

THE FAIR BABY

A One-Act Play
By Nicole J. Burton

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Cast of Characters

SIS 31, a lawyer living in the Upper East Side of New York City
MATT 29, her brother, a stay-at-home dad in Baltimore

Setting

Scene 1

Takes place in the dark with flashlights in the basement of Mom's Baltimore row house

Scene 2

Takes place in a brightly lit office furnished with an examining table

The time is February 1989.

Pre-Show Music: Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely"

Scene 1: The Basement

(AT RISE: A box pulses RED on the dark stage. The actors enter through the audience in the dark with flashlights. The RED light dims. As they reach the stage, it goes out. The stage is full of boxes.)

SIS

No matter what anyone says, Canton Baltimore's *not* coming back in 1989! We'll be *lucky* to sell. The market's horrible.

MATT

I have to wait up here.

SIS

Oh, no. Get down here.

MATT

But...

SIS

He's not coming. Call someone else... there might be something worth keeping down here...

(goes further)

... although *God knows what!*

(MATT enters)

Why do people keep this stuff? Canning jars! Did you ever see her can anything?

MATT

Should I bag it?

SIS

Hell, no. We need someone to come haul it all away. I just want to see if... Looks like junk.

MATT

She might have put the Will down here.

SIS

She said it was *in the desk*. Did she say anything different to you?

MATT

No.

SIS

(Muttering to herself)

So embarrassing to have your own mother die intestate!

(She passes her flashlight to MATT while she pokes around in boxes)
Hold this.

MATT

Hey, look! The stuffed animals!

SIS

Want 'em?

MATT

(MATT picks one up, then another, from a box, dusts them off)
Sure! It's Leppy! And Henry! You remember Henry the Cat?

SIS

No.

MATT

Sure, you do. He's got a zipper in his stomach, you can stuff stuff inside him. I used to put my candy in there. Hey, good to see ya, guy! Oops.

(MATT juggles the flashlights to play with Henry, drops one, retrieves it.)

SIS

If I were Mom, where... Why wasn't it with the Deed?

MATT

Maybe she never had a Will.

SIS

She said she did!

MATT

Maybe she thought you'd yell at her.

SIS

That's ridiculous! What's in here?

(MATT shines flashlight where she points; SIS pulls out stacks of old bills)

MATT

I can't believe she's in the ground.

SIS

Believe it.

MATT

We'll sure miss her.

SIS

Funny how people turn syrupy over grandchildren.

MATT

She wasn't syrupy. She loved them!

SIS

Could be.

MATT

How much will we get?

SIS

Forty, fifty grand. Nothing's moving *in* Baltimore. It's like Newark, New Jersey, the kiss of death.

MATT

It's close to the water.

SIS

It's close to the *Port!* Who wants to live near the Port of Baltimore? The wind comes off the water, it's cold, the back stairs are falling down. And look at that furnace—it's a dinosaur.

MATT

(Casting the flashlight around him)

It's not that bad.

SIS

The neighborhood's full of druggies and winos. Even the Can Company's closing. I'm surprised no one's squatting... If this were New York, there'd be a whole punk band and a squad of Puerto Rican anarchists living here.

MATT

It's not *that* bad.

SIS

Shine the light over here.

(SIS opens some more boxes)

MATT

I'll call another electric guy tomorrow. Sis, if we get fifty grand, I'll get half, right?

SIS

Less fees and closing costs. We might see twenty grand each.

MATT

Could be more! The bus driver said Canton's ripe for redevelopment. He said they've made a plan and Canton's coming back...

SIS

Sweetheart, Mt. Washington may come back. Or Northwood. But Canton? Please! They're tearing everything down to put up a highway.

MATT

Do we have to pay taxes?

SIS

I think we're exempt.

MATT

So I might get... enough to buy a house?

SIS

(Opening another box)

Who needs *a hundred* used styrofoam meat trays?!

MATT

She used to mix paint on them.

(He pushes the box in a corner)

... If we get enough, Joy and me want to buy a house with a yard. She wants pink climbing roses.

SIS

Pink climbing roses?

MATT

Yeah... Why not?

