Acting Edition

We Had a World

by Joshua Harmon

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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WE HAD A WORLD was first produced by Manhattan Theatre Club (Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Chris Jennings, Executive Director) and premiered at New York City Center Stage II on March 19, 2025. The production was directed by Trip Cullman, with scenic design by John Lee Beatty, costume design by Kaye Voyce, lighting design by Ben Stanton, sound design by Sinan Refik Zafar, wig and make-up design by Tommy Kurzman, and casting by Kelly Gillespie. The production stage manager was Bess Marie Glorioso. The cast was as follows:

RENEE . . . . . Joanna Gleason
ELLEN . . . . . Jeanine Serralles
JOSHUA . . . . . Andrew Barth Feldman

WE HAD A WORLD was originally commissioned by Roundabout Theatre Company, New York, NY.

CHARACTERS

RENEE – 60s to 90s
ELLEN – 30s to 60s
JOSHUA – 5 to 30s

TIME

The play takes place from 1988–2018.

*(**RENEE** emerges in a nightgown, as **JOSHUA** observes from the other side of the stage, in his underwear. They walk toward each other.)*

RENEE. Joshua.

(They turn and face out. They are now on a phone call. No need to mime phones. They can just speak without looking at one another.)

It's your grandmother. I've got your next play here in my apartment.

JOSHUA. What?

(Quick beat.)

RENEE. Your next play. It's here in my living room. It's called Battle of the Titans.

JOSHUA. Battle of the Titans?

RENEE. It's about your mother and your aunt.

JOSHUA. Oh. Well that'll be… *(Unspoken: fucking brutal.)*

RENEE. Your mother says she's going to bring Passover to our apartment. Fine. Then Susan decides to fly in, now your mother says she won't step foot in the apartment if Susan's here. So we're to send Susan away before you people arrive – I can't keep up with it all.

JOSHUA. Oh boy.

RENEE. All I know is, it'll be *Virginia Woolf*, Part II.

JOSHUA. I have – always wanted to write about our family, I didn't know if – I had your permission?

RENEE. Absolutely.

JOSHUA. Oh, that's – that's good to know.

RENEE. But I want you to promise me something.

JOSHUA. OK...

RENEE. Make it as bitter and vitriolic as possible.

JOSHUA. Oh. OK. Well, I'll – do my best?

RENEE. You can even make your grandmother a real Medea.

JOSHUA. I don't know about all that, but, I'm glad to know I have your blessing.

RENEE. Absolutely. It ought to be a real humdinger.

JOSHUA. I guess there's a lot of fighting?

RENEE. It's all so angry, and it's all so stupid.

JOSHUA. Yeah. How are you feeling?

RENEE. I feel fine! I feel absolutely fine! They tell me I'm dying, but I wouldn't know it.

JOSHUA. Well that's – that's good.

RENEE. Alright baby. I'll see you this afternoon.

*(***RENEE** *exits.* **JOSHUA** *turns to us and begins dressing.)*

JOSHUA. Before I can take you to Nana's apartment, you probably want to know a few things. Like why my aunt and mother don't want to be in the same room. But giving you the sixty-five-year blow-by-blow of that relationship would... we only have *one* play, so... just take my word.

It's March, 2018. Nana was just diagnosed with metastasized pancreatic cancer. She's almost ninety-four, they're not gonna operate. And while you could say, we are all, always, dying – she is now, legitimately, dying.

In a few months, the highest point in Sweden – the southern peak of Kebnekaise Mountain – will become the *second* highest point, when the glacier that's sat atop it for millennia – melts.

But first – a small family drama?

There's going to be enough ugly stuff, so let's start with something good: It's the late 1980s. I'm five years old, and Nana has signed us up for a two week course at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Just me and her. I live in the suburbs, which, even as a child, I know is not where I belong. Nana lives in New. York. City. For two weeks, my parents bring me on their daily commute to work, Mom hands me off to Nana, we take the bus uptown, where those two great fountains – the old ones, not the replacements paid for by megarich polluter David Koch – in blood money, I might add – shoot water into the air opposite the magnificent limestone mansions of Fifth Avenue.

