

# Triptych

a play by  
Dana Petrillo

## Author's Notes (Synopsis):

Upon hearing the limitations of the play I had to write, I set out to write something new and interesting. I wanted to write a play in which the characters and their motives would be complex and developed, and moreover, a play in which those characters would be sufficiently human and realistic that the viewers of my script would become trapped in their lives and personalities, become part of the cycle. I tried to do this by using a theme of threes: three characters set in three different stages of one woman's life. In this way the audience could see not only how the interactions of the characters effect the outcome, but also how the interactions of the central character's past selves, and the past selves of her family, effect her current self.

A triptych is a picture or carving in three panels side by side, or anything composed or presented in three parts or sections. Historically, triptychs are a set of three images showing three separate scenes of a person's, usually Jesus Christ's, life. The three scenes of a triptych are chosen to convey an overall theme or message about the person whose life the panels depict. What I tried to create, therefore, is a sort of literary triptych: a single play in which three separate scenes are constantly present and on stage, each scene being a separate time period in one woman's life, and interwoven to convey an overall theme. The three scenes are always on stage, the people living in one time period do not interact with those of the others, and their actions never stop. This means that the three scenes are always alive and moving, and though the characters of two separate scenes never talk at the same time, the two silent scenes continue while the characters of one scene speak.

The central character of the play is named Nikita. It is her life around which the scenes are placed. At the present moment she is in her mid fifties. She stands alone in the play, and her scene contains only her, reflecting on her life, speaking in a monologue. I shall call her scene 'scene 1' because it occurs in the present time period and contains only one manifestation of one character. Scene 2, then, occurs in Nikita's past, when she is a 20 year old university student. This manifestation of Nikita is always called Kitty, and her mother is always called Mother. Therefore, as only Mother and Kitty occur in scene 2, they are the only people who can talk to each other. Scene 3 occurs when Nikita is 12 years old and she is called Nikki. The manifestation of her mother is always called Mom, and her father is always called Father. Likewise, as Nikki, Mother, and Father are the only people who occupy this scene, they are the only people who can talk to each other.

The point of the play lies in the interweaving of the three scenes. Circumstances and events twist and turn, so that certain thoughts and images fall in and out of each time period, hiding and then resurfacing in each scene like the bright threads of a tapestry. This interweaving of themes is subtle and poignant, so that viewers are led to a final overriding message, pertinent to both the characters in the play and to themselves. The message is that life is cyclical, and we are products of our histories. The final words of each scene act as an echo through time.

The play is entitled "Triptych."

### Characters:

**Nikita James:** A woman in her mid-fifties, grey appearing at her temples, her eyes and brow newly wrinkled, her posture stooped. As a 12 year old child she was precocious and tomboyish, and called **Nikki** by her friends and family. As a 20 year old university student she was feminine, intelligent, the picture of lovely, and commonly called **Kitty**.

**Katherine James:** Nikita's mother. When Nikki was a child, she was called **Mom**. She was flustered and nervous, like a caged bird, always preening and fixing. When Kitty was a young woman, she was called **Mother**, and was obviously tired and worn, but is constantly trying to this fact from others.

**Eric James:** Nikita's father, Katherine's husband. He is suave and demanding; a lover of discipline. He is used to getting his own way, and his sense of self-worth is based on the respect and admiration he receives from his wife and daughter. Nikita has always called him **Father**.

### Scenes and Props

There are three separate scenes on stage at the same time.

**Scene 1:** Scene 1 contains Nikita and can be on a blank section of stage. She doesn't need to have any props, although a love letter would be nice, and she should be wearing a yellow dress and some sort of necklace, preferably pearls.

**Scene 2:** Scene 2 contains Kitty and Mother. They are set in some sort of outdoor cafe, and so should have a cafe table, chairs, and some cups

and saucers. The counter and/or cashier can be offstage and are not necessary.

**Scene 3:** Scene 3 contains Nikki, Mom, and Father. They are set in a kitchen and so should have a kitchen table and counters. The Kitchen table can double as the dining room table. The oven and pantry can be offstage. Mom should be wearing a yellow dress and pearl necklace. Father should be wearing some sort of severe suit. There should be plates, glasses, a pie dish, etc.

## TRIPTYCH

**Nikita:** I loved my family.

*(Kitchen door slams. Nikki rushes into the kitchen, dropping books on the table)*

**Nikki:** Hi Mom!

**Mom:** *(Wearing a yellow dress)* Hey! Don't go stomping around like an elephant, Nikki; slamming doors, dumping books... that's not how a young lady behaves.

