

(1-900-)Selfplex

by
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SCENE 1

In darkness, the sound of stately
Cathedral bells.

A WOMAN'S VOICE

(in a British accent)

But I've already told you who I am. We're in a palace. A
great, big, beautiful...

The Woman giggles. Lights up.
ALBERTA, late thirties/early forties,
is talking on the phone in the cramped
living room of her apartment, which
also doubles as her office. A desk
littered with papers, on top of which
sits a computer and the base of the
telephone attached to a small black box
(a line scrambler). The walls are
almost entirely covered by posters,
mostly of bands -- The Pixies, Nirvana,
Blondie, Patti Smith, Siouxsie and the
Banshees. A guitar and a guitar-amp in
one corner. In another corner, a CHILD
is playing, admiring himself in a large
mirror on the floor as he puts on
makeup and lipstick.

Alberta is dressed in a tank-top and
torn jeans. The Child wears a striped
t-shirt and underwear but no pants.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Exactly. But shhh -- we can't be found out. I'd lose my
position cavorting with a -- a toilet scrubber? You scrub
the royal toilets, do you? So you deal with the royal
droppings. Every day, your face -- your nostrils -- inches
away from the filth as you scrub the hardened bits of feces
off the inside of the bowl. Shhh. I'm over the bowl. I
take the --

(she stops, falling out of
character)

I told you! It's not a handkerchief!

(back in character)

I reach between my thighs, my fingers climbing towards your
asshole, and I take my beautiful, silk scarf -- the scarf I
stole from the royal wardrobe, because they have so much --
the scarf I knotted in four places. I slip in the first
knot. That's right. Then the second. Now the third. Shhh.
Oh stop, oh daddy, oh be quiet, be quiet...!

Click. Alberta hangs up the phone,
checks a digital timer, then logs the
call on her pad.

She stretches, then turns to her computer and types, speaking in her real voice.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Never underestimate the power of fantasy, readers. Many of us grew up with fairy tales. They're so deeply embedded in our psychies that I'm willing to bet the first time we laid hands on our privates, we secretly imagined we were parting the doors to the magic kingdom. If all men are secretly looking for their mothers, I'd add that most of them are also looking for a good storyteller. The fact is that we are, all of us, a bundle of stories, and there's nothing hotter or more powerful than letting them run wild.

Keys jangle offstage and a door opens. Alberta hears and quickly finishes up.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Post your comments below. Your loving sexpert, Alberta.

MAX

(from off)

You working?

ALBERTA

Hey, baby.

(picks up the phone)

Pick up the phone in the hall, would you, baby? I've got an exhibitionist on the line, he wants you to listen! Max? Max!

She runs after Max, exits, and re-enters, pulling her on stage. Like Alberta, MAX is in her late-thirties, dishevelled -- not quite grown up.

MAX

Why do you think that's funny?

ALBERTA

(teasing)

Look what it does to your face. You get all sour-looking.

MAX

That's not funny, Laurie.

ALBERTA

Then stop falling for it. No, you're right. I shouldn't make fun of you, not when you're off all day working so hard for us.

(of a short stack of CDs Max is holding)

For me?

MAX

Don't get too excited.

ALBERTA

Undiscovered treasures.

MAX

Not if I got to take them home, probably not.

ALBERTA

Those jerks you work for wouldn't know genius if it bit them on the ass. Who do they want to sign? -- the next Foo Fighters? Imagine if they scored a Foo Fighters promo -- the sloppy, homoerotic wrestling match that would break out as they fought over who was going to take it home. What's the matter, baby?

MAX

Just hungry.

ALBERTA

I'll put one of these on, you make yourself a sandwich. You should really listen to some of this stuff. Okay, so it's not Sonic Youth or Nirvana. So it doesn't come personally recommended by David Geffen, which might as well be the requirement these days to get a half-decent label to listen to your demo. Max! As soon as the album comes out --

(of the music playing)

Shit -- this is awful.

(as she fast-forwards from one song to the next)

As soon as the album comes out and we start shopping for a new label, I'll put David Geffen's face on the cover! Photoshop a new slip for the jewel case and bam!, the first thing those executives see when they open the envelope is David Geffen smiling back at them. What are you doing?

MAX

(from off)

There's no bread.

ALBERTA

(turning off the stereo)

Really, when it comes down to it, you and I are just as much of a part of the problem as anybody else. I mean it, Max. As soon as the album comes out, we've got to find a new label. A real label. Sub Pop. Matador if we have to. Giorno. Their distribution's for shit, but Giorno would take the whole package -- the music and my writing. I mean, what we do is more than just music. Really it's a kind of performance art, and we need a label that understands what that is. What art and storytelling are.

Max reappears from the kitchen with a few slices of turkey on a paper plate and a beer.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Want some bread with that?

MAX

There isn't any.

ALBERTA

They don't appreciate you at that shitbox. How can they? I know you think you owe them something, but your bosses should be kissing our asses. Your ass. Down on their knees fellating us with thanks for finally giving them something decent.

MAX

(sniffs the turkey, pushes it
aside)

They took both songs.

ALBERTA

Damn right they did.

MAX

We're the only band on the sampler with two songs. I mixed them loud, too -- so they'd stand out.

ALBERTA

When do I get to hear it?

MAX

Tomorrow.

ALBERTA

The album?

MAX

The album?

ALBERTA

I don't give a shit about the sampler, I want to hear the magnificent mixing you've done on our album.

MAX

They took the two songs.

ALBERTA

You just said that.

Pause.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)
I don't understand.

MAX
I'm still trying.

ALBERTA
No -- I don't understand this. I do not understand this.

MAX
Two songs is something.

ALBERTA
They signed us for an album.

MAX
They didn't sign us.

ALBERTA
They were sitting right here. Those fuckers signed us.

MAX
They said they might be interested.

ALBERTA
I'm getting them on the phone.

MAX
Don't.

ALBERTA
Don't tell me they didn't sign us when they were sitting right here and I signed a fucking piece of paper!

MAX
We signed a release. For two songs.

ALBERTA
How long have you known about this?

MAX
Laurie.

ALBERTA
I've been going on and on -- about albums and labels and press releases and --

MAX
The songs are mixed and ready.

ALBERTA
With no fucking label!

Alberta puts down the phone, crosses to her computer.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

You have to quit.

MAX

I can't.

ALBERTA

It's fucking embarrassing. They pay you nothing, you slave away all day turning shit into mildly listenable shit.

MAX

Maybe if you hadn't pushed them...

ALBERTA

This again?

MAX

I know how much you want this --

ALBERTA

How much we want this, Max. Or don't you want it as much as I do? Maybe you're content living in fucking obscurity making seven dollars an hour while I double-charge the bastards I fuck over the phone just to carry our asses from month to month.

MAX

I never wanted you to do that.

ALBERTA

The double-charging?

MAX

It's not healthy. You're here all day, alone, doing whatever it is you do.

ALBERTA

I am not going back to being a copy-editor at some fucking word farm. I am not going to the grave with my best work published on the back of a bottle of dish detergent.

MAX

At least you had other stuff to focus on. At least you got out of the apartment!

ALBERTA

I am an artist, I tell stories, and if the best practice I can get is role-playing over the phone for three dollars a minute, I'd rather be here.

MAX

And how I feel about it doesn't matter?

ALBERTA

Not when you can't land us a deal with your own fucking label.

MAX

It's not mine. It's a shitbox.

ALBERTA

They have no taste.

MAX

I tried.

ALBERTA

I try. You failed. So you need to quit, and I'll try harder for the both of us, as usual. We'll need a loan.

MAX

From where?

(off Alberta's look)

No.

ALBERTA

Where else?

MAX

It almost killed me the last time, I am not calling him.