(He opens up another box)

Empty baby food jars. For storing paint. She brought them home from the hospital.

SIS

If she lied and there's no Will, *you'll* have to be the personal rep. I can't do it, I'm out of state!

MATT

Maybe it'll turn up. We should check under her mattress! ... Think we could buy a place for twenty grand?

SIS

Give me these.

(She takes the flashlights)

Push this into a big pile—that's the junk pile.... You could certainly use the space.... I don't know how you survive in a one-bedroom.

MATT

It's two.

SIS

Feels like one.

MATT

You're just not used to family life.

SIS

I hope I never am. No offense.

MATT

(An old "joke")

None taken! It wasn't bad... until the baby came.

SIS

I never understood...

MATT

Don't even start...

SIS

I didn't bring it up.

MATT

Can we afford a house?

SIS

First-time buyer, FHA with PMI, 5% down plus closing costs...

MATT

Say it in English.

SIS

How much is your rent?

MATT

Four-twenty-five plus utilities.

SIS

You're sunk.

MATT

Cripes.

(Sits dejected on a box)

There go our climbing roses. Everything goes in their mouths or on their backs.
Or under their butts.

SIS

There's a lot of children... You know, if you worked, even part-time, you might
be able...

MATT

I do not want to...

SIS

Okay. You could probably afford something for fifty grand. But remember,
interest rates are going *up*.

MATT

So... someplace like this?

SIS

Exactly. A dump.

MATT

I *like* staying home. I'm a good father.

SIS

I'm sure you are. Too bad nurses don't make more.

MATT

Like lawyers?

SIS

Ha! If nurses made what lawyers make, and lawyers made what nurses make...

MATT

We'd have a hellavu healthcare system!

SIS

Yeah, but *I'd* be in a one bedroom in Jamaica Plain eating Oodles of Noodles.

MATT

But *I'd* be shopping at White Marsh Center and driving the kids to ballet lessons in a Beemer! And *we* would've grown up rich, rich, rich!

SIS

Can't believe my eating Oodles of Noodles would help the New York Judiciary. Oh, look at that!

(Points up on the wall)

MATT

"Pennsylvania," "Maryland," "Delaware," "Wyoming." ... "Wyoming?"

SIS

Dad's legacy.

MATT

(Examines them closely)

Let me see: '69, '65, '74, and '72.

SIS

Nope, too recent for Dad. *Her* legacy. Thanks for the license tags, Mom! They're great! ...Let's check out "The Studio."

(Ventures in closer to where the RED light was)

... keep your eyes open for the Will...

(Rummages)

Nothing, besides her paint-by-numbers. God, some people should be dissuaded from having hobbies.

MATT

She came here for "Peace & Quiet." I wasn't allowed in.

SIS

You were a total pest. You didn't listen. Give me the flashlight.

(MATT hands her a flashlight. She picks up a painting)

This one's not quite as hideous as the rest. I might keep it...

(pause, looks at a few more)

... Nah. Look, "Climbing Roses"—this one's especially for you.

MATT

I kind of like it.

SIS

God! You have her taste, that's scary... Look in that cabinet.

MATT

(MATT opens drawers)

Tubes of paint, rags, couple of art books...

SIS

But no Will. Okay, let's go.

(They turn to go. The RED light pulses dimly, enough to catch her attention. She finds an old trunk and pulls it out)

What's this? This is neat! These old trunks go for hundreds in New York. It could be in here. It's locked—seen any tools, a screwdriver, anything like that?

MATT

Here's a paint can opener. Take this...

(Passes SIS his flashlight and tries to force the lock)

SIS

Don't damage it!

MATT

It's rusty. Hasn't been opened in years.

SIS

Probably just junk. Still, it's a nice old steamer... I'll put it in my living room under the windowsill.

MATT

Ouch, dammit! That hurt.

SIS

Let me try.

MATT

No, I've almost got it... there.

(MATT opens the trunk and steps back)

SIS

Okay... what's this? Ancient clothing...

(SIS rummages in the trunk with the flashlight looking. Yelps in disgust and drops the flashlight. Knocks into MATT who drops his flashlight too. She rubs her hands on her clothes as if to rub off what she has touched.)