RENEE. *(Coolly.)* Come here, pussycat.

*(***RENEE** *returns, now dressed. Maybe she's wearing her open-toed Bass sandals and her black and white World Wildlife Federation wolves t-shirt, with her wallet in a string around her wrist. Or maybe she's in something else.)*

*(***RENEE** *always treats* **JOSHUA** *like a full-fledged adult, whatever his age, so there is no need to become a little boy.)*

JOSHUA. First: a word on how Nana speaks. Though she was born in Brooklyn, granddaughter of immigrants, a few years before the Great Depression – *Renee* puts on airs. She has this weird pseudo-British accent. At restaurants, she asks:

RENEE. May we have some bread and *but-tah*?

JOSHUA. And:

RENEE. Would you pass the *pep-pah*?

JOSHUA. And she always wants to discuss the latest ad-*verrr*-tisments.

RENEE. And this is where they would *bathe*.

JOSHUA. She's just told me about the *Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, and the children who lived at the Met.

What if someone saw?

RENEE. They went first thing, before anyone was awake. And at night, they would sleep inside the museum. Let's choose a bed for you. Which do you like?

JOSHUA. That one.

RENEE. Uh huh. Why?

JOSHUA. I like how high it is. But how do you get into it?

RENEE. That's a good question. Sir, how does one get into that bed?

JOSHUA. Nana loves to ask questions at museums.

RENEE. Is that light fixture original to the room? Oh, it's just a fluorescent, I see.

JOSHUA. Sometimes she asks questions just to ask them, I don't think she even cares about the answer.

RENEE. Can you tell me in what century fringe on rugs became fashionable?

JOSHUA. A few years later, she takes me to see *Dances with Wolves*.

RENEE. Kevin Costner lies on a table, waiting for his horribly gangrened foot to be amputated. Then slowly, very slowly, he reaches for his boot and works it over the bloody, oozing –

ELLEN. Mom! He's seven!

RENEE. So? We had a great time.

ELLEN. What's it rated?

RENEE. How should I know?

ELLEN. R? Is it rated R?

RENEE. Well. It shouldn't be.

ELLEN. Uh, news flash: you are not on the board that decides the movie ratings.

RENEE. At one point, they hunt bison, and eat one of its livers – raw! Fabulous!

ELLEN. Was there nudity?

RENEE. How should I know?

JOSHUA. You see Kicking Bird and his wife doing stuff when they think everyone's asleep, and then Kevin Costner goes swimming, and… you see his butt.

ELLEN. Mom! I don't want him seeing those kind of movies yet.

RENEE. Then don't take him. Your mother is such a prude.

JOSHUA. A word on how my mother speaks: When I went to college and told my friends about her, she sounded a lot like Marisa Tomei in *My Cousin Vinny*.

ELLEN. *(Strong Brooklynese.)* "Imagine you're a deer. You're prancing along, you get thirsty, you spot a little brook, you put your little deer lips down to the cool water… BAM! A fuckin bullet rips off part of your head!"

JOSHUA. Then she visited, and introduced herself to my friends:

ELLEN. Hello, I'm Ellen, it's so nice to meet you.

JOSHUA. They were confused.

ELLEN. Because I don't talk like that.

JOSHUA. I know but like, even that? Like, when your voice? Travels through the air? It hits my ear drum in this like, very particular way that's like:

(Brooklynese.) I don't *tawk* like that.

ELLEN. And like, now? A word? About how my son talks?

JOSHUA. I don't talk like that.

ELLEN. No I know but like, as your voice? Travels? Through the air? That's just like, how it hits my ear.

RENEE. I agree.

JOSHUA. I'll watch the likes. Back to *Dances with Wolves*:

ELLEN. No R-rated movies. PG-13. That's it. Kapeesh?