ALBERTA

Your sister hustles him plenty.

MAX

She's not my sister. If she doesn't mind being dependent on him, that's her business, but I am not asking him for --

Alberta crosses away, returning to her desk.

MAX (CONT'D)

Laurie.

ALBERTA

I'm working.

MAX

I'm too old to be asking my dad for money. Aren't we getting too old to be the next Patti Smith or Sonic Youth or -- ?

ALBERTA

I'm in the middle of a column.

MAX

A column.

ALBERTA

It doesn't have to be printed in a newspaper to be a column.

MAX

It needs readers.

ALBERTA

I have readers.

Max backs off, seeing she's hurt
Alberta. The Child glowers at Max.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Any asshole can be a rock star these days. Any blonde with a ponytail and cones on her tits, any punk with a plundered British accent. There's no art to any of it, and there is no age limit on art. And if you think differently, you can go to the store, buy a loaf of bread, let it go stale and hard, then fuck yourself with it.

The Child giggles. Alberta acknowledges him for the first time in the scene; he is all made up.

MAX

I'm sorry.

Alberta smiles tenderly at the Child.

MAX (CONT'D)

(not noticing)
I'll try harder.

Alberta looks at Max, disoriented.

ALBERTA

What?

MAX

I just wish we could be happy the way things are.

ALBERTA

You don't think we're entitled to the tiniest piece of success?

MAX

I'll call him.

ALBERTA

Then fuck off.

MAX

I said I'll try harder.

ALBERTA

I need doing, baby -- not trying. If you'd told me ten years ago that this is where I'd be, I'd have laughed my ass off.

MAX

It wouldn't matter that you still had me?

Alberta looks at him. A smile passes over her face, then fades quickly as she catches sight of the Child, still smiling clownishly.

ALBERTA

No more trying, okay? I'm sick of trying. From now on, only doing.

SCENE 2

In darkness, the sound of a telephone ringing tone, then the pickup.

A MAN'S VOICE

This is Jim Russo for A&R.

Lights up. Alberta is on the phone as the Child picks at the guitar, obviously bored. There are now two phones and line scramblers on Alberta's desk; as she talks on one phone, the other -- her "sex line" -- rings.

ALBERTA

Yes, this is Jim from Vantage Artists. Lorraine! I've been swamped myself, I can't tell you. The phone has literally been ringing off the --

She hangs up on her other caller, accidentally knocking over the phone.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Are you still -- ? Yes. This assistant of mine is working my last nerve...

(periodically referring to her computer)

So, I've gotta tell you, I've been doing this for awhile -- longer than I care to admit -- and I really think these women have something special. Two songs on a sampler. Maybe not, but we're using it to break them on college radio, and -- So you didn't listen to the whole thing. Well maybe you'd rather have this conversation after you've -- ? Yes, I know how busy you are, but...

The Child strums a loud and out-of-tune chord. He speaks with a faint hint of Southern drawl.

THE CHILD

I'm bored!

ALBERTA

(still on the phone, fighting to stay in character)

Lorraine, let me ask you something. What can I do to convince you to listen -- I mean really listen -- to that CD? I understand that, but, with all due respect, let me remind you that I've also taken time out of my day. How can you know that unless you listen to the songs?

These women could be the next Nirvana -- a female version of Nirvana, even better -- and your job, Lorraine, would seem to entail that you at least listen to...

The other party has hung up; Alberta slams down the phone. She pulls the cord from the other phone and sits very still.

THE CHILD

I'm bored!

ALBERTA

Not now.

THE CHILD

I wanna play! I'm BOOOOOOOOOOOORED!

ALBERTA

What did I tell you about distracting me while I'm working? Do you know who I was talking to?

The Child bangs cacophonous notes out of the guitar.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Stop it!

He bangs louder.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

STOP IT!

She grabs the guitar out of his hands; the Child shrinks back, frightened. The sight of this seizes Alberta for an instant. She picks up a stapler and hands it to him.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Here. Play with that. Staple something.

THE CHILD

I don't wanna.

ALBERTA

And stop slurring your words. How old are you anyway?

THE CHILD

Nine.

ALBERTA

"I don't want to." Say it.

THE CHILD

(resentfully)

I don't want to.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Don't expect any sympathy from me. Life is full of people taking things away from you and telling you what you can't have. And you know what? You fight. You stop flinching and you grow the fuck up, otherwise you're left with nothing.

She stares at her computer screen. The Child looks away angrily, then softens a little as he fiddles with the stapler.

THE CHILD (CONT'D)

(suddenly more grown up -- in the voice of a teenager)

Her hair was a like a mystery. It swallowed the sunlight at the roots where the dye was growing out, but the ends splintered it into a thousand lemon-colored pieces. In the mornings when she sat up and pushed it out of her eyes, you could see the dust from the sofa cushions dancing around her face. And no matter if she'd gotten back at five a.m., or if I hadn't seen her at all the day before, she'd look at me and smile. I dyed my hair blonde to look like hers. The roots are starting to show, like hers. I dyed it for one of her boyfriends so I'd look like her; she asked me to. And when I smiled at myself in the mirror, I looked just like her.

Alberta stares at him.

ALBERTA

How old are you?

THE CHILD

Almost fifteen.

ALBERTA

How did you know what I'd written.

THE CHILD

What?

ALBERTA

I remember those words. I wrote them. It was this story I was working on; I never finished it.

(beat)

I shouldn't have been so harsh with you.

(no response)

Do you want me to get my make up?

(no response)

I've got a feather boa in the bedroom. Do you want to play dress up?

THE CHILD

I'm too old.

ALBERTA

No one is too old for dress up. Who do you want to be?

THE CHILD

Her.

ALBERTA

The woman from the story?

The Child nods.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

She's your mom, isn't she?

(no response)

Tell me more about what she looks like.

THE CHILD

No.

ALBERTA

If you want me to make you look like her, you have to tell me more about what she looks like.

THE CHILD

Her eyes.

ALBERTA

(taking out eye shadow)

Okay.

THE CHILD

Green eyeshadow.

ALBERTA

Really?

THE CHILD

She had green eyes. She knew how to use her eye shadow to make her eyes stand out.

ALBERTA

Is she beautiful?

THE CHILD

No.

ALBERTA

But men love her eyes.

THE CHILD
 Everyone.

ALBERTA
 You, too? You love her eyes?

THE CHILD
 I can't get away from her. I want to be her.

ALBERTA
 (reaching out to apply eye shadow)
 She haunts you.

THE CHILD
 (shrinking away from her)
 Don't.

ALBERTA
 She was more than I had words for.

THE CHILD
 (pushing her away)
 DON'T!

Alberta puts down the eye shadow.

ALBERTA
 I know how you feel.

THE CHILD
 I'm sorry.

ALBERTA
 All these stories inside you and nobody's listening. You feel powerless. I want to tell your stories -- our stories.

THE CHILD
 What if she finds me?

ALBERTA
 She won't.

THE CHILD
 She's found me before. She'll take me away.

ALBERTA
 From now on nobody can do anything to you unless you let them. You'll be like a superhero.

THE CHILD
 I don't feel like a superhero.

ALBERTA

Keep talking. I want your voice in my body. The story isn't real unless it sounds like you're telling it.

THE CHILD

My name is...

ALBERTA

(imitating him)

My name is...

(pause)

I never gave you one, did I?

THE CHILD

Let's play something else.

ALBERTA

No, that's okay. We'll give you a name.

THE CHILD

I don't want to talk anymore.

ALBERTA

Why not?

He puts his head in her lap, catching Alberta by surprise. The sudden contact makes her flinch; she is impatient, uncomfortable, but the sight of him finally begins to soften her.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

But you'll talk to me tomorrow?

The Child nods. Long pause.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

You're safe here. You know that.

