

IN THE CERVIX OF OTHERS

A full-length play

By Alice Eve Cohen

Excerpt

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CHARACTERS

*Can be performed by 6 or 8 actors, with doubling: (3 F, 2 M, 3 any gender) or (3F, 3M)
Or 10 actors without doubling (3F, 4M, 3 any gender).*

See notes on suggested doubling, below.

JESSICA: Female, age 27

OLDER JESSICA: Female, age 54. Also plays Mom.

MOM: age 54, Jessica's mother Kate. Played by the actress playing Older Jessica.

PHILOMELA: Female, any age. The character from Greek mythology. Her costume includes feathers.

DR. ANDREW COOPERMAN: male, (50) Wears a white lab coat.

JIM: 45, male. Wears expensive suits.

DAVID: 30, male. Jessica's husband. He is a sound engineer.

MIKE: 25, male. Wears shabby suits.

THE 3 GODS:

3 slapstick, Marx Brothers-esque clowns. A motley crew of indeterminate age and gender. They are the Judges in the Court of the Gods.

GOD 1: Any age and gender.

GOD 2: Any age and gender.

GOD 3: Any age and gender. GOD 3 is blind.

FILM CREW (Camera man, Sound Guy, Gaffer) Played by actors playing the 3 Gods

Notes on Cast Doubling

*Actor playing **Older Jessica** also plays **Mom**, in any cast configuration.*

With cast of 8 actors:

- *Actor playing Dr. Cooperman also plays Jim*
- *Actor playing Mike also plays David*
- *Actors playing Gods also play Film Crew*

With cast of 6 actors:

- *Actor playing Dr. Cooperman also plays God 1*
- *Actor playing Jim also plays God 2 and Camera Man*
- *Actor playing Mike also plays David, God 3, and Sound Guy*

SETTING

The entire play takes place in a gynecological office. And other places.
It is October 1991 and it's September 2018. And other times.

COSTUMES/cast doubling

Simple costume changes for actors playing more than one role:

- Older Jessica wears a patient medical robe. She removes the robe to play Mom.
- Dr. Cooperman wears a lab coat. He takes off the lab coat to become Jim.
- Mike wears a rumpled suit. He removes the jacket to become David.
- ***If performed by 6 actors, GODS 1, 2, 3 remove their judges robes to change character. Their quick costume/character changes should be visible to audience***

PROJECTIONS

Projections may be used minimally or maximally throughout play—director & designer choice.

ACT 1

SCENE

GYN OFFICE

Dr. Cooperman's gynecology office. There is an examining table with stirrups, a sheet, a chair, a stool, and a large video monitor.

OLDER JESSICA (age 54), lies on the examining table, writing in a notebook. She's wearing a blue medical gown. It's a typical gown: pale blue cotton-polyester blend, wrap-around style, with the opening in the front, tied at the waist.

She finishes what she's writing, closes the notebook. She sees the audience, walks downstage, speaks to them.

OLDER JESSICA

This is a true story. Everything in it actually happened.

Jessica, age 27, enters, wearing a jacket over T-shirt and jeans, carrying a folded blue gown. Looks around, doesn't see OLDER JESSICA.

This is Jessica. She's the main character in the play. She's me when I was 27. Exactly half my life ago. It's October 18, 1991. She has just arrived at the gynecology office. She can't see me.

Jessica takes off her jacket and her shoes.

Last week, Jessica watched Anita Hill's testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee, about being sexually harassed by Clarence Thomas. Later today, Thomas will be sworn in as Supreme Court Justice.

Jessica sighs angrily, thinking about Thomas being sworn in.
She pulls off her jeans, folds them, puts them on the chair.

OVER THIS:

OLDER JESSICA

I'm 54-year-old Jessica, in the present. It's September 27, 2018, and *I've* just arrived at the gynecology office. Same gynecologist. Different reason.

Without thinking, she covers her left breast with her right hand.

This morning, I was glued to the television, watching Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee, about being sexually assaulted by Brett Kavanaugh, when they were in high school. It was like watching a Greek tragedy play out in my living room.

When they broke for lunch, I got a call from my doctor, asking me to come in right away... *And* that's why I'm here.

(Hears something, not audible to audience.)

Do you hear that? The senate hearing is on the TV in the waiting room. Lunch break's over. It's Kavanaugh's turn.