JOSHUA. But I learned my lesson, and a few years later, I didn't say a word after Nana took us to a Mapplethorpe exhibit.

I was only nine. I didn't yet grasp the concept of fisting.

ELLEN. She took you to Mapplethorpe? She's a sick fuck.

JOSHUA. Then she took me to a gallery where we saw something called "Pubic Hair on Soap." It was – exactly as it sounds.

*(***RENEE** *and* **JOSHUA** *look at it for a moment.)*

RENEE. Vehhhhhry interesting.

JOSHUA. She brought me everywhere – exhibits on Magritte, and Fabergé eggs, and when I was ten, she handed me a play:

RENEE. If you read this, I will take you to see it.

JOSHUA. You can usually read a play in one sitting. I was a kid. It took a month. I didn't understand much, but I read it, and once I did, she bought us tickets.

RENEE. Two for *Medea*.

JOSHUA. I'm ten.

RENEE. Now before we go, tell me: what did you think of it?

JOSHUA. It's hard to follow. She kills her children?

RENEE. Yes. To get revenge on her husband.

JOSHUA. How does she do it?

RENEE. Like this.

(She pretends to slice his neck.)

Aaahhhhhhh!

JOSHUA. I don't think my mom would ever kill me.

RENEE. No, I don't suppose she would.

JOSHUA. Would you ever kill your children?

RENEE. It would depend on the situation.

ELLEN. Nice.

JOSHUA. We take our seats. The play stars Diana Rigg. Again, I don't know how much I understand – but I am mesmerized. And all these years later, I still remember Medea's golden chariot, rising into the sky.

(Beat. They watch Medea's chariot rise.)

Nana does not know it – neither do I – but I am ten years old, and she has just changed my life.

ELLEN. When can we get to the ugly stuff?

JOSHUA. Soon.

ELLEN. How soon?

JOSHUA. Soon. But it won't make sense without the good stuff.

ELLEN. What good stuff?

JOSHUA. You forget, but you two would talk, like, six times a day.

RENEE. Yes?

ELLEN. So I get to this parent's association meeting –

RENEE. Right.

ELLEN. Which I only joined out of guilt, since I can never do anything at Joshua's school, but I work for a living! But there I am, in a roomful of parents – all mothers –

RENEE. Certainly.

ELLEN. Thirty minutes in, they're still debating what *oil* the lunch should be cooked in: peanut or canola? Which is healthier? Which has a higher fat content – Finally I said, "Am I the only one in this room with a *job*? Use whatever fucking oil you want."

RENEE. Good for you.

ELLEN. Oh, oh and then – get this –

JOSHUA. Or for your fortieth – Nana had us over for a feast – she spent three days cooking your favorite childhood dishes.

ELLEN. Oh my god! Mom! Gribenes?

JOSHUA. Fried chicken skins – it's disgusting.

ELLEN. Delicious. Mom! Thank you!

RENEE. You're welcome!

ELLEN. And lamb chops. No one ask for ketchup!

JOSHUA. Why?

RENEE. It's an old story.

ELLEN. Mom once spent a whole day making lamb chops for dinner.

RENEE. I really worked hard on it, I served it with parsley –

ELLEN. She gives it to us and Susan says, "Can I have ketchup?"

RENEE. I said, "You want ketchup? I'll give you ketchup."

ELLEN. And dumped the whole jar on her plate!

RENEE. Susan ran from the table, very upset.

ELLEN. God that was funny.

And you made krau pretzel!

RENEE. Yah.

JOSHUA. Krau pretzel comes from Nana's Hungarian grandfather.

RENEE. Peasant food.

JOSHUA. Cabbage and noodles, fried in butter.

RENEE. It's actually called kraut spaetzle, but the kids couldn't pronounce it, they called it krau pretzel, the name stuck.

JOSHUA. You taught me to make that, too.

RENEE. It worked both ways. You taught me things.

JOSHUA. She's talking about this book I had, as a kid.