**Kitty:** Oh, here I am, Mother!

*(Sitting in an outdoor café, waving her hand energetically)*

**Mother:** Kitty, darling! How are you?

*(They kiss the air next to each other's cheeks: once on each side)*

**Kitty:** Oh, I'm doing well. Menu?

**Mom:** Now, wash your hands and help me finish preparing dinner. Don't sulk! Quickly now, before your father gets home.

**Nikki:** *(Startled)* Will he be home soon?

**Mom:** Not for about another half hour, so hurry up and help me with this pie. You know how he gets when things aren't just so.

**Nikita:** I miss my childhood, which is strange because I don't have any really marked memories of it. I have a very good memory and all, it's just that there's no distinction between my memories and my dreams.

**Mother:** Mmmm, that hot chocolate sounds nice. And your classes?

**Kitty:** Oh, they're good. I just finished working out my schedule for next term. I'm taking Calculus II, Biology, Post-modern thought, Belief and the Body, and Mapping the Modern World.

*(Pause)*

**Mother:** Hmm, that... sounds nice. *(Silence)* Let's go get our food.

*(They walk to the café counter)*

**Nikita:** I was three once, and my parents were having a lovely dinner party. Mom wore pearls, and father wore a suit. I was told to stay outside and keep out of the way.

**Mom:** Be careful peeling those apples, Nikki.

**Nikita:** I was playing with Josh Lyndon, who lived across the street.

**Nikki:** Ouch!

**Mom:** Oh you stupid girl! What did I just tell you?

**Nikki:** Sorry!

**Nikita:** And I ran in crying because he had punched me in the stomach. The guests chuckled or looked nervous, but my parents just stared at me in horror.

**Mom:** Now we'll have to throw out that whole batch! You've gotten blood on the apples!

**Nikita:** "Never cry in public again," my father hissed into my face, "because then they'll know that you're a loser, that you're weak. Then they'll know that they've won and you've lost."

**Mom:** Go into the pantry and get some more, we'll start all over again. It has to be finished in time.

*(Nikki scowls and stalks offstage)*

**Kitty:** *(Returning with a large piece of cake)* So... how have you been?

**Mother:** *(Returning with hot chocolate)* I've been well. *(Pause)* What a delicious piece of cake. Reminds me of how my mother used to bake them.

**Kitty:** Speaking of which, k'you give me that apple pie recipe? My friend Alice, you remember her?

*(Nikki returns with more apples)*

**Mom:** *(Examining Nikki's finger)* Oh, you'll be ok. Go and get a band-aid, you'll be good as new.

*(Nikki fetches a band-aid; Mom makes a big deal of kissing her finger better)*

**Nikki:** Mo-om!

**Nikita:** I never could cry after that. Not in public anyway. Not really.

**Mom:** What? So now you don't need your mother anymore? And after all I've done for you....

*(They start making a new pie)*

**Mother:** *(Thoughtfully sipping her cocoa)* She the blond one, from Kentucky?

**Kitty:** Yeah that's her.

**Mother:** Pretty girl.

**Kitty:** Anyway, she just got engaged and she's having a dinner party at her house and I promised I would bring some desert.

**Mother:** Don't be silly, Kitty. You never could bake anything, not even a pie. *(Pause, sips cocoa)* That's so exciting. So... who's her beau?

**Kitty:** *(Laughing dejectedly)* Ben Macintosh.

**Mother:** Oh, he's the son of that big businessman, right? One of those oil kings from Texas?

**Kitty:** Yeah, he's the one.

**Mother:** What a catch! That Alice is one lucky girl. Now, if only you could be so lucky.

**Kitty:** What's that supposed to mean?

**Nikita:** I loved my father. Which is funny, because he never seemed to show any emotion towards me. He was so strong like that... not like me. Not like my mother.

**Mom:** (*Laying apples in a ceramic pie dish*) There, that's good. Right around in a circle like that, so it makes a pretty pattern and there're no air pockets. (*Places last apple; carries pie to oven*) Nikki, what did you do?

**Nikki:** What are you talking about?

**Mom:** Did I tell you to touch the oven?

**Nikki:** No.

**Mom:** So, why did you touch the oven?

**Nikita:** I think I dreamt this: She was young, and lived somewhere vaguely in New England in the late 1800s.

**Nikki:** Well, I just thought that if Father's coming home soon, and the pie takes an hour to bake at 350, then it would only take like a half hour or something at 550.

**Mom:** Jesus, Nikki! That's too hot! The crust will burn! How can we give your father a pie with a burnt crust? Did you think of that? Don't you have any common sense?