Oh! Ohh! Ahh! Oh, God! Ohhh!!!

MATT

(MATT finds his flashlight and shines it into her face, then into the trunk)

What is it? Sis? What is it?

(Flashlights off)

Scene 2: The Baby

(A brightly lit office; a closed, rectangular cardboard box about 24 inches long rests atop an examining table along with some forms and a pen. SIS and MATT are in the office when the lights come up.)

SIS

Thank God he said “no foul play!” That’s all we need in the family. A murderer.

MATT

He said, “Undetermined cause.” He didn’t say “no foul play.”

SIS

He did.

MATT

He didn’t.

SIS

He did!

MATT

Why are you taking it like this? It’s not your baby.

SIS

Of course, it’s not!

MATT

It’s not like you knew anything about it. Did you?

SIS

Of course, I didn’t!

MATT

It’s not everyday you find a skeleton...

SIS

She’s our sister.

MATT

It could be any...

SIS

Anyone’s baby? It was in a locked trunk in her basement.

MATT

There's a lot of stuff in her basement.

SIS

Matt... shut up.

MATT

Fine! But I'm not getting worked up about a skeleton.

SIS

She was *your sister*.

MATT

Mom went to her grave with a few dark secrets. Big deal.

SIS

It *is* a big deal.

MATT

Are you jealous?

SIS

What?

MATT

You're not the oldest anymore! Now you're Miss-Ordinary-in-the-Middle.

(Sing-song voice)

"I'm the oldest, he's my baby brother."

(Mockingly)

Ow!

SIS

You are *so* immature.

MATT

The truth hurts.

SIS

You have no idea about the truth...

MATT

Really? How about this: Mom somehow had a baby. It died, and she stuck it in a trunk. Like everything else; once it goes down those stairs, it *never* comes out. Maybe she got rough with it...

SIS

He said “no foul play or disease!” He said it was crib death.

MATT

No, that’s what you said!

SIS

He said it was possible.

MATT

I wouldn’t put it past her to rough up a crying baby in the old days...

SIS

What/do/you/mean?

MATT

Nothing.

SIS

She was totally indulgent with you.

MATT

Indulgent?!

SIS

She did everything for you.

MATT

She left me with you! She told me I was stupid!

SIS

Well... No offence.

MATT

(The not-funny old “joke” again)

None taken! I’m just saying, Mom could have snuffed her own baby.

SIS

Didn’t you hear the doctor? “No/foul/play!”

MATT

Coroner.

SIS

He’s still a doctor. And the other guy, the anthropologist... he said the same.

MATT

Since when were you choked up about babies? You should come play Auntie.

SIS

I see your kids.

MATT

Yes, you see my kids, maybe once a year. “Hi, kids! See ya!” When you drag yourself away from your little friends...

SIS

I can’t help it if I have an adult life!

MATT

They *are* my life, stupid!

SIS

There’s no need to be insulting. I can’t help it if they don’t like me...

MATT

You always make that sour face... yeah, *that one*. Like they smell bad. Like they’re noisy and messy.

SIS

Last time, I tried to read them a story and they wouldn’t sit still!

MATT

Bulgarian Folktales?

SIS

It was a bestseller!

MATT

Where?

SIS

I’m sure you both try your best.

MATT

We do more than try, we *deal* with it. They can’t help it.

(MATT takes the lid off the box)

What do you want to do with Ole Fair Baby?

SIS

(SIS takes an embroidered handkerchief from the box and examines it)

“World’s Fair 1939.” She must have been 16.

MATT

Think she ever told anyone?

SIS

If she did, they kept it secret. I wonder... do you think she went to the Fair alone? It was in Flushing Meadows. For two summers, like a big amusement park. I looked it up in the encyclopedia.

MATT

Like Kings Dominion?

SIS

No. It didn't have a regular midway. It had exhibits.

MATT

Like the State Fair? The World's Biggest Zucchini?

SIS

No! There was a technology theme. 'The World of Tomorrow.' They had all kinds of new inventions, like Television and Plexiglass and...

MATT

Television? In 1939?

