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*For my family—thank you for the time*

## **Cast of Characters**

AMANDA SPRINGER, female, openly religious (Christian)

CHRIS KIELHORN, male, football player, keenly intelligent (if not always wise)

HAZEL DANDENEAU, female, bound for an exclusive college

HEATH CAPRINI, male, private, keeps ferrets

JARED SEIFERT, male, rocks out to Led Zeppelin

KELSEY GERLING, female, grieving for her mother

KIM PACKARD, female, quiet and growing quieter

MARIA FRAZIER, female, the play's primary narrator and a budding writer

PILAR ARROYO, female, growing up faster than she likes; the play's assistant narrator

TONI STRADER, female, impoverished, a dog-lover

TYLER WADE, male, devoted to the yearbook and all things web

ZACH MENCHERIAN, male, a happenstance hero devoted to blending in

STEVE BURNS, pre-recorded voice; a TV weatherman

## **Character Notes**

The race of most characters has been left intentionally ambiguous.

“Housing Development” kids: Amanda, Chris, Hazel, Maria, Pilar, Tyler.

“Trailer Trash” kids: Heath, Jared, Kelsey, Kim, Toni, Zach.

## **Time**

The present, spring.

## **Place**

The negative space of an empty, flexible stage.

## **Production Notes**

Rotation—in transitions, especially—is key to the success of this piece. Whenever possible, actors should spin counter-clockwise.

For the opening waltz, Tchaikovsky’s “Sleeping Beauty Waltz” does work exceptionally well (minus the brief introduction); for a more contemporary feel, I recommend “Waltz in the Fourth Dimension” by Michael Andrews.

Certain props, like the TV crew’s equipment, can and possibly should be mimed.

The cell ringer on Hazel’s phone should be standard, instantly recognizable as a cell phone, and not at all stylized—in fact, it should sound a lot like Kim’s.

The tornado-in-a-bottle is easy to achieve, but the bottles must be filled in the performance space, preferably in air the same temperature as the stage. Air pressure changes can collapse the bottle, causing the whirlpools to fail.

The (trademarked) Tornado Tube may be purchased from many science museum shops, better children’s toy stores, and online at: [Fatbraintoy.com](http://Fatbraintoy.com), among many others.

Jared’s Led Zeppelin concert jersey can be from any year and doesn’t even have to be genuine (so long as *Jared* thinks it’s the Real McCoy!). If the jersey used has an obvious date, change the relevant line to make the jersey and dialogue consistent.

If by some weird chance your production is in spitting distance of Swarthmore, change the Swarthmore references to Reed (College).

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## Acknowledgements

*Acts of God* was first produced by the Evansville Civic Theatre (C. Lynn Kinkade, Managing Artistic Director) in Evansville, Indiana, on November 16, 2006, with the following cast and staff:

HEATH.....	Andrew Baum
HAZEL.....	Amy D’Alto
AMANDA.....	Taylor Fritz
ZACH.....	Matt King
TYLER.....	Ryan McDonald
PILAR.....	Ashley Mifflin
KELSEY.....	Laura Reinicke
MARIA.....	Kayli Russell
JARED .....	Danny Schembre II
KIM .....	Caitlin Seitz
TONI .....	Hayley Torres
CHRIS .....	Nick Wentzel
Director .....	Christopher P. Tyner
Scenic and Lighting Designer.....	Charles Julius
Stage Manager .....	Christina MacIntyre
Dramaturg.....	Diane Brewer
Sound Mixer.....	Russell Stout

All production groups performing this play are required to include the following credits on the title page of every program:

*Acts of God* was first produced by the Evansville Civic Theatre (C. Lynn Kinkade, Managing Artistic Director) in Evansville, Indiana, on November 16, 2006.

# ACTS OF GOD

A DANGEROUS SWIRL OF ACTIVITY  
IN ONE EXTENDED ACT

by Mark Rigney

*(Lights up:)*

*(To the carefully metered strains of an elegant waltz [Tchaikovsky's "Sleeping Beauty Waltz," perhaps], the cast whirls onto the stage. Gray and white scarves or ribbons adorn their arms, creating a dizzying effect of constant rotation, always counter-clockwise. After a minute or two, a tornado siren overwhelms the waltz, and the dancers scatter. The siren—loud in its own right—gives way to a rising roar, reminiscent of an approaching subway train. As if struggling against a fierce wind, two of the cast members push an old-fashioned classroom blackboard, wheeled and reversible, downstage so it faces the audience.)*

*(Having abandoned their scarves, the entire cast [AMANDA, CHRIS, HAZEL, HEATH, KELSEY, KIM, JARED, MARIA, PILAR, TONI, TYLER, and ZACH] assembles around the blackboard, standing as if rooted to the ground with steel bolts. HAZEL wears a bicycle helmet, TYLER holds a digital camera, and ZACH clutches a rake. Others may have totems of their own as needed; all are high school students.)*

*(The torrent of sound abruptly ceases, giving way to:)*

**MARIA.** This is not a blackboard. It's a window. The supports (*Indicating the posts holding the blackboard.*) are the studs holding the window in place. Normally you can't see them. You see the wall, and the studs are inside. The window gets anchored to the studs—and also to a top plate up here (*She indicates the top of the board.*) and a sole plate down here (*She indicates the bottom of the board.*). My dad taught me. He's a contractor. Thing is, see, 'cos the window's anchored all the way 'round, it can't do...this.

*(MARIA rotates the board to a horizontal position.)*

I took a writing class, college credit. The instructor kept saying, "Show, don't tell." As if that's the way it ever really works. But okay. We'll save the telling. First, let's show.

*(Like a human tornado, KELSEY crosses to AMANDA and attacks her.)*

**KELSEY.** Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

*(Stricken, AMANDA hardly resists at all; she collapses to the ground and rolls into a ball rather than attempting to ward off the blows. No one else moves a muscle. KELSEY finally relents, her breathing ragged.)*

Don't ever say that again. Don't...ever...

*(Unable to continue, KELSEY exits.)*

**MARIA.** That didn't actually happen. Not quite. But I know a lot of people *wanted* it to happen. Maybe even Amanda. Anyway:

Imagine this window. Up on the wall in my living room where it belongs one minute. The next, the glass blows outward—and it's night time out there, I can't see it, it's gone. Then the whole window goes with it, I mean the whole thing, horizontal. Half the wall disappears, and then—this is the real scary part—the window comes flying back in. I'm on the couch, kinda half-trying to write a story but really I'm watching re-runs, except the power just went out, and now here comes the window—the entire complete window frame—it's zooming right at my head. And that's the image I keep getting stuck on, so to tell this story properly, I'm gonna ask for help. And if I *can* tell this story—and tell it well—I think maybe if I can do that, I can move on.

**JARED.** It was quiet.

**CHRIS.** The noise was incredible.

**JARED.** No. It was quiet.

**CHRIS.** Not at my place.

**ZACH.** No rain at all.

**HEATH.** Dead silent, but something coming...

**TONI.** It was real windy. Hard rain.

**TYLER.** I was busy, right? Uploading my new vids to the web, 'phones over my ears...I had no idea.

**CHRIS.** I remember hail.

**HAZEL.** The cats went nuts.

**PILAR.** Then the house...can houses groan?

**CHRIS.** The dogs are barkin', going totally crazy.

**TYLER.** And then—then I heard it.

**ZACH.** One minute I'm sitting in bed, doing all this SAT prep-stuff, and the next thing you know, the roof's gone and I'm doing flip-flops through the air.

**MARIA.** We have a huge living room. So I had time to think, with the window flying right toward my head, "How can it *do* that? And where'd the wall go?"

**KIM.** An F-3 tornado.

**PILAR.** Early April, one o'clock in the morning.

**CHRIS.** Only an F-3. Not so bad, right?

**HAZEL.** The Fujita Scale goes up to six.

**TONI.** Story problem: The funnel cloud touches down in *[insert town]*.

**ZACH.** It travels at forty miles an hour.

**KIM.** It stays on the ground for twelve minutes.

**JARED.** So—hold up—how many miles is that?

**HAZEL.** How many miles of complete and total destruction?

**HEATH.** I don't care. One minute I had a home. The next...

**AMANDA.** "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."<sup>1</sup>

**HEATH.** Oh, give it up.

*(Half of the group exits: Those who remain are TONI, ZACH, HEATH, KIM, and JARED. KELSEY re-enters and joins them.)*

**TONI.** So, check us. We're the trailer trash.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 23 (All cited biblical text originates in the 1611 [Authorized] King James version.)

**JARED.** Ex-residents of the Prairie Sunset Trailer Park.

**HEATH.** I hate trailer parks.

**TONI.** Tornadoes love them.

**HEATH.** I used to live in a real house.

**TONI.** Yeah, and now you *used* to live in a trailer park.

**KELSEY.** One hundred sixty-three units, total.

**ZACH.** Seventy-eight completely gone.

**HEATH.** Another fifty-eight bulldozed.

**JARED.** Leaving...wait. I'm confused.

**ZACH.** Twenty-seven. There are twenty-seven trailer homes left.

**HEATH.** F3. That means that when the funnel touched down, it had wind speeds of between one hundred fifty-eight and two hundred and six miles per hour.