**Nikki:** What's that supposed to mean?

**Nikita:** Her father was a scientist, a groundbreaker, an explorer, a genius. He had left for Africa 3 years ago, and her mother died after his letters stopped coming.

**Mother:** (*Calmly sipping cocoa, patronizing*) Nothing! Just that you're twenty now, you should start looking for someone to take care of you.

**Kitty:** Well thanks, Mother, but I can take care of myself.

**Nikita:** So she lived alone in her large, grey, perfect dollhouse. She had 2 friends: the best of best, and we helped her. But she missed her father, and she had no idea what happened to him. She began having dreams, concentric silvered screens, glowing wire outlines bright and perfect in her head, oval yet rectangular centres, invading her waking consciousness, motionless at first, then faintly vibrating; humming. She began to realize that her father was sending her this symbol, that she had to follow it.

**Mom:** (*Calmly fixing oven, patronizing*) Nothing! Just that you're twelve now, you shouldn't still be doing stupid things like that. You should know better.

**Nikki:** Sorry.

**Mom:** I mean, seriously, you should be able to figure out these things. I thought you were smart.

**Nikki:** I am smart!

**Nikita:** And the symbol began spinning. So she took her two best friends, and we booked passage overseas on a schooner. The symbol permanently glowed now in the foreground of her vision, spinning, rotating so fast that it was a constant blur, the rings within rings visible like the lines of a coil. That's how she knew her father was close, that she could find him.

**Mother:** Oh, I know you can take care of yourself. *(Pause)* For now anyway. But what about your future? *(Stop, deliberately sips her cocoa, reaches over and eats a piece of Kitty's cake.)* Talk to your father lately?

**Mom:** I'm sure you are smart, dear. I know you are. You make such good marks at school. You're just not very good at practical things. Now go set the table.

*(Mom finishes preparing dinner, Nikki sets the table)*

**Kitty:** *(Coolly)* He's fine. What about you?

**Nikita:** But the weather destroyed us. Somewhere in Mother Ocean, the masts snapped and we were cast into the sea, alone. With tired arms and tired legs we swam and swam, the symbol now the faintest murmur. But slowly emerged a new symbol, the same concentric theme, but all ovals and teardrops, a circle at its heart. She led us, following her father's icon, and we slowly merged, formed, congealed, becoming a single entity, with her at the helm: a leviathan.

**Mother:** Oh, I haven't heard from him in years. He stopped writing me letters years ago.

**Kitty:** *(Backtracking)* Wait, What about my future?

**Mother:** Well... what will you do? How will you support yourself? What do you want to do with your life? Don't you want a family? You won't be able to work once you get married and have children.

**Nikita:** She was the brain, directing the ghost-whale's mission: to follow the symbol, find her father, no time to sleep or eat. But she was killing us.

**Kitty:** It just so happens, Josh and I are planning to get married.

**Nikita:** Ragged and malnourished, we, her friends now within her, the best of the best inside the whale, begged her to stop, to set us free.

**Mother:** You've got to be kidding me. That boy? He's been beating up on you your whole life. He treats you like an annoying little sister.

**Kitty:** That was just when we were kids. It's different now. He loves me.

**Mother:** He couldn't love anyone. Least of all you.

**Kitty:** Mother, stop it. We're adults now and we're in love!

**Nikita:** Slowly, painfully she separated from us, became her own whale, tiny and old, too worn to swim. Methuselah was her name. We two friends remained, inside a smaller whale, filled with useless baleen. Silly human girls could not feed without the chomp-chomp of teeth. First friend took control, nudging and bumping Methuselah, ignorant of her own power. She could not eat. We were dying.

**Nikki:** I'm starved. K'we eat soon?

**Mom:** No! We have to wait for your father. He'll be home any minute. Sit at the table and wait for him.

**Nikki:** But I'm bored! What am I supposed to do till he gets here?

**Mom:** I don't know... try thinking about something! I told you, he'll be here soon. Everything has to be ready when he gets here. You'll sit and do as you're told. *(They sit and wait)*

**Nikita:** I am the second friend. I took the reigns, willed my body to be, and became a shark at last. I feasted on Methuselah, tore her flesh, ate her bones and drank her dreams, until she was no more and all inside of me.

**Mother:** I know you think you love him, but you don't know what love is.

**Nikita:** I emerged from the sea, strong and sleek, fat on blubber and broken hearts. First friend became first friend, and I became me. We were one no more.