SIS

It was the first time anyone saw it! And they had a ride called "Futurama," an imaginary airplane ride across America. Different countries had different pavilions: Italy, Japan, Germany, France... Do you think it was Dad?

MATT

Dad?! They didn't meet till after the war.

SIS

I guess that's what she's telling us. This baby's from another part of her life.

MATT

Yeah, the part in the trunk.

SIS

A precious part.

MATT

Yeah, the skeleton!

SIS

She would have been 16 when you were born.

MATT

At least there would have been a grownup around.

SIS

Mom *had* to work.

MATT

She *always* worked. Or slept.

SIS

She did not “always work.” I remember plen...

MATT

Except for Mrs. Darby, I’d be dead.

SIS

That busybody.

MATT

You couldn’t lock me in the closet anymore!

SIS

It wasn’t a closet!

MATT

It was a closet! Want me to lock you in? It was dark. I couldn’t breathe!

SIS

You had a flashlight. What was I supposed...? You pulled everything off the shelves, magic-markered up and down the stairs. *I* was responsible! And I was only eight.

MATT

You weren’t eight! And I couldn’t help it!

SIS

You wanted attention. Along came Mrs. Darby and you got it, end of story.

MATT

She set things straight.

SIS

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

(Lays the handkerchief on the table and closes the lid. She takes up the pen and completes the form)

We should bury her next to Mom.

MATT

Whatever.

SIS

I've picked out a name.

MATT

Brrring! goes her alarm clock!

SIS

No need to be cruel.

MATT

“Cruel?” That’s good. Headline: “Arbitration attorney mourns dead fetus.”

SIS

It’s not a fetus, it’s a baby! You ought to know the difference.

MATT

Right, our *sister*, Sister Flushing Meadows.

SIS

That’s not fair.

MATT

That’s what I used to think when you locked me in the closet.

SIS

For Pete’s sake, it was twenty years ago!

MATT

This was 50 years ago!

(Grabs the form)

Let’s toss Ole Bone-Bag in the trash.

SIS

(Protectively)

No! She loved Rebecca!

MATT

Rebecca?

SIS

Yes!

MATT

Rebecca?!

SIS

The Worlds Fair baby. Rebecca May. That's her name.

MATT

You're mental.

SIS

(Takes back the form)

She kept her all these years.

MATT

In the basement.

SIS

In the basement.

MATT

She never threw anything away.

SIS

She kept her because she loved her. Maybe she loved the father. Maybe he died. It was 1939. Maybe he was a French pilot who plummeted to his death when his parachute...

MATT

We'll never know.

SIS

Or maybe he broke her heart. Men can be very tricky sometimes.

MATT

How would you know?

SIS

I know. I have to tell you something. I knew about The Baby.

MATT

You knew this thing was in the basement?!

SIS

No! But a long time ago, she told me she'd had a baby.

MATT

What did she tell you? A *long* time ago?

SIS

I was in college.

MATT

This is very weird.

SIS

She told me never to tell anyone. I wanted to tell you... I'm going to tell you something I never told anyone except her. When I was in college, I got pregnant.

MATT

This is *your* baby?!!!

SIS

No!!

MATT

He said 50 years old.
(*Flapping the hanky*)
"World's Fair 1939"!

SIS

She's not my baby. My baby died. She's our sister... I think.

MATT

You had a baby?

SIS

Yes.

MATT

You had *a baby* out of wedlock?
(*Stunned, then smirks*)
Miss Smarty-Pants?

SIS

Yes, I did once think I knew everything. I did know History. And I knew Algebra and Biology and Statistics. But I did not know Men. I definitely did not know Romance. And I got knocked up. End of story.

(Resumes completing the forms)

MATT

Whoa, Sis, not end of story... who was it?

SIS

God, seduction's such an old-fashioned idea. My English professor... He romanced me, and I got pregnant.

MATT

How?

SIS

The usual way!

MATT

I mean, what happened?

SIS

I thought she'd go crazy...

MATT

Where was I when this was going on?

SIS

She Told me I should have the baby, and we'd put her up for adoption. I knew some girls got abortions. But we didn't have the money. You remember:

(Imitating Mom)

"Rub two pennies together and make a dime!" Plus abortion was dangerous. *He* even suggested he wasn't the father. The jerk. So she found a place no one knew me. I'd forgive her anything for this, even this!