Jessica puts on the medical gown, with the opening in the front. It's identical to OLDER JESSICA's gown. She ties the sash, pulls her underwear off from under the gown and puts them on the stool.
OVER THIS:

OLDER JESSICA

In addition to playing myself—Older Jessica in 2018—I'll also be playing the role of Jessica's mother—*my* late mother. Which is kind of perfect, because I'm the same age my mother was the very last time I saw her...

(looking at Jessica)

and because I'm having all these maternal feelings—toward my younger self. Things I wish I could tell her. Things I know now that I didn't know then.

Jessica lies down on the examining table, looks at the ceiling.

The subtitle of this play is something Dr. Ford said this morning:

Older Jessica leans forward and says this in a quiet, almost apologetic voice, channeling Dr. Christine Blasey Ford.

"He put his hand over my mouth to stop me from screaming. It was hard for me to breathe, and I thought that he was accidentally going to kill me."

(pause)

But it should sound like this:

She puts her hand over her own mouth and repeats the quote, screaming, as if she's being suffocated. It's muffled, unintelligible.

"HE PUT HIS HAND OVER MY MOUTH TO STOP ME FROM SCREAMING. IT WAS HARD FOR ME TO BREATHE AND I THOUGHT HE WAS ACCIDENTALLY GOING TO KILL ME."

She takes a moment to catch her breath.

OLDER JESSICA

It's September 2018. And it's October 1991. Younger Jessica will take it from here.

Light shift

**SCENE
THE CEILING**

Spotlight on Jessica. She's floating on the ceiling. She just is. Maybe she's suspended by wires. Or sitting on a ladder. Or she might simply be standing on the examining table. Whatever works.

Jessica does a stand-up comedy routine. Except she's not standing up. She's floating. On the ceiling. She might be holding a mic.

JESSICA

(on ceiling)

On the appointed day, I arrive at Dr. Cooperman's office, ready to make my contribution to medical research—And my television debut! I strip, put on one of those robes, which sort of fastens in the front but doesn't really cover anything—lie down on the table, and slide my feet into the stirrups, which anyone who's ever been to a GYN exam knows has nothing to do with horses.

Dr. Cooperman enters with the nurse. He asks me to sign a waiver permitting the taping, and I suppose, waiving my rights to royalties, should this ever become a box office hit or win the Nobel Prize. As soon as I sign, he snaps his fingers, and through two doors come the all-male film crew, a team of sound, light, and camera technicians who look as though they moonlight as the starting line for the Green Bay Packers.

This wasn't at all what I expected, and I feel very naked indeed, so I do what any naked woman would do in similar circumstances. I make jokes! "Hey Doc, this could be the beginning of a beautiful new major motion picture --*Womb with a View*," and he says, "Please, Jessica," and I say, "How 'bout *In the Cervix of Others*," and he says, "Cervixes should be seen and not heard," and I say, "Oh, I know, it could be a comedy—we'll call it *Hysterical Women*, 'Hysterical', from the Latin '*hyster*',"

from the Greek '*hustera*', for 'uterus', as in 'How's your hister, sister?'" and *he* says, "I'm trying to shoot a training film, Jessica, so stop talking!"

She claps her hand over her mouth, then continues her comic monologue.

He engages the microscope to my vagina, the camera man gets a close-up on the doctor, as the sound man brings his boom mic in.

Lights up on DR. COOPERMAN and FILM CREW (Sound Guy, Camera Man, Gaffer) examining and filming "Jessica" on the examining table. Cooperman's head is between her legs. He sits up and faces the camera. Jessica watches from the ceiling.

DR. COOPERMAN

(to camera)

Hello. My name is Dr. Andrew Cooperman, head of OB/GYN. My specialty here at City Hospital is cervical pathology, and you're about to see a microscopic close-up, filmed through a colposcope, of a cervix which has been damaged by exposure in utero to the pregnancy drug *diethylstilbestrol*, prescribed to millions of women from 1940 to 1971 to prevent miscarriage, and commonly known as D.E.S."

JESSICA

And the next thing I know... I'm on the ceiling, having an out-of-body experience, while Dr. Cooperman and his film crew turn my private parts into a Cecil B. DeMille production.

DR. COOPERMAN

This is Jessica, a D.E.S. progeny.