**TONI.** Two hundred and six. Why not two-O-seven point four? I mean, who comes up with this stuff?

**HEATH.** Officially, ours topped out at two hundred even.

**KIM.** Wayne and I had tickets to the Kenny Chesney concert.

**HEATH.** Which wasn't until the next night.

**TONI.** Wait, who's Wayne?

**KIM.** No one you'd know.

**JARED.** Different school?

**KIM.** Something like that.

**ZACH.** I was thinking of going. To see Kenny Chesney. 'Course, I wasn't gonna tell anyone.

**TONI.** You couldn't get me in the door of no country music show for any money.

**JARED.** Me, either.

(MARIA leads the rest of the cast back on. As she opens her mouth to speak, PILAR beats her to it.)

**PILAR.** Can we keep this on track, please? (To MARIA:) Sorry. Did I just step on your toes?

**MARIA.** No. I asked for help. I meant it.

**PILAR.** Cool. 'Cos I'm good with, you know: Snappy. Kicking things into gear.

**CHRIS.** *¡Andale! ¡Andale!*

**MARIA.** (To PILAR:) Can you get our group introduced?

**PILAR.** Are you kidding? Toni, can we clear some space?

**TONI.** You got it. Trailer trash—and I use the term with affection and love—over here.

(The groups divide: The “Housing Development” kids are MARIA, AMANDA, CHRIS, TYLER, HAZEL, and PILAR. Those just entering hand out brooms and/or hoes, shovels, buckets, scrub-brushes; the group at large morphs into a clean-up army standing at attention, striking a decidedly “American Gothic” pose.)

**MARIA.** We're the rich kids. Nice big houses.

**PILAR.** Not me. House, yeah. Nice? Never.

**HAZEL.** And now, you don't even have that.

**TYLER.** Mine's still standing.

**PILAR.** Yeah, keep smiling, Holmes. This time next week, the county's gonna have your ass condemned.

**TYLER.** That's not what the inspector says.

**CHRIS.** The point is, despite some obvious internal divisions, it's really *them* we ain't s'posed to get along with.

**HAZEL.** But we mostly do.

**AMANDA.** I know I do. I like everybody.

**KELSEY.** Liar.

*(KELSEY moves to attack AMANDA again, but the group at large intercepts her. Amid ad-libs of “whoa,” “hey,” “cut that,” etc., KELSEY retreats. ZACH takes over and the rest get to work, miming each job as dictated by the tools they carry.)*

**ZACH.** See this? This is my armor. *(He hoists the rake.)* I mean, I hate housework. *Trailer* work. Yard work. Whatever. But I can't put it down. It's been three days now, and I've got it with me at school. I'm walking down the hall, heading for home room, and I suddenly realize I'm carrying this rake. Here comes Brent, my friend. He goes, “Dude, lose the rake.” I try, I want to...I can't.

**HAZEL.** Just like I can't lose this helmet. And yes, my classmates are calling me paranoid...

**TONI.** Paranoid!

**PILAR.** Very paranoid, Hazel!

**CHRIS.** Our very own Chicken Little.

**HAZEL.** I admit, this is like the opposite of trendy—but I have to take precautions.

**ZACH.** When no one's looking, I start cleaning. Raking things up. Carpets. Hallways. The street, late at night. The forest down by the river. It's like I have to keep cleaning, because it's such a mess...there are things scattered just everywhere...

**KELSEY.** Postcards.

**CHRIS.** Pipes.

**TONI.** Blankets.

**HEATH.** *(Rubbing at his eyes, maybe scratching:)* Insulation.

**MARIA.** Insulation—that really is everywhere.

**ZACH.** Caught on branches, stuck in the grass...

**KIM.** Pink. Everywhere pale, icky pink.

**TYLER.** Pink cornfields.

**HAZEL.** Pink telephone wires.

**JARED.** Pink is for groupies.

**PILAR.** Other stuff:

**AMANDA.** Furniture.

**HAZEL.** SUVs.

**CHRIS.** Clocks. All of them stopped at two minutes past one.

**ZACH.** Throw all that together in piles and that's what we're dealing with. This incredible mess. And we have to clean it up. *I* have to clean it up, so we can move on.

**PILAR.** Zach...

**ZACH.** Yeah?

**PILAR.** Look, over there. That's the National Guard.

**TONI.** And there's the fire department.

**CHRIS.** Three different fire departments.

**HAZEL.** And police.

**TYLER.** And like tons of volunteers.

**MARIA.** You can stop. Really.

**KELSEY.** It isn't your fault.

**ZACH.** Maybe if I'd gotten out a little quicker.

**KELSEY.** I don't think so.

**MARIA.** See, what Zach can't accept is, he was a hero.

**PILAR.** A guardian angel.

**TYLER.** The new fact on Zach: He's who I want to be.

**ZACH.** Oh, come on.

**TONI.** He was trapped, see? Right in one of the worst debris piles. But he got out, and then he found a truck right-way-up with a working flashlight in the cab and tools in the back, and he went running 'round calling for people, and he pulled out *five* all by himself, before anybody official even had a chance to show up.

**MARIA.** He was organizing everybody else—

**PILAR.** —Organizing grown-ups—

**MARIA.** —Everyone who could stand—

**PILAR.** —Telling them what to do—

**CHRIS.** —Telling them where to go—

**TONI.** —And doing it really well.

**ZACH.** Hey, we need some kind of stretchers! Let's pop that door off its hinges, use that! Come on, let's move!

**TYLER.** What he didn't like—

**ZACH.** —What I really didn't like was...

**PILAR.** Go on.

**ZACH.** Have you met Kelsey? *(He pulls KELSEY forward.)* Look, something like what happened here, not everybody, um...you know. I found the dog first.

**KELSEY.** Peter. My dog's name was Peter.

**ZACH.** And then I found her mom.

*(A moment.)*

**HAZEL.** Hey, y'know what's on tonight? *American Idol!*

*(HAZEL's infectious excitement leads to lots of bubbly ad-libs, and the group quickly rearranges itself, with the vast majority surrounding HAZEL.)*

**JARED.** You people are so lame.

**TYLER.** Hey, I'm sorry you've got issues with, like, mass culture.

**JARED.** It's karaoke!

**PILAR.** See now, what Jared fails to appreciate is that right now, for most of us, stuff on the level of TV karaoke is about all we got left.

**MARIA.** It's about coping.

**PILAR.** We're like Zach. All we want is to move on.

**MARIA.** But this storm uncovered more than we bargained for.

**PILAR.** Not just insulation, either. Emotions.

**MARIA.** Ideas. It's a kind of unburying.

**PILAR.** You ask me, some of this crap should've stayed buried.

**MARIA.** To put it all back, well. Some things help.

**PILAR.** Some things don't.

**MARIA.** But we're okay. Everything's okay. Right?

*(General nodding and mumbled assent.)*

**PILAR.** It's been four days. And we're fine. We're all absolutely fine.

*(A moment. Breathing. In, out, in. Nerves everywhere, fraying as we watch. KELSEY breaks first, and even though her neighbor tries to cover her mouth, it's only another second before the entire group is screaming their lungs out in an agony of high-decibel release. Just like that, it's over.)*

See? We're like the poster kids for "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

*(Everyone exits, spinning off into the wings. They take their cleaning supplies with them and leave behind a scattering of T-shirts. Only JARED remains.)*

**JARED.** So with me, it's like that John Cougar Mellancamp song, right? Life goes on. And here I am, it's a couple days later, my first day back in school, and I'm real happy, right, 'cos I found like half my concert tees out in the woods the day before, all draped over this bush, right? So I'm totally psyched, there's my Pearl Jam and Rush and Def Leppard and AC/DC—and yes! Led Zep!

*(JARED rips off the shirt he's wearing and hauls on the Led Zeppelin jersey instead, possibly getting stuck a few times along the way.)*

The genuine 100% original '74 concert jersey! Picked it up cheap on eBay. Man. Oh, sorry. I'm in school, and I was almost real late 'cos I couldn't decide which shirt to wear. It's hard, you know? It's like, my idea of Heaven is I walk in and St. Peter or whoever says, "So, would you enjoy a helping of AC/DC, or would you prefer Led

Zeppelin?” and I go, “Can I maybe hear ‘em both?” and he totally rocks out and says, “Yeah! Why not?” and then they jam, Led Zep and AC/DC together, for hours, with Bon Scott and Bonham back from the dead—which they aren’t, exactly, ‘cos in Heaven they like really *are* dead... Okay, sorry. I’m in school. Still. Humming that whole “Life goes on” tune, and next thing I know I get pulled right out of class ‘cos I had this pre-arranged guidance counselor meeting-thing scheduled, and I’m still completely, you know, *tuned in* to the whole tornado thing, and which county my Nirvana and Billy Idol shirts wound up in, but now there’s all this interference ‘cos I’ve got Ms. Schneider on the other side of the desk asking all these not-very-nice questions.

