer Igor Stravinsky said, “I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge.” I keep this quote tacked beside my desk when I write, because it aids my defense against perfectionism much the same as dream-catchers net nightmares. Perfectionism locks up the joints of my creativity. I can still feel those hours spent staring into

the wall across my desk as I wrote *Home*, cleaving the drywall in two with beams from my eyes. My shoulders were always tight and my brain empty in the worst way. I breathed short, shallow breaths and struggled against the invisible vice grips fastened on my skull. For me, this is perfectionism, and it helped me learn very little except how to sob behind a desk and go to bed early.

Mistakes, on the other hand, have taught me everything I know. When I work fast and in the spirit of exploration and play, I make dozens of them per minute. I still smile when I think of my early drafts of *Home*, particularly a thirty-page section I wrote in under a week. I thought that if I composed the play fast enough I could somehow avoid character development and the difficult questions that come with it. The result was a beautiful monster, thick with cliché and melodrama. James Miller Sr. sounded like a cowboy and everyone died in a blaze of gunfire at the end. Similarly in *Galliagh*, I avoided the real issue of substance abuse by glossing over it with details and minutia. Masquerading beneath the guise of “realism,” I bogged my actors down with naturalistic tasks. However, when one of my colleagues intervened to stylize the scenes of drug use it became apparent to me that this grotesque, theatrical representation captured the truth more honestly than my attempts at realism had.

Perfectionism interferes with my ability to learn quickly because it draws out my mistakes; slows down their rate of occurrence. When people surround me and we are focused on art-making; when I monitor my stress level and take breaks when I am tired; when I am happy and curious—this is when I create unique and engaging theatre. My experience crafting *Galliagh Lass* opened my eyes to the immense opportunity to work in this mode, and I feel pleased and motivated to pursue a life in such community-centric theatre. Writing *Home* taught me that, despite my best intentions, rigidity and stoicism only frustrate my imagination. I anticipate a

career full of collaborative, Boalian work in the community because it frees my voice while simultaneously enabling others’.

The mistakes I made writing *Home* gave me this direction. Like bits of sand caught by an oyster, they have become pearls only after months of scratching my throat. They are valuable. My mistakes taught me to garner feedback often, to release my death grip on realism, to relax and play. I will carry them with me, along with tools gathered from class and books and professors, into the work that awaits me.

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