(Indicating the box)

—She marched into the Dean's office, you know, with that little straw hat on and her stacked heels and she got The Jerk fired! *And* she arranged it so I could go back to school.

MATT

...What about the baby?

SIS

What about it?

MATT

What happened? I mean, to you?

SIS

Well. I was in this home for unwed mothers in South Philly. God, South Philly. That was bad enough. One night, I started getting cramps... in the morning, she was gone. I only saw her once... pitiful little blue thing.

(Signs the form and shoots it over to MATT to sign it)

MATT

I'm sorry.

SIS

I got on with my life.

MATT

Did they know why she died?

SIS

(Folds the handkerchief and passes it to MATT)

...“Undetermined cause.”

MATT

(Shakes out the handkerchief and folds it in thirds like a diaper)

Rebecca?

SIS

It's just like a soap opera.

MATT

Tough break, Sis.

SIS

I'd forgotten all about it. Best forgotten...

(They look at the white box between them.)

MATT

Easier said than done. She used to say that. “Easier said than done.”

SIS

She said she told me so I'd be brave. Which I appreciated.

MATT

What exactly did she say?

SIS

She got pregnant, had a baby, and then the baby died. She didn't say how. She didn't mention any mementos in the basement, if that's what you mean! And she didn't say who the father was either. And I didn't ask.

MATT
He was a schoolteacher.

SIS
What?

MATT
And he did die in the war.

SIS
... You knew? *You* knew too? Come on! Out with it!
(*She moves toward him aggressively. MATT snatches the handkerchief
from the table.*)
Give me that!

MATT
(*Staying out of her reach*)
She told me last year. Said don't tell anyone. Ha!

SIS
Liar! You're making this up.

MATT
Okay.
(*Hums chorus of Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely"*)

SIS
Tell me!

MATT
Say: I will *not* call Matt "a liar."

SIS
I will not.

MATT
Okay.
(*Hums, using the hanky to dust off his clothes*)

SIS
I will not call my brother a liar.

MATT
Two years ago. Before the baby was born. *My* baby.

SIS

Really?

MATT

It was... kind of a crisis. We never planned three kids. I know you think we did but two that was supposed to be it. She was an accident.

SIS

How?

MATT

The usual way! We' just found out about all... the problems, and the idea of raising *three kids*—potentially—with learning disabilities... Man, I couldn't... And it wasn't too late for an abortion...

SIS

You guys wouldn't have...

MATT

She told me I was her joy, and I was her third. That's what she said. She didn't pressure us but that kind of did it. He was a school friend, she said. Had a scholarship to Teachers' College. They somehow kept the whole thing secret, she stayed in New York or something, with a cousin or a friend of the family.

SIS

Which cousin?!

MATT

I don't remember... I didn't grill her. I just listened.

SIS

Not very well. Honestly, Matt, you're useless.

(He shuts up, hums, shakes the hanky out, refolds it)

Okay.

MATT

(He resumes)

When her baby died, they were going to marry anyway but he volunteered for the Army, then he was killed... in Czechoslovakia, I think. Buried over there.

SIS

You think?

MATT

I'm *not* on the witness stand! I don't remember.

SIS

You could have talked to me about your problems.

MATT

I know what you would've said. She was different. She'd changed.

SIS

She never changed!

MATT

People say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach but I think it's through his kids. She paid her dues as far as I'm concerned. Babysat for us every week, helped out when they were sick. So I forgive her anything...

(Puts the folded hanky in his pocket)

SIS

Everything?

(Indicating the box)

MATT

This is nothing. She probably forgot it was down there.

SIS

You know, she *must* have known we'd find it...give me that...

(Tries to get the hanky out of his pocket)

MATT

I don't know why she didn't get straight with us...

(MATT resists)

I mean, we're adults?

SIS

(SIS gives up)

She wanted to leave us something special. Couldn't very well put it in the Will!

MATT

Something besides the house.

