

PRUDENCE

A One-Act Play

By

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CHARACTERS

MARGIE – 39 years old. A very capable woman who looks younger than she is but sounds much older on the inside.

CATHY – 23 years old. A recent college graduate and still wide-eyed and idealistic.

TIME

Present

SETTING

A quiet café in Chicago.

NOTES

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Chicago. A quiet café.

MARGIE takes her coffee and sits down at a table. She takes her bag off her shoulders and sets it on the seat of one of the chairs close to her. Margie then spreads her paper out in front of her on the table and sips her coffee.

CATHY enters the café', stands and stares at Margie. Margie slowly becomes aware that she is being watched and gradually looks up. Cathy tentatively approaches Margie, who eyes her suspiciously. Margie carefully slips her hand into her handbag.

MARGIE
Can I help you?

CATHY
Are you Margerette Blackburn?

MARGIE
Who wants to know?

CATHY
My name is Catherine Adele Wooley.

Cathy, who speaks with an Oklahoma accent, sits down at the table with Margie.

MARGIE
Catherine Adele Wooley, do you recall anyone inviting you to sit at my table?

Cathy jumps back up.

CATHY
Oh, I'm terribly sorry, I didn't mean to . . .

MARGIE
What do you want?

CATHY
I'm looking for Margerette Blackburn.

MARGIE
Why?

CATHY
I'm her daughter.

Brief pause.

MARGIE
Have a seat, Cathy.

Cathy looks at her a moment, then sits at the table with Margie. Margie takes her hand out of her handbag.

CATHY
So. Are you Margerette Black . . .

MARGIE
Call me Margie, everyone calls me Margie. Yes, I am she.

CATHY
I'm uh . . . I'm your daughter. You gave me up for adoption when you had me . . .

MARGIE
I know Cathy, I was there, I remember doing it. How did you find me?

CATHY
Well, I got your name from the agency, the one I was adopted through . . .

MARGIE
That couldn't have been easy.

CATHY
It wasn't, actually, took a lawsuit and a court order just to get your name released. Your phone number is unlisted, no email address, nothing. I had to hire a private detective to find your home address. I went to your house yesterday morning but this large black woman answered the door and denied that you lived there, denied even knowing you. She threatened to call the police if I came back and slammed the door on me. She was very mean. She didn't even give me a chance to tell her who I was.

MARGIE
That's my roommate, Fran. She's that way. How did you find me here?

CATHY
Well, I saw this café in your neighborhood and thought that it was the perfect spot to stop for coffee in the morning

before work. I got up early this morning, waited down the street until I saw you come out of the house and followed you here.

MARGIE

That's very resourceful of you, Cathy. Let's hope Fran didn't spot you following me, she's very protective and things could get ugly.

CATHY

My Lord, she was simply awful. How can you live with someone like that?

MARGIE

Fran has many good qualities.

CATHY

I think she just likes being mean.

Very brief pause.

MARGIE

So. You found me. What can I do for you?

CATHY

Well, I was hoping that maybe we could get to know each other.

MARGIE

No offense, Cathy, but if I had wanted to get to know you, then I wouldn't have put you up for adoption in the first place.

Brief pause. Cathy's face bunches up.

CATHY

Oh my. Oh my goodness. I don't know why . . . I can't understand why you're being so unfriendly.

MARGIE

I'm not deliberately trying to be unfriendly, Cathy, I'm simply being straightforward and honest. I find life works best for me that way.

CATHY

I don't understand it, your roommate lied about you living in your house, threatened to throw me in jail, when I finally found you and asked you if you are you are you

looked at me like I'm some psycho killer, grilled me with questions and with your hand stuck in your bag like you were gonna pull out a baseball bat and hit me over the head with it. What's going on, you got a gun in there or something?

MARGIE

As a matter of fact, yes, I do have a gun in my bag.

CATHY

You do have a gun? Oh my Lord! I'd say that's being unfriendly!

MARGIE

I'd say that it's just being careful. Please keep your voice down. I have a license and permit for it and I'm perfectly within my rights. In my line of work I have to be careful.

CATHY

What are you, some sort of government agent or something?

MARGIE

No. So, what do you want?

CATHY

I just, I just wanted to meet you, that's all, find out a little bit of who you are and tell you who I am. Is that so terrible?

Brief pause.

MARGIE

I guess not. All right.

CATHY

Really?