She rests a hand on his head.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

We're both safe here.

SCENE 3

The Child is talking on the phone.
 Alberta is reading through a hundred-or-so sheets of 8.5 x 11 paper.

THE CHILD

No, no, it's cool. I just never though anyone would care. I mean, my life's pretty shitty, isn't it? No, that means a lot, Mr...

He looks to Alberta. She points at a name on a list.

THE CHILD (CONT'D)

Random House?

Alberta throws up her hands, gestures for the phone.

THE CHILD (CONT'D)

I gotta go. Doc wants to talk to you.

Alberta takes the phone; the Child pulls the manuscript towards him and reads.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

(in a male voice -- the Doctor's)

I need your assurance on two points. First, his safety. His biological mother may try to find him, and his immune system is very weak. He should be interviewed only by phone, no public appearances.

Keys jangle offstage and the door opens; Max enters. She is wearing a name-tag, on break from work. She crosses discretely off to the kitchen and exits.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Second, I need your word that you and your colleagues will respect my recommendations and treat Ms. LeSalle as your point of contact in all matters related to Jeremy. I see no reason against publishing the book so long as you abide by these conditions.

(picking up an envelope from her desk, turning it over between her fingers)

You're doing a beautiful thing for Jeremy. I'll forward it to Ms. LeSalle.

She hangs up, quietly bursting with joy as she presses the envelope to her chest.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)
(calling off)
Max?

MAX
(from off)
You finished?

ALBERTA
(singsong, getting up to meet her)
Come here, Max. Come here, Max...

Max reenters eating a sandwich. Alberta playfully plucks the sandwich from her hand and deposits it on the desk. The Child -- Jeremy -- eats it.

MAX
(gesturing to the phone)
Were you working?

ALBERTA
Oh yes, baby.

MAX
Someone calling for some kind of office fantasy or something?

ALBERTA
(handing her the envelope)
He wanted a doctor, and that wasn't a sex call.

MAX
What is it?

ALBERTA
Open it.

As she opens it and reads:

ALBERTA (CONT'D)
They're publishing my novel.

MAX
What?

ALBERTA
One of the largest publishers in the country, and they're publishing my novel.

MAX

There's a check in here!

ALBERTA

Five grand! And it's only the advance!

MAX

I can't fucking believe it! Oh my God, Laurie!

ALBERTA

(grabbing her name tag)

Take this off. We're going to burn it! You quit the label, you made your point, and now it's time for your triumphant return. You want your own studio? As soon as this baby starts selling, I'll buy you a studio!

MAX

(who has been reading --
suddenly confused)

Who's Jeremy?

ALBERTA

(pulling off her shirt)

Fuck it, take off the whole thing.

MAX

The letter's addressed to some guy named Jeremy.

ALBERTA

It's a pseudonym.

MAX

What?

ALBERTA

You know. George Eliot. Currer Bell. Sappho. Alberta LeSalle.

MAX

This is your novel, the reason you've stayed up working until five a.m. for the past four months. Why wouldn't you put your name on that?

ALBERTA

It's not about taking credit.

MAX

This is huge.

ALBERTA

It's about love.

MAX

Love?

ALBERTA

People love him, Max. The publishers, they love him. And Margot Young, the novelist, and Robert Thames, THE greatest science fiction writer since Philip K. Dick. And Thurston Moore, Max! Thurston Moore! I've been writing letters, e-mails. Well, Jeremy has. He's been sending them pages, lyrics, and they all love him.

MAX

They know he's a pseudonym?

ALBERTA

He isn't. No, I mean, of course he is, but --

MAX

Oh Laurie.

ALBERTA

It's a grey area, Max -- splitting hairs. It's me! Of course it's me. And Jeremy, he's a... He's been gestating. I didn't understand what to do with him, and it's taken time, you know, after I realized... to get him to talk, to trust me, and then all the details, he helped me with those, because I had bits and pieces, but not the truth of the story. He gave me that in exchange for my trust and -- And I've never written more honestly in my life.

MAX

So you've written to all these people -- as him.

ALBERTA

Yes.

MAX

And they think he's real.

ALBERTA

Haven't you been listening? He is real.

MAX

I don't like this, Laurie.

ALBERTA

What's not to like?

MAX

This isn't one your performance pieces.

ALBERTA

That's exactly what it is.

MAX

Life isn't some kind of never-ending blur where you can pretend to be someone else just to get a rise out of people.

ALBERTA

Everyone is always playing characters. For fuck's sake, Max! It's Kierkegaard. It's as old as fucking philosophy.

MAX

And you think that's how other people are going to see it if they find out?

ALBERTA

There are way too many people invested in this already for anyone to find out. There's Doctor Edwards.

MAX

Who?

ALBERTA

There's Lilah, Jeremy's birth mother. There's his friend, Zip, from when he used to turn tricks on the truck stops.

MAX

Those aren't real people, Laurie.

ALBERTA

(a sly smile)

I know.

MAX

That wasn't funny.

ALBERTA

I gotcha.

MAX

No, that wasn't funny, Laurie.

ALBERTA

Okay, I've got a real joke for you. How many rejections have I gotten?

MAX

I don't know.

ALBERTA

How about between the two of us? And I'm not just talking about written rejections here. I'm talking about putting ourselves out there -- repeatedly. To label executives, recording studios, bar crowds, publishing houses, agents and managers, bar owners, the fucking listings editors of piece-of-shit local papers. And you know what?

Even those asshole dilettantes you worked for, they were right. It wasn't art we were putting out there, it was desperation. Because I was fucking angry. And exhausted. And wasting my time on this -- this phone-sex shit and internet advise column nobody fucking reads. And you. Your lunch break's almost over. You can't even participate in this discussion because in fifteen minutes you have to get back to work. At a record store. We've had our successes -- our puny fucking successes -- but there is no qualifying this.

(offering him the envelope)

This is our first, real success. And I can show you more.

(pulling papers from her desk,
reading from them)

Margot Young -- she won a Pulitzer -- she says, "This is your gift. Few writers of any age have moved me as deeply or compelled me to engage in such somber and purposeful self-reflection." Robert Thames: "You have the true heart of a poet; in these pages are the raw gems of brilliance." I have the raw fucking gems of brilliance!

Max reads through the letters.
Finally:

MAX

Can I read the book?

Alberta smiles. She signals to the Child; he brings the manuscript to Max.

MAX (CONT'D)
(reading the title page)

"Lilah."

ALBERTA

"Lilah."

MAX

Who's "Lilah"?

ALBERTA

His birth mother.

MAX

And what does that make us?

(turning the page, reading)

"For Max and Alberta."

THE CHILD

(of Max)

I didn't dedicate it to her.

MAX

So now we've got a kid?

THE CHILD

I didn't dedicate it to her.

MAX

I mean, I always imagined, one day...

ALBERTA

Have a seat. Read.

THE CHILD

I dedicated it to you. I love you.

Alberta's eyes dart away from the Child. She turns to Max, who has been staring first at her and then in the direction of the Child, apparently not seeing him.

ALBERTA

Go on. Read. (to Max)

Max reads.

SCENE 4

A few significant changes to Alberta and Max's living room: A new/more expensive-looking guitar for Max, a new computer for Alberta, several additional phones -- cordless models, a cell phone, and a beeper -- and far more clutter on Alberta's desk: Newspapers, scrapbooks, two or more manuscripts in progress.

The Child reads one of the manuscripts, making corrections/revisions with a red pen. Alberta is on the phone, speaking in her British accent from Scene 1. She and the Child exchange playful glances throughout.

ALBERTA

I'm sorry, Ms...? No, he can't meet you in person. My hands are tied. He'll tell you the same thing I am. 972-818-6374. I'm sorry I can't help...