RENEE. *50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth*.

JOSHUA. I was a conservationist, even at a young age.

RENEE. You taught me to brush my teeth again, in my sixties.

JOSHUA. You don't need to run the water. Just wet your toothbrush and turn it off. You can save a lot of water that way.

RENEE. Yes but I didn't know that until you told me so.

JOSHUA. It never occurred to you to turn off the water?

RENEE. It never did. We didn't think of these things. We were stupid. Now I know. I turn it off. And each time I brush my teeth, I think of you.

JOSHUA. We taught each other. I learned about Fraunces Tavern in school, then you took me there.

RENEE. Downtown, surely, where General Washington ate with his soldiers. I wonder whether their boots had heels. Sir, did the Revolutionary soldiers' boots have heels?

JOSHUA. That's the waiter, Nana.

RENEE. So?

JOSHUA. We toured Gracie Mansion. I think Dinkins was mayor.

RENEE. Could be.

JOSHUA. You took me to *The Heiress*, on Broadway, with Cherry Jones.

RENEE. She was marvelous, absolutely marvelous. "Bolt the door, Mariah." I still get goosebumps!

JOSHUA. When I was in seventh grade, snowstorms kept pummeling the region – this is the winter of '96, when New York still got snow. I wake up one morning to yet another snow day, and Mom says:

ELLEN. Call Nana, maybe she'd like to spend the day with you.

RENEE. I have a doctor's appointment – I'll cancel it. Come. We'll go to the movies.

JOSHUA. We see three films. First up, at 9:30 in the morning, Mike Leigh's masterpiece, *Secrets & Lies*.

RENEE. Absolutely brilliant.

JOSHUA. Next, we sneak down the hall for a freebie: *Sling Blade*.

RENEE. I'm glad we didn't pay for that one.

JOSHUA. Finally, the pièce de résistance: *The English Patient*. At this point, I fall asleep, but not Nana. She never sleeps during movies or plays.

RENEE. I'd love to see the desert some day, wouldn't you?

JOSHUA. When we walk, Nana always takes my arm.

Thank you for dropping all your plans to see me.

RENEE. Are you kidding? Anytime, baby.

*(***RENEE** *exits. Beat.)*

ELLEN. You ready?

*(***JOSHUA** *nods.)*

When he was fifteen, Joshua wanted to be – oh, god – an actor. But despite my strong belief that that is a leisure activity to enjoy on the side as you pursue a professional career, I sign him up for Saturday classes at The Neighborhood Playhouse. One of his teachers is directing a workshop of a new musical and asks Joshua to be in it. For a week after school, he goes into the city to rehearse. He's convinced this will be his big break.

JOSHUA. This will probably be my big break.

ELLEN. The day of the performance, I drive into work and park near the theatre, so I can take him home after.

JOSHUA. Dad isn't there?

ELLEN. No, he's home with your sisters.

JOSHUA. But Nana and Grandpa come.

*(***RENEE** *appears. She and* **ELLEN** *look at each other.)*

At intermission, I run out to say hello, then go back to perform Act Two. Afterwards, Mom is waiting for me.

*(***RENEE** *is gone.)*

ELLEN. Oh my god, you were so good!

JOSHUA. Really?

ELLEN. Yes!

JOSHUA. But like, how good?

ELLEN. You were the best one up there. By a mile. I'm being completely objective.

JOSHUA. Where's Nana?

ELLEN. She wasn't feeling well.

JOSHUA. They left?

ELLEN. They had to go home.

JOSHUA. They missed my song.

ELLEN. You have *such* a beautiful voice. Will you sing it for Dad?

JOSHUA. Is she OK?

ELLEN. Yeah, she just didn't feel well.

JOSHUA. We walk to the garage. I make her rank my performance against everyone else's. We get in the car. We drive up the highway. I am staring out the window, looking at how dark the trees appear at night, thinking about the show, and my beautiful voice, and the great career I am on the cusp of having, wondering who was in the audience, who saw me, who's about to discover me and make all my dreams come true. Then I look over at my mother.