**Kitty:** *(Very cold, cutting)* I really don't think that you should be lecturing me on knowing what love means.

**Nikita:** Then I began to see the symbols. I couldn't stop them. They burned inside me. And I had to follow them.

**Nikki:** He's late again, Mom! Can't we eat now?

**Mom:** I said no! Sit down and be quiet. We'll wait as long as it takes.

**Nikita:** But her father was dead. Our search was futile.

**Mother:** What's that supposed to mean?



**Nikita:** I saw the symbols for the rest of my life, the haunting memory of ghost-whale, the sharp taste of survival. Her father's ghost could only see the her in me. I became a scientist, an explorer, a groundbreaker, a genius. And I always followed his icon. His plan.

**Kitty:** Well, you didn't exactly have a successful marriage, did you? You only married father for comfort, for money. At least Josh and I love each other.

**Nikita:** I was young once and in love:

*(Kitchen door slams. Father enters, dropping briefcase on the table)*

**Mother:** That's the whole point. I loved your father at first. I lost myself in him. And look what happened.

**Nikita:** There was never a time that I did not know you. We look around us and see things, feel things, upright entities protruding from the plane, encapsulated in 24-hour periods of life-change and soul-keep.

*(Nikki rushes up to hug Father; he avoids her hug and pats her on the head)*

**Father:** Mmm... smells good, girls. What's for dinner?

**Nikita:** But you are the first thing I remember in the morning and the last thing I know before oblivion. Our bodies play out these scenes of waking and sleeping, and the world is created anew in each blissful day and destroyed again in the unconscious night.

**Mom:** You're an hour late.

**Father:** Stop it, Katherine. Don't nag me. It doesn't suit you.

**Mom:** I'm not nagging.

**Father:** I'm tired, dear. And I want my dinner.

*(Mom takes dinner out of the oven and brings it to the table)*

**Kitty:** You never could believe in me, could you?

**Mother:** And what, that boy of yours believes in you? That simpleton couldn't even understand your dreams, let alone support them. I thought you wanted to be a scientist, a groundbreaker, an explorer?

**Kitty:** That's not the point. He loves me. After we're married for a few years and he has a job and some money, he'll let me come back and finish my degree.

**Mother:** What do you mean he'll *allow* you to finish your degree?

**Nikita:** I have always known you. A strand of pearls surrounds my knotted unconsciousness, optic memories, cerebral perceptions, always connected and never touching. My crying soul yearns and strains towards yours. It held yours before being trapped in this rising, cradled you before there was substance to keep.

**Kitty:** I'm leaving university and we're getting married

**Father:** This food's too dry.

**Mom:** It's been waiting for over an hour.

*(They eat in silence, no one looking at each other, loud sounds of cutlery clinking.)*

**Mother:** Don't be silly, Kitty. That's ridiculous! I won't allow it.

**Nikita:** The image of your body, your back a plane, gently rolling; the indefinable point where your spine-valley ends and rising becomes a shoulder blade-mountain. Arms reach out, peninsulas in a sea of zero, parallel ribs held by flesh, shore groove remembrances of the sea after tide. I give you my being, my memory-pearls, all that I know and think that I am, only to watch the bauble dissolve, melting away in the soul-salt brine.

**Kitty:** It's not your decision.

**Mother:** But you'll be throwing your life away! You're too smart for that Kitty; use some common sense! You're too good for him.

**Kitty:** *(Quietly, ashamed)* Well I don't really have a choice.

**Mother:** What did you say?

*(Kitty avoids her Mother's eyes, looking dejectedly at her cake. She takes a bite.)*

**Nikita:** It never happened, that life before you. I am engulfed and drowned, fighting and flooding, paralysed by the throes of the storm, submerged in the icy water stillness.

**Mother:** What was that supposed to mean, Kitty?

**Mom:** *(Timidly)* Why are you late, Eric?

**Father:** I had to meet a business associate.

**Mom:** *(Under her breath)* I bet she was pretty.

**Father:** *(Purposely ignoring her)* You know, I'd really like some more wine, Darling.

**Nikita:** I'm dying. I'm sinking. My weighted feet, formless and fitting, find the earth. Our love is dancing, and all that I'm holding is Joy.

**Kitty:** Nothing, Mother, don't worry about it.

**Mother:** Don't tell me not to worry about it. You said you didn't have a choice! What was that supposed to mean?

**Kitty:** Nothing! I didn't want to tell you, it's not a big deal.

**Mother:** Not a big deal? If you don't tell me right now I swear to God...

**Kitty:** I'm pregnant, ok! Is that what you want to hear? I'm going to have this baby, and I'm going to get married, and I'm going to be happy! So just shut up and be happy for me.