MARGIE

I have about ten minutes. I'll let you have them. So . . . how's your life? Where did you end up?

CATHY

Well, I was adopted by a wonderful couple, Diane and Russell Wooley, from Lehigh, Okalahoma. I'm twenty-three years old, graduated college last spring with a degree in education, right now I have a job as a receptionist but I'm

planning on grad school this fall. I'm hoping to be a elementary teacher someday.

MARGIE

That's nice. Your parents, are they nice people? Did you have a good childhood, get everything you need?

CATHY

Oh, absolutely, very loving parents, I never lacked for anything as a child. Mom and Dad loved me like their own.

MARGIE

Well. Okay then. That's good. That's really good.

CATHY

So do you have any other children, are you married . . .

MARGIE

No, to both questions. How about you, you married, have a boyfriend?

CATHY

I'm engaged, his name is Rod and he's just the best. He's an engineer, builds grain elevators, we've been together three years. He's the best.

MARGIE

Great. That's great.

Brief pause. Margie looks at her watch and reaches for her bag.

MARGIE

Well, it was nice to meet you, but I should be going.

CATHY

Wait! Can't we talk some more?

MARGIE

I'm afraid I'm on a rather tight schedule, so . . .

Cathy takes out a card from her purse and tries to hand it to Margie.

CATHY

Here are all my contact numbers back home. Is it possible for us to stay in touch? I'd really . . .

MARGIE
I don't think so, no.

CATHY
It hasn't even been ten minutes yet.

MARGIE
I'm sorry, but I really have to be going.

Margie stands, picks up her bag and starts to walk away.

CATHY
Do you really hate me that much?

Margie stops.

MARGIE
I don't hate you. I'm just not . . . interested in starting a relationship with you.

CATHY
But you're my mother.

MARGIE
Diane Wooley is your mother. I'm simply the woman that gave birth to you.

CATHY
That's something, at least.

MARGIE
It was something.

CATHY
Isn't it at least worth a whole ten minutes?

Margie looks at Cathy for a moment, sighs and sits back down.

MARGIE
I suppose that it is, yes.

CATHY
Can I ask you something?

MARGIE
You can ask.

CATHY

Why did you put me up for adoption?

MARGIE

I was sixteen years old when I had you, Cathy. I put you up for adoption because I didn't have the means or the money to take care of you.

CATHY

Why didn't you ask your parents for help? They could have helped raise me, couldn't they?

MARGIE

They could have but they didn't. They kicked me out of the house when they found out I was pregnant.

CATHY

They did what? But . . . but they're your parents, why would they do something horrible like that?

MARGIE

Lots of parents all over the world do horrible things to their kids all the time. One thing I've learned for certain is that the ability to procreate doesn't preclude the potential for ignorance. I managed to survive somehow, and I gave birth to you. I gave you up for adoption so that you would have a happy childhood and not go hungry. It sounds like that's what came to be and for that I'm truly grateful.

CATHY

Didn't you want me?

MARGIE

I wanted what's best for you, Cathy, that's what I wanted.

CATHY

I don't understand why we can't stay in touch.

MARGIE

The time of my life when I had you happened to be a very scary, uncertain time and while it's not anything I'm ashamed of, it not something I look forward to being reminded of, either. I have a different life now. Don't take it personally.

CATHY

Okay. Okay. There was one other big thing I wanted to ask you, um . . . who was my father?

MARGIE

Again, your father is Russell Wooley and your mother is Diane Wooley. They raised you, they're your parents.

CATHY

But who impregnated you? They said . . . the agency said that there was only your name on the birth certificate.

MARGIE

That's right.

CATHY

So who was . . .

MARGIE

I'm not saying.

CATHY

I have the right to know who my father is.

MARGIE

And I told you, your father is Russell Wooley. As far as who I was involved with when I was sixteen, that's my business and nobody else's.

CATHY

But . . .

MARGIE

There are no buts. I don't have to talk to you. I'm not required by law to tell you anything that I don't want to. I can sit here and not say a word if you want. It's your choice, it's your ten minutes.

Brief pause. Cathy looks away, clearing her throat.

CATHY

Okay. Okay. So, um . . . what have you been doing with your life?

MARGIE

After I gave birth to you, I got a job as a waitress and did that for a long time. I went to night school, earned my GED and after that my college diploma, all while working full time at various jobs. I had some hard times, but I

survived. I completed my Masters two years ago and now I work full time as a counselor at Planned Parenthood.