(Beat.)

ELLEN. It's nothing, I'm fine.

JOSHUA. What…

ELLEN. I'm fine, I'm… I shouldn't – I'm fine.

JOSHUA. Why are you upset?

Mom?

Tell me!

(Beat.)

ELLEN. Nana wasn't sick, honey. She was drunk. She was drunk.

JOSHUA. What?

ELLEN. Nana's an alcoholic.

(Beat.)

I never told you, I didn't want… but she's an alcoholic. She always has been. My whole childhood.

(Beat. **JOSHUA** *looks at* **ELLEN**, *wanting more.)*

I'd come home from school and find her in a pool of vomit. Dad was at work, Robert was useless, Susan was never home, so it would fall to me to pick her up, clean her up, put her to bed. One summer, we were in Massachusetts, Dad was working in the city, and she was three sheets to the wind, driving us on these dark, twisty roads – we were screaming from the backseat, trying to keep her from swerving – I thought for sure she would kill us.

JOSHUA. But – why haven't I ever seen her drunk?

ELLEN. Because when you were born, I told her, "If you want a relationship with your grandson, you are never to drink in front of him. Ever. Do I make myself clear?"

RENEE. Yes.

ELLEN. No second chances here.

RENEE. Understood.

ELLEN. That's why.

JOSHUA. Is that why she always has water at dinner?

ELLEN. Yes.

JOSHUA. I just thought she liked water.

ELLEN. No. It's why I went to boarding school junior year.

JOSHUA. I thought it was cause you hated your school?

ELLEN. No. I had to get away. It's why Susan joined every after-school activity – Hebrew School, even – ironic now – but she'd do anything not to face it. It's probably why Nana dumped a jar of ketchup on Susan's plate.

JOSHUA. I thought that was a funny story?

(Quick beat.)

ELLEN. She would get drunk, I'd take care of her – but then she and Grandpa would get mad at *me*: "You're wrong, your mother wasn't drunk"* – I'd cleaned up her vomit – and then *they* would stop speaking to *me* until eventually, *I* would have to apologize to *her*. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." They somehow turned it all around and made me the bad guy, made me feel crazy…

JOSHUA. At this point, we are home, at the kitchen table. My sisters are asleep, my father's upstairs. This is before cell phones. Right now, the only people on Earth who know what's just happened are me, and my mother.

ELLEN. Maybe I shouldn't have told you.

JOSHUA. No, I'm glad you did. I just – don't understand why you never told me before.

ELLEN. Maybe I should have. I don't know. I wanted you to have a relationship with her, and you love her so much, and – she really had stopped drinking these last fifteen years. I would know. I talk to Mom, what, six times a day? I can hear it in her voice if she's had half a drink, two drinks, four – I know exactly what she's had, and how much. I thought that was behind her.

---

* Whenever an actor speaks as Grandpa, they should try to use the same stereotypical "Dad" voice.

(Beat.)

JOSHUA. What's going to happen?

(Beat.)

ELLEN. I don't know.

JOSHUA. What are you going to do?

ELLEN. I don't know.

I don't – don't tell your sisters. I need to think about what to – how to tell them.

*(***ELLEN** *kisses* **JOSHUA** *and exits. He watches her go, then sits for a long, long moment, absorbing this new information.)*

*(***RENEE** *appears. She holds her toothbrush, having just brushed her teeth. She looks at it for a beat.)*

(She sits down.)

RENEE. Josh? It's your grandmother.

JOSHUA. Hi Nana.

RENEE. How are you dear?

JOSHUA. OK. How are you?

RENEE. Fine. I'm calling because… I'm putting an article in the mail to you, I think you will find most interesting. About bison.

JOSHUA. OK…

RENEE. They're doing well. There was some concern they might go extinct, but it seems private citizens are raising herds to make hamburger meat, so their numbers are headed in a good direction.