JESSICA

Says Dr. Cooperman. A big round thing appears on the TV screen, which Dr. Cooperman has thoughtfully placed a few inches from my face, so I can see the show. A ring-side seat. Not actually a seat, I'm lying on a table. Of course, I'm really floating on the ceiling, looking at me, looking at this 21" video screen, which is filled with my cervix.

An image appears on video screen. It might resemble what Jessica describes. Jessica looks intently at it.

It looks like a cross between Mars and the moon. A pinkish and bluish sphere, with a big crater right in the center. The "os", from the Latin for *hole* or *mouth*. "O" "S", a handy two-letter word to keep in mind for tough scrabble games. The mouth of the cervix. The passage to the uterus.

Suddenly, the show turns into a grade B horror movie, as a monstrous appendage appears on the screen. What Godzilla is to a salamander, and King Kong is to a monkey, this thing is to a cue tip.

(She demonstrates this, using her arm as the giant Q-tip)

The huge, angry cotton ball sweeps across the screen, painting the entire lunar cervix red, and then withdrawing from the picture as suddenly as it appeared.

DR. COOPERMAN

The red stuff is iodine.

JESSICA

Ow!—and it burns like hell! Ouch—Ow, ooh, aaa, ah— I feel the burning. Rather, from the ceiling I watch myself lying on the table feeling the burning, and my brain registers the sensation deep inside me on the two-inch area of my cervix. But I *see* the stinging, projected 21 inches wide.

DR. COOPERMAN

Notice the surface of the cervix.

JESSICA

In fact, the cervix surfix—cerfix surface, cervix surface, cervix surface, cervix surface—say that ten times fast—cringes. Kind of like if you’ve ever had the pleasure of petting a slug, it cringes and shrinks into itself a little bit... Not to say my cervix is like a slug. It’s just that under the circumstances one is apt to make outrageous associations.

DR. COOPERMAN

This is Jessica,

JESSICA

Says Dr. Cooperman... Looking at the red, inflamed sphere, I can’t say I recognize myself. But on the other hand, the sphere does register everything I feel at the instant I feel it, so it’s rather like looking in the mirror... and the cervix is my face, and the os is mouth, and the os has no tongue, and neither do I, since *Dr. Cooperman has FORBIDDEN ME TO SPEAK!*

She claps her hand over her mouth and tries to scream, but her voice is strangled, muffled and unintelligible.

OVER THIS:

DR. COOPERMAN

Jessica has all of the classic D.E.S. changes that medical science is only today becoming aware of. She has the characteristic uterine deformity: her uterus is bi-cornuate—or T-

shaped—which causes infertility in many D.E.S. daughters. Notice her cellular abnormalities: this area of geometric cellular pattern, different from normal cells; and this area of *glandular*, rather than the normal *squamish* tissue—

JESSICA

(shuddering comically)

Squamish is an unpleasant word.

DR. COOPERMAN

—possibly indicative of structural defects in the uterus as well. We don't know in how many women this condition will turn into *cancer*,

JESSICA

—my least favorite word.

DR. COOPERMAN

—but we can generically call this type of cellular change, which affects 95% of D.E.S. daughters exposed in the first trimester of pregnancy, *pre-cancerous*.

JESSICA

Wow! That sentence was a mouthful. Our shall I say, an *os*-full?...

I'm grateful I'm on the ceiling, because I need some distance from the proceedings. And besides, the TV monitor is really too close to my face, and the bright lights are burning my eyes. It's humiliating to be lying here, crying, with nothing but this robe, which doesn't quite close, between my nakedness and the cinematic football team. So I leave the Jessica on the bed, and the Jessica on the TV screen, and turn all my attention to important matters close at hand—the fluorescent light fixtures and the sprinkler system up here on the ceiling... And while all the hoopla over my cervix continues down below, I relax, I fall asleep, I have a dream.

Light Shift

SCENE

JESSICA'S DREAM

During dream, Jessica continues to float on the ceiling. The GYN office is now a delivery room. Jessica is giving birth. The stage is filled with projections: moving and still images from dream, crazy visuals, gigantic and tiny. The images come in and out of focus, projected on various surfaces, at skewed angles. They appear to be 3-dimensional, emerging from the air around Jessica.