**Nikita:** There was never a time that I did not know you. The never-earth thrives in the dance  
of the cosmos. My waters flow through your caverns and veins.

**Mom:** There's none left; you drank it all.

**Father:** Well then, you can go to the store and buy some more, can't you?

**Mom:** It's too late; the bottle shop's closed.

**Mother:** You're joking aren't you? *(Pause, waiting)* You stupid girl! What have you done? You've ruined your whole life, that's what you've done!

**Kitty:** Stop it.

**Mother:** And that boy will never really love you, and he'll cheat on you, and he'll treat you like shit because deep down he'll know what you really are.

**Father:** *(Slowly, quietly, looking directly at Mom)* You stupid woman. All you have to do is make stay at home and cook dinner and you can't even do that right. And you wonder what keeps me out late at night?

**Mom:** *(Nervously)* Nikki, dear, go and get the pie out of the oven. And some dessert dishes.

*(Nikki looks at both of her parents, then goes to get the pie)*

**Kitty:** And what's that?

**Mother:** A slut.

*(Kitty is shocked; she starts crying)*

**Nikita:** I loved my husband: I lost myself in him. *(Looks down at herself)* It's yellow. Piss yellow. Stinky urine dripping yellow and I hate it. I wear this dead-goldfish runny-egg yellow dress every day. It has polka dots, white spots, flecks of dried spittle the size of a bottle cap.

**Mom:** I'll go ask the neighbours if I can borrow some wine. Just calm down.

**Father:** Don't you tell me to calm down, Katherine. Who do you think you are? *(Suavely, menacingly)* And don't think I don't hear you, always sneaking, always whispering behind my back. It's none of your business what I do while I'm out.

**Nikita:** I pretend to love this dress: wash it, iron it, every day. Light starch, fabric softener, tumble dry low, lemon scented. Always lemon scented jaundice yellow.

**Mom:** *(Sweetly, placatingly)* Well, maybe if you weren't out late every other night, I wouldn't worry so much... maybe if you came home after work you're dinners wouldn't be too dry, or it'd be early enough for me to run out to get you more liquor if you wanted it. *(Suddenly hurt, angry)* You ever think of that?

**Nikita:** It was his first present to me, loving gift, last gift ever. Fucking prick, loved my eyes, loved my hair, loved my breasts. Hated me.

**Kitty:** *(Slowly becoming more and more agitated)* Yeah, well that's better than what you are, Mother. I slept with Josh for love; you slept with Father because you were afraid. Not afraid of him, he could do whatever he wanted and you wouldn't care. You were afraid of losing your middle class status, your deluxe kitchen, your four bedroom house. You were afraid that if you didn't do what he wanted he'd take all your pretty things away from you. And that makes you no better than a whore.

**Nikita:** He was brown. Soft brown, chewy caramel delicious chocolate brown man, and I hated him. He had black hair, funeral black, unruly mop. I pretended to love my man. Fed him, slept with him, eggs fried in butter every morning, only satin underwear, never cotton. A woman should only wear things that please her man: soft lingerie, yellow dress.

**Father:** *(He speaks softly, looks disgusted, spitting out the last words)* I'm a good father, a good husband. I keep you fed and clothed, and this is the thanks I get? You should be happy to have a man like me. I don't deserve a wife like you.

**Mother:** *(Very flustered, almost hysterical)* How could you? How could you say that to me? After all I've done for you, you treat me like this? I worked so hard, kept the family together as long as I could, raised you right, and look what you do... you go and get knocked up! I'm so disappointed in you. You're worthless, now. You're dead to me.

**Nikita:** My man had a sweet tooth, a sharp tongue, hard fist. I bake him biscuits: Sugar, honey, lemon, glass shards, cyanide. Hand wash the blood red panties, gentle cycle lemon yellow dress. I wear satin every day, swathe myself in piss. *(Full stop, coming to a realization.)* I lost everything.

*(Nikki returns carrying the apple pie and the dessert, just in time to see Mom turn to go. Father grabs Mom's arm, pulling her back, hitting her hard across the face. Nikki drops the pie as Mom drops to the floor. The ceramic pie dish shatters as Nikki looks at her father with fear and loathing and runs from the room in terror.)*

**Father:** What have I done?

*(Kitty stands, turns to leave and Mother grabs her arm, pulling her back, slapping her in the face. Kitty stops, looks her mother in the eye, and resolutely walks away.)*

**Mother:** What have I done?

*(Nikita looks at the scenes from her past, looks at the audience, and drops to her knees.)*

**Nikita:** What have I done?

*The End*