The other party hangs up. Alberta puts down the phone. A second phone rings. Alberta and the Child tremble with glee.

On the fourth ring, an answering machine picks up:

ALBERTA'S "MALE" VOICE

This is Doctor Edwards. I'm in session or currently unavailable. Please leave a message. If this is an emergency, you can page me at 972-818-6784.

Beep. Alberta and the Child have broken into wild laughter. The answering machine records a CLICK. Alberta and the Child fall silent -- until...

The sound of a vibrating beeper sets them off again. Alberta retrieves the beeper from the desk and shows it to the Child. She shuts it off; the laughter abates.

ALBERTA

How do you like that?

Awesome.

THE CHILD

Alberta proceeds to unplug each line/turn off each phone, then looks at his revisions.

THE CHILD (CONT'D)

What's wrong?

ALBERTA

Wrong? No, nothing's wrong. It's your honesty. Every word you change, every insertion, every new detail is just so... It's the kind of honesty most writers would kill for. I never had it before [you showed up.]

She looks at the Child; he seems distant.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Hey.

He looks up at her.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

I said I'd protect you, right? See these cords? There are hundreds of miles of telephone cord separating us from the rest of the world. No one can touch you.

THE CHILD

I know.

ALBERTA

I look after you, you look after me. Compadres.

THE CHILD

Compadres.

Alberta takes a stack of the Child's revised pages and begins punching the changes into her computer.

THE CHILD (CONT'D)

Why don't you tell me things?

ALBERTA

What?

THE CHILD

Max knows more about you than I do.

ALBERTA

Max only knows what I've told her.

THE CHILD
Was "Lilah" your mother's name?

ALBERTA
No.

THE CHILD
Did she hurt you?

ALBERTA
Who's mother hasn't?

THE CHILD
Where is she?

ALBERTA
I don't know. She could be dead -- or not. I honestly don't know.

THE CHILD
Are you lying? Alberta?

ALBERTA
(impatiently)
Yes?

The Child falls silent. Then, after several beats:

THE CHILD
I'll kill myself if you leave me.

ALBERTA
What?

THE CHILD
If I ever told you so much that you didn't need me anymore, or if other people don't like my stories, or --

ALBERTA
Listen to me, Jeremy.

THE CHILD
I'm sorry.

ALBERTA
I'm not angry.

THE CHILD
I'm sorry.

ALBERTA
I just don't like talking about myself.

THE CHILD

Lilah always let me sleep with her. She let me put my head in her lap.

ALBERTA

You're grown up now. You should be sleeping by yourself.

THE CHILD

Max is grown up.

ALBERTA

That's different.

THE CHILD

I could dress up like you -- for her.

ALBERTA

No.

THE CHILD

She'd like me better if I looked like you.

ALBERTA

She likes you fine how you are.

THE CHILD

You have breasts.

ALBERTA

Let's get back to this now, okay?

THE CHILD

I could have sex with her for you --

Alberta slaps him. Pause. The Child suddenly grabs one of the telephone cords and twists it around his neck.

ALBERTA

What are you doing?

THE CHILD

(strangling himself)

I'm sorry!

ALBERTA

Stop it, Jeremy! LET GO!

She wrestles the cord away from him. He coughs.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

What's the matter with you?

I'm disgusting. THE CHILD

Never do that again. ALBERTA

You hate me. THE CHILD

Jeremy? ALBERTA

I hate me. THE CHILD

I don't hate you. ALBERTA

I'm sorry. THE CHILD

ALBERTA
I've told you a hundred times, I'm not going to leave you.
And I can't take care of you or help you unless you stop
being so goddamn stubborn.

I want you to love me. THE CHILD

I do. ALBERTA

Then how come you never say it? THE CHILD

ALBERTA
People can love each other without always having to say it.
Those three words, "I love you," are emptiest in the English
language. People say them all the time and don't mean them,
so I elect not to say them.

Do you love me as much as Max? THE CHILD

More. Happy? ALBERTA

How much more? THE CHILD

ALBERTA
This is exactly what I'm talking about -- your stubbornness.

The Child looks at her; she sighs,
searching for something to say.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Lilah told you she loved you. So you know how meaningless those words are. Love is... messy and -- hurtful. It shouldn't be, but it is, and that's why it's important not to care too much about other people.

THE CHILD

But you care about me?

ALBERTA

Yes.

THE CHILD

I'm the only person you care about?

ALBERTA

You are the only person I care about.

Offstage: Keys jangle, door opens --
Max enters. She carries CDs, a stack
of mail, and a bag of take-out. No
more name-tag.

MAX

What are you doing on the floor?

ALBERTA

(to the Child -- Max does not
notice)

Are we okay?

MAX

You okay?

The Child nods.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

(to Max)

What you got there?

MAX

(of the bags)

Thai.

ALBERTA

(of the CDs)

And those?

MAX

Undiscovered treasures.

Max moves to kiss her. Alberta senses the Child watching and moves away.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Guess who called.

MAX

You sure you're okay?

ALBERTA

Your sister.

MAX

What?

ALBERTA

She said she saw your name in that article on Jeremy in the *Times* and decided to look us up. I know, who knew? Abby reads the *New York Times*.

MAX

How did she find us?

ALBERTA

The *Times*.

MAX

No, I mean, how did she get our number? My dad gave it to her, didn't he? Shit.

ALBERTA

Don't get so excited.

MAX

No, you don't understand. You think you've seen how bad she gets, but you haven't. What if she shows up here and figures out there's no kid? Shit, Laurie!

ALBERTA

Relax.

Long pause. Max sits down, holds her head.

MAX

Did she say what she wanted?

ALBERTA

What do you think she wanted.

MAX

Can we send her some money?

ALBERTA

Jesus.

MAX

We can afford it. Now that we've got everything we want, I don't have to see her. I don't have to see her or my dad or talk to them -- ever.

ALBERTA

It was just a phone call, baby. I thought it'd be good for a laugh.

MAX

Just tell me you'll send her something.

ALBERTA

I'll send her something.

MAX

How was the writing today?

ALBERTA

Challenging. I had a little block to work through, but everything's fine now.

MAX

It's quiet.

ALBERTA

I unplugged the phones.

MAX

I've been getting more calls at the studio. Reporters. Agents.

ALBERTA

Just do exactly what I told you. If anyone calls about Jeremy, you give them Selena's number and hang up.

MAX

Selena?

ALBERTA

Alberta's assistant. The British one.

MAX

It's like there's a dozen people living in this apartment.

ALBERTA

Well, be prepared for more. Selena's going to need an assistant at the rate we're going.

MAX
I just worry.

ALBERTA
Don't.

MAX
They're on to us, some of them.

ALBERTA
Relax, baby. That's the beauty of a good story. People believe it. They tell their friends and their friends believe it. Everyone knows Richard Gere never stuffed a gerbil up his ass, but that doesn't make it any less true.

MAX
Jeremy's famous.

ALBERTA
He's getting there.

MAX
People love him. The more famous he gets, the more people are going to want to see him.

ALBERTA
I've got a plan for that.

MAX
What are you going to do, pick up another kid off Hustler's Row and offer him ten bucks to meet with a reporter?

ALBERTA
Okay, so that wasn't one of my best ideas. But I have others.

What?

ALBERTA
If we absolutely can't hide him anymore, if people need to see him, I'll get someone -- permanent.

MAX
Permanent.

ALBERTA
Someone malleable. Someone we can control.

MAX
That's your plan? Reporters are calling me all day trying to get a hold of him. There's this yellow station wagon parked outside the studio with someone sitting in it, doing nothing.

ALBERTA

And you think this person's a secret agent or something? Lighten up, for fuck's sake. You've had a pole up your ass from the moment you came in.

