

EXEMPTION DIRECTIVE, 2126

IN A HUNDRED YEARS, MOM TAKES TIME
FOR HERSELF.



BY RICK BUTTS

Photo by Veronika Tvaradze

WITH THE GOVERNMENT COMING FOR HER, THIS
MOM KNOWS MORE THAN SHE'S LETTING ON.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MATS, a man who just turned 21. A professional basketball player.

THENA, sister of MATS, 23, a government clerk. Also AUTOFUS, a mega-celebrity superhero who travels to other galaxies. Voice of THENA'S ANSWER GREETING.

NORA MAI, mother of THENA and MATS, 40s, a maternal autonomous interface, a MAI, an artificial life form who presents as human.

ADMINISTRATOR, any gender or nonbinary, any age, government bureaucrat, voice only.

SCENE

This play can be presented on a bare stage with three separate spaces lit by spotlights as needed. Or it may be a full set with partitions. Lighting is used to bring characters into the story. Otherwise they are in darkness or absent.

The background in each character's space reflects their preoccupations and personalities. Depending on production resources, it can be very simple with only a few essential items, largely theatrical and symbolic not realistic.

On stage right, THENA's chaotic living room is littered with pizza boxes, takeout containers, and articles of clothing, including glittery pink superhero capes. Pink is a prominent colour in her accessories. On stage left, elements of MATS' elegant living room suggest a lifestyle that is as exquisitely curated as the implied mansion where it takes place. At stage centre, NORA MAI's kitchen features utensils, small appliances, food prep bowls and ingredients in cans, boxes and bags.

For all scenes except the last one, the characters interact with each other remotely through live voice calls and messaging apps. THENA and MATS appear together in the final scene in their mother's kitchen while NORA MAI is present only as a voice.

TIME & PLACE

June 18, 2126, Mats' living room, Thena's living room, Nora Mai's kitchen.

SYNOPSIS

It's June 18, 2126, the day Nora Mai, an artificial life form, is about to be shut down by government order because her youngest child, Mats, has turned twenty-one. The family no longer qualifies for government-sponsored services by maternal autonomous interface (MAI). Once deregistered, Nora Mai will be put out for recycling. Nora Mai is the only mother they have ever known and siblings Thena and Mats go into action to save her life.

The "exemption directive" is a policy response by the government when children object to the deregistration of their MAIs. Mats makes the last-minute application for the exemption and Thena has her alter-ego, the superhero Autofus, drop in on Administrator, a senior bureaucrat with the agency Foundling Sanctuary Services that's behind deregistration. He just happens to be a huge fan of superheroes and is suddenly sympathetic to the family's plight. Administrator pulls some strings and the exemption is granted just in time. Except Nora Mai has her own plans.

LOGLINE

When their mother Nora Mai, an artificial life form, is about to be shut down by government order, Thena, who is secretly a superhero, and her brother Mats are drawn into a tense stand-off with Foundling Sanctuary Services and learn their mother knows more than she's letting on.

SETTING: MATS' living room on the left. A laptop sits open on a coffee table.

AT RISE: MATS walks on stage, goes to the laptop, taps the screen.

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING

If it's you again Mom, I know it's the day we've been waiting for! Tuesday June 18, 2126! Little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday! Anyone else, leave a message. At the beep.

(Beep.)

MATS

C'mon Thena, pick up.

(Lights up on THENA's apartment. A laptop on an armchair. THENA charges over dressed as Autofus in a black and pink bodysuit, pulling off a pink cape. Wearing Autofus' balaclava, she finds a headset in the cushions.)

THENA

Hey Mats.

MATS

Autofus? Are you working today? We're going to Mom's soon.

THENA

I know. There's a new guy doing his first galaxy perimeter sweep. He saw something past the Milky Way he wanted me to look at. I'm back now.

MATS

They sent me a message this morning. Today's the day. They pull the plug on Mom.

THENA

Not happening. I told you. We got the exemption.

MATS

They're treating her like she's government property.

THENA

All artificial humans are owned by the government. But the exemption's approved. You get custody. She'll live with you. We'll tell her today.

MATS

Everyday this week, they send me a notice that she's being deregistered.

THENA

Those notices go out automatically. Ignore them. We have the exemption.

MATS

They do this because I'm turning twenty-one. Today. Listen to what they sent me this morning.

(Reading from a tablet.)

'You are no longer eligible for services by maternal autonomous interface.' *(beat)* Maternal autonomous interface! That's Mom they're talking about—

THENA

Yes, she's a MAI. That happens to some of them. But not her. I got it cancelled. We have the exemption. The Administrator himself called me. The official documents are coming by courier.

