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SF PERUSALS

Breadcrumbs

Jennifer Haley

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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BREADCRUMBS was first produced by the Contemporary American Theater Festival at Studio Theater in Shepherdstown, West Virginia on July 10, 2010. The performance was directed by Laura Kepley, with sets by Robert Klingelhoefer, costumes by Ivania Stack, lights by Colin Bills, and sound and composition by Matt Nielson. The Production Stage Manager was Lori M. Doyle. The cast was as follows:

ALIDA . . . . . Helen-Jean Arthur
BETH/MOTHER . . . . . Eva Kaminsky

CHARACTERS

ALIDA – a reclusive writer, somewhere in her sixties, diagnosed with Alzheimer's

BETH/MOTHER – a chaotic drifter, somewhere around thirty, looking for a home

SETTING

Alida's apartment, various locales around the country, and the deep, dark woods.

For my mother

WOODS

*(***ALIDA** *writes on sticky notes. One word per note. She drops them as she walks along the path.)*

ALIDA. Words. Window sills. Yellow leaves. High heels. Etymology. Sticky notes. Text Messages. Stuffed Animals. Basements. Fortune cookies. Bones.

(She glances around. Spooked. She continues.)

Peep shows. Fairy tales. Boyfriends. Dark woods. Twisting paths. Breadcrumbs. They point the way back. To something familiar.

(She glances backward. The sticky notes are gone. Gasp!)

Until they are stolen, by the squirrels. And the only way out, is the only way in. The only way forward. Is to the light. Of the witch's house.

(In the clearing, a house becomes visible. The witch stands inside the doorway, silhouetted against the light. She moves to a table in the woods. Nods to the seat across from her. **ALIDA** *reluctantly sits. The witch pulls off her mask. Underneath is* **BETH**.*)*

DIAGNOSIS

(A clinic. Cold. **BETH** *wears a lab coat.)*

BETH. Do you find you misplace things?

ALIDA. Yes. I. Yes.

BETH. When you go out, do you forget how to get home?

ALIDA. I don't go out any more.

BETH. Does your family notice a difference in you?

ALIDA. I live alone.

BETH. Okay Fran. Can I call you Fran?

ALIDA. My name is Alida.

BETH. Alida. You're not Fran?

ALIDA. No I'm not Fran.

BETH. Wait. Oh. I got the wrong chart. Hold on. Here we go. Today's nuts. I'm losing my mind.

*(***ALIDA** *stares at her.* **BETH** *realizes her gaffe.)*

Sorry. Uh. Sorry. SO! Alida. Can I call you Alida?

ALIDA. You *may.*

BETH. I'm Beth. It says right here on my name tag. Beth.

ALIDA. Beth.

BETH. And it says here you're a writer.

ALIDA. I am. A writer.

BETH. That's so cool! What kind of stuff do you write?

ALIDA. Stuff?

BETH. I mean like books? Poetry?

ALIDA. Is this part of the exam?

BETH. No. I was just. Getting to know you.

*(***ALIDA** *stares at her.* **BETH**, *nervous, consults a brochure.)*

Okay Alida. I'm going to administer a diagnostic test. First I will recite ten different words to you. Try to remember these because I'm going to ask you about them later. Ready? Squirrel. Squirrel. Squirrel.

Squirrel. Squirrel. Squirrel. Squirrel. Squirrel. Squirrel. Squirrel. Got it?

*(***ALIDA** *absorbs the words as though each one is different.)*

ALIDA. Got it.

BETH. Next I'm going to tell you a word, and I want you to spell it for me. The word is: optimistic.

ALIDA. Optimistic?

BETH. Optimistic.

ALIDA. *(annoyed)* Right. O. P. T. I. M. I. S. T. I. C.

BETH. Now I want you to spell it backwards.

ALIDA. C. I. T. I. *(She stops.)*

BETH. Keep going.

ALIDA. S. M. T. O.

BETH. Great! Now I'm going to recite a story to you, and when I'm done, you will recite it back to me. Got it? Once upon a time…

(Something changes.)

There was a little girl whose parents gave her so many stuffed animals she didn't know how to love them all. There was Bunny and Bear B and and Durndell and Gerger Meal and Mustafus Otter Brown and Wormy and Scrotal and Flopsalot and…well it went on, she had so many stuffed animals she couldn't sleep with all of them, so she developed a system where she called her bed the Home, and a box next to her bed the Hotel, and every night she would rotate sets of animals from the Hotel to the Home so she could fill each one with fair and regular love. When the girl grew up, she put them in a big, black garbage bag and hauled them from one boyfriend to the next, long after her parents told her they didn't want her to be their daughter any more.

(Something changes back.)

Okay Alida, would you please recite that story back to me as you remember it?