ENSEMBLE is everyone else in the cast. The Film Crew continues filming Jessica, while reciting the text, possibly with music accompaniment.

JESSICA & ENSEMBLE

(Rhythmic, with a steady beat: Italicized words are accented.)

in the in the in the in the in the
womb
from the *round* bellied *maiden*
from the *womb* of the *maiden*
baby comes
ripened *sweet*
bearing *fruit*
bearing *child*
soul-bearing
child-ripened
baby from the

JESSICA

No!

ENSEMBLE

in the in the
No pear-shaped
Not round
No!

Two *horns*
like a *beast* what could *grow*?
What *creature*
in the in the
two-horned womb
no *room*!

JESSICA

Yes!

ENSEMBLE

Where would it *grow* in such a woman's *body*?

JESSICA

My water's broken

ENSEMBLE

Dreaming *dreams*—
Needs to *dream*—
Dreams *of*—

JESSICA

Going into labor.

ENSEMBLE

Yes!

JESSICA

Starting the contractions!

ENSEMBLE

Yes!

JESSICA

Birth, yes! —Now!

ENSEMBLE

Midwives to the *room*!
Breath. Breath. Breath. Breath.

JESSICA

Hu, hu, hu...

(She continues panting rhythmically.)

Ensemble becomes Triage team of doctor and nurses in a delivery room, performing an emergency delivery.

ENSEMBLE

Push, push, Jessica.
Push, push.
Bearing fruit.

JESSICA

Bearing child.

ENSEMBLE

Push, push,
Bre-----athe

JESSICA

Hu, hu, hu, hu...

ENSEMBLE

Head pushing through.
Head pushing. What?

JESSICA

What?

ENSEMBLE

Of a *fish*! Of a *toad*!

JESSICA

What?

ENSEMBLE

Two heads!

JESSICA

Two?

ENSEMBLE

Three heads. *Lizards*!

JESSICA

What!

ENSEMBLE

Push, Jessica, *Push*!

JESSICA

Hu, hu... (*continues*)

ENSEMBLE

Snakes sliding from her body.
Jessica, Jessica, Jessica
giving birth to *monsters*.

JESSICA

Mommy!

ENSEMBLE

Creatures pouring from the *birth* canal
from her *infertile* plains
deep in the *loins*.
Nine months she *nurtured* *monsters*.

JESSICA

Where's my baby?

ENSEMBLE

The *end-less* flow of *monsters'* eggs are *hatched*,
from her *in—human, hidden* parts,
shaped like a *T*, like a *bull's* head. Huh, huh, huh, huh... (*Continue over next line*)

JESSICA

(non-rhythmic)

Mommy! Oh God, no more, please, God. Hu, hu, hu, no, NO, MAKE IT STOP!

Light Shift

Silence. Dream changes.

MOM appears. She's dressed in middle-aged clothing, circa 1980. Kind of frumpy. She's in her own world, trying to remember something.

Jessica sees Mom.

Mom doesn't see Jessica.

MOM

(Sing-song, like the nursery rhyme, "The house that Jack built." Accented syllables are italicized. Faster and faster, all on one breath.)

This is the woman *all* forlorn,
That *milke*d the cow with the *crumple*d horn,
That *toss*ed the *dog*,
That *worri*ed the *cat*,
That *chas*ed the *mouse*,
That *ate* the *cheese*,
That *lay* on the *plate*
That was *crack*ed by the *rock*,
That was *throw*n through the *window* and *onto* the *table*,
That *held* the *dinner*s that *fed* the *family*,
That *lived* in the *house* that *Jack built*.
(Out of breath, gasps for breath.)

MOM & JESSICA

(slowly, in unison)

This is the woman who *swallow*ed the *pills*
That *change*d the *shape* of her *unborn girl*...
When she *lived* in the *house* that *Jack built*.

Spotlight on Jessica, floating on the ceiling.
SOUND TRACK: Laughter and cheers.

JESSICA

(back in stand-up mode)

Thank you. Thank you very much for this standing *OV-U-LATION*!

Laugh-track and rim shot

Seriously now—(*cough*). So the other day, I walked into a—(*cough, cough*)

She continues to cough, begins to choke.
Laugh-track laughter diminishes.

DAVID enters, looks at Jessica on ceiling.

ENSEMBLE

Hu, hu, hu, hu...

