

An Excerpt from BRANCHED

By

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Cast of Characters

<u>Belinda Cartwright</u> :	35, Kindergarten teacher at Park Slope Independent Learning School
<u>Tamara Jenkins</u> :	34, (Pronounced TAmara. "Accent on the 1st syllable, not the second") Mother, Author, Speaker
<u>Martin Laurence</u> :	42, Manager of HSBC Bank, Park Slope
<u>Ben</u> :	5 and 1/2, Boy in Belinda's classroom. He should be played by a petite adult actress
<u>Beatrice</u> :	newborn, Ben's little sister. She is "played" by a freakish babydoll/puppet creation. She "ages" throughout and should be "played" by larger, freakier babydoll/puppet creations

Scene

Park Slope, Brooklyn, NY

Time

October

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Scene 2

The following morning, 7:20am. Park Slope Independent Learning School. The room is cheerful with children's artwork hanging about on clotheslines. There are various "work stations" along the perimeter, all the proper height for small children to access. Belinda, 35, is writing in a festive journal with a girly pen. She is startled by two loud raps on the door. Tamara juts her head into the classroom, her body remains in the hall.

TAMARA

Miss Cartwright?

BELINDA

Uh, Belinda, yes. Hi. Ms. Jenkins?

Belinda's eyes shoot up to the wall clock.

TAMARA

Yes, Tamara's fine. I just saw you look at the clock. I realize I am 10 minutes early, but we have a lot to discuss so-

BELINDA

Oh, no, please- I didn't mean to look at the- Please, come in.

Tamara's body is still partially in the hallway. She speaks to Ben who sits unseen in the hall.

TAMARA

Now Benjamin, you be good while Mommy speaks with your new teacher. Eh! No. (covering her breasts with both hands) Absolutely not. You have ostrich jerky in your pouch if you're hungry and coconut water if you're thirsty. Work on our crossword puzzle. Mommy loves you.

BELINDA

Ms. Jenkins, Benny's welcome to come in and start working if he likes.

TAMARA

Thank you Miss Cartwright, but no, "Benny" is not welcome. He'll wait. Kiss kiss, angel.

Tamara slams the door. She finally enters the room and can be seen in her full glory, perfectly dressed in an eggplant-colored suit, her hair tied back tightly and elegantly. Her body shows no signs of ever being pregnant. She wears a flesh-tone baby sling strapped across her chest which carries a baby sleeping, hidden inside. Tamara makes a beeline to Belinda and offers her a firm, quick handshake.

TAMARA

Thank you for meeting me on such short notice.

BELINDA

Happy to! Would you like to sit down?

Belinda gestures to a child-size table and chair set. There are no adult-sized chairs in this room.

TAMARA

Alright then.

They sit.

BELINDA

(trying to peek in the sling)

What a beautiful baby! Is she playing with a... stick?

TAMARA

Let's get something straight before we begin.

BELINDA

O-K.

TAMARA

You are completely taking over for Mrs. Weisenhutter while she's on maternity leave, yes?

BELINDA

Yes.

TAMARA

So you'll be spending a solid six months in the classroom with my son. Correct?

BELINDA

Correct.

TAMARA

Good. I wouldn't want to spend time building a foundation with you, only to find out you're a run-of-the-mill substitute teacher who will be out of here in a few days. I'm sure you understand.

BELINDA

I-- think I do.

TAMARA

Terrific. (she suddenly looks down at her wristwatch) Ah. Belinda, pardon us a moment, would you?

BELINDA

(confused)

Uh- Sure, sure...

Tamara takes a deep breath, closes her eyes and puts her hands purposefully on the baby.
Is everything ok?

TAMARA

Shh!

Belinda is silenced. Tamara starts making swirling, whooshing sounds with her mouth for a good thirty seconds. She finishes. Belinda remains silent.

Thank you for that. Today is Beatrice's first day on the planet. I'm providing womb sounds for her every hour on the hour so she doesn't feel abandoned by my body.

BELINDA

Sure, sure.

