

An excerpt from

**WHERE I CAME FROM** (from **JUDGMENT DAYS**)

a play in one act

by Rich Orloff

*Place:* A middle-class suburban home.

*Time:* A Friday afternoon in June, 1986.

*Characters:* RACHEL, elderly, frail, becoming senile

(*Note:* Her name should be pronounced as the Yiddish "Ruh-chul", with a guttural "ch".)

ABIGAIL, late sixties, her daughter

SUSAN, mid-thirties, Abigail's daughter

TED, late sixties, Abigail's brother

SUSAN, a professor in her thirties, is visiting her home town to give a speech on geratologic research she's doing. She spends the afternoon with her mother ABIGAIL, with whom she has a strained relationship, and her grandmother RACHEL, whom she adores. When Rachel exits to take a nap, Susan asks:

SUSAN

So how are you, Mom, really?

ABIGAIL

I'm fine.

SUSAN

Well, now I feel completely caught up.

ABIGAIL

If I say I'm fine, I'm fine.

SUSAN

How are my brothers doing?

ABIGAIL

Why don't you call them and ask?

SUSAN

I do; they say they're fine. Their kids are fine; their wives are fine. We should change our family name to "Fine".

ABIGAIL

Some people *like* being fine.

SUSAN

Some people *like* being Napoleon. It doesn't necessarily make them Napoleon.

ABIGAIL

I was hoping this visit could be an easy one.

SUSAN

So was I.

Later, Abigail asks Susan how she is:

ABIGAIL

So... how are things?

SUSAN

*Fine.*

ABIGAIL

Can I ask if you're seeing anyone?

SUSAN

You can ask.

ABIGAIL

Are you seeing anyone?

SUSAN

I'm not sure.

ABIGAIL

I could have sworn I asked a "yes" or "no" question.

SUSAN

I mean, I'm – I'm seeing the type of guy you see when you're not seeing anyone.

ABIGAIL

Then why are you seeing him?

SUSAN

I can't think of a good reason not to.

ABIGAIL

I'm not sure I want to meet this one.

SUSAN

He's actually not that bad. He's very intelligent, and he can even be sweet when he thinks about it.

ABIGAIL

How often does he think about it?

SUSAN

All he can think about now is whether or not he's going to get tenure, which he's going to get, but that doesn't keep him from worrying about it day and night. Anyway, I was incapable of a relationship when I was working towards tenure, so I don't see why I should expect more from him.

ABIGAIL

(not seeing)

I see.

SUSAN

This is an honest conversation, Mom. What do you think?

ABIGAIL

I think everything in life is a mixed blessing.

SUSAN

I'm going to miss this place.

ABIGAIL

I won't.

SUSAN

Later, I'd like to go through our photos, and take some back with me.

ABIGAIL

I'm not sure I have any left.

SUSAN

What do you mean? We have a whole drawer full –

ABIGAIL

I threw them out.

SUSAN

What?!

ABIGAIL

I was housecleaning, and I thought  
as long as I was moving...

Susan opens the drawer where the family pictures were kept.

SUSAN

You threw out all our family pictures?!

ABIGAIL

Don't raise your voice.

SUSAN

How could you?

ABIGAIL

They're just a bunch of old photos.

SUSAN

They're our, our history.

ABIGAIL

Nobody looks at them.

SUSAN

I don't believe it.

ABIGAIL

If I'd known you'd get upset, I wouldn't  
have done it. But I didn't know.

SUSAN

Typical, just typical.

ABIGAIL

What?

SUSAN

You do this all the time, you know that?

ABIGAIL

Do what?

SUSAN

Throw out our history.

ABIGAIL

What are you talking about?

SUSAN

Mom, if I could change one thing about my childhood, do you know what it would be?

ABIGAIL

Your parents.

SUSAN

No, of course not.

ABIGAIL

Sometimes I wonder.

SUSAN

I just, I just wish you had told me stories about what it was like to be a child in the old country.

ABIGAIL

I don't remember what it was like to be a child in the old country.

SUSAN

Exactly. Why?

ABIGAIL

I was a child.

SUSAN

You left when you were eight. That's not that young.

ABIGAIL

So I have a bad memory.

SUSAN

Or you threw it out.

ABIGAIL

What difference does it make?

SUSAN

Mom, can't you – don't you – God.

ABIGAIL

What?

SUSAN

I've spent millions of hours in therapy –

ABIGAIL

Don't remind me.

SUSAN

– going over my whole life, and I'm still lacking answers.

ABIGAIL

Maybe you should quit therapy.

SUSAN

I keep thinking, if I knew where I came from, maybe I'd know why I'm me.

ABIGAIL

Susan –

SUSAN

There's this family history that's influenced who you are and even who I am, and I have no idea what it is.

ABIGAIL

Susan, I didn't raise you to be a product of your past.

SUSAN

But I –

ABIGAIL

I raised you so you could be whoever you wanted to be.

SUSAN

But I'm not whoever I wanted to be.

ABIGAIL

Is that my fault?

SUSAN

I'm not talking about "fault". I wish you would stop looking at it that way.

ABIGAIL

And how would you like me to look at it?

SUSAN

Mom, don't you ever wonder why you are who you are?

ABIGAIL

I keep meaning to, but I've been busy the last forty years.

SUSAN

Well, I wonder. I wonder a lot.

ABIGAIL

Your whole generation wonders. Sometimes I think you believe it's a sin to leave well enough alone.

SUSAN

If my life felt "well enough", I'd leave it alone.

ABIGAIL

You have a very nice life.

SUSAN

Then why am I single when so many of my friends are married?

ABIGAIL

So you've made some bad choices.

SUSAN

Why am I so afraid of intimacy?

ABIGAIL

Everyone's afraid of intimacy.

SUSAN

Why have all of my relationships failed?

ABIGAIL

Maybe your boyfriends got sick of your constant questioning.

SUSAN

Mom, look at me. I'm a frightened woman who takes refuge in my studies and my teaching –

ABIGAIL

You're a very smart woman, a little headstrong perhaps –

SUSAN

You don't want to see me, do you?

ABIGAIL

Of course, I do.

SUSAN

No. You don't want to see your past,  
and you don't want to see me.

ABIGAIL

I see you! You're my daughter who I bathed  
and fed and who I cradled in my arms when  
she got sick and I thought, "Please, God, don't  
let it be polio!" You always got honors in school,  
and the day you got your Ph.D. I was the proudest  
mother in the world. And now you're successful  
and you're struggling because the whole world  
is crazy, but you're bright and you're attractive,  
and you're going to make it, so don't you dare  
say I don't see you!

SUSAN

Mom, what I'm trying to say is –

ABIGAIL

Now I'm changing *her* diapers and taking  
*her* to the doctor and worrying about what  
if she falls, and sometimes she looks in my  
eyes and calls me the names of *strangers*.  
That's what it's like when your mother  
doesn't see you, and if I ever do that  
to you, I give you permission to kill me!

SUSAN

I didn't...

ABIGAIL

So if I say I'm fine, please, let me be fine.