ALIDA. Let's see. Once upon a time…

(Something changes.)

There was a little girl whose mother dragged her from one end of the forest to the next in search of Prince Charming. They traveled through briars and bogs, through mountains and valleys, through snow and ice and wind. Every night, bundled together against the cold, the mother would whisper to the girl, Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow we will find him. And then one day, the little girl awoke to find her mother – gone. All the Princes, it seemed, were looking for women who were unencumbered. So the girl became a writer, because filling the world's emptiness with words was the only way to go on living in it –

(Something changes back. **BETH** *looks at* **ALIDA** *strangely.)*

That's not the story, is it? I'm not doing it correctly.

BETH. There is no correct way. You do the best you can.

ALIDA. But I'm not – I can't remember it the way you told it.

BETH. *(too chipper)* That's fine! There's no right and wrong here. It's simply diagnostic. Now, I want you to think back to that list of ten different words I recited before the story. Can you tell me what some of them were?

ALIDA. Squirrel.

BETH. And.

ALIDA. Squirrel.

BETH. That's one of them. Can you remember the others?

*(***ALIDA** *realizes she cannot.)*

ALIDA. Um…squirrel?

BETH. Okay, Alida, I'm going to give your test results to the doctor, and he will contact you to go over his findings. You should expect a phone call in about a week –

ALIDA. What are the findings?

BETH. I'm sorry, but only the doctor can interpret them.

ALIDA. I want to know now.

BETH. I'm just a nurse's aide. I'm not supposed to talk to patients about their diagnosis.

ALIDA. Don't fuck with me. It's –

(She can't say the word. Pause. **BETH** *nods.)*

And there's no cure.

*(***BETH** *shakes her head.)*

Why even bother diagnosing it?

BETH. It's so families can start making. Arrangements.

ALIDA. What about women? Who live alone?

WINDOWSILLS

*(***ALIDA***'s apartment. Small and spare.* **BETH** *stands in the doorway, an enormous handbag over her shoulder, clutching a manila folder.* **ALIDA** *faces her in combat stance.)*

ALIDA. Who let you in?

BETH. The door was open.

ALIDA. I don't leave my door open.

BETH. I came up the stairs, and the door was –

ALIDA. Who let you up?

BETH. You buzzed me.

ALIDA. I did not.

BETH. Someone buzzed me. I pushed the bell, and there was a buzz.

ALIDA. It wasn't me.

BETH. I'm sorry.

ALIDA. Get out.

BETH. Okay. It's just. You left this at the clinic.

(She proffers the manila folder.)

ALIDA. I've been looking for that.

BETH. It was on the counter. By the Q-tips.

ALIDA. I don't remember taking it with me.

BETH. Is it a new story?

ALIDA. Did you read it?

BETH. No, no. Of course not. We respect our patients' privacy.

ALIDA. Uh huh.

*(***ALIDA** *reaches for the folder.* **BETH** *hands it to her. Hovers.)*

BETH. I read one of your other stories. All last night. I found it at the bookstore. I couldn't believe it. I went to the bookstore, looked up your name, and there they were. All your books. That must be amazing. To

see your name on all these stories that other people read. "Fractured fairy tales for the literati." That's what it said on the inside cover. I don't know if I count as literati. I got my degree at the community college. But I loved the story about the girl stuck in the dungeon of a high rise castle. It reminded me of a temp job where I worked on catastrophic claims for a workers compensation insurance company, and I had to have a security badge to get into this windowless basement room, and all day long I went through files of people who like got their hands chopped off in machinery or were shot by disgruntled co-workers –

ALIDA. How did you find me?

BETH. Your address was on your chart.

ALIDA. So was my phone number.

BETH. You're on my way home.

ALIDA. Does the clinic know you're here?

BETH. Sure.

ALIDA. Perhaps I should let them know you came by.

BETH. No! Please. I mean. I thought I'd –

ALIDA. Before I call them, I think you should –

BETH. Go. Right. Okay. Thank you.

*(***BETH** *leaves, instantly returns.)*

I almost forgot! These were downstairs by the mailbox.

*(***BETH** *produces a bundle of envelopes from her giant bag, hands it to* **ALIDA**.*)*

Fans?

ALIDA. I don't have fans.

BETH. They look like they're from people –

ALIDA. Football players have fans. Rockstars have fans. I have individuals who appreciate my work.

BETH. Isn't that –

ALIDA. And they are irrelevant to me because I write only for myself.

*(***ALIDA** *chunks the envelopes in the trash.)*

BETH. You don't have to do that. Just because –

ALIDA. Because what?

BETH. Because of your diagnosis.

ALIDA. I did not receive a diagnosis.

BETH. At the clinic.

ALIDA. You said only a doctor could give me a diagnosis. I did not speak to a doctor.