*(The other students suddenly enter. They surround and circle JARED like a flock of crows, and begin firing off questions as Ms. Schneider:)*

**TONI.** Jared, how can you be failing gym?

**CHRIS.** Jared! Are you smoking pot *again*?

**HAZEL.** Jared! What’s sixteen times nine?

**TYLER.** Jared! Do you know you’re failing algebra? For the third time?

**AMANDA.** Jared! Do you even think you’ll graduate?

**JARED.** Truth is, nobody likes Ms. Schneider. Nobody.

**PILAR.** All those who like Ms. Schneider, way over there.

*(The accusatory circle evaporates, as everybody except ZACH zips over to wherever PILAR did not point, with ad-libs as appropriate.)*

**ZACH.** She’s not that bad.

**TYLER.** Zach. My man.

**ZACH.** *(Blending back in:)* Okay, okay—but you gotta admit, Jared’s perspective on this is major-league whacked.

**JARED.** Zach! *(To somebody else:)* Here, hold my shirts. *(To ZACH:)* She’s got like zero grip on anything, most especially rocking out.

**ZACH.** I rest my case.

**MARIA.** (*As Ms. Schneider:*) Jared! One last question:

**ALL.** (*Except JARED*) WHAT DO YOU INTEND TO DO WITH YOUR LIFE?

**JARED.** Like I know the answer to that. But, I'm there, she's there. I give her the truth.

**MARIA.** Which is?

**JARED.** I want to be a doctor.

*(Horror! Disbelief!)*

Okay, so that does not go over well. In the words of the great Ms. Schneider, to be a doctor, I have to go to medical school. To go to medical school, I have to go to college. To go to college, I have to graduate from high school. To graduate from high school—and this is where she gets way out of control—I have to pass my classes and—*and*—stop spending my life inside a pair of headphones.

**PILAR.** Check that.

**JARED.** Hey! Am I telling this, or you?

**PILAR.** You, Jared. It's all you.

**JARED.** All me, yeah. All of me versus all of Ms. Schneider, and I stand up, I'm like up and out of my seat and ready to just let her have it—and suddenly there's my dad. He's flying through the air. His clothes are getting sucked off his body. He's got a bible in his left hand—nope, there goes the Bible—and Dad goes with it, up in the air, gone. Next thing you know I'm up there, too, but not even going the same direction, and there go all my T-shirts, and my iPod and—was that a fish tank? With fish? Who cares! I'm flying. I can fly! It's incredible, like better than meth. And then—wham. I'm down. My dad, too—I can just see him. Nothing wrong with him except a broken wrist. And then I realize I'm not in the ditch like I really was. I've landed on Ms. Schneider's nasty orange carpet, and I'm doing that hyperventilating thing and this is it: Life going on. I've got a one-point-two GPA, I am a suck-ass guitar player, and an even worse drummer. But for a couple seconds, real late at night, I could fly. Which totally rocks.

*(JARED exits, to be replaced by AMANDA and TONI, who bears a large sheet of card stock bearing the blocky words "TONI'S PLACE.")*

**AMANDA.** Let's talk about insurance.

*(ZACH enters.)*

**ZACH.** Hold up, let's talk about lost and found.

**AMANDA.** Zach...

**ZACH.** No, seriously. Over at the Red Cross, people've been hanging up fliers for stuff they lost that they'd really like back. My mom, she's going crazy, we had genealogy charts going back something like two hundred years.

**TONI.** Listen, Zach. I don't want to be cold and unfeeling and heartless and all, but we're kind of doin' a thing here.

**ZACH.** Well, if you see it...any of it...

**TONI.** We'll tell you.

*(ZACH joins the majority of the cast as they settle in for AMANDA and TONI's presentation.)*

**AMANDA.** So. Let's talk about insurance.

**TONI.** Which means, let's focus on me, me and my trailer. See? Right here. My place. Looks sharp, yeah? Now, here's my trailer in the face of the big F-3.

*(AMANDA blows on the board as TONI lets her hand go from the top; the card stock flops predictably to the ground.)*

**AMANDA.** And now, back to insurance. My mom sells insurance part-time, in the mornings. And then she spends half the afternoon cooking up these fabulous meals. In my family, everybody tells about their day over dinner, and at least once a week my mom'll be like, "They are bound and determined to buy the wrong policy. I give good advice. Nobody listens."

**TONI.** Or maybe it's just we can't afford the "right" policy. Look.

*(TONI picks up the card stock, swings it around. On the back are the words "CONTENTS: \$15,000.")*

**AMANDA.** “Contents” as in, what’s in your house.

**TONI.** Trailer.

**AMANDA.** Home.

**TONI.** Whatever.

**AMANDA.** “Fifteen thousand” as in, the total financial ceiling insurance carriers will allow for replacement of items other than the home itself.

**TONI.** A lot of money.

**AMANDA.** Is it?

**TONI.** Are you kiddin’ me? Look, my mom and me, we went to the insurance person today. And this lady says, “Make me a list and we’ll get started.”

**AMANDA.** I would like to point out that this “lady” was not my mom.

**TONI.** Not exactly, anyway.

**AMANDA.** Was her last name Springer?

**TONI.** Either way, we got to make a list. Of everything we had that we don’t have now. Of all the stuff we can’t see ’cos it’s been blown across three counties and covered with pink insulation. And then, once we get a list—once somebody *believes* our list—if it comes in under fifteen grand, we get it all back.

**AMANDA.** It’s a solid policy.

**TONI.** Under, over! It weren’t much, but I want what I had before.

*(MARIA steps in.)*

**MARIA.** What Amanda’s mother deals in are “Acts of God.”

**AMANDA.** I prefer the term “force majeure.”

**TONI.** Only ’cos mommy does.

**AMANDA.** Insurance doesn’t hold God accountable any more than we do.

**TONI.** You sure 'bout that?

**AMANDA.** You can't say God did this.

**TONI.** I can't?

**AMANDA.** "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."<sup>2</sup>

*(The lighting becomes immediately solemn, reverential. Severe organ music crowds in from all sides [perhaps the closing minutes of J.S. Bach's "Passacaglia and Fugue In C Minor"], as cast members bring in benches or pews along with a shrouded box or casket. The group sits down to attend the funeral service of Kelsey's mother. One by one, they rise and file forward to lay a hand on the casket or perhaps place a small flower on the shroud. Each one exits after doing so, removing their seating as they go. Left alone, with the final strains of the organ fading, KELSEY approaches last.)*

**KELSEY.** Mom? I just want you to know, it was a really nice service. Everybody came. I wish you could have been here.

*(AMANDA enters, clearly wishing she were elsewhere. MARIA and PILAR follow, with the rest not far behind.)*

**AMANDA.** This is completely inappropriate.

**MARIA.** It's what's next.

**PILAR.** Go on. You can do it.

**AMANDA.** And now, back to insurance!

**MARIA.** Chris?

**CHRIS.** I ain't no expert, but here's the deal if I understand it correctly—

**MARIA.** —Which you do.

**CHRIS.** Maybe.

**MARIA.** He does. He's the smartest guy here.

**CHRIS.** Yeah, sure.

**MARIA.** Even Hazel says so.

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<sup>2</sup> Job 13:15

**CHRIS.** (To HAZEL:) You do?

**HAZEL.** But I'll get valedictorian, because you (*Rapping her bicycle helmet*) are a head case.

**PILAR.** Chris. The topic.

**CHRIS.** Right. HO-3. Homeowner's Insurance, most basic kind. I come home yesterday, my dad's hashing it out with the State Farm agent—and my dad, he don't back down easy. Car salesmen: They can really close a deal. But he was lost with the insurance jargon. Totally lost. I had to keep stepping in—and I don't think there's even a word for how that makes me feel, but I can tell you that “bad” and “awful” don't begin to cover it. All this at my uncle's place, 'cos our house, well—FEMA says it's coming down any day now. Want to know what my dad calls FEMA? Failing to Effectively Manage Anything.

**PILAR.** The topic, hotshot.

**CHRIS.** HO-3. Covers wind, hail, lightning, fire, theft: The “perils,” that's what the guy called 'em.

**HAZEL.** Go on, say it: Acts of God.

**AMANDA.** That is not fair!

**MARIA.** To you, maybe not. But not everyone here is starting out from the same point.

**PILAR.** Exactly. True believers, over here with me!

*(The entire company joins MARIA, PILAR, and AMANDA—except for HAZEL.)*

**HAZEL.** Oh, get real.

**MARIA.** Zach.

**ZACH.** Okay, all right. But I'm not the only one. Heath.

**HEATH.** Jared.

**JARED.** My dad finds out about this, he'll kill me. No, worse: He'll take my Ozzie CDs.

**TYLER.** Get 'em all onto a flash drive, wear it 'round your neck—

**HAZEL.** —Hey, Tyler. I think you're in the wrong group.

**TYLER.** (*Brandishing his flash drive like a crucifix:*) No way. I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

**AMANDA.** (*To HAZEL's group, with genuine concern:*) There is a very good chance you will all burn in hell for eternity.

**HAZEL.** There is a very good chance I will not be sharing my tater tots with you ever again.

**KELSEY.** Please. Stop.

**PILAR.** I believe Chris still has the floor—if his enormous brain can somehow remember what he was talking about.

**CHRIS.** Thing is, see, my dad, he only asked for fifty K on the contents, so now maybe we get a grant but maybe not, in which case we're gonna wind up borrowing from FEMA and owe big money. I was all set to break it to my dad that I want to do college next year, and that was gonna have to be kind of delicate, 'cos me bein' in college ain't in his plans at all, but now, like a lot of stuff around here, that idea is pretty much D.O.A.