JOSHUA. They were going extinct?

RENEE. Yes.

JOSHUA. But now they're making hamburgers out of them so they're *not* going extinct?

RENEE. That's right.

JOSHUA. That doesn't… *(Unspoken: make sense.)* OK.

RENEE. It's all in the article so, keep an eye out for it.

JOSHUA. OK.

RENEE. Alright.

What else?

JOSHUA. Nothing. I'm just – doing homework.

RENEE. Alright. Bye dear.

ELLEN. So she didn't say anything? That's the playbook. Pretend nothing happened.

JOSHUA. Maybe she doesn't know, that I know.

ELLEN. She knows.

I called Grandpa.

JOSHUA. You did?

ELLEN. He was furious. "You should not have told him!" Too bad. Get someone else to keep your secrets.

JOSHUA. But I didn't bring it up to her, so…

ELLEN. You shouldn't have to! You're the child! She's the adult! If she's adult enough to get fall-down drunk at her grandson's play, she's adult enough to pick up the phone and say, you're probably wondering why I left: I was drunk!

JOSHUA. Why are you so angry?

ELLEN. Why aren't you?

JOSHUA. Because, it's, I mean, it's an illness, no? She's sick.

ELLEN. Yeah, she's sick all right.

JOSHUA. It's a disease, isn't it?

ELLEN. No. Joshua – she had every resource at her disposal, every chance to get better – she didn't want to. One time, we got her to call a psychiatrist – she hated psychiatrists – but she called, with all of us standing around, and said:

RENEE. My family thinks I'm sick.

ELLEN. Not:

RENEE. I need help.

ELLEN. Not:

RENEE. I have a disease.

ELLEN. Just:

RENEE. My family thinks I'm sick.

ELLEN. She'd go to the doctor, then drink, and then say:

RENEE. He couldn't fix me.

ELLEN. The structure of that sentence!

RENEE. He couldn't fix me.

ELLEN. Completely passive. Like it was the doctor's fault! She had every resource – She ran a nursing business for Chrissake.

JOSHUA. Why do you think she drinks?

ELLEN. Who knows? Who cares? One time, she said:

RENEE. My mother preferred Martin.

ELLEN. Some bullshit like that.

JOSHUA. Maybe that's true. Grandpa won't let Nana put up any photos of her mother. Maybe she really was a bitch.

ELLEN. Of course she was. So what? Nana's a bitch – I don't drink. I'm a bitch – do you drink?

JOSHUA. You're not a bitch.

ELLEN. Of course I am. It's one of my best qualities.

And my father…

JOSHUA. What'd Grandpa do?

ELLEN. Nothing! He was supposed to protect us. If it is a disease – *if* – he didn't have it. He should have taken us and left, but he said she said she would kill herself.

"Then let her!"

"No, I could never do that."

It would have inconvenienced him too much. And he enabled it. When she was trying not to drink, he'd encourage her. "You can have one glass, hon, go on, hon."

JOSHUA. She said she would kill herself?

ELLEN. So he says. Who knows. Who cares.

(Beat.)

JOSHUA. Mom?

Can we still do family book club?

ELLEN. What?

JOSHUA. Remember? We were gonna do a book club this summer? You me Dad Nana and Grandpa. Can we still?

*(***ELLEN** *looks at him: Is he seriously asking this of her?)*

ELLEN. Sure.

JOSHUA. We each choose a book. First up, Nana's pick: *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Did you finish it?

ELLEN. I – skimmed.

JOSHUA. You didn't finish?

ELLEN. Joshua, I have a full time job, get off my back.

JOSHUA. Dad works full time, he finished.

ELLEN. Well if Dad wants to start doing all the grocery shopping and making doctor's appointments and dentist appointments and orthodontist appointments and researching summer camps and coordinating transportation and and and then maybe I'd have time to finish *Cry, the Beloved Country*, but I don't see that happening, do you?