(*rhythmic panting continues softly, through scene*)

DAVID

Sound!... We can't hear you... Louder!

JESSICA

(*coughing, choking*)

Water!

DAVID

The acoustics in this place suck. Sounds like you're on the ceiling.

David approaches Jessica. Reaches up to her. She reaches for his hand, gradually descends, choking and coughing.

OVER THIS:

MOM

*I want to know
Who threw the rock
That cracked the window
where she was born.*

*I want to know
Who changed the shape
Of my unborn girl.*

JESSICA

(*coughing, choking*)

Water!

David helps her down from the ceiling. She sits on examining table.

MOM

When I lived in the house that Jack built.

Light shift

Jessica gasps for breath. It's quiet. Everyone disappears, except for David, who gently rocks her. She's shaking and panting.

DAVID

Wake up, Jessica, you're having another nightmare.

Disoriented, she clings to him. The examining table is now their bed.

JESSICA

David.

DAVID

You're with me now. I love you, honey. It's OK.

JESSICA

No, it's not.

DAVID

Everything's OK. I'm here.

David disappears. Jessica wakes up.

Light shift

SCENE: AFTER THE DREAM

Jessica lies on examining table, her feet in stirrups. Cooperman, between her legs, examines her.

DR. COOPERMAN

Could you slide up just a little bit, Jessica?

She slides up.

DR. COOPERMAN

Thank you, that's fine.

(to the camera)

Jessica's cervix is a tapestry, in which the story of her prenatal history—and the clues to her biological future—are woven. By interpreting her unusual cellular patterns, we hope to unravel the tangled threads, embroidered into the fabric, so many years ago.

VIDEO SCENE (Continuous)

JIM AND MIKE

Jessica, lying on examining table, watches this scene on the video monitor, while the G.Y.N. exam continues.

On Video screen, in black & white, we see:

JIM and MIKE: Jim's office. It's 1948. A framed portrait of President Truman hangs on a wall behind Jim's desk, along with 1940s ads for pharmaceutical products. Mike is interviewing for a job.

Jessica sees them on screen. She's very confused.

JIM

Why pharmaceuticals?

MIKE

Well, sir, with a degree in biochemistry, my choices are either military or civilian. After what I witnessed at Normandy, I'd rather test drugs than weapons.

JESSICA

Who are those men?

DR. COOPERMAN

What men?

JESSICA

The men on the video monitor! Didn't you—

DR. COOPERMAN

Shh.

JIM

I'd like you to work for me, Mike.

MIKE

Thank you, sir, thank you very much.

Jim and Mike shake hands.

JIM

Call me Jim.

Screen goes dark.

Then, Anita Hill appears on screen.

Jessica recently watched this on TV.

ANITA HILL (on video)

On several occasions, Thomas told me graphically of his own sexual prowess...

JESSICA

(to Dr. Cooperman)

Why is Anita Hill on the/

DR. COOPERMAN

Shhh.

ANITA HILL (on video, continuous)

Because I was extremely uncomfortable talking about sex with him at all...and particularly in such a graphic way, I told him that I did not want to talk about these subjects.

Clarence Thomas appears on screen, furious.

CLARENCE THOMAS (on video)

I don't think that my name should have been destroyed. And I don't think that my family should have been put through this ordeal and I don't think that our country should be brought low by this kind of garbage.

JESSICA

(to Clarence Thomas on video)

Destroyed? You have a lifetime appointment to the Supreme Court!

DR. COOPERMAN

Shhh.

Brett Kavanaugh appears on the screen, red-faced, shouting. Jessica has never seen him.

JESSICA

Who is *that*?

Cooperman ignores her.

BRETT KAVANAUGH (on video)

My family and my name have been totally and permanently destroyed by vicious and false additional allegations!

Jessica hits the screen.

Dr. Christine Blasey Ford appears on screen.

DR. BLASEY FORD (on screen)

He put his hand over my mouth to stop me from screaming. It was hard for me to breathe, and I thought that Brett was going to accidentally kill me.

Jessica, freaked out, hits the screen. Hill, Kavanaugh, Ford, Thomas, flash on screen, one after another, faster and faster, the image and sound speeded up.

Scared, Jessica bangs on the screen till picture ends. Just static on the screen.

DR. COOPERMAN

Try not to move.

