

# TOMORROW TOO

## THE BRENDA MONOLOGUES

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BRENDA

Long before I got sick, way back  
before I had Jack, before Larry,  
I wanted another part besides my own.  
I wanted to crawl inside another skin,  
not just to look around but *be* that one  
a while -- the only kind of make-believe  
I could believe in. To come alive as someone else  
changed everything. In high school, in *The Crucible*,  
nobody wanted to be Abigail,  
a troublemaker who danced wild in the woods  
and never 'fessed up. I loved that role.  
I could feel the parents in their seats, afraid –  
that's how good I was at being Abigail.  
And ever since, I've loved to say her name.

## ABIGAIL

Head-first into the world, my hair  
before the rest of me, the doctor pulling.  
I cried out long before they saw me,  
wailing in the womb-wash, before the doctor  
lifted me squalling to the bright light.  
Wet dark hair – like Mom’s, Dad said.  
A little Brenda, all agreed, the eyes, the hair,  
the lollapalooza, impatient to get out,  
can’t wait, let me at ‘em, bring it on,  
ready or not, enter Abigail,  
center stage, a drama queen, day one.  
That’s what it must have seemed to them,  
if not to me. I breathed. I fell asleep.

*Who is this Brenda I remind them of?*

## LARRY

We met because she tried to get into my pub  
when she was under 21. O what a tale  
she spun. All yours, boss, my doorman said,  
she won't take no for an answer. I stepped outside  
to hear how she had lost her last ID  
getting stopped by a cop. She was running late  
and gorgeous – flirty and classy at the same time.  
Look, I said, that is one heckuva great story  
I don't believe a word of. So here's the deal:  
I'll let you in – if you give me your number.  
She didn't slap me or flinch. On our first date  
we watched "Titanic" on the pub's big screen.  
It was the day after Sinatra's birthday,  
December 13th. *Fly Me to the Moon...*

BRENDA

My left thumb discovered the lump  
as I tried on a snug new halter top.  
Not a lump exactly, not a marble or a pea –  
a shapeless hardness underneath, invisible  
except to a thumb. It didn't hurt.  
My girlfriend made me get it checked.  
A cyst, they said. The biopsy was optional  
is what I heard, let's check it in three months, OK?  
OK. (I can't stand needles anyway.)  
I got the postcard in the mail – I did.  
Jack was 2. A crazy time. When is it not?  
I let it slide, and no one called. Moot point now  
but I was thirty, feeling fine, no family history.  
And no one called. I let it slide. I did.

DR. MOORE

First I tell the patient who I am  
and why I'm calling, why me  
instead of the oncologist who's out of town.  
I talk slowly, but try not to sound  
grave. I make sure she's at home  
or somewhere she can talk, and not alone.  
Then I take a deep breath, and start to break  
the news. But not like it was breaking news.  
Except it is – to them it always is.  
I can't just hate that part – the messenger –  
because it matters so. Whatever they hear  
I want it to leave room for hope. The only way  
is to remember there's this Brenda  
on the other end, who could be me.

## BRENDA

After the doctor called I felt suspended  
upside down which is funny – well, not funny but  
I had just told Lillian the suspense was killing me –  
you know, how not knowing could be worse  
than what a biopsy might have to say.  
And then my phone went off and I could tell  
the news was bad before she said it when she asked  
Are you in a place where you can talk?  
The rest I don't remember – something about a mass  
and *all we can* and that weird word *margins*.  
I saw an open book and a hand scribbling  
red ink in the clean white space  
at the edge of the page, and then I was sobbing  
and I handed the phone to Larry and I ran.



## CANCER

Call me The Crab – the other word has such  
a bad name. I move sideways, hide inside  
my shell. I break in unannounced  
when something tiny no one understands  
goes haywire in a cell. Leave blame out of it.  
Just say I run amok, a flourishing  
malignancy disguised as growth,  
the quintessential inside job.  
My work, up close under a microscope,  
is beautiful – abstract expressionist –  
damage soaking up the dye in purple swirls.  
Don't call me terrorist – you  
who bomb and burn, poison, cut and run.  
I'm part of you and I will not be gone.