CATHY

You work at Planned Parenthood?

MARGIE

Yes.

CATHY

Isn't that . . . isn't that where they do . . . abortions?

MARGIE

It's one of the places a woman can go for an abortion. We do other things there as well, but we're known for that.

CATHY

Is that why you carry a gun in your bag?

MARGIE

Yes. A doctor and a couple of the counselors have been attacked in the past, and there have been bomb threats, among other things. I also volunteer at a shelter for battered women two nights a week and find carrying a firearm while doing that to be very prudent.

CATHY

So . . . you do abortions?

MARGIE

The clinic doctors perform abortions. I counsel women that are considering abortion.

CATHY

Do you try and talk them out of it?

MARGIE

I try to help them discover what their very best choice is.

CATHY

Which sometimes means they have an abortion.

MARGIE

It often means that, yes.

CATHY

I could never have an abortion.

MARGIE
All right.

CATHY
I don't know how anyone could ever have an abortion.

MARGIE
How is not too hard, it's usually the why that makes it difficult.

CATHY
You're killing babies, how can you do that?

MARGIE
We don't kill babies, so just disabuse yourself of that notion right here and now. We abort fetuses in the first trimester of a pregnancy. We help women and girls better their lives by terminating unwanted pregnancies, that's what we do, it's a difficult thing but also legal, very necessary and anyone that thinks otherwise is just fooling themselves. Jesus Christ, you sound like one of those crazed Catholics that are constantly picketing us.

CATHY
I AM Catholic, thank you very much!

Brief pause. Margie puts her head in her hands.

MARGIE
Oh my God. You're Catholic. Someone somewhere has a sick sense of humor.

CATHY
What's that mean? What's wrong with being Catholic, do you have a problem with Catholics?

MARGIE
As a matter of fact, yes I do, I have a problem with any organization that is sexist, homophobic and ignorant and right now as far as I'm concerned Catholicism fits the bill!

CATHY
Oh my Lord, you're one of those atheist lesbian activists, aren't you? That explains everything!

MARGIE
What? No, I'm not a lesbian!

CATHY

You're not married and . . .oh! You even LIVE with a woman.

MARGIE

Living with another woman doesn't make you a lesbian! What's wrong with you!

CATHY

I should have known! That black woman at your house, she was definitely a lesbian!

MARGIE

Her name is Fran and she's my roommate and yes, she is a lesbian and yes, I am an atheist but no, I am not a lesbian, I'm just her roommate.

CATHY

You're one of those atheist lesbian activists, I was born to an atheist lesbian activist. I can't believe it.

MARGIE

For the last time, I am not a lesbian. Believe me, Cathy, if I were a lesbian, I would have no problem telling you that I was. And so what if I was? There is nothing wrong with being a lesbian.

CATHY

But you are an atheist, you hate Catholics and I'm Catholic, so that means you hate me, don't you?

MARGIE

I don't hate Catholics, I hate Catholicism, there's a difference, and let me tell you something Missy, you'd be surprised at just how many Catholic boys and girls I find sitting in my office in need of the services OF MY CLINIC!

CATHY

I suppose you're sorry that you didn't have an abortion when you were pregnant with me!

MARGIE

I wasn't sorry then but I'm sure STARTING TO BE NOW!

Brief pause. Cathy starts to cry.

CATHY

This is horrible.

MARGIE
Now she cries, of course, she cries.

CATHY
This isn't how I thought this was going to go at all. Oh my Lord.

MARGIE
How did you think it was going to go?

CATHY
Not like this! This is awful. This is horrible.

Cathy puts her head in her hands and cries even harder. Margie looks at her a moment, then reaches into her handbag and pulls out some Kleenex. She hands the Kleenex to Cathy.

MARGIE
This is not that awful, trust me. There are more horrible things happening in the world than this.

CATHY
It's just terrible, it's simply just terrible.

MARGIE
What's so terrible? We shouted at each other, so what? People shout at me all the time and I shout right back. It's not the worse thing.

CATHY
I guess I had it in my head that we would talk and get to know one another, get close and find out stuff about each other.

MARGIE
Well, I would say that's definitely what's happening, wouldn't you?

CATHY
I thought it would be happier than this. I thought we would maybe be friends.

MARGIE
I told you, Cathy, I don't make friends very easily. Don't take it personally.