MAX

I feel like we're exploiting a kid who doesn't even exist.

ALBERTA

(short pause; then:)

Look, baby. You've been having a rough day -- we both have. You need to eat your lunch and get back to work.

MAX

I love you, Laurie.

Alberta, aware of the Child, doesn't answer.

MAX (CONT'D)

What's the matter?

ALBERTA

Nothing. I...

MAX

You're on top of the world, aren't you?

ALBERTA

Sure.

MAX

This is everything you ever dreamed of. You're the center of attention, everyone's after you.

ALBERTA

They're after Jeremy.

Max gets up to go.

MAX

(of the food)

I'll warm it up later.

ALBERTA

Not yet. Look, baby, I'm telling you, I can keep those reporters eating out of my hand as long as I want.

MAX

You've got a real talent for that.

They look at each other.

ALBERTA
Love you.

MAX
Me too.

She kisses Alberta and exits; a door closes off. Albert sits in silence for a moment. Then, one by one, she plugs back in the phones -- and, one by one, they start ringing.

Alberta takes a deep breath and picks one up.

ALBERTA
(as Selena)
Alberta LeSalle's office, hold.
(picking up another line, in a new voice)
Dr. Edwards' office, one moment.
(putting the caller on hold, picking up another line)
Alberta LeSalle's office, can I -- ? I know who you are, and I've already told you.
(she hangs up, then picks up another call)
You've reached Zip, talk fast.
(a quick pause, then:)
Here's a tip, lady: Jeremy doesn't wanna talk to you. FUCK OFF!
(picking up another line, in her own voice)
This is Alberta.
(pause)
For fuck's sake, Abby. How long does it take you to check your messages?

SCENE 5

Alberta studies ABBY, mid-twenties but able to pass for younger. Abby sits/leans on the corner of Alberta's desk, fingering various papers and objects. A glowering Child watches them.

ALBERTA

She can't know I called you.

ABBY

What are these?

ALBERTA

Line scramblers. I was doing phone sex for awhile; they keep the caller from being able to see your number. That's Dr. Edwards, that one's Selena, that one's also Selena, that's Zip -- Jeremy's friend. This one's mine.

ABBY

So he is fake. I met this guy at a party -- this executive at something-something pictures, they bought the rights to the book. Said the kid's never come in for a meeting, only talks to them by phone. No one's ever seen a picture of him either. Just the picture on the back of the book cover, and this guy was telling me he's pretty sure it's fake.

ALBERTA

Do you think this executive would recognize you if he saw you?

ABBY

Doubt it. Had so much crap up his nose he started -- you know --

Abby mimes a seizure and laughs.

ALBERTA

So you -- get around a lot, do you?

ABBY

Oh yeah.

ALBERTA

But not in a way that makes a lasting impression. It's hard to do that when you're mostly facing the floor, fucking or puking.

Abby smiles hatefully, picks up a piece of paper and reads it.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Not many people live as anonymously as you -- so little sense of self.

ABBY

Bet you plenty of people would wanna know who I am if I showed them some of this.

ALBERTA

Let's get right to it, shall we? I need a body.

ABBY

A body.

ALBERTA

Someone to make appearances, do interviews, put a public face on Jeremy, satisfy some of the speculation. You're not exactly camera ready, and Max hates you, but you're the best I can do in a pinch, and things are getting tight.

ABBY

I don't know if I'm interested.

ALBERTA

Fifteen hundred a month, plus living expenses. I rented the apartment upstairs; it's no palace, but it should do fine.

ABBY

In a pinch?

ALBERTA

Exactly.

ABBY

But I'm not in a pinch. And who the fuck are you to tell me my sister hates me, anyway?

ALBERTA

That's another thing. She can't know I contacted you. If you tell her, the deal is off. I don't know what happened between the two of you, but if you so much as send her a birthday card without my permission or do anything to jeopardize me or Jeremy in any way, I will fuck you so hard you won't know front from sideways.

ABBY

You've got some fucking nerve.

ALBERTA

And you've got pupils as big as hamster wheels. No more drugs. Think of this as paid detox, get your fucking life together.

ABBY

By pretending to be someone else.

ALBERTA

That's the deal.

ABBY

A boy. You want me to pretend to be a fucking boy.

ALBERTA

Actually, you're a preoperative transsexual. Jeremy wants to become a woman.

ABBY

No way.

ALBERTA

Because he's a transsexual?

ABBY

Because you're talking like you're my fucking warden or something and I don't have to do shit unless I feel like it. I could take these to whatever -- journalists -- and do a deal of my own.

ALBERTA

You do that, and this line here -- my line -- I use to call my lawyer. If you go anywhere with anything of mine or spread your bullshit stories, he will burry you.

Abby studies Alberta.

ABBY

How do I know you're not lying?

ALBERTA

I could be.

ABBY

(pause)
Eighteen hundred.

ALBERTA

No negotiating.

ABBY

You fucking owe me. What name are you using again now anyway? You stole my name.

ALBERTA

Fifteen hundred.

ABBY

You stole my fucking name!

ALBERTA

"Abby" stands for Abigail.

ABBY

I told you one of my asshole ex-boyfriends used to call me "Alberta."

ALBERTA

Only because he couldn't remember your name.

Alberta tosses her a set of keys; Abby catches them.

ABBY

Max doesn't hate me.

ALBERTA

She'll manage.

ABBY

It's good to know she's not wasting her life on some -- unfeeling bitch.

ALBERTA

Max has always been willing to compromise.

ABBY

Yeah?

ALBERTA

When's the last time you shared anything meaningful with another person, other than a few bumps of cocaine and some toilet paper?

ABBY

I know my sister better than you.

(off Alberta's look -- totally unimpressed)

She deserves better. So does your imaginary kid.

SCENE 6

In blackout: Voices calling "Jeremy!," "Alberta!" give way to the voice of a TV JOURNALIST playing through an intercom.

TV JOURNALIST (V.O.)

Coming up, author J.C. Tolin joins us live for his first-ever appearance on television. Tolin will address the speculation surrounding his true identity and criticism of the graphic depictions of violence and sexual abuse in his writing.

Lights up on a TV studio dressing room (as indicated by the action). Alberta stares out and above the audience, presumably watching a monitor.

A knock on the door startles her.

STAGE MANAGER

(from off)

Five minutes.

Alberta exhales deeply.

ALBERTA

What are you doing in there, Abby? We've gone over your answers a hundred times, they just called five minutes.

(beat)

I swear to God, Abby, if you come out here all twitchy and gnawing at your fingernails, I'll...

She stops at the sight of Abby, who has entered dressed as Jeremy. Behind her is the Child. Abby and the Child wear identical beat-up jeans, Keds, and t-shirts. Abby's breasts have been bandaged flat, and her appearance, though androgynous and obviously "unreal," should register as just "real" enough (or, paradoxically, the reverse) to be authentic. Abby also wears a wig to match the Child's hair. Both she and the Child seem genuinely lost; they fearfully squint away from the lights, turning their heads to keep part of their faces in shadow. They periodically mime each other's actions.

Alberta stares. A beat or two as she and the audience take in Abby's transformation.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)
If you don't think you can do this...

ABBY
I don't know.

THE CHILD
No.

ALBERTA
(giving Abby the sunglasses)
You're going to wear these. No one will recognize you.

ABBY
(pulling away; uncomfortable)
Let's just do it.

THE CHILD
Don't make me go!

He grabs onto Alberta, seeming much younger than his fifteen years -- more like the child of the first two scenes. Abby does not see or hear what follows. She shifts uncomfortably in her clothes.

ALBERTA
You can't keep doing this.

THE CHILD
I'm sorry.

ALBERTA
You have nothing to be sorry about. You need to stop apologizing all the time.