## BRENDA

I don't bet on horses but I'll play the odds  
like anyone. I gave up wine, cut back  
on coffee to one cup. Then in my fifth month  
the world turned upside down, its lottery  
of crosswise odds no longer playable.  
Here's the bet those odds have made for me –  
I'm sitting in a row of easy chairs,  
the youngest patient in the infusion room,  
while the Red Devil drips into my vein.  
Long story short, my baby needs Mom  
to stick around. But chemo doesn't come decaf.  
How can the Devil's poison find the cells  
it needs to find to kill, but not the rest –  
and not the other one of me, unborn?

BRENDA

One day at a time never made much sense  
till now. It seemed like giving in.  
At 31? With a 3-year-old,  
another on the way? I know a year  
is made of days, but I can't bring myself  
to say my life might not be made of years.  
This afternoon I go to Good Samaritan  
to see two doctors, one for me,  
the other for the one we're calling Abigail.  
They're both, of course, for both of us.  
If their news is good – the baby growing,  
the cancer not in sight – I'll praise the day.  
If not, I'm grateful for today. It is a gift.  
But when tomorrow comes, I want that too.

BRENDA

Soon as the first few random tufts came loose,  
I wanted it all off, done with, gone.  
Head bowed, I sat on a kitchen stool  
while Larry buzzed the clippers back and forth.  
It fell in fistfuls. Jack climbed into my lap,  
handed me the wig, "Mommy's new hair,"  
and helped me put it on, then looked amazed.  
I hugged him so he'd know I was still Mom  
and so he wouldn't see Mom's tears.  
Larry took my new round face between his hands.  
I'm fine, I said. *No, fine! Really, I'm fine.*  
The mirror hurt: When you lose your hair,  
it's like your eyes have nowhere else to go.  
Funny, I never knew I had a crooked nose.

## BRENDA

Who knew a moment could contain such joy  
and grief? I wear a bra when we make love.  
Or like that day when, draggy from chemo,  
I saw my daughter's hair on ultrasound.  
Today as I was dressing, Jack ran off  
with my prosthesis. When it slipped  
out of his hand and slid across the floor,  
he shrieked in glee. What could I do  
but giggle through my tears, join in  
a 3-year-old's delight at this outlandish world.  
I've seen the same confounded look  
in Larry's eyes. He tries so hard  
never to let me see him scared.  
I do the same for him. Sometimes it works.

## BRENDA

At first, I wouldn't leave the house without the wig. Friends gushed over my new 'do. Weeks now, and everyone is used to it but me. Haven't told Larry, but last night I put the wig away for good. It isn't me or mine. Too sharp and shiny, perfect like my hair was never meant to look. It made me feel like someone else just when I wanted most to be myself. Being me right now means going bald and growing back. A wig can't grow. Need be, I'll wear a scarf. And I know this: Whether mine grows back by then or not, when Abigail arrives I'll have her hair.

## ABIGAIL

The nurse dry-wiped me off, and Dad  
cut the cord. It seemed forever  
before they gave me back to Mom,  
her exhausted whispery smile,  
and all she said – exhaled – was *ohmygod*.  
No one else heard, above the hubbub  
and Beatles oldies on the boombox,  
the playlist of the anesthesiologist.  
I didn't hear her either till I learned  
to read her lips on video. The nurse  
settled me against my mother and an arm  
kept me from falling, held me to her neck,  
her chest, her heart. Her missing breast –  
it would be years before I knew.