PHILOMELA enters the GYN office, wearing a toga and garland. There are feathers in her costume. She's beautiful, bird-like. You probably don't notice that she has wings. They're subtle, folded behind her back. Jessica is very, very confused.

JESSICA

(to Dr. Cooperman)

I suppose you don't see her either.

Dr. Cooperman sighs impatiently. Philomela sits on table beside Jessica, takes Jessica's feet out of the stirrups, helps her off the examining table.

Philomela speaks in bird calls and muffled vocal sounds, which Jessica understands.

Older Jessica enters. Watches.

PHILOMELA

(to Jessica)

(muffled sounds and bird call)

JESSICA

(answering Philomela)

Yeah, right. I love gynecology exams. Doesn't everybody?

PHILOMELA

(muffled sounds and bird call)

JESSICA

That's why I prefer being on the ceiling.

DR. COOPERMAN

Slide down a bit towards me, Jessica.

JESSICA

Who are you?

DR. COOPERMAN

Please stop talking.

PHILOMELA

(muffled sounds, bird call)

JESSICA

Philomela... Should I know you?

PHILOMELA

(bird sounds)

JESSICA

Why wouldn't I understand you?

Philomela's sounds change to laughter. Her
laugh is hoarse and rusty from lack of use.

JESSICA

What's so funny?

PHILOMELA

I haven't spoken for a long time.

JESSICA

Why are you here?

PHILOMELA

I knew your mother... Did she tell you about me?

JESSICA

I don't think so. Were you guys friends?

PHILOMELA

Yes. But she broke a promise.

JESSICA

What kind of—

PHILOMELA

She said she'd share my story, but she kept it secret.

JESSICA

Oof. Typical.

OLDER JESSICA
(to audience)

Mom kept secrets.

DR. COOPERMAN

You're going to feel a little scraping now.

JESSICA

OUCH!! Ow, Ow. Ugh. So... you want me to make good on my mother's promise?

PHILOMELA

It wasn't a formal agreement.

JESSICA

Aaaaaa, OW! Ow, ow, ow. What are you doing in the middle of my colposcopy?

PHILOMELA

Is that what this is called?

JESSICA

Yup.

PHILOMELA

I assumed you'd at least heard of me... She said she'd write a book about me.

OLDER JESSICA

(to audience)

Mom worked forever on that book. It was her life's work. Never finished it.

JESSICA

She never published.

PHILOMELA

Come with me.

JESSICA

Where?

PHILOMELA

Just come.

JESSICA

Yeah, right. Why shouldn't I follow a stranger, in a toga, who crashes my G.Y.N. exam?

PHILOMELA

Fine. Stay on the ceiling.

Philomela briefly spreads her wings.

JESSICA

Whoa! Are you an angel?

PHILOMELA

No.

JESSICA

Then why—

PHILOMELA

(laughing)

I didn't always have them. Story for another day.

JESSICA

What do you want?

PHILOMELA

I need you to be my voice.

JESSICA

What—

PHILOMELA

Your mother sent me.

JESSICA

My mother died eight years ago.

PHILOMELA

I know. When you hear my story—

JESSICA

I'm listening.

PHILOMELA

A story takes its own time—

David enters, carrying an old carton.

DAVID

This was in your father's attic. He said you should have it.

He puts the carton down, kisses Jessica.

PHILOMELA

—and you have to wait for the right time to tell it.

Jessica sits with David and opens the carton.
They take out old notebooks, manuscripts,
photos.

Philomela watches the scene.

Older Jessica, unseen, reads over Jessica's
shoulder.

JESSICA

These were my mom's.

David takes a large manuscript from box.

JESSICA

Oh my God, her PhD dissertation!

(reading title page)

"Philomela's Tapestry: Contemporary Variations on the Greek Myth"

DAVID

Wow, that's weirdly similar to *your* dissertation topic.

JESSICA

I know. Crazy, right? And she never even told me what she was writing about.

OLDER JESSICA

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

JESSICA

(turns page, reads introduction)

"In my research, I found that the story of Philomela, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, appears in many mythologies. I collected contemporary variations of the myth from dozens of women, by recording oral histories, folktales, and urban legends."

DAVID

Very cool.

JESSICA

Mom worked on this forever and never finished it.

DAVID

(teasing)

And you're going to finish *your* dissertation, when?