THE CHILD
Max hates us.

ALBERTA
She does not.

THE CHILD
She talks to herself, I can hear what she says. You wouldn't ever make me go away because of her, would you?

ALBERTA
No.

THE CHILD
I don't feel good.

ALBERTA
You're fine.

THE CHILD

What if I get pneumonia?

ALBERTA

You're not.

THE CHILD

I have AIDS. I could be dying!

ALBERTA

You have HIV, not AIDS, and you are not dying. Don't you ever say that.

The Child falls silent.

THE CHILD

They think I'm a freak.

ALBERTA

Who?

THE CHILD

(of the people beyond the
dressing room door)

Those people from the TV show. The way they looked at me coming in.

ALBERTA

Those people are assholes.

THE CHILD

What about the others?

ALBERTA

Everyone is afraid of something. And what they do is, they comfort themselves by inventing stories about what the world is, how things are. A freak is someone who doesn't fit that story, someone who makes other people uncomfortable. But do you know what the Indians called us, the freaks? They called us "shamans." They put us in charge of the whole living balance between human and animal, the flesh and the spirit. And do you know what that means? It means there's nothing you can't do or have. So if anyone looks at you like you're a freak -- if anyone ever tries to take away a piece of your dignity or anything else that's rightfully yours -- here's what you do. You say to yourself: I have nothing to be afraid of. I can have whatever I want. I own you. I am a shaman.

Another knock on the door -- LOUD.

STAGE MANAGER

Let's go -- two minutes!

ALBERTA
(aimed at the door)
For fuck's sake!

ABBY
(tenuously)
I'm ready.

Silence. Alberta looks at her.

ABBY (CONT'D)
(more confidently)
Can I have my sunglasses, Alberta?

Abby's voice has taken on an uncannily
Jeremy-like inflection. An astonished
Alberta stares at her.

ALBERTA
You sound just like him.

Alberta gives Abby the glasses; Abby
puts them on and exits. The Child
moves to follow her; Alberta holds him
back.

ALBERTA
I love you, Jeremy.

Jeremy kisses her on the mouth.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)
Remember what I told you. Those people will treat you with
dignity. And love. And God help anyone who doesn't, because
you and I will crush them.

SCENE 7

Back in Max and Alberta's apartment. Max sits at Alberta's desk, a (new) guitar at her feet. The Child sits in his usual corner. He is dressed in Abby's clothes and wears a blonde wig. The radio is on.

Max's eyes impatiently wander the room, settling on the guitar, which she kicks. The Child startles and looks at her. They lock eyes.

A new radio program has begun. Max looks at the radio.

RADIO PROGRAM HOST

Tonight on Q and Arts: To his fans and supporters, J.C. Tolin is a composite between William Blake and Kurt Cobain, a wounded voice of innocence and experience whose stories are inspired by his own personal history of childhood abuse, sexual confusion, drug addiction, and life as a hustler. Some accuse Tolin of exploiting the unsavory details of his life. Others dispute his existence entirely. Earlier today, Tolin joined us in studio along with his friend and guardian, Alberta LeSalle. Who is J.C. Tolin? Find out tonight, on Q and Arts.

Max shuts off the radio just as manic, almost hysterical laughter billows in from the hall. The offstage door bursts open; the Child stands.

ALBERTA

(offstage; howling with laughter)

So I say, "how much"?

ABBY

(offstage)

How much?!

ALBERTA

(entering)

I'm looking at those rentboys he's been dragging around with him all night. And I say, "I bet you've got more money than Christmas."

ABBY

(entering behind her -- dressed as Jeremy)

You tried to sell me?!

MAX
(to get her attention)
Laurie.

ALBERTA
Please. Like you haven't sold it for less.

ABBY
(only a little offended)
Do you hear what she's saying about your little sister?

MAX
Laurie!

Quick pause. Alberta registers her for the first time and smiles.

ALBERTA
Alberta, darling.

MAX
Laurie, I --

ALBERTA
Shhh shhh shhh. Say it with me. Al-ber-ta.

MAX
Where the fuck did you take her?

ALBERTA
What?

ABBY
She cares what happens to me, don't you -- big sis?

ALBERTA
I told you where we were going.

MAX
You didn't say you were taking her with you.

ALBERTA
She's not drunk.

ABBY
(giggling)
Am too.

ALBERTA
She's a little drunk, but I kept an eye on her the whole time -- like a periscope.

ABBY

I didn't touch nothing.

ALBERTA

She didn't touch nothing aside from a little happy juice at the bar.

THE CHILD

You tried to sell me?

ALBERTA

Not you, honey. Abby.

MAX

How could you take her to -- ?

Alberta trips over Max's guitar.

ALBERTA

Why's your new Fender on the floor?

MAX

(suddenly abashed, picking it
up)

I was putting it away.

ALBERTA

(sitting Max down)

I wanted you to be there. I talked about you the whole time, didn't I?

ABBY

(riffling through her bag)

How should I know?

ALBERTA

Abby was with me the whole time, she heard me talking about you. And the people I rubbed shoulders with tonight, baby. The Arts and Leisure editor of the Times.

ABBY

Is it dark in here?

ALBERTA

The editors of Paper, Spin. Anyone who's anyone in this fucking hemisphere, Max! Fred Durst. Frank Black! I was doing shooters with Frank fucking Black while Jeremy was --

ABBY

Abby.

ALBERTA

While Abby was dancing with Debbie Harry -- THE Debbie Harry! And Debbie was doing, you know, that spastic thing with her arms.

ABBY

Almost broke my nose.

MAX

You met Frank Black?

ALBERTA

Everyone keeps asking when they're finally going to meet you. People are starting to think I've made you up.

THE CHILD

When am I going to get to go?

MAX

Imagine that.

THE CHILD

I hate being here without you. The whole time I'm thinking about how you're never coming back.

ALBERTA

But I always come back, don't I?

THE CHILD

After you leave!

ALBERTA

For the hundredth time, Jeremy. You're a kid.

THE CHILD

I'm sixteen.

ALBERTA

Sixteen is a kid. Your mom may have taken you to strip clubs and drug parties, but no kid has any business hanging around that.

THE CHILD

You're not my mom.

ALBERTA

And you're not showing much gratitude, are you, Jeremy? But fine, if that's how you want it. I'm not your mom. Think about that the next time you're turning tricks at a truckstop.

ABBY

Someone turn on a light.

ALBERTA

Take off your glasses!

ABBY

(taking off her sunglasses)

Oh my god, Abby! I've been wearing these the whole time!

MAX

Why is she calling you Abby?

ALBERTA

(to Jeremy)

Stop staring at me!

ABBY

I couldn't see in my bag. I thought I was going blind or something.

MAX

I'm going to bed.

ALBERTA

Fine. You know, I was fabulously happy when I got home.

(to Max and the Child)

I'm glad it gives the two of you so much pleasure to shit all over my high fucking spirits.

ABBY

(itching her wig)

I'm not doing anything.

ALBERTA

I wasn't talking about you.

ABBY

I've been feeling like shit ever since I got here. Have I complained? Have I said anything about this -- this smelly, itchy two-dollar Barbie hair wig that I'm...

She looks for it on the table in front of her, then realizes it's still on her head.

ABBY (CONT'D)

...that I'm still wearing?

She breaks out in giggles and takes off the wig. Max shakes her head, glaring at Alberta. Seemingly oblivious to this, Alberta settles at her desk and shuffles through papers.

ABBY (CONT'D)
 (frantically scratching her
 head now)

God. That's right. Thaaaat's right. Maxine, scratch my head.

MAX

No.

ABBY

Oh pretty pwease? Pwitty pwitty pwitty please?

MAX

(to Alberta)

What's she on?