## LARRY

Sometimes she talked about it as a plot,  
a play the diagnosis cast her in  
to be herself, her hardest role by far.  
She dreamed of conjuring a different script –  
made up, but real, of voices that she heard  
or overheard. Each voice a part of the truth  
she learned from cancer and that big swerve.  
She bought a spiral notebook just for this.  
I never asked to see inside. I knew  
it would come out one day. And when I found  
the notebook afterward, after all this,  
here's what I found: three parts, each with  
its cursive title: *Larry. Jack. The Doctors.*  
And that was all – every page a blank.



## ABIGAIL

My mother was an Abigail  
before I was. At seventeen, on stage  
in high school, Hawthorne, California,  
where the Beach Boys went, she played the part  
of Abigail in that Salem witchcraft play.  
Her favorite of all the characters  
she ever tried, which sounded weird.  
That was before I understood  
how you could want to be somebody else  
or want someone so bad it's not just you.  
Or how they'd make a wish like that for me  
and Mom, the one I came from, Brenda.  
She was me before I was, before I came alive  
or anybody wanted me to stand for her.

## BRENDA

All those older women in the waiting room –  
was this the day? Or did they know?  
The stillness in that room felt like  
they knew. No eye-to-eye, no chit-chat.  
And me in my red high-tops, headphones,  
a Mickey Mouse t-shirt – pure Disneyland.  
Thinking: *Look beyond*. The tumor's gone, out,  
margins clear, the stage downgraded – *Yes!* –  
from 3 to 2 – gigantic little numbers.  
When I walked in – waddled, Jack would say –  
the others all looked up, saw me *expecting*  
and couldn't help but smile – sweet wistful smiles  
as if my waiting was the far side of theirs.  
But that was last year. Now I'm one of them.

MARIA (Mama)

She no tell me nothing how she sick.  
My back it hurts she say. That's all.  
Carry baby all the time, all that  
pulling too much it hurts. That's all she say.  
Three months ago, November, she come home.  
I know something not right but she no say.  
She wear a wig she wrap it in a scarf.  
I see. She say it just for style. I know  
but she no tell me nothing how she sick.  
Then she call me from the hospital  
it is her back she say my back it hurts.  
Three days and she is gone. I find out  
from Sonia and Armando. My baby gone.  
Even when she doesn't know, a mother knows.

## LARRY

My saving grace was having things to do  
that couldn't go undone. Like telling Jack.  
Not that I knew how to talk about forever  
but when the others, mindful, cleared the room  
we found ourselves, just me and him, alone.  
I kneeled and held his bony shoulders and I said  
Jack Seamus, something terrible happened  
and...and I told him. Said the words *Mom died*.  
He made a goofy face. She died? is all he said,  
his eyes a saving grace of innocence.  
Yes. I pulled him close and promised  
something about how me and him and Abby  
would live a long, long time, remembering.  
He didn't cry. I cried for both of us.

## LARRY

How do you ask your son, the 4-year-old,  
if he will help pick out the urn to hold  
his mother's ashes? You just do. Then pray.  
The funeral home had dozens on display –  
plain or gaudy – brass, pewter, porcelain,  
ceramic, stone. With angels, dolphins, butterflies –  
I swear – a hummingbird, a lighthouse, pyramids.  
Jack Seamus studied all of them. I cringed  
until he pointed to a shapely one, cream with roses,  
simple and dignified – beautiful.  
I asked: Is this the one you think Mom would want?  
You can say a thing like that at times  
like this. And Jack did right by nodding silently.  
Dear Brenda, you would be so proud of him.

## BRENDA

Hello. My name is Brenda. I don't live here anymore...OK, let me start again...  
My name is Brenda and I'm actually not here at all. I know that sounds dramatic but it's not. The drama's over. I've been on stage and this is nothing like a play, nothing like the round-the-clock suspense when I was sick. Will Jack remember me? Will Abigail? Will you? Please, don't hear a bitterness that isn't here. The ending broke my heart before it came, and when it came I was already gone. Don't worry: I am safe from hurt and from all knowing and the world is yours. Remember how it didn't end.