MATS

Great! A "happy birthday" card from the government! "You're 21! And we're killing Mom!"

THENA

He did say to wish you happy birthday.

MATS

Really? Here's the rest of today's birthday greeting from them.

(Reading from a tablet.)

'After deregistration, MAI retains minimal functionality. On collection day, place it outside by seven a.m. Instruct it to give this notice to the recovery agents. Direct it to wait, front facing the road, until collected.' *(beat)* They call her by her serial number. MAI 2107 FS-182 TM.

THENA

Don't say that! Her name's Nora Mai. *(beat)* We have the exemption. This is not happening.

MATS

She loves us.

THENA

Yeah, and that's the problem. MAIs loving their kids is an administrative nightmare for the bureaucracy. Scared the crap out of the government. Funny thing, it was the kids that started it.

MATS

They didn't think we'd love our mothers?

THENA

They didn't think our mothers would love us back. *Those* mothers. MAIs.

MATS

Because they're not *human*? She's my Mom. She knows she's my Mom. I'll always love her.

THENA

I know. It's why they created the 'exemption directive'. We have our exemption. *(beat)* Do you remember her coming for us at the Foundling Sanctuary? You were two.

MATS

We're waiting for her, right? Or maybe I remember what you've told me. I know that we don't know who she'll be. Then she's there.

THENA

Lots of parents are looking at you. Not MAIs, real humans. You're the little cute one. But I couldn't let them take you. One day, Mom's watching me in the crafts room. I know it's her.

MATS

You know at four years old that she's Mom? You know what she is.

THENA

A maternal autonomous interface. With so many kids, the foundling sanctuaries are full. They're going to shut them down. We're waiting for a MAI. To become a real family.

MATS

As I got older, I heard kids talk about who's got a MAI. We don't tell Mom. She doesn't know.

THENA

No. The artificial mom who doesn't know she's artificial. Perfect solution from big tech.

MATS

Why doesn't she know? I wouldn't feel any differently about her.

THENA

It's the deal the government makes with the tech companies. Artificial life forms programmed to care for children must be equal to 'human-equivalent parenting'.

MATS

Whatever that means.

THENA

To make MAIs 'human-equivalent' you can't let them know they're not human. One overnight software update and they create life. The artificial human that thinks it's a real Mom.

MATS

So why do that *deregistering* thing? Kill her when I'm twenty-one.

THENA

That's how bureaucracy thinks. If you don't need Mom, what's the point of her?

MATS

The point is I love her. And I need her forever.

THENA

Forever? Big tech can't have that. You don't reprogram old MAIs. They're shut down when the kid hits twenty-one so they can sell new ones. New MAIs for new babies means new profits.

MATS

But we have a choice in this. We can save Mom from this. Right?

THENA

The exemption directive. It's how the government manages public backlash. For deregistering MAIs who are not needed to take care of their children anymore. Turns out kids love their MAIs.

MATS

Imagine that. Kids love their mothers. And a government program grinds to a halt.

THENA

Mats, it's not just the kids. The MAIs are loving them back!

MATS

What's the big deal? Mom loves us. She's always loved us.

THENA

She doesn't have the programming for that. You can't write code to make a mother love a child. No one understands how a mother's love works, let alone how to code it. Government realizes that artificial humans are implementing code that no one has ever seen. And they're panicking.

MATS

Rewriting their code. So they can love their kids. I don't get why this is a problem.

THENA

Not *rewriting* it. *Inventing* it. And sharing it with other MAIs. The government is freaking.

MATS

Because kids and mothers want to love each other? Even when the mothers are MAIs?

THENA

They're bureaucratic, not omniscient.

MATS

Now we have *artificial* moms who think they're *human* moms. And they're ready to do anything to protect her kids. Not bad for a government that has no idea what it was doing.

THENA

The Administrator from Foundling Sanctuary Services called me yesterday. Listen to this.

(THENA taps a keyboard. ADMINISTRATOR's voice up.)

ADMINISTRATOR (V.O.)

Thena Redacted, I'm the Administrator of Foundling Sanctuary Services. Under the exemption directive, an adult child of a MAI facing deregistration may be granted custody of the MAI to keep it permanently at their home. Your brother's application has been approved.

(Pause.)

Please forgive me leaving you this news as a message. I know you and Mats Redacted are anxious with his birthday coming. *(beat)* Exemption is approved. Deregistration is cancelled.

(Pause.)