BETH. But the story you told to me. It was different.

ALIDA. I told the same story differently.

BETH. Do you want to tell *this* story?

(She gestures to the manila folder, tucked under **ALIDA***'s arm.* **ALIDA** *stares down at it. Beat.)*

ALIDA. The other morning. There was a leaf on the windowsill. A yellow leaf. And I realized. It's Fall. It's Fall again. The leaf looked like my hand. With all its veins. Reaching out. And I thought, maybe I should write my memories. Before my brain. Turns brown.

BETH. If you want any help. I don't know anything about writing. But I'm good at taking notes.

*(***ALIDA** *snaps out of it.)*

ALIDA. I don't need any help.

BETH. I'm only part time at the clinic.

ALIDA. I don't like people in my apartment.

BETH. And I am – an individual who appreciates your work.

ALIDA. Especially sycophants. Get out. I have everything under…everything under…

BETH. Control?

BOYFRIENDS

*(***BETH** *sits at* **ALIDA***'s table with her day planner.* **ALIDA** *stands over her.)*

ALIDA. I will expect you here from six a.m. to ten a.m.

BETH. Six a.m.?

ALIDA. My best time to work is in the morning.

BETH. I'm due at the clinic by nine. Except for Wednesday. How about that morning we split the difference with…eight a.m. to noon? And maybe Tuesdays and Thursdays we could do two p.m. to six. Except, duh, I have therapy on Thursday afternoons. Maybe we could do an evening session – I could bring takeout –

ALIDA. This is not a negotiable system.

BETH. Oh.

ALIDA. And probably not a good idea.

BETH. Wait. Let me talk to one of the doctors about moving my shift around.

ALIDA. I have notepads here. Please bring your own pens. Make sure they are working.

BETH. I have a laptop. I'll bring that.

ALIDA. A what?

BETH. A laptop computer.

ALIDA. Oh no no no. I only work longhand.

BETH. But I type faster than I write.

ALIDA. This is about quality, not quantity. This is about ink on paper, not zeroes and ones. This is about none of the material leaving my apartment.

BETH. I would never –

ALIDA. No? I don't know you. I don't know you at all. In fact, I don't think –

BETH. I'll bring pens! Lots of pens. Working pens…

(She makes a note in her day planner. Smiles brightly at **ALIDA***.)*

ALIDA. You'll be sent to the library on occasion. I assume you have a card.

BETH. I tried to get one. They want a local address.

ALIDA. You don't have a local address?

BETH. I live with my boyfriend.

ALIDA. Don't you pay bills?

BETH. It's his apartment. I moved in three months ago.

ALIDA. What about your previous residence?

BETH. That was. Another boyfriend.

ALIDA. Another boyfriend?

BETH. *(shrugs)* I like guys.

ALIDA. I know the type. Listen…what's your name again?

BETH. *(points to her name tag)* Beth.

ALIDA. Listen, Beth, what do you think qualifies you for this position?

BETH. This is a position? I thought I was helping out.

ALIDA. I told you I do not want "help." I'll be paying you every two weeks.

BETH. Really?

ALIDA. You were going to do this for free?

BETH. I thought. I might learn something.

ALIDA. This is not an apprenticeship. I am not a teacher.

BETH. But I'm sure the experience –

ALIDA. Will mainly involve research. And keeping my thoughts together.

BETH. Such thoughts. I had this job once as a cocktail waitress, and my regulars had so many stories. I fell in love with them. Not like, love love, but secret love, because they were so sad. I brought them stiff drinks and a big smile, and for a little while I made them happy, listening to their sad stories. I tried to write them down. I couldn't put them together in a way that made them live. So when I read that paragraph. About your mother brushing your hair. And I saw her so clearly, in just a few words. I thought, if I could learn to tell a story –

ALIDA. How do you know about the mother?

BETH. You left your story at the clinic.

ALIDA. You said you didn't read it.

BETH. I glanced inside to see what it was. I scanned the first page.

ALIDA. The mother doesn't appear on the first page.

BETH. Oh. Well. Perhaps I read a few more.

ALIDA. So you were lying to me?

BETH. No. I just loved it and – *(pause)*. Why do you call her "the" mother when it's your mother?

ALIDA. This is a work of fiction.

BETH. It sounds like an autobiography.

ALIDA. How much did you read?

BETH. If I'm helping you, I'm going to have to read –

ALIDA. You are not helping –

BETH. Working for you – if I'm working for you –

ALIDA. You are *not* working for me. And you *will not be* working for me. You are clearly someone I cannot trust.

*(***BETH** *slowly closes her day planner.)*

BETH. Long term memories remain intact, but the patient finds it harder to relay them as the short term memories come and go.

ALIDA. That sounds like a threat.