Beat. Belinda looks at Tamara's stomach.
I'm sorry- You gave birth... yesterday?

TAMARA

Last night, you bet.

BELINDA

Wow! But you're so- Shouldn't you be resting?

TAMARA

What for? Labor's a breeze if you know how to breathe, and believe me, I do. Do you have children?

BELINDA

No. Not yet, no.

TAMARA

Stay away from women who tell you giving birth is painful. Those women are weak. Here's my advice: have a talk with your uterus now, today, before you even conceive. Unless of course you are pregnant already. Are you? Are you pregnant?

BELINDA

No, I'm not.

TAMARA

Terrific. Here's what you do then. Tell your uterus that you are the boss. You decide when the contractions come and how long they last. You create your birth story. You are the dominatrix of your birth canal.

Beat.

BELINDA

Oh! Now? Talk to it now?

TAMARA

No time like the present.

BELINDA

(looks down and considers)

Um. I- think we'll chat later. If you don't mind.

TAMARA

Why would I mind? You are entitled to make your own decisions, however misguided. I've only written a slew of books on feminine energy, natural birthing, and proper parenting. Surely I don't know what I'm talking about.

BELINDA

(Belinda pronounces her name taMAra)

No, I'm certain you do! I just- Forgive me Tamara, I didn't mean to offend.

TAMARA

You're forgiven. Alright, enough of that! Let's-

BELINDA

Gosh, I'm sorry to interrupt you- I'm working on not doing that- but... (looking her up and down) I'm just so distracted by your-

TAMARA

Physique?

BELINDA

Well, yes! How did you...?

TAMARA

Easily. I went to the gym this morning and everything went right back into place. Being slim is a decision. You either make it or you don't.

BELINDA

(laughing)
Tell that to my thighs!

TAMARA

Gladly. Swing them this way please.

BELINDA

Beat.
Oh. I was just- joking actually. I don't need you to tell them anything.

TAMARA

Fair enough. Although I wouldn't joke about my thighs if I were you, Belinda. Alright, you've gotten us off-track. We are not here to talk to your thighs...

BELINDA

No, we're not.

TAMARA

...nor are we hear to chat with your uterus.

BELINDA

Certainly not.

TAMARA

I'm sure you are well aware of why I'm here.

BELINDA

Actually... no. I'm not.

Beat.

TAMARA

No?

BELINDA

No.

TAMARA

No idea.

BELINDA

No.

TAMARA

Fascinating.

Beat.

BELINDA

(she pronounces her name taMara again)
Um. Tamara, you should know that Ben is really doing beautifully. Even after just one day with him, I can tell how bright he is- and funny! So funny! Oh gosh, you have to hear this- listen to this- he comes up to me yesterday and says-

TAMARA

Don't bother. I can hear his witticisms at home. I'm here because of the Cheerios incident.

Beat.

BELINDA

The "Cheerios Incident".

TAMARA

Indeed.

BELINDA

(she pronounces it wrong a third time)
Forgive me Tamara, but I don't know what "incident" you're talking about.

TAMARA

It's TAmara, not taMara. The accent is on the first syllable, not the second.

BELINDA

Oh. I'm sorry. (trying it out and failing) TAM-ra.

TAMARA

Let's just stick with Ms. Jenkins. I think that is more appropriate under the circumstances anyway.

BELINDA

Great.

TAMARA

Great. Now, since you don't seem to know what goes on in your classroom, let me fill you in.
(getting a little choked up)
I'm sorry. This is difficult for me.

BELINDA

Oh my goodness, what is it?

TAMARA

Benjamin came home last night with- Cheerios on his breath. It seems that little Jeremiah Parker boy took it upon himself to share his snack with my son.

BELINDA
Ok...

Beat.
I'm sorry, is that the problem?

TAMARA
You allow snack sharing?

BELINDA
Sure. We encourage it!

TAMARA
He gave him Cheerios, Miss Cartwright! With MILK! Is that something you encourage?