JOSHUA. Nana and Grandpa arrive. The hellos are ice cold.

RENEE. Hello Ellen.

ELLEN. Hello. Did you come sober, or drunk?

JOSHUA. Grandpa and I start yelling, a chorus of: Mom! Ellen! Mom! Ellen!

RENEE. No I'm not drunk!

ELLEN. How should I know?

JOSHUA. And yet, aside from this small outburst – we actually sit down and discuss *Cry* the fucking *Beloved Country*.

RENEE. I found the character of Gertrude, the prostitute, to be most interesting.

ELLEN. Why?

(The **WOMEN** *go back to their books, then exit.)*

JOSHUA. There is no straight line to tell this story. One year my mother isn't speaking to her parents; the next, she's throwing a birthday dinner for her father. It's confusing.

JOSHUA. For me, it's the beginning of something else: understanding that this thing we were all in, this family, is just a collection of individuals. It is the first time I understand two people, or three people, can look at the same thing and see something entirely different. Even the most benign object. Even just a chair.

Can I tell you about this chair? I love it. It's one of a pair, in Nana's apartment. I have always loved Nana's apartment. For one thing, it's in New! York! City! For another, it's filled with beautiful objects. Most of them she inherited from her uncle. He worked for a wealthy bachelor named Ferdi Schluss, and when Ferdi died, he left everything to Nana's uncle. I never questioned this story: A *bachelor* boss leaves everything to a favorite… *employee*?

Never mind. The items are magnificent: Helleu portraits of Gibson girls with long necks and piled-up hair, Meissen figurines on marble bases, and my favorite: two matching high-backed love seats, covered in pale green silk. Nana bought these, the summer she went to Paris for furniture. Like out of an Edith Wharton novel.

To sit in one of these chairs is to know my Nana, on a cellular level, before she landed on the Upper East Side – born and raised in Brooklyn, from immigrant stock – and yet such aspirations. Her grandmother was French – in a world of Poles and Hungarians, this was something to cling to – so she returned to the motherland, bought a reproduction of something worthy of a palace and shipped it home, so when company came over, and she set out a plate of brie and crackers and cold green grapes, she could sit in this chair, shoulders back, neck erect, and pretend, if only for a moment, she mattered.

*(***RENEE** *enters.)*

RENEE. In the summer of 1960, I packed up my children and took them to Europe. Len was working, he would fly over later while the children were at camp in Switzerland, learning French. I'd always wanted to travel aboard a ship, so I booked a suite on the *Rotterdam*, and the three children and I sailed the Atlantic. It was marvelous, it really was. Ellen got sea sick, of course she complained the whole time, but to wake each morning and see blue sky, and blue ocean…

When we got to Europe, I dropped the children off in Switzerland, kissed them goodbye, and got on the train to Paris. I checked into my hotel – a little nothing of a place in the eighth – went upstairs, took off my shoes, and lay across the bed. I was thirty-five. I had been married eleven years. I had three children under the age of nine. I worked full time beside my mother at the nursing registry, and I realized this would be the first night I would be alone in more than a decade. No snoring lump next to me to disturb my sleep, no rat-a-tat-tat on my shoulder at three in the morning because someone felt ill or had had a bad dream. My life was my own, it belonged to me, if only for two days before Len arrived. Imagine: it's 1960, you're thirty-five, and you're alone in Paris.

I made sure to dress impeccably. I felt the eyes of everyone the next morning as I went down to breakfast – who is this elegant woman, sitting by herself? I finished my café and walked the streets to the Left Bank, and the antique shops I'd read so much about. I arrived at the Jacques Bodart Company, where two darling high-backed love seats, covered in pale green silk, beckoned from the window. How might I feel, back in Brooklyn, walking past my living room and seeing them, catching the afternoon light? I went inside, sat in one of the chairs, more tired than I had realized, placed my hands on the arm rests, and hoped that once I brought them to America, anytime I sat in them again, I could conjure this moment, when I had felt so free.

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