*(The "Housing Development" kids exit, except for PILAR. HEATH, JARED, KELSEY, KIM, ZACH, and TONI also remain.)*

**PILAR.** Hey, I don't think you've had a chance to meet Kimmie.

**KIM.** Kim.

**PILAR.** She's gonna get y'all up to speed.

**KIM.** Hi.

**PILAR.** Oh, did I say? She's kinda like shy.

*(PILAR exits.)*

**TONI.** Go on, girl.

**KIM.** I wasn't home the night of the storm. Which is probably good, because there is *nothing* left.

**TONI.** But your folks...?

**KIM.** They're fine. They work night shifts. So now...it's been five days.

**TONI.** Since the storm.

**KIM.** And this is the first time we've been allowed back in.

**TONI.** Tell 'em who.

**KIM.** Who what?

**TONI.** Who's gonna let us in where.

**KIM.** Oh. The sheriff's department. And FEMA.

**HEATH.** And the National Guard.

**TONI.** The mayor.

**ZACH.** The county commissioners.

**JARED.** The Red Cross.

**TONI.** Okay, we get the idea: Can we let the girl talk?

**KIM.** You're the one who interrupted!

**TONI.** Kimmie. Talk.

**KIM.** Each family got a pass.

**TONI.** A pass, yeah. To do what?

**KIM.** A pass to see...to pick up...

**ZACH.** A pass to pick up whatever we can of our lives. Me, I'm not sure I want to be here.

**HEATH.** Looks like Bulldozer City.

**ZACH.** One big landfill.

**TONI.** You find anything yet?

**HEATH.** Homework. All of it.

**TONI.** Shut up.

**HEATH.** No, for real. Just what I wanted.

**ZACH.** Me, I found my sleeping bag from Boy Scouts.

**KIM.** My first Kenny Chesney scrapbook. With a hole in the middle.

**HEATH.** Oh, wait. I found this. From the backing off a roll of insulation: “Warning: contains fiberglass wool. Possible cancer hazard. Minimize breathing.”

**TONI.** But it’s everywhere.

**HEATH.** “May cause temporary irritation to skin and eyes and respiratory tract. Avoid eye contact with eye and skin. Wear gloves and eye protection.”

**ZACH.** I was wading in it.

**TONI.** Jared?

**JARED.** *(Headphones on:)* Huh?

**TONI.** What’d you find?

**JARED.** I told you! Shirts!

**TONI.** Kelsey?

**KELSEY.** I went to church, instead. Which I should point out wasn’t my regular church. I took some alone time, and when I was done, I took off my cross *(She undoes the clasp of her necklace and removes it.)* and I went back to my grandma’s place where I’m staying and I opened a beer. I don’t drink, but I drank that. I didn’t really like it. Tasted like fungus mixed with flat soda. But hey, the doing of it felt good. My little protest. The opening salvo of me walking out on God. That’s right. I’m on strike. Specifically, I am now on strike against Amanda’s version of God.

*(The avowedly religious members of the group begin singing with summer-camp cheer as KELSEY gives way to AMANDA.)*

**CHRIS, KIM, MARIA, PILAR, TONI, and TYLER.**

“All night, all day, angels watching over me my Lord...  
All night, all day! Angels watching over me...”

*(As AMANDA begins to speak, the singing fades and the rest of the cast settles, perhaps miming test-takers, or perhaps swirling around AMANDA like a living memory of the storm...)*

**AMANDA.** They all think it's easy. God sent angels down to watch over me, and just because He did that, just because I had the courage—the clarity, even—to say so on camera, to Heath's mom—Channel Six—well. Everyone thinks I've got it easy. I wish. Hey, I was there, too. In my closet. Screaming. The top half of my house getting ripped off. I know that officially, I'm supposed to be strong, and of good courage—neither afraid nor dismayed—for the Lord my God is with me whithersoever I goest.<sup>3</sup> But in that closet, right then? I was feeling very, very alone. And now I'm here, in my school, surrounded by my classmates. I am taking a test, I am supposed to be taking a social studies test, but I am standing, I am up on my feet and flying in the aisle between these very stable, ultra-safe rows of desks...and I cannot stop moving, I am a swirl, my insides are churning and now my body and skin are following and I cannot focus on this exam, I cannot focus on this test, I cannot focus on what is expected of me because I am still in that closet and the wind is reaching in and I am spinning right out through the wall, I am spinning and floating and flying—and wham! I am down, I am dropped, I am dumped out of that dark howling cloud and I am laying in the wet in the grass and the darkness muffles my sobs and my fast-beating heart and I realize the darkness is God, it's God holding me, holding me in His arms, and He lays me down to rest and says sleep, sleep, sleep. And I am sorry, but I cannot sleep, I do not sleep—not yet—and I have no idea what is on this test.

**MARIA.** Why didn't you ask for an extension?

**AMANDA.** Because I can handle it.

**MARIA.** It's okay to get extensions. For personal trauma, deaths in the family...

**AMANDA.** Nobody died.

**MARIA.** In your family, no.

**AMANDA.** It wasn't our time to go.

*(A school bell rings: Time to change classes.)*

**PILAR.** Fifth period. Six days after the storm.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from *The Book of Joshua* 1:9

*(Everyone moves at once, emulating the most crowded of high school hallways. Handshakes, nods, spoken greetings: Quiet or mimed ad-libs as necessary but taking care to highlight TYLER snapping everyone's picture together with the following, downstage:)*

**AMANDA.** Hey, Kelsey. Wait up.

**KELSEY.** What's up?

**AMANDA.** I just wanted to say how sorry I am.

**KELSEY.** Thanks.

**AMANDA.** If you need anything...

**KELSEY.** I'll let you know. *(As AMANDA starts to leave:)* Hey, Amanda? Is that really what we said?

*(AMANDA checks with MARIA, who shakes her head.)*

**AMANDA.** Again?

**MARIA.** Again.

**AMANDA.** Hey, Kelsey. Wait up.

**KELSEY.** What?

**AMANDA.** I just wanted to say how sorry I am. About your family, I mean.

**KELSEY.** Oh, my dad's fine.

**AMANDA.** He is?

**KELSEY.** He's in Idaho someplace. Been gone for years.

**AMANDA.** I'm sorry, I didn't realize.

**KELSEY.** No, you didn't, 'cos we never talk and we aren't friends.

**AMANDA.** Look, something has happened, something bad, and I am trying to acknowledge that—

**KELSEY.** —Have you ever been to Idaho?

**AMANDA.** To Idaho? No.

**KELSEY.** Me, neither. But I'm thinking about it. Mountains, maybe wolves: Zero tornadoes.

**AMANDA.** I think there are things closer to home that we could talk about.

**KELSEY.** Oh, get over yourself.

**AMANDA.** What?

**KELSEY.** Don't offer a shoulder when you don't even like me in the first place.

**AMANDA.** I'm trying to say I'm sorry!

**KELSEY.** Why?

**AMANDA.** Because I am.

**KELSEY.** But angels were watching over *you*. The sheltering hand of God. I think that's pretty much an exact quote.

**AMANDA.** What happened was terrible.

**KELSEY.** Get away from me.

**AMANDA.** Kelsey—

**KELSEY.** —Get away from me!

*(The school halls empty, and everyone exits except for TONI.)*

**TONI.** Me, I went to the counselors like first thing. "Crisis counselors," they call 'em. They were everywhere. Some from whole other counties. I sat down, I was like, "I don't care 'bout my trailer, that's only stuff, what's gone is gone, but Skunk"—he's a whole 'nother story. I got him when I was eight. He was just a puppy. Hadn't even named him yet when he ran down a real skunk. And my puppy, he *stank*. And then *I* stank, the *trailer* stank, my *mom*—everything. It's no good havin' a stinky mom; it's like the opposite of what you want, right? And Skunk! You ever given a dog a bath in pure vinegar? It's been what, six years?—and I still can't deal with salad dressing. But Skunk, he's fine now. Look, here's a picture—exactly like the one I was posting all over, tryin' to get him back. Community boards, telephone poles, everywhere. But he was just gone. No barking, nothing. The Humane Society didn't have

him, Animal Control didn't have him, the neighbors—hey, what neighbors, right? Where I live, that word is like irrelevant. 'Course, I don't live there now. I live in a shelter. Future Homeless of America, that's me! But then, eight days after the storm, I see this thing in the paper. They've got dogs they picked up way out in *[insert town]*, and they're tryin' to figure out who they go with. My mom and me, we drive out, and there's Skunk, in this stainless steel kennel. I know it's not real normal, but I couldn't even wait for him to come out. I went in. I lay down with Skunk in that tiny little kennel and nobody could get me out for like a full half hour. He's with us in the shelter now. Shares my cot. I think maybe everything's gonna mostly work out.

*(TYLER enters in time to hear and react to this. As he speaks, he shoves TONI off-stage and takes her place.)*

**TYLER.** That's one perspective. Me, I'm not so sure. In fact, me, myself and I were *so* not sure that I took it upon my own fine self to visit the school crisis counselor.