BELINDA
Well, I don't know. Ben doesn't have any food allergies, does he? I checked!

TAMARA
Benjamin, I'll have you know, is a strict follower of the Paleo Diet.

BELINDA
The Paleo Diet?

TAMARA
Yes! No carbs, no dairy, and no grains of any kind. If Benjamin can't pick it from the ground or chase it and kill it, then he should not be eating it.

BELINDA
Tama- Ms. Jenkins, I apologize for the oversight, truly. We pay great attention to what the kids are eating, but when it comes to these fad diets, it's hard to keep up, and-

TAMARA
Whoa, whoa whoa. Fad diet, did you say?

BELINDA
Poor choice of words. It's just- I am Ben's kindergarten teacher, not his personal trainer and- Oh god, that sounded ruder than I intended. Not that I intended to be-

Beat. She breathes.
Ms. Jenkins, I can assure you, now that I know Ben is a Peelio devotee-

TAMARA
Paleo.

BELINDA
-a Paleo devotee- I will absolutely keep him safe from anything that's... un-pickable or un-kill-able. And-- actually, yes! this may make you feel better. I know for a fact that Jeremiah's mother packs him "Oat-holes." They are a sugar free, healthy alternative to Cheerios! No big deal, right? Ben had a little snack, made a new friend, and certainly did not die.

Beat.
Right?

TAMARA
(covering the baby's ears)
You're damn right he did not die! No thanks to you of course! Thank God he had the good sense to confess so we could get them out of his system immediately!

BELINDA
Immediately? You mean- I'm sorry, what do you mean?

TAMARA
We threw up those Oat-holes.

BELINDA
Wait- You made your son throw up?

TAMARA
No, I did not make him throw up. What kind of mother do you think I am? He chose to throw up. We did it together. I lent him my support.

BELINDA
You and your five-year-old purposely vomited together.

TAMARA
You bet we did. And we would do it again.

Beat.
Belinda, how many stomachs do you have?

Tamara stands up, approaches a child-size dry-erase board easel and tears the head off a thick marker.

BELINDA
(confused)
How many...

TAMARA

...stomachs do you have?

BELINDA

Uh... one.

Tamara quickly draws a human stick figure with one swirly image of a stomach next to it. She is quite adept at sketching and speaking at the same time.

TAMARA

Correct. One. And how many does a cow have?

BELINDA

Beat.

Four?

Tamara draws a simple cow head followed by 4 swirly stomachs.

TAMARA

Gold star. Four. Now, how many breasts do I have?

Belinda looks at Tamara's breasts.

Go on.

BELINDA

You have two breasts. Ms. Jenkins, this is-

Tamara draws two circles side by side with dots in the middle to represent breasts, followed by several crude squiggly shapes for cow udders.

TAMARA

Excellent. Now describe to me how a cow's udders differ in appearance from a woman's breasts.

BELINDA

Ms. Jenkins, this is starting to get offensive.

During this next speech, Tamara takes every opportunity to emphasize her points through creative illustrations.

TAMARA

It certainly is. Congratulations, that is the first intelligent thing you've said today! Moral of the story: cows and humans are different. Now, how "offended" would you be if I stuck my breast into your cow's mouth?

Belinda attempts to answer but gets cut off.
You'd be VERY offended. Not only would your cow be confused and emotionally damaged, but he would get sick. Terribly, physically sick. His four stomachs cannot tolerate the milk from my two breasts. It's not meant for him.

Tamara puts the cap back on the marker and approaches Belinda.
When you expose my child to "Oat-Holes" and Bovine milk, that's exactly what you are doing. You are shoving your cow udders into my human baby's mouth and I will not sit idly by and watch that happen.

The women are practically nose to nose. A long silence. Tamara suddenly breaks their face-off, grabs her purse and heads briskly for the door.
I trust that we have learned something here today, and there will be no further incidents of this nature.

Beat.
A pleasure to meet you. Your skirt is just darling.

Tamara slams the door, leaving Belinda sitting at the tiny table alone.