OLDER JESSICA

Ouch. She pretends not to hear him. He asks her this question a lot.

JESSICA

(flipping pages)

Damn, I should read this. At least one person should read your life's work, right?

(looks at back of a page.)

Aww, these are my crayon drawings... And chocolate finger prints. She read this to us when we were toddlers.

DAVID

Mothers don't read PhD dissertations to toddlers.

JESSICA

Do *not* underestimate my mother.

David laughs, hugs Jessica. She's too caught up in the manuscript to notice.

Older Jessica removes robe, becomes Mom.
Jessica pages through the PhD manuscript.
David looks through other items in the box.
Philomela watches Mom.

OVER THIS:

Mom's monologue may be partially sung.
Or not. She doesn't see Jessica and David.

MOM

The dialects were hard for me
But I finally gained fluency
I interviewed, collected myths
Laid the foundation for my doctoral thesis.

The women swapped stories with me all night
Under the stars, to our mutual delight.
Regaled me with gossip and mythic variations,
events from their lives, and fabulations.
When I asked them if their stories were true,
They said, "true as we're sitting here talking to you."

Late one night, a young woman began to tell
a tale I knew as Philomela.
The character from Ovid's poem,
Re-appeared as this girl, in this new home.

Her brother-in-law betrayed her trust
Assaulted her with violent lust
She struggled desperately to escape
But nothing could prevent the rape.

DAVID

She read *that* to you as a toddler?

JESSICA

Probably? Oh! Listen. She's quoting from Ovid here.

MOM & JESSICA

(Mom, to herself. Jessica reads to David)

If those on high behold these things, if there are any gods,
If anything is left, not lost as I am,
What punishment you will pay me, late or soon!
Now that I have no shame, I will proclaim it.
Given the chance, I will go where people are,
Tell everybody; if you shut me here,
I will move the very woods and rocks to pity.
The air of Heaven will hear, and any god
If there is any god in Heaven, will hear me.

(Jessica is visibly moved by what she's reading. So is David. So is Philomela.)

MOM

The evil king was moved to fierce anger
To equal fear;
To draw the sword, to catch her by the hair,
To pull the head back, hold the arms behind her,
But Tereus didn't kill her; he seized her tongue
Though it cried against the outrage,
Babbled and made a sound something like

MOM & PHILOMELA & JESSICA

Mother...

MOM

Till the sword cut it off.

A long stream of red ribbons slowly falls
from Philomela's mouth.
OVER THIS:

MOM

The mangled root
Quivered, the severed tongue along the ground
Lay quivering, making a little murmur,
Jerking and twitching, the way a serpent does
Run over by a wheel, and with its dying movement
Came to its mistress' feet.
And even then
It seems too much to believe—even then, Tereus
Took her, and took her again
The injured body
Still giving satisfaction to his lust.

Lights Shift

**SCENE
THREE WOMEN**

Jessica, Philomela, and Mom stand together facing downstage. A pool of red ribbons lies on the floor below them. All three try to speak but cannot. Each of them covers her mouth with her hand and tries to scream. It sounds like they're being strangled, suffocated. Their voices are choked, broken. They try to communicate something of great urgency, but all that comes out are breath sounds and short bursts, explosions.

Lights Shift

SCENE
DAVID & JESSICA

David and Jessica are the only ones visible.
They're at home in bed, cuddling
affectionately under a sheet, joking and
laughing.
The examining table is their bed.

DAVID

I picture us with about six children.

JESSICA

I thought you wanted to be serious.

DAVID

OK, nine kids.

JESSICA

Nine.

DAVID

Eleven is my final offer.

JESSICA

Done deal.

DAVID

They'll be really noisy, and they'll have messy hair.

JESSICA

What color will their eyes be?

DAVID

I haven't decided. But their names—

JESSICA

You've named our kids?

DAVID

Oh, yeah! Not all twenty-three of them yet—

JESSICA

Twenty-three

Yeah.

DAVID

I'm in.

JESSICA

They kiss passionately. Their kissing
continues over next scene.

SPLIT SCENE
(stage / video)
David & Jessica / Jim & Mike

JIM & MIKE

Jim & Mike are on the video screen. Jim's
office, 1953, framed phot of President
Eisenhower on wall.

End of excerpt