*(PILAR pokes her head on-stage—)*

**PILAR.** Not true! I dragged you there.

**TYLER.** I told you I'd go!

**PILAR.** You've got follow-through issues, Tyler, and you know it.

*(—and exits again.)*

**TYLER.** Whatever. Her name's Ms. Fleming—and here she is—

*(Enter KIM as a mortified Ms. Fleming stand-in.)*

—looking a little young or something. No sweat. I am kinda truth-to-tell surprised to see Ms. Fleming, 'cos she's also the other guidance counselor—remember Ms. Schneider, the one nobody likes? Anyway, I didn't realize that guidance and crisis were now the same department, but it's no big thing: I go in. I sit down. Ms. Fleming sneezes.

*(KIM hesitates, gets encouragement from TYLER, and sneezes.)*

Hey, Ms. Fleming, I'm glad you did that. Did you know a sneeze ejects itself from the body at speeds up to one hundred miles per

hour? Ms. Fleming expresses surprise and interest. I say, yeah, I saw it on the 'net. I was looking up tornado trivia. Y'know, for fun. She says, "What have sneezes got to do with tornadoes?" I say, think about it. A hundred miles an hour, that's a top-speed F-1 tornado. If the entire football team all sneezed at once, they'd prob'ly take down the bleachers. Okay, hang on. I'm not gettin' a lot of feedback here from Ms. Fleming, and I want to get the full picture across, so...

*(TYLER rushes to KIM and takes over as Ms. Fleming. For the remainder of this exchange, he volleys back and forth, first as Ms. Fleming, then as himself, switching places and personas like a conversational [and increasingly exhausted] super ball. As the performance evolves, KIM makes it clear she would rather be anywhere else in the universe.)*

"Tyler, it's good you came to see me. Is there anything you need? Need? I'm sorry, what do you mean need? "Clothes? School supplies, maybe food?" Oh, food! Well, I'm kinda hungry and lunch is three periods away... "I didn't mean now, Tyler." No, I guess I can see how the critical state of my hunger pangs might not be your department. "Tyler. Is there anything you need to get through the next week or two?" Yes. Yes, there is. I need to get my friends off my case! "Your friends are on your case?" My so-called friends, yeah. Who d'you think made me come down here? "Tyler, are you saying you didn't come to see me of your own accord?" I didn't, no—'cos I'm fine. "Are you sure?" Yes. "Sure-sure one hundred percent sure?" Yes. "No trouble concentrating? No weepy moments, sudden bouts of temper or inappropriate emotional flare-ups?" No. "No issues sleeping?" No. I mean, my house is mostly okay, got sheets on the bed, so...what's to worry about? "I don't know, Tyler. What at this point worries you?"

*(Too tired to continue, TYLER collapses.)*

**KIM.** Tyler? Are you all right?

**TYLER.** In. What. Sense?

**KIM.** I don't mean "Are you tired?"

**TYLER.** Well. The truth? If I am not totally and completely moment-to-moment distracted, I will lose my freaking mind.

*(The rest of the cast enters with a military cadence.)*

**PILAR.** Check that, let's hear more from our distractions! Pet owners, line up!

*(Pets: HAZEL, KELSEY, AMANDA, CHRIS, TONI, MARIA, JARED, and HEATH.)*

**MARIA.** Can we get a roll call, please? Of the pets?

**CHRIS.** Two Golden Retrievers, both fine.

**AMANDA.** Three parakeets, lost.

**TONI.** Skunk. The dog. Found!

**AMANDA.** Two albino hamsters, missing.

**MARIA.** One fish tank, lots of cichlids. History.

*(HEATH tries to step forward, salute at the ready, but AMANDA beats him to it.)*

**AMANDA.** One hermit crab, shell slightly cracked but doing well.

**KELSEY.** One chocolate lab, dead.

*(Again, HEATH's too late.)*

**AMANDA.** Three lop rabbits, all missing.

**JARED.** Seven cats, none of which were my idea. I think they're all back—and I think I'm allergic.

*(And again...)*

**AMANDA.** One African grey parrot.

**TONI.** Okay, so your house is like some kinda private zoo.

**AMANDA.** I'm sorry, I like animals.

**HAZEL.** Two cats: One orange, one black-and-white with a broken leg.

*(Everyone waits for AMANDA.)*

**AMANDA.** Yes, I'm done!

**JARED.** What happened to the parrot?

**AMANDA.** Oh, Otto's fine. He hid in the dryer. (*Off reaction:*) It was open, he was wet, he's a smart bird!

**MARIA.** Heath. What'd you have?

**HEATH.** Ferrets. But they're illegal inside the city limits, so...maybe I got 'em back, maybe I didn't.

**PILAR.** Other area pets that were lost and later found included six venomous snakes, among them a five-foot *cascaval* and a spitting cobra—

**KIM.** —several tarantulas—

**TYLER.** —iguanas—

**ZACH.** —a pig—

**CHRIS.** —and one real panicked howler monkey. Big, furry, black-cat black. Took off like a shot and ain't been heard from since. Can you say, "Illegal"?

**PILAR.** Chris. Why are you looking at me?

**CHRIS.** No reason.

**PILAR.** Is that so.

**TYLER.** Chris, hold on: Yeah, right there. One for the yearbook.

*(TYLER's flash goes off and CHRIS and PILAR blink back the afterglow. The school bell rings.)*

**MARIA.** Third period, the hallways, two weeks gone.

*(Again, the procession through the halls.)*

Context: In several voluntary but strongly encouraged group sessions with a professional shrink, we are reminded that life is a gift, and it would be an intriguing experiment to contemplate those things we have always wished to do but never acted on.

*(HAZEL immediately seizes CHRIS and sticks him with a deep, lingering kiss. The others drop back and applaud.)*

Hazel's a smart cookie, but she does have this tendency to kind of literalize everything. As you can see.

**PILAR.** And I guess it's nice to see people happy. Even him.

**MARIA.** But it *is* a nice segue. Brings us right to the sciences.

**PILAR.** But not chemistry. Physics.

*(The cast exits, except for CHRIS and HAZEL, who drag the blackboard back into play.)*

**CHRIS.** So I'm thinking maybe I should be the one wearing the helmet.

**HAZEL.** Don't tell me I embarrassed you.

**CHRIS.** No. Embarrassing would be if you continue to talk about it.

**HAZEL.** Then let's talk storms.

**CHRIS.** Go for it.

**HAZEL.** Fact: A typical thunderstorm contains, in droplet form, ten thousand tons of water.

**CHRIS.** So?

**HAZEL.** "So?" Doesn't that blow you away?

**CHRIS.** What we need to be talking about is Archimedes' Principle, which says, as you can see here (*Referring to the following equation, already written on the board:  $F_b = \rho_{\text{fluid}}gV$* ), that any physical body immersed in a fluid is buoyed up by a force equal to the weight of the displaced fluid.

**HAZEL.** Helper Elf Number One, please!

*(KIM enters, carrying a large, clear bin or tank filled with water. In the water floats a fat rubber duck.)*

**CHRIS.** Here, the buoyant force is more than the weight of the object.

**HAZEL.** It's not an object, it's a duck.

**CHRIS.** You really are literal.

**HAZEL.** It *is* a duck.

**CHRIS.** I think your helmet's on a little tight.

**HAZEL.** Chris!

**CHRIS.** Whatever it is (*As he pushes the duck underwater:*), the weight or force of the object is now greater than the buoyant force.

**HAZEL.** Translation: The duck sinks.

**CHRIS.** Let's give a big hand to Helper Elf Number One!

*(Embarrassed and fed up, KIM exits hurriedly.)*

**HAZEL.** Next key point: Heated air expands.

**CHRIS.** As it expands, its density decreases.

**HAZEL.** Helper Elf? Would you mind coming back, please?

*(KIM reappears, with duck and bowl.)*

**CHRIS.** Imagine the duck is the heated air.

*(He pushes it back under the water.)*

**HAZEL.** Now Chris lets go...

**CHRIS.** ...And because the cooler material around it has a greater density, the air rises.

*(The duck obediently bobs to the surface.)*

**HAZEL.** Once begun, the process is self-sustaining.

**CHRIS.** The rising air creates a vacuum beneath it—

**HAZEL.** —More cool air gets sucked up and in—

**KIM.** —Excuse me, am I done?

**HAZEL.** If you want to be, sure.

*(HAZEL's cell phone suddenly rings. KIM jumps, and her water sloshes dangerously.)*