SIS

You should buy a house. It's a good investment. You can write it off on your taxes, plus you live in it. You've got to live somewhere. I don't understand people who don't take advantage of mortgage interest deductions. I've even been thinking of a rental, you know, an investment.

MATT

Always seems so complicated and expensive.

SIS

I'll help you find someplace. In a way, the market being so bad is in your favor.

MATT

How's that?

SIS

Buyer's Market! Of course, first we've got to unload The Dump.

MATT

It's not that bad. She was living there till last month.

SIS

If you call that living. It won't be easy. The schools are kennels!

MATT

We went to them.

SIS

That was back then.

MATT

There are magnet schools now. We're already looking into one for Maggie. In case we don't like the neighborhood school.

SIS

We'll put that on the sales sheet: "Close to Magnet Schools!"

MATT

I wish I had enough to buy it myself. I could learn how to fix it up...

SIS

You're nuts!

MATT

...I already fix things around the apartment, I could learn. There's no yard but Patterson Park's down the street.

SIS

"Drug Pusher Heaven." No, you want a nice little bungalow in the west side of town where you don't know anyone. Trust me.

MATT

But that's the point, I know where *everything* is at home, the library's across the street, and I could take the kids down to see the ships—the way *we* used to...

SIS

You're not serious.

MATT

Please don't say no... I could love that house. We could make it Home.

SIS

I thought you hated it? I thought it was the repository of everything that went wrong in your life? Where you were brutally and callously neglected by *moi*, tortured and abused, not necessarily in that order!

MATT

I could take the freakin' door off the closet!

SIS

You'll get mugged every time you walk down the street.

MATT

Mrs. Wrinklebutt still lives on the left side and a gay lawyer just bought the one that had the fire across the street. I tell you, Canton's coming back!

SIS

A lawyer?

MATT

And the bus driver said...

SIS

He's gay?

MATT

She. Mrs. Wrinklebutt told me last week.

SIS

How does she know?

MATT

Said she works for the City. Head of Environmental Something-or-other... So *she's* not going to let them tear down the neighborhood for a highway.

SIS

Probably bought it as an investment! You know, if lawyers are moving in... wait, is she going to live there?

MATT

That's what Mrs. Wrinklebutt says. Fix it up and live there. Walk to City Hall.

SIS

That's a long walk!

MATT

She must be one of those fitness-freak lawyers, you know the kind.

SIS

(Sucking in her gut)

Sure, I do! Maybe we should hold onto it. Maybe the bus driver's onto something.

MATT

Hey, maybe *I'm* onto something. What do you think? Can I buy you out?

SIS

You don't have any money! No offense...

MATT

Sis, please.

SIS

I guess... I could give you a mortgage for my half. That could be a tidy income. And I could write off my visits!

MATT

Would Joy and me *own* it?

SIS

Yeah. Instead of a bank, you'd pay me. We'd have to get a lawyer to draw up the papers. Wait a minute, are you *sure* you don't want to look for teensy rundown rambler out where the white people live—I mean, you do have children to think of? You'd better talk to Joy first, she's the sensible one.

MATT

(Trump)

It was her idea!

SIS

Oh, really?

MATT

No offense.

SIS

None taken. Your wife's a saint, you know that?

MATT

Yep.

SIS

Which is fine if sainthood is your goal in life.

You know that pile of brambles in the back of the house? Do you remember when it used to climb up the back porch all summer?

MATT

Nope.

SIS

Well, it flowered pink from June till Thanksgiving. I remember it. Probably would again if you fed it.

MATT

Let's tell Joy!

SIS

(MATT leads the way and SIS picks up the box.)

Come on, Sister Becca, time for cocktails.

(Something's wrong. She shakes it gently, shakes it again. Puts it on the table and opens it completely—nothing. Looks under the table then at MATT, speechless)

MATT

What's wrong?

(MATT looks in the box, astounded. Reaches in his pockets for the hanky, turns them inside out—gone. They stare into the box and at each other, look up, look down, look around)

Where did it go?

Where did she go?

Sis?

(SIS reaches out and takes his hand)

Sis?

*(Lights out, except for a dull RED pulse on the box for four beats.)
Blackout.)*

End of Play