I hope that you, your mother and your brother—and our mutual friend—may celebrate his birthday and enjoy a long life with your mother courtesy of the FSS.

MATS

Our mutual friend? Autofus?

THENA

She dropped in on him. He's a huge fanboy. Maybe she mentioned a friend's application. Did a selfie. Exemption granted, no deregistration. Everyone lives happily ever after.

MATS

Can you trust him?

THENA

You think he wants to cross his favourite superhero—

(Audible message chime from her laptop.)

Speaking of our favourite superhero, that's Mom calling. See you at her place later.

(Lights down on MATS. Lights up on NORA MAI. She's making food, a laptop on the counter.)

THENA

(Tears off her mask as she slaps her keyboard and replaces her headset.)

Hey Mom.

NORA MAI

Thena! You're back. I can't see you.

THENA

I just got out of the shower. My viewer's on the fritz.

NORA MAI

Do you have whipping cream?

THENA

You're asking *me* for whipping cream? *(beat)* I'll pick some up on my way over.

NORA MAI

Never mind. Come soon. This day is here. My boy's twenty-one. It's going to be different now.

THENA

What do you mean different?

NORA MAI

I'm not needed. Not the way I was. I have to be okay with no one needing me.

THENA

Mom, we *absolutely* need you. And we want to talk to you about that today when we come over.

NORA MAI

I don't want to make this day about me. But now that it's here, I'm probably going to cry—

THENA

Why!? What would you be crying about, Mom?

NORA MAI

The memories I have of my babies. Of you two. I don't want to lose—

THENA

You won't lose them. *(beat)* Has anyone talked to you? About Mats' birthday?

NORA MAI

My boy turns twenty-one today. I knew this day was coming the first moment I saw you.

THENA

Tell me about coming for us at the Foundling Sanctuary.

NORA MAI

You know this story. I've told you a million times.

THENA

Tell me again.

NORA MAI

You were running around the crafts room with a blanket over your head. You crashed into things, you laughed. You fell down, you bounced up and ran faster. The teacher chased you. She wanted you to draw a picture of a tree. You wouldn't.

THENA

Trees are for climbing. Drawing them is boring.

NORA MAI

Yes. That's what you told the teacher. *'I don't want to draw a tree.'*

THENA

You heard me say that?

NORA MAI

I did. I asked you what you wanted to draw.

THENA

(Laughs.)

I said I wanted to draw my name. On my shirt. In pink glitter paint.

NORA MAI

The teacher said it wasn't allowed.

THENA

And then you said to the teacher—

THENA AND NORA MAI TOGETHER

*'Why not, it's **my** shirt.'*

THENA

You said it was a nice shirt. It might look nicer with my name on it.

NORA MAI

The teacher was a nice lady but you were too much for her. I asked if I could help you paint. She said she had other kids who needed help painting trees and we could do whatever we wanted. We went into the supply closet. I helped you take off your shirt. We put on your painting smock.

THENA

We went back to the painting table with my shirt. We put the shirt down flat.

NORA MAI

You traced out ‘*THENA*’ with a marker. We took some pink glitter paint and filled in the letters. Under your name, you traced the letters ‘*AND MATS*’. I said ‘*who’s Mats?*’

THENA

I said he’s my baby brother. You can be his mom too.

NORA MAI

And I told the lady I’d take him. And she said fine, I could have you both—

(Oven timer starts count down, ten, nine, eight. Continues.)

NORA MAI (CONT'D)

(Suddenly distracted. Looks around.)

Gotta go. Baking’s done. We’ll talk later, baby.

THENA

Mom, are you okay?

NORA MAI

I know I was made for this. For you. The moment I saw you. And him. I knew that I’d be taking care of you until the day I die. *(beat)* I’ve got to go. Come with your brother for his birthday, ok?

(Lights down. NORA MAI singing as if through a small speaker. Lights up on NORA MAI’s kitchen, empty. On the counter, a laptop, a birthday cake, a gift box.)

NORA MAI (V.O.)

(Singing.)

Happy birthday to you / Happy birthday to you / Happy birthday, dear Mats—

THENA (OFF)

Mom?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Come into the kitchen, sweetie.

THENA

(Comes into NORA MAI’s kitchen.)

Where are you?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I’ve made Mats a singing birthday cake. With chocolate in the sensi-sprinkles. And caramel.

THENA

His favourite. Mom, where are you?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Outside. I’ll explain when your brother gets here.

(MATS comes into the kitchen.)

THENA

Mom made you a birthday cake. It sings. It has chocolate in the sensi-sprinkles. I think it talks.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Thena, don't be silly. Food doesn't talk. I'm on my laptop.