ABBY

I'm not on anything! I'm in the room, thank you. This isn't like back home where you and dad could do all the talking. Mom, that cunt. Never listened to a goddamn thing I said. Boy did you two fuckers luck out.

MAX

I'm going to bed.

ABBY

(as she struggles to undo an
 ace-bandage around her chest)

"Abby's adjusting. Abby just wants attention. Maxine is doing such a good job taking care of poor, attention-starved little -- "

She breaks off with a scream as the ace-bandage falls to the floor.

ABBY (CONT'D)

My tits!

ALBERTA

What?

ABBY

My tits are shrinking.

ALBERTA

Funny.

ABBY

No, they're shrinking.

ALBERTA

What?

MAX
 (to Abby)
 What did you take?

ABBY
 Nothing!

MAX
 Abby?

ABBY
 I didn't take anything.

ALBERTA
 We had an agreement.

ABBY
 (to Alberta)
 I swear I didn't take anything. I know what they're supposed to feel like!

MAX
 (has been looking through
 Abby's purse -- finds
 something)
 What the fuck is this?

Max holds out a pregnancy test.

MAX (CONT'D)
 Are you pregnant?

ABBY
 No!

MAX
 What are you doing with a pregnancy test if you didn't think you were pregnant?
 (to Alberta)
 Did you know about this?

ALBERTA
 No.

ABBY
 (to Max)
You feel them!

MAX
 For christ's sake!

ABBY
 You know what they're supposed to feel like! You know they aren't this small.

MAX
 You're high.

ALBERTA
 Max?

MAX
 (to Alberta)
 How could you take her to that party?

ABBY
 What's the fucking problem? -- feel them! Just cause dad's not here and you've got no one to protect me from --

Max shoves Abby. Abby trips and falls, still grasping her breasts.

ALBERTA
 What is she talking about?

ABBY
 (pleading with Max)
 It's not my fault!

ALBERTA
 Max, what is she -- ?

ABBY
 It's her fault I stopped getting my period and my tits are shrinking. She's changing me into a goddamn boy!

Alberta gazes at the Child. He has been staring at Abby since she undid the ace-bandage -- not blinking, not moving.

ALBERTA
 (to the Child)
 What are you doing?

MAX
(to Abby)
Get up!

ALBERTA
Jeremy? Jeremy, I'm talking to you. What are you doing?

MAX
GET OFF THE FLOOR!

ALBERTA
Look at me, Jeremy. I need you to stop what you're doing.

THE CHILD
(angry, not looking at her)
You're not my mom.

ALBERTA
You heard me, Jeremy. Whatever you're doing, stop it. Stop
it, Jeremy!

MAX
Grab hold of me.

ABBY
No!

MAX
I'm trying to help you!

ABBY
Don't touch me!

MAX
I'll take care of you.

ABBY
(furiously -- tearing a hole in
the air with sound)
DON'T TOUCH ME!!!!!!

Long pause. Alberta looks at Max.
Abby whimpers. Max stares at Abby.

MAX
I'm sorry.

ABBY
Don't touch me.

Max looks away from Abby. She stands
quietly, not looking at anyone.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)
 She's high.

MAX
 She isn't.

ALBERTA
 I lied to you about watching her at the party. She could have taken all sorts of shit while I wasn't looking.

MAX
 She's not high.

Alberta tries to touch Max; Max shrinks away.

MAX (CONT'D)
 I can't keep telling stories.

ALBERTA
 Sure you can. She's high. She doesn't know what she's talking about. She broke our agreement. Tomorrow I'll get rid of her, and then -- then, we'll --

ABBY
 Jeremy just wants attention. Max is adjusting. Alberta is doing such a good job taking care of Jeremy.

Max turns to the Child -- looking at him vaguely at first, then staring straight at him.

MAX
 (to the Child)
 Who are you?

The Child looks at Max but says nothing.

ALBERTA
 Max?

Max meets Alberta's stare -- long pause -- then abruptly breaks away, moving to exit.

ALBERTA
 Max, where are you going?

Max exits.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)
 Max? Max, get back here -- !

She is cut off by the sound of the offstage door slamming. Long pause.

Alberta looks at the Child, then, with sudden violence, turns to Abby.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

(to Abby)

Get the fuck up off my floor.

ABBY

Abby?

ALBERTA

You're Abby, not me, and I'm telling you to --

ABBY

(suddenly lucid; as if struck
by a memory)

You stole my name.

ALBERTA

GET OUT! GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY HOUSE WITH YOUR GODDAMN
DRUGS AND YOUR PREGNANCY TEST AND --

Alberta begins to drag Abby off.

ABBY

(looking around, frightened)

Max?! Max!

The Child is left alone onstage as the fight continues off. The Child takes off his shirt, cups his hands over his breasts, and looks at himself in the mirror.

ALBERTA

(offstage)

TAKE ALL YOUR SHIT AND --

ABBY

(offstage)

Max, where are you?!

ALBERTA

GET OUT! GET OUT!

The offstage door slams. We hear furious banging against the door -- Abby trying to get back in.

ABBY

(muffled)

Open the door. Open the fucking door, Alberta! I'll tell Max! I'll tell her you called me and told me how to find you! Alberta! I'LL TELL EVERYONE! Open the door!

The banging gradually dies away. The Child picks up Abby's discarded ace-bandage and wraps it around his chest.

Alberta reenters.

THE CHILD

I'm a shaman.

(no response)

I took her period.

ALBERTA

I know.

THE CHILD

I'm taking her breasts. You'll treat me with dignity.

ALBERTA

Yes.

THE CHILD

And you'll never leave me alone?

ALBERTA

I'll never leave you.

The Child watches Alberta -- she doesn't move. He crosses to the radio, turns it on, and nuzzles himself into her.

RADIO PROGRAM HOST

We're speaking tonight with J.C. Tolin. What does the "C" stand for, Jeremy?

THE CHILD (ON THE RADIO)

Cyborg.

RADIO PROGRAM HOST

Why cyborg?

THE CHILD

You ever seen *Blade Runner*?

Laughter is heard in the background of the broadcast.

RADIO PROGRAM HOST
Apparently Alberta here finds that funny.

ALBERTA
(not miked; heard in the
background)

Excuse me.

THE CHILD
(giggling along with Alberta,
then becoming serious)
Cyborgs are synthetic. They don't have selves, only machine parts and stories implanted in their brains which they've been programmed to treat as memories. They're a metaphor for human beings. And, theoretically, they're immortal. In a lot of the great fiction about cyborgs, the cyborg characters have shortened life spans. But once you figure a way around that, a cyborg is pretty much indestructible.

Alberta's laughter continues gleefully
in the background.

SCENE 8

Alberta and a REPORTER (played by the same actor as Abby) in Alberta's apartment. Alberta is blowing her nose; she looks frail, vulnerable. The Reporter watches her impatiently.

Gone are all the telephones on Alberta's desk. Also gone: Max's guitar.

ALBERTA

I tell you, this cold is going to be the death of me. Everything's running.

REPORTER

You want me to get you some water?

Alberta looks at her.

ALBERTA

(a steely edge to her voice)

It's my apartment. If I want something, I'll get it.

Alberta sinks back into her chair, finding a clean spot on her tissue, looking frail again.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Where were we?

REPORTER

I don't know. I've been sitting here for twenty minutes.

ALBERTA

So? Ask me a question?

REPORTER

I've asked you several questions. Are you going to answer any of them? Look, the fact is I'm writing this story with or without you, so you might as well help me put a human face on it -- give yourself some chance at winning a little sympathy.

ALBERTA

Do you know why I picked you?

(no answer)

Because you're a woman. And tenacious. It's not for prestige, that I'll tell you. I had plenty of prestigious, mostly male reporters hounding me from the beginning, just like you. But god you're tenacious.