**CHRIS.** You never heard of "vibrate"?

**HAZEL.** Hi, Mom. Yes, as a matter of fact, I am busy. Where am I? I'm with a boy. Yes, Mom. I'll be careful.

*(She hangs up.)*

**CHRIS.** Family leash a little tight?

**KIM.** Hey! Will you tell whosever in charge that I don't want to be the stand-in guinea pig?

**CHRIS.** Yeah. Sure.

**HAZEL.** Kimmie, are you okay?

**KIM.** My name is Kim.

**HAZEL.** Okay. Sorry. It's just, you know, you've been "Kimmie" forever.

**KIM.** Not anymore.

*(KIM has already turned her back and exited.)*

**CHRIS.** And on that sulky note: Angular momentum, or the tendency of a moving object to spin.

**HAZEL.**  $L = mvr$ , where  $L$  is angular momentum,  $m$  is mass,  $v$  is velocity—

**CHRIS.** —tangential—

**HAZEL.** —yes, of course, obviously tangential—and  $r$  is the radius from the axis point of the spinning object.

**CHRIS.** We *are* dealing with a few real big generalizations here—

**HAZEL.** —but imagine a figure skater, arms outstretched, in the act of spinning...

**CHRIS.** Helper Elf Number Two!

*(TYLER enters.)*

**HAZEL.** You're a figure skater?

**TYLER.** Nine years of lessons. My mom's idea, swear to God.

**CHRIS.** Spin. Arms out.

*(TYLER spins in place, rather gracelessly.)*

**HAZEL.** Now: Arms in.

*(TYLER spins...faster?)*

**CHRIS.** This is nine years of lessons?

**HAZEL.** Maybe it all comes together in year ten.

**CHRIS.** Well, one thing for sure: Without ice and ice skates, this is pointless.

**TYLER.** I could've told you that.

**HAZEL.** All right, Elf. Dismissed.

*(TYLER exits, still spinning.)*

**CHRIS.** We need a rotating office chair and two dumbbells.

**HAZEL.** Elves Number Three and Four!

*(HEATH and TONI enter, with the requisite items. [The chair's casters are locked.]*

**CHRIS.** Man, I can get better elves at the Dollar Store.

**HEATH.** Hey, we're here, be happy.

**TONI.** Is this gonna hurt?

**HAZEL.** No. Now sit in the chair.

**CHRIS.** Take the dumbbells. Arms out.

**HAZEL.** Heath.

*(HEATH spins the chair, with TONI in it.)*

**TONI.** Wheeee!

**HAZEL.** Now, Toni! Arms in to your chest!

*(The effect is immediate and visible to all: The chair, with TONI in it, picks up speed.)*

**TONI.** Ohmigosh.

**CHRIS.** Elf!

*(HEATH grabs the chair and stops it.)*

**TONI.** I think I'm gonna be sick.

**HAZEL.** Thank you, Elves Three and Four.

*(TONI wobbles off, supported by HEATH.)*

**CHRIS.** So, as you can see: The smaller the radius out from the central mass of a spinning object, the faster it moves.

**HAZEL.** You can see where all this is leading, right?

**CHRIS.** Vortexes. Big ones.

**HAZEL.** So now we've got this huge moving air mass, and there's a whole formula to keep it rotating—

**CHRIS.** —Accelerating, even—

**HAZEL.** —and also: The Coriolis Effect.

**CHRIS.** Spin a disc, a CD maybe, and the outer edge rotates faster than the center.

**HAZEL.** The key is, the Coriolis Effect forces low pressure weather systems to rotate counter-clockwise.

**CHRIS.** In the Northern Hemisphere.

**HAZEL.** Well, obviously in the Northern Hemisphere, where do you think we all live?

**CHRIS.** You're cute when you're mad.

**HAZEL.** And you're off-topic. Again.

**CHRIS.** Okay. Counter-clockwise rotation. Add in your typical spring and fall air currents and wham, bam, thank you ma'am, you got Tornado Alley.

**HAZEL.** (*With evident distaste:*) "Wham bam thank you ma'am"?

**CHRIS.** Okay, how about... *voila?*

**HAZEL.** French: Be still, my heart.

**CHRIS.** Air flow, *mademoiselle*.

**HAZEL.** *Oui.* If upper air rotation begins—

**CHRIS.** —If the figure skater starts to spin—

**HAZEL.** —Right, if the localized spinning starts in the first place, which isn't all that probable—

**CHRIS.** —but if it *does*, then all the forces we just described are likely to cause the funnel to narrow—

**HAZEL.** —which is really the skater dropping her arms—

**TYLER.** (*Appearing momentarily:*) —*His arms—*

**CHRIS.** —Whatever. If the column of rising air narrows enough, you get a serious, fast-moving vortex.

**HAZEL.** What nobody seems to fully understand is why these vortexes sometimes drop down here to *terra firma*.

**CHRIS.** All we know is it's bad when they do. So. How long you been wantin' to kiss me?

**HAZEL.** Ninth grade?

**CHRIS.** We don't have a single friend in common.

**HAZEL.** Sometimes disasters bring people together.

**CHRIS.** You realize I'm bein' groomed for the lot, sellin' cars. There ain't no college diploma on my horizon.

**HAZEL.** Yeah, ain't no college for poor ol' Chris.

**CHRIS.** Don't make fun of how I talk.

**HAZEL.** Is that how you talk?

**CHRIS.** Yeah, you definitely need to loosen up.

**HAZEL.** Excuse me?

**CHRIS.** Lift your chin.

*(HAZEL does so. CHRIS unsnaps her bicycle helmet and removes it. They kiss again...and the rest of the cast returns, each carrying a pair of two-liter soda bottles joined by a Tornado Tube. By rotating the bottles, they immediately set in motion ten rapidly spinning, gurgling whirlpools.)*

**PILAR.** Vortexes: Rising air, sucking up the world like a great big wet-vac.

**AMANDA.** Hurricanes, for example.

**HEATH.** Waterspouts.

**AMANDA.** *Wasserhose*, in German.

**HEATH.** Or, in Australia, Cock-Eyed Bob. (*Off group's disbelief:*) Shut up. Saw it on TV.

**TONI.** One thousand verified tornadoes hit the U.S. every year.

**MARIA.** Research suggests as many as another thousand form but are never witnessed.

**KIM.** But the ones that we do see...

**JARED.** Trouble.

**CHRIS.** Camanche, Iowa, 1860.

**HAZEL.** One hundred dead.

**TYLER.** Waco, Texas, 1953.

**AMANDA.** Four in the afternoon.

**ZACH.** The storm hit downtown, it collapsed a six-story furniture store.

**HEATH.** Other major tornadoes:

**HAZEL.** There are so many!

**MARIA.** Gainesville, Georgia.

**CHRIS.** New Richmond, Wisconsin.

**TONI.** Tupelo, Mississippi.

**KELSEY.** Flint, Michigan.

**JARED.** And let's not forget April third and fourth, 1974.

**KIM.** History books point to Xenia, Ohio.

**PILAR.** But this bad boy was everywhere.

**MARIA.** A so-called "super outbreak," spawning one hundred forty-eight tornadoes in twenty-four hours.

**AMANDA.** The largest number on record.

**TYLER.** For a couple of minutes, there were fifteen funnels on the ground simultaneously.

**HEATH.** Fifteen tornadoes across thirteen states—

**TONI.** —not to mention Canada—

**HEATH.** —leaving five thousand, four hundred eighty-four injured.

**HAZEL.** Three hundred and fifteen killed.

**PILAR.** In Xenia alone, thirty-three killed.

**MARIA.** That was an F-5.

**ZACH.** But the granddaddy monster of 'em all was the Tri-State Tornado.

**KELSEY.** The Great Tornado of 1925. It stayed on the ground for two hundred and nineteen miles, from Annapolis, Missouri to Princeton, Indiana. It decimated fifteen thousand homes, injured over two thousand people, and killed at least six hundred and ninety-five living, breathing human beings. Imagine if that storm came along today. The country's filled up a lot. People and buildings everywhere. Just take a moment. Imagine...

*(A tiny moment.)*

**MARIA.** Ours was only an F-3.

**KELSEY.** I wish it had been an F-6.

**PILAR.** Why?

**KELSEY.** So it could have taken me with it.

*(KELSEY exits.)*

**MARIA.** She doesn't mean that.

**PILAR.** Not at all.

**AMANDA.** If you ask me, she sounds suicidal.

**PILAR.** No.

**AMANDA.** She's having specific suicidal thoughts and she's asking for help. You can't hear that?

**PILAR.** Group check-up! Anyone else in trouble?

*(General ad-libbed nodding and edgy agreement—but in doing so, the group begins to rotate, spinning in messy vortex-fashion. ZACH gets ejected from the vortex first...)*

**ZACH.** So, okay. My sort-of girlfriend dumped me 'cos I'm angry all the time. Throwing things. And the SATs? Forget it. But I'm fine, really. Except the other day, I was staying at my aunt's place 'cos my mom and dad are on the road—she plays guitar, he plays keyboards, and they've got a band Jared would like kill for. Anyway. My aunt's got her kids watching *The Wizard of Oz*, and I walk in right when the tornado shows up. I literally get dizzy. The whole floor turns into some kind of Tilt-A-Whirl. I had to get outta there. I went outside, I looked at the sky and I started crying, I mean really sobbing, right there in the street...what the hell was that about?

*(...and ZACH is reabsorbed. KIM is next, and so on, one at a time...)*

**KIM.** I was quiet to start with. I'm quieter now.

**AMANDA.** My grades are going back up, that's good. My weight, on the other hand...not only do I not sleep, I've kind of stopped eating. But I can handle it.

**JARED.** I've been going to my dad's church. Which is weird, 'cos it's like the opposite of the Temple of Deep Purple, y'know? But it turns out, my dad's a pretty good preacher. Who knew? Oh, and then, I was out driving around with Boston cranked on the stereo, and I go by the airport and it hits me: Maybe med school *is* way out of reach, but I could be a pilot. I could fly all the time. So I stopped in, signed up for lessons. I start next week. Which totally rocks!