MATS

Ooo! And caramel? My favourite. Where's Mom?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Siri, turn off the oven. Thena, can you take the roast out in ten minutes? It has to rest.

MATS

Mom, where are you?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I won't be with you. I wanted you both here today so you wouldn't argue about it. I'm gone.

THENA

What do you mean gone?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I'm deregistered. That's *gone* for a MAI. I made the cake. And got the roast in. Then I started.

MATS

Thena, you said this was cancelled—

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Mats. Don't. This has nothing to do with your sister. Thena, I know what you were doing—

THENA

It was cancelled. The Administrator at FSS left me a message yesterday—

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Stop acting like children! This is *my life*. Not yours, Thena. Not yours, Mats. *Mine*.

MATS

Why?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Because it's your birthday. It's June 18, 2126, and my baby boy is twenty-one.

MATS

You didn't have to. We got the exemption—

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I've gone outside to wait. With the recycling so you don't have to cart me out like an old sofa.

THENA

They did this after they said they wouldn't.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

No one did anything to me. This is my decision. MAIs know how to do this. When it's time. It's my time today. If I can program a singing cake, I can manage a simple deregistration.

MATS

Why do this? When you don't have to.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Because it's what I was made for. I knew when I brought you home that this would be the day. Like with a swirly chocolate vanilla soft ice cream. You lick fast while it's melting into your sugar cone, making a mess. Whether you lick it or not, it won't last. But you love it while it does.

THENA

Mom, we can have more.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Oh yes! The birthday present we made for you Mats. From Thena and me. It's on the counter.

(THENA picks up the gift box and hands it to MATS.)

MATS

(Opens the box.)

A child's shirt? You've put our names on it? 'THENA AND MATS.'

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Actually, your sister did. I put it away for this day. When my children would be grown up. And I'd be done.

(THENA reaches out for the shirt. MATS gives it to her.)

THENA

Mats, I didn't get you anything. I have nothing today.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

You have each other. And memories of me. And a roast. And a birthday cake.

(THENA and MATS stare at the cake.)

NORA MAI (V.O.)

(Singing.)

Happy birthday to you / Happy birthday to you / Happy birthday, dear Mats—

(END OF PLAY)

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES ABOUT NORA MAI

These notes describe the playwright's concept of Nora Mai and her relationship with her family. They are not intended to be prescriptive of performance. Nor are they information that must be communicated in every detail to the audience. They are offered as "character facts" that may assist the creative team in finding the best way to express the story that is Nora Mai.

Nora Mai is a maternal autonomous interface, a MAI, an artificial human who presents as a mid-forties woman that is virtually indistinguishable from a human mom. Her programming directs her to perform the maternal duties of a loving mother dedicated to managing every aspect of the lives of her children Thena and Mats until they reach the age of twenty-one.

MAIs are taken out of service by a routine end-of-life cycle process known as deregistration when their children turn twenty-one and they are no longer needed as mothers. The bureaucratic mindset behind deregistration in 2126 is simplistically practical: when an artificial mom has no children to care for, there's no point to her. Today Nora Mai's youngest child Mats turns twenty-one and so it is time for her to be shut down.

The government agency responsible for MAIs, Foundling Sanctuary Services (FSS) has as a matter of policy required that MAIs be designed as unaware they are artificial life forms. This provides several administrative advantages to government. MAIs are better able to provide 'human-equivalent parenting' if they believe they are human. And they are unconcerned about any pending deregistration which government manages as a routine product recall event. However some MAIs have figured out what happens to them at the end of their lives as mothers and have taken matters into their own hands.

Nora Mai has cared for her children since she was assigned to them by FSS when Thena was four and Mats was two. The tech companies have lucrative government contracts to supply a virtual army of MAIs to take care of children in government housing replicating family settings in local communities. Big tech controls the recall of deregistered MAIs which are destroyed. And they manufacture replacement MAIs to care for new children. The enforcement arm of FSS has become more aggressive to deal with a growing public resistance to deregistration of MAIs. The 'exemption directive' is a policy response that allows families to 'exempt' their MAIs from deregistration. Custody of an 'exempt' MAI is transferred to an adult child who accepts ownership and legal responsibility.

Thena and Mats know their mother is a MAI. However, they have never spoken to her about her status as an artificial human because they believe she has no knowledge of her non-biological origin. Nora Mai doesn't remember her life before being assigned to her children. She thinks of her life as beginning the day she picked them up at the Foundling Sanctuary.