You're always thinking about how to do everybody one better because you're a woman and you're ambitious and, maybe because of that combination or maybe something else, nobody takes you all that seriously, do they?

REPORTER

So we're talking about me again?

ALBERTA

Yes, let's talk about you.

REPORTER

(after a beat)

I grew up in Virginia.

ALBERTA

Oh?

REPORTER

I went to college up north. No one in my classes talked like me, so I listened to how they spoke, took a voice class in the theatre department, got rid of my accent. My mom taught special education and my dad is a psychologist. I had a nice home -- nothing much to talk about there. But I went through a rebellious phase. Tore holes in my clothes, stopped washing my hair, threw out all my disco and started listening to punk, hung out with what my parents described as "all the wrong people" -- all of whom, ironically, were exactly like me, very comfortable and stable and sick to death of having nothing to be angry about. Is any of this sounding familiar?

ALBERTA

Should it?

REPORTER

These "wrong people" and I, we used to hang out at truck stops along the highway. I had this crush on one of my friends: Stephanie Lambert. She let me feel her up in the bathroom one time, but really, I could swing either way -- and I did -- because what mattered most was always, did other people want me? It didn't matter if they were male or female, older or younger, gay or straight or undecided.

Alberta stares at the Reporter. The Reporter looks away, then continues after a beat.

REPORTER (CONT'D)

I wanted other people to want me -- I wanted power over other people. At least that's what the people who used to know me would say, and, if you ask around, there are plenty of them who would tell you what they think about me. One woman in particular -- Maxine?

Maxine appears.

REPORTER

She'd say -- reluctantly -- that from the moment you met, she could see everything. She saw how you flirted, how you lit up the room. But that wasn't why she fell in love with you. She'd say -- and these would be her exact words -- that she fell in love with you because she could see the effort. She saw how hard you were working to light up that room, and she fell in love with your exhaustion. She thought she understood it -- always trying and never quite succeeding at convincing yourself how strong you were. And she really did think you could be happy together because, well, you were both so tired, and didn't you each deserve at least one person who wouldn't care if the other of you stopped trying?

Maxine exits. Silence.

REPORTER (CONT'D)

I have a deadline. I have a fiance at home who's getting his doctorate in philosophy. I have eighty-thousand dollars in debt for student loans which I'll be sharing with him, and which we'll probably never pay off. I have a second novel I'm writing which, as you so kindly reminded me earlier, will probably never get published because nobody bought my first. Why did you do it?

ALBERTA

What?

REPORTER

I'm asking because I sincerely want to know.

ALBERTA

Why I did it.

REPORTER

Why you did it.

ALBERTA

(a long pause, then:)

What do you think?

The Reporter closes her pad, moves to get up.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

No. You're asking me a sincere question, so I'm asking you -- sincerely -- what you think.

The Reporter looks at Alberta.

REPORTER

I think you pissed off a lot of people who thought there really was a very gifted, very damaged HIV positive child writing those books. I think you did it because you were desperate, and you wanted to be famous.

ALBERTA

(short pause)

That's exactly why I did it.

REPORTER

(expecting more)

And that's all.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Make sure you print that. I did it for one reason, and one reason only: To take over the world.

REPORTER

And now that it's over?

ALBERTA

Now that it's over...

(beat)

I'm saying this off the record.

REPORTER

(pause)

Fine.

ALBERTA

I'm sorry nobody read your first novel. I hope you do find a publisher for your second novel, for your own sake. Because there's nothing worse than watching your stories die. You watch them lose power -- belief. No one is listening or believing anymore. Protect the power of your stories. Fear that power, because it's bigger than you'll ever be -- but let your stories disappear, limping into oblivion, you might as well be a murderer.

(quick pause)

That was off the record.

REPORTER

I gotcha.

The Reporter moves to exit, then turns back.

REPORTER (CONT'D)

Does this mean no more writing?

Alberta sneezes, wipes her nose, and scoffs.

ALBERTA

You wish. I don't see you throwing in the towel; why the fuck should I?

REPORTER

You can't write as Jeremy.

ALBERTA

No. No, I can't write as Jeremy anymore, can I? I'll have to find someone else.

REPORTER

Laurie Jeanine Henderson?

Alberta shakes her head uncertainly.

ALBERTA

Who?

REPORTER

Laurie Henderson. Yourself.

ALBERTA

(chuckles)

What exactly is that -- my self?

The Reporter exits. The offstage door closes behind her. Alberta looks at her tissue, smiles, and tosses it on the floor, sitting up in her seat.

A very long pause -- count to ten -- as Alberta sits alone.

THE CHILD

(from off)

Alberta?

ALBERTA

Yes?

The Child enters. He looks frail, very ill. He has a bottle of pills in his hand.

THE CHILD

I don't feel good.

ALBERTA

I know.

THE CHILD

I'm still bleeding.

ALBERTA

That's what happens when you become a woman, honey. It's just your period -- you'll be fine in a couple of days.

THE CHILD

I don't feel good.

ALBERTA

Shhh... Just sit here, lean up against me. There, that's better, isn't it? We'll just sit like this for awhile, compadres. Or -- wait -- what's the female form of "compadres"? We're like sisters now, or mother and daughter.
(long pause)

Jeremy?

THE CHILD

I don't feel good.

ALBERTA

Did you take that Tylenol I gave you?

THE CHILD

Yes.

ALBERTA

In the medicine bottle? The one where I usually keep your AZT?

THE CHILD

(he takes out the medicine bottle)

This one.

Long pause. Alberta opens the bottle and shakes out two pills.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Here, take two more.

CHILD

I hurt.

ALBERTA

I know that, honey, so you need to take more pills so you'll stop hurting. Here, take four.

CHILD

Four?

ALBERTA

The more pills you take, the better you'll feel. That's how medicine works, Jeremy.

Jeremy takes the pills and swallows them.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Two more.

He takes them. She looks in the bottle.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

There's only four more left. You might as well take those too, just to be on the safe side.

He takes them.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

You can chew them if you can't swallow.

He chews, tastes them, doubles over to vomit.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

No, don't do that. Look at me, don't breathe through your nose. Swallow.

THE CHILD

(gagging)

I can't.

ALBERTA

(sternly)

Jeremy!

Beat. He looks at her. Her voice softens.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Here, there's one more. I'll take it with you, okay?

She splits the pill in half, puts one half in her mouth and the other in Jeremy's, and chews.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Now swallow.

They swallow.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

I haven't slept in -- shit, I think it's been three days now. I could use some sleep.

Pause.

THE CHILD
Can I have some water?

ALBERTA
What?

THE CHILD
I still taste it.

ALBERTA
No, that goes away. You won't taste it for much longer.

THE CHILD
Why won't you get me water?

ALBERTA
Because I want to make sure I'm here when the pain goes away. You don't want me to be in the kitchen, do you? Or miss out on -- on however much time we have left before you get all better and don't need me anymore?

THE CHILD
I'll never not need you.

ALBERTA
Shhh...

THE CHILD
I wrote a poem.

ALBERTA
You did?

THE CHILD
I thought it was going to be a song. A lyric. I never wrote a poem before.

ALBERTA
Poems are challenging.

THE CHILD
When?

ALBERTA
I was never any good at poetry. One false emotion and the entire thing falls to pieces. I can't wait to read it.

THE CHILD
Alberta?

ALBERTA
Is it about me?

THE CHILD

Yes. Everything I write is about you.

ALBERTA

Then I'll put it with the rest of my stories in a very special, secret place.

Alberta suffocates the Child; he lies limp in her arms.

ALBERTA (CONT'D)

Jeremy? I love you, Jeremy. I can't wait to read it.

Lights fade. The end.