**TONI.** So me and my mom, we're out of the shelter. FEMA and the Red Cross gave us these housing vouchers, so we got a one-bedroom apartment. Pre-furnished, seriously tacky, but—it'll do. My mom sleeps on the living room couch. Skunk sleeps in my bed. He don't actually want to, but I force him. My boyfriend says if he gets fleas, the deal's off. I'm like, "Deal? What deal?" But it don't matter. Havin' Skunk in the bed is the only way I can sleep.

**MARIA.** I never see my dad now. He's got so many homes to fix or build...including ours... I see my mom a lot. Mostly I see her praying. Praying and watching our new TV.

**CHRIS.** I dreamed about my mom the other day. I dreamed she was in Idaho, with Kelsey's old man—which is stupid, 'cos she's livin' right across town, shacked up with some guy named Brutus. Dreams. Who needs 'em?

**KELSEY.** My grandma is good people. Generous. Kind. But she hadn't counted on raising another kid. Especially not me.

**PILAR.** I keep the radio on all night, every night. I am not gonna be caught by surprise again, not ever. Not. Ever.

**TYLER.** I'm in charge of the special tornado section in the yearbook. Layout, photo selection. Used to be, I'd put off schoolwork, sure, but I could always bear down at home. Really focus on the computer, my cameras, and being a bad-ass webmaster. Now...this project, it's making me like the king of procrastination. Choose photos? I can't even look at them.

*(HEATH arrives last at the front of the whirlwind, but can't speak. The whirlwind disintegrates, ejecting all but MARIA and PILAR off-stage.)*

**MARIA.** Meet Heath. Nice kid. Five foot ten?

**HEATH.** *[Corrects her by stating his actual height.]*

**PILAR.** Broken family.

**MARIA.** Mom married down. Or so thinks Heath.

**PILAR.** For Heath, "down" would be a very enormous understatement.

**HEATH.** We had a house. Back when we were a "we."

**PILAR.** Dad number two's a flea dealer. Full time!

**MARIA.** Mom's a reporter. Local news. And look, here she comes now:

*(Enter HAZEL, primping her hair and clutching something that passes for a microphone. Behind her comes TYLER with a TV camera, sometimes aimed at HAZEL, sometimes not.)*

**HEATH.** Mom's always on TV. I'm used to it. She started when she was twenty-four. Now she's forty-two, still going...but I never

thought she'd bring the crew to, you know. Our house. Our *trailer*. Our *ex-trailer*. Our trailer that is mixed up with a couple trees and a dead raccoon and somebody's apparently complete collection of Burt Reynolds movies. Every last one on VHS. Now, letting Amanda spew about how God had a bubble over her, that's one thing, but this? I mean, look around! The county's here bulldozing what's left of Prairie Sunset—our lot included. Machines everywhere: Excavators, front-loaders, the works. And here comes mom. She's got a camera aimed at what's left of our life. Now, you ask anyone, I am a private person. I'm the guy in the halls that nobody knows. I walk by myself and I like it that way, so I do not accept sinking to the level of being a blip on some stranger's TV set. I am right here, right now—watching my mother watch me. I have always been good to my mom. I don't like this guy she married, and I don't ever plan on calling him "Dad," but I have tried to be, you know, supportive. But with that camera lens staring at me and my mom adjusting her hair like it actually matters, I am getting this science-fiction feeling and it is seriously creeping me out.

*(HEATH suddenly rounds on HAZEL / MOM and TYLER / TV MAN.)*

WILL YOU GET OUT OF HERE? WILL YOU STOP? Don't you see what you're doing? *(A moment.)* Mom, I'm thinking of dropping out. Of school. Will you do a story on that?

**MARIA.** Two months after the storm. The school hallways, sixth period.

*(The entire cast re-enters, criss-crossing, heading to class.)*

**AMANDA.** Hey, Kelsey! Kelsey!

**KELSEY.** What do you want?

**AMANDA.** I know you'll probably say no—and I understand, I really do—but I want to invite you come over this Sunday. To come to church with me and my family, and then come have lunch with us.

**KELSEY.** Lunch.

**AMANDA.** We usually do pancakes on Sundays, but we could whip up some eggs or something if pancakes aren't, you know.

**KELSEY.** What church do you go to?

**AMANDA.** Samaritan Christian. I know, it's pretty huge.

**KELSEY.** Can I ask a question?

*(By now, the others are listening in, still moving toward class, but at a crawl. The atmosphere suggests a coming fight.)*

**AMANDA.** Sure, but shouldn't we maybe head for class?

**KELSEY.** How are we supposed to know when God's actually getting involved?

**AMANDA.** I don't understand.

**KELSEY.** I mean, He's not responsible for me losing the gas cap on the car, right? Or getting decent grades in trig? But what about something bigger? Mt. St. Helen's? Katrina?

**AMANDA.** How should I know?

**KELSEY.** Oh, come on, it's your *job* to know.

**AMANDA.** No. No, no, no...

**KELSEY.** Uh-uh, you get back here.

**AMANDA.** Kelsey!

**KELSEY.** Lemme in on the secret: What's a miracle and what's just an accident? And don't gimme some quote.

**AMANDA.** I think—look, our youth minister is really terrific, you could talk to him.

**KELSEY.** How come nothing bad is ever God's fault?

**AMANDA.** Kelsey, we really have to get to class.

**KELSEY.** I guess it doesn't really matter. All those "big" miracles, they're like parlor tricks. Jesus walking on water, loaves and fishes, showing up as a talking burning bush. I mean, if that's God, I should be worshipping Penn and Teller.

**AMANDA.** Okay, this is not you talking, this is a demon, this is what demons are—

**KELSEY.** —No, no. You can't have it both ways. Either God's right here, right now, making rain and flowers and storms or He's gone, not around, forget it good-bye!

**AMANDA.** Making Heaven and Earth, it's not—that's not a parlor trick!

**KELSEY.** You want me to come to church? Answer one question.

**AMANDA.** Kelsey, I really am worried about you—

**KELSEY.** —Are you saying God sent a tornado to kill my mom?

**AMANDA.** I don't know! Did she go to church? Did you?

*(An ugly moment.)*

**KELSEY.** And you say *I'm* a demon.

**AMANDA.** That didn't come out the way I meant it.

**KELSEY.** Oh, really.

**AMANDA.** Kelsey, I will pray for you.

**KELSEY.** Don't ever say that again. Don't...ever...

*(KELSEY exits. To salvage the moment, PILAR steps forward.)*

**PILAR.** Hey, *oyeme!* Everybody who thinks they're misunderstood, over there!

*(Everyone, including PILAR, heads "over there"—which, of course, is right next to AMANDA. Plenty of ad-libs throughout.)*

Now, if you suck at art, that way!

*(The group rearranges: The only ones who claim to be good at art are TYLER, HAZEL and, after a reluctant moment, MARIA. ZACH, predictably, hesitates.)*

Somebody else!

**TONI.** Dog lovers, with me!

*(This leaves HAZEL and JARED and HEATH behind, with ZACH unsure.)*

**CHRIS.** Country fans, here. Y'all with no musical taste, there.

*(Admitted fans: KIM, CHRIS, AMANDA, MARIA.)*

**HEATH.** All right, who's embarrassed by your parents?

*(HEATH leads the charge, and everyone except ZACH, HAZEL, MARIA, and PILAR joins him.)*

**MARIA.** This way if you are completely and beyond all reason over-worked!

*(Everyone. Except maybe ZACH.)*

**HAZEL.** Who's moving away first chance you get and never ever never looking back?

*(HAZEL, JARED, and TONI.)*

**CHRIS.** Right here if you play sports!

*(This one, ZACH can commit to—along with AMANDA, CHRIS, HAZEL, MARIA, PILAR, and TONI.)*

**CHRIS.** All right Zach.

**TYLER.** 'Fessin' up time! Who owns at least one iPod?

*(Everyone does except KIM, PILAR, and TONI.)*

**AMANDA.** This way if you drink coffee!

*(Fifty-fifty.)*

**HEATH.** And won't admit it to their parents!

*(The same.)*

**TONI.** Hey, who's in therapy for all this 'sides me?

*(Some dishonesty here, but KIM and HAZEL definitely commit.)*

**JARED.** Okay okay okay! With me if you love Led Zeppelin!

**HEATH.** Is it possible to love something that out of date?

*(JARED is on his own. Only MARIA even wavers.)*

**CHRIS.** How about this? Step right up if you wish our tornado'd picked up Zach's double-wide, carried it all the way 'round to Afghanistan and dropped that two-ton bastard right on Osama bin Laden's skinny rag-head ass!

*(JARED, HEATH, and TONI join CHRIS, to the overt dismay of everyone else.)*

**PILAR.** How about this: Whoever favors deporting all the illegals—or maybe just anybody not white—over there with Chris.