CATHY

I thought maybe you'd be happier to meet me and find out how I turned out.

MARGIE

I wasn't unhappy to meet you. I'm a little displeased with the Catholicism choice, of course, but for the most part, I'm glad you were adopted by a nice couple who love you and took care of you in a way that I was not able to, at that time. I'm . . . I'm very happy to know that, to know that I made the right and prudent choice at that time in my life. I really am. Believe me.

CATHY

Yeah?

MARGIE

Yes.

Margie looks at her watch.

MARGIE

I'm really late. I think we've both scratched our itch more than enough, wouldn't you say? I should be going.

CATHY

But . . .

Margie stands and gathers her bag.

MARGIE

It's been ten minutes. I'm glad you've come, but I really . . .

CATHY

Margie?

MARGIE

Yes?

CATHY

Why didn't you?

MARGIE

Why didn't I what?

CATHY

Why didn't you have an abortion? You could have, right?

MARGIE

I could have, yes. It was harder to do back then, but not impossible. I could have.

CATHY

So why didn't you?

MARGIE

What difference does it make?

CATHY

It might have made a difference to me. Why didn't you?

Margie looks at her a moment, sighs and sits back down.

MARGIE

Because I was Catholic at the time.

CATHY

You're Catholic?

MARGIE

Was Catholic. I'm not Catholic anymore. I got over it.

CATHY

What happened, why are you not Catholic anymore?

MARGIE

Two primary reasons, one, I got myself educated and learned how to think for myself, educated enough to see through all the malarkey and crap they call the church. As for two . . .
. two . . .

CATHY

What? What's two?

MARGIE

Doesn't matter, forget about two.

CATHY

I'm not gonna forget about two, tell me what the two is.

MARGIE

You don't want to know what two is.

CATHY

I do too want to know what two is.

MARGIE

You can't handle two.

CATHY

I can handle a lot more than you think, I tracked you down, didn't I? I sued a government agency, I hired a private detective, I faced a large shouting black lesbian, I even managed to get you into a conversation without getting shot. I can handle a lot, thank you very much.

Short pause.

MARGIE

Reason number two, the man that impregnated me was my priest.

CATHY

Oh no. Oh my Lord.

MARGIE

The Lord had nothing to do with it, it was a man wearing the collar of a priest. He took advantage of me when I was fifteen, and I'm fairly certain that I wasn't the first nor the last. I wouldn't tell my folks who did it, and because of that they kicked me out of their house. The priest just let them do it and said nothing.

CATHY

But . . . but you can't blame the church for the actions of one man.

MARGIE

I can blame whomever I choose, Cathy. I can blame the priest, I can blame my parents, I can blame the Pope, I'm a free person to blame or not to blame anybody. For a long time I blamed myself, but I was able to let go of that and now I just blame ignorance, especially organized ignorance, which often comes in the form of a religious or political group.

CATHY

So what happened to him?

MARGIE

He stayed a priest, kept on doing what he was doing for a long time. He died eight years ago, of testicular cancer,

which makes you wonder if there is perhaps somebody watching and doling out justice. But I sincerely doubt it.

Brief pause.

CATHY

I'm sorry it was so tough for you, back then.

MARGIE

There are a lot of people that have had it worse, believe me. I survived. That's the good thing. So. Well. Has curiosity been honored?

CATHY

So this is it then?

MARGIE

Yes. It's the prudent thing. You have a pair of wonderful and loving, if somewhat misinformed, parents at home. Go back home and honor the work they've done. Get married, be happy and chase your dreams, whatever they are. Just do me the favor of reading some book other than the bible and I will be pleased. Okay?

CATHY

All right. Thank you. I just wanted to know where I came from.

Margie stands.

MARGIE

Isn't it obvious? You come from Oklahoma.

**Margie looks at her for a moment, and then walks away.
Cathy picks her card up from the table.**

CATHY

Margie, wait.

Margie stops and looks at Cathy. Cathy holds her card out to her.

CATHY

Take this. Just in case.

MARGIE

I can't promise that I will ever . . .

CATHY

I know. Take it anyway. Just in case. You never know when you might need a friend, right?

Margie hesitates, and then takes the card from her.

MARGIE

Thank you. Just in case.

CATHY

Just in case.

Margie pauses for a moment, steps forward and kisses Cathy on the top of her head. Margie exits. Cathy sits quietly.

CATHY

It's the prudent thing.

End of Play.