BETH. I've been working at the clinic a year now. I know this disease. You'll have to trust someone if you want to finish your story.

*(***BETH** *reaches in her bag and pulls out a hair brush. Something changes.)*

BREADCRUMBS

*(***BETH** *becomes* **MOTHER**. **ALIDA** *becomes herself as a child.* **MOTHER** *brushes* **ALIDA***'s hair. They stare forward into a mirror.)*

ALIDA. Once upon a time there was a girl named Gretel, who lived with her mother at the edge of a deep, dark woods. One day Prince Charming came to call, so the mother sent Gretel to the woods to gather kindling. She gave her a loaf of bread, instructing her to drop crumbs along the path to mark her way home.

MOTHER. What about Hansel?

ALIDA. Who?

MOTHER. Hansel and Gretel. And the woodcutter.

ALIDA. That's not how I tell the story.

MOTHER. Keep your head up, Alida.

ALIDA. *Ow! Mom!* That's not how I tell the story.

MOTHER. Well I beg your pardon. Please continue.

ALIDA. Gretel pushed into the woods, gathering kindling in her voluminous skirts, dropping breadcrumbs behind her. So intent was she that only the cawing of an evening crow drew her attention to shadows rising up the trees. She turned homeward and saw – a squirrel – and clutched in its tiny claws – a breadcrumb. The squirrel's eyes glittered, and it was gone. All the breadcrumbs were gone. Gretel found herself surrounded by an infinite, indifferent darkness.

MOTHER. *An infinite, indifferent darkness* – ? Where do you get this stuff?

ALIDA. I made it up.

MOTHER. But that phrase. You must have read it somewhere. And I thought it was birds who stole the crumbs. Not squirrels.

ALIDA. That's not how I tell the story.

MOTHER. When does she get to the witch's house?

ALIDA. That's coming. Do you want me to finish or not?

MOTHER. Okay, okay. Go ahead.

ALIDA. Gretel's fingers grew bloody from pushing hours through the roots and branches. The slithery pawsteps of ravenous creatures drew closer and closer. Just as she was about to give herself to the night, she saw – through the trees – a tiny light.

It twinkled from the windows of an odd house. The walls looked like chocolate flesh, and criss-crossing the roof were shiny white lines, like strands of mucous, glittering in the light of the moon. The front door was made of roots – or was it bones? – and lining the walkway were hairy plumes of cotton candy. Gretel knelt over one, and as it melted beneath her tongue, heard the front door *creeeeeeeak*, open, like a rusty eyelid.

*(***MOTHER** *stops brushing* **ALIDA***'s hair, troubled.)*

An old woman was silhouetted in the doorway. She regarded Gretel, who found herself floating up the walkway and following the woman into her house. The front door closed behind them. The end.

MOTHER. The end?

ALIDA. The end.

MOTHER. What happens to Gretel?

*(***ALIDA** *shrugs.* **MOTHER** *stares at her in the mirror.)*

Well don't tell Tom that "story." He'll be here any minute. You look adorable.

ALIDA. He's your date. Why do I have to look adorable?

MOTHER. Every little bit helps.

ALIDA. Is he going to stay over?

MOTHER. If he does, it will be like a slumber party.

*(***ALIDA** *makes a face.)*

Don't make that face – it'll freeze that way. And please. Do not say anything to Tom about an infinite, indifferent darkness.

(Something changes back. Etc.)

ETYMOLOGY

*(***MOTHER** *becomes* **BETH**, *taking notes longhand.* **ALIDA** *dictates.)*

BETH. Tom was the Bible salesman?

ALIDA. The shoelace manufacturer.

BETH. Your mother was social.

ALIDA. That's a very nice word for it.

BETH. She was looking for love.

ALIDA. Another nice word.

BETH. Don't you believe in love? My boyfriend's a musician, and last night he sang me this beautiful –

ALIDA. Ten a.m. Time's up.

BETH. But we just got –

ALIDA. This is all I can take of her. Or you.

BETH. Okay.

ALIDA. For tomorrow I'd like you to look up the etymology of the word 'femur.'

BETH. The what?

ALIDA. Etymology. The derivation or history of a word. For instance, the etymology of the word *etymology* is from the Greek *etymon*, which means "true sense" plus *logos*, which means "word." It is the story of a word. Another point of reference.

BETH. Cool. I'll look it up online.

ALIDA. No, you'll look it up at the library. The old lady on the third floor can show you how to cross reference a variety of dictionaries and encyclopedias, some going all the way back to when the word first *(noticing* **BETH***'s expression)* what?

BETH. It sounds time consuming.

ALIDA. This isn't community college. I don't want cliff notes. I want information of substance.

BETH. But you – we – don't have much time. If we want to get to the end.

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