**MARIA.** Pilar!

**PILAR.** Be honest, now.

**HAZEL.** If you're trying to say something, say it.

**PILAR.** Hands up if you think I'm an illegal. Come on. Don't be afraid.

*(Most of the group puts up their hands.)*

**AMANDA.** How about a category for people who don't care one way or the other?

**CHRIS.** *(To PILAR:)* Better yet: How about you own up? Are you one of us or not?

**AMANDA.** She doesn't have to answer that!

**PILAR.** I agree, I don't.

**CHRIS.** But if you were a real American, you would.

**MARIA.** Okay, new topic—

**CHRIS.** —You're a little wetback border bunny.

**HAZEL.** Chris!

**PILAR.** Feel good to get that out of your system?

**CHRIS.** It does, yeah.

**PILAR.** Amazing what a little natural disaster drags to the surface.

**CHRIS.** Now who's off-topic?

**PILAR.** All right. Maybe I am illegal—maybe. Or maybe my family got Green Cards. Or maybe we're full citizens, just like you. Doesn't matter—and I'm not telling. Doesn't matter, 'cos whatever I answer, when I go walking down the hallway, down the street, I will still hear the whispers. "Spic." "Beaner." "*La bonita migra.*" Which not only makes no sense, it's backwards. It's "*La migra bonita.*" Adjectives second, *por favor*.

**CHRIS.** Gosh, I truly do apologize.

**KIM.** Please stop.

**HAZEL.** (*To CHRIS:*) Can I talk to you?

**PILAR.** Yeah, Chris, go talk to your girlfriend. Tell her what a red-neck racist you are.

**CHRIS.** You watch it...

**PILAR.** Go on, say it.

**HAZEL.** Chris!

**CHRIS.** Leave me alone.

*(By now, the cast has melted back into the wings. PILAR follows, disgusted, leaving CHRIS and HAZEL behind.)*

**HAZEL.** Tell me what I just heard was some kind of mistake or misunderstanding.

**CHRIS.** No, you tell *me* something. You're in a disaster area, there's been a tornado, broken buildings every direction. You find two survivors under a wall. One's white, one's some kinda A-rab. Which one do you get out first?

**HAZEL.** Don't dodge the question.

**CHRIS.** Uh-uh. Who do you rescue first? Which one's gonna be more likely to make an IED and blow up your Toyota?

**HAZEL.** I am not hearing this.

**CHRIS.** Fine. But if you want to hang around me, you will, 'cos I don't hide what I know—and I won't back down on the truth for you or anyone.

**HAZEL.** I see.

**CHRIS.** The choice is yours.

**HAZEL.** It's not a choice.

*(HAZEL abruptly exits, as far from CHRIS as possible. MARIA enters.)*

**MARIA.** June! School's out!

*(TYLER rushes in.)*

**TYLER.** Whoa, whoa, wait! I haven't got the tornado spread done yet, it can't be summer.

**MARIA.** But it is.

**TYLER.** Then the yearbook's gonna be late.

**MARIA.** You're looking at me like that's *my* fault.

**TYLER.** No, it's just, I mean—I gotta finish.

**MARIA.** Yes. You do.

**TYLER.** So I have to really look at these pictures.

**MARIA.** Personally, I cannot wait to have my yearbook. And I do not want ten absolutely blank pages in the middle just because you cannot deal with what every single one of us went through, and I'm very sorry if that sounds harsh, but you're the one that agreed to do this, right?

**TYLER.** Yeah.

**MARIA.** So...?

**TYLER.** I gotta talk to Ms. Fleming.

*(TYLER hurriedly exits.)*

**MARIA.** Where was I?

**PILAR.** *(Off-stage.)* It's summer!

**MARIA.** Oh, right. It's summer! School's out! It's ninety-four degrees and humid, so where do we go?

*(Everyone enters at once:)*

**ALL.** *(Except KELSEY)* The mall!

*(The group mingles, pretends to shop, ad-libs as needed. HAZEL avoids CHRIS, KELSEY [humming to herself] avoids AMANDA, and PILAR mostly gets out of everyone's way. ZACH still carries his rake. KELSEY, very quietly, begins to sing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken.")*

**KELSEY.**

Well, I saw that undertaker,  
I said, "Undertaker, won't you please drive slow?  
'Cos that body that you're carrying  
Lord, I hate to see my mother go."

*(By now, all pretense at shopping has ended, and the ensemble joins in the chorus: Reverently but not too slowly, every word an honest question.)*

**ALL.** *(Except KELSEY)*

Will the circle be unbroken?  
By and by, Lord, by and by  
There's a better home a-waiting  
In the sky, Lord, in the sky.

**KELSEY.** *(Over the singing:)* I don't go to the mall anymore. I don't go anywhere. I sleep all day, I come downstairs and watch movies all night. My grandma says she's gonna cancel our cable. But she's addicted to the cooking channel, so she won't really do it. To be honest, sometimes I kinda wish she would. I don't think this being on strike thing is good for me. Grandma's like, "You've got to get out of the house!" Which I do, sometimes. I met with this lawyer and told her I wanted to sue God—or at least sue some churches for like reckless endangerment or something, but she said I should keep my money or maybe put it into therapy so I could get on with my "grieving process." Which, for me, comes down to one thing: Successfully ignoring God. I'm getting pretty good at that, but it's funny where you start to go. Mentally, I mean. I know I've got lots of options—or part of me knows that. Mostly I only see one tangible, rock-solid option, and it's amazing how comfortable that one is starting to feel.

*(Meanwhile, two cast members have wheeled an audio cart on stage complete with a monitor and DVD or VHS player. On the monitor, a nearly fixed image plays: White fluffy clouds, blue skies and sunshine, the opposite of storms. KELSEY drifts to join the others as they settle to watch. JARED pulls out a phone, stands and dials. MARIA answers when it rings—and KIM flinches.)*

**MARIA.** Hello?

**JARED.** Hey, Maria. It's Jared.

**MARIA.** Oh. Hi.

**JARED.** I know, kinda weird, huh? Bet you didn't even know I had your number.

**MARIA.** You're right, I didn't.

**JARED.** So, what're you doing?

**MARIA.** Nothing.

**JARED.** Yeah. Me, neither. What do you think everybody else is doing?

**ALL.** *(Except JARED and MARIA)* Nothing!

**MARIA.** Well, actually, I'm not completely doing nothing. I'm trying to write a story, and I'm kinda stuck, so...that's why nothing.

**JARED.** You write. That's cool.

**MARIA.** Thanks.

**JARED.** You're welcome.

*(And here we have the proverbial awkward pause.)*

**MARIA.** Well, hey. I should maybe go.

**JARED.** Yeah, okay. But hey, look, I just wanted to say that maybe we could get together sometime. Not go out or anything, just...I don't know. Something.

**MARIA.** I don't know...

**JARED.** Look, you probably don't even remember, but when we got brought in, you know, to the ER? We were right next to each

other, up on those gurney things. I was awake, but you were out. Like totally unconscious. I wasn't trying to stare or anything, but I watched you—not like that! No, it's just, you had a huge bruise on your head, like you got hit by a door or something.

**MARIA.** Actually, it was a window.

**JARED.** Really?

**MARIA.** Yeah. Pretty funny, getting clocked by a window.

**JARED.** It is?

**MARIA.** No. Not really. But it might make a funny story.

**JARED.** Is that what you're writing about?

**MARIA.** Jared, do you like ice cream?

**JARED.** Are you kidding? Ice cream rocks.

**MARIA.** Want to meet over at Baskin Robbins? In like an hour?

**JARED.** Sure. That'd be cool.

**MARIA.** Yeah, that would be *(Trying this new word on for size:)* cool.

**JARED.** Great. So I'll C U there.

**MARIA.** Hey, Jared? Do you think we could maybe talk about the storm?

**JARED.** Talk about it how?

**MARIA.** Everybody's trying so hard *not* to talk about it, and I just...that distance, it's killing me. So can we eat ice cream and talk, at the same time?

**JARED.** Yeah, yeah. We can definitely do that.

*(The TV gets removed as PILAR steps to the fore:)*

**PILAR.** It's back-to-school time. Book reports, please. How'd you spend your summer?

*(As with the pet line-up, the group falls out as if at a military inspection. With a proper salute, AMANDA reports first.)*

**AMANDA.** Donated five days a week to Habitat for Humanity. Took two weeks off to work as a camp counselor for my church.

**HEATH.** Repainted our apartment. Played with my ferrets.

**KIM.** Volunteered at the Red Cross. Read books. (*Suddenly sharing:*) Plus, I went on this road trip with my cousins to see Kenny Chesney play Nashville. For ten minutes in the middle, it was just me and the music. Which I didn't think could still happen.

**TYLER.** Worked three jobs. Paid for my new computer myself—"Good morning, Dr. Chandra!"—and am now running at three-quarters pre-tornado capacity.

**TONI.** Worked *four* jobs, count 'em, four—sorry, Tyler. Helped my mom pay the rent and saved the rest for when I get outta here and move to Florida. I don't really know or nothin', since I'm pretty sure I've never left the county, but I kinda think I might like the ocean.

*(What's left of the military delivery ends with KELSEY.)*

**KELSEY.** Well, I didn't think she'd do it, but my grandma not only cancelled the cable, she threw out the TV. Literally. Hauled it onto the lawn and beat it with a shovel 'til the capacitor blew up. Sparks, glass flying—it was way out of control. I mean, she's like eighty-two and this tall. And then she sent me off to this camp, this wilderness bonding camp thing. Which I don't even want to talk about. But now that I'm back, well...I guess maybe I have more options than I thought.

**CHRIS.** I washed a lot of cars for my dad, so I pretty much got paid for gettin' a sunburn. I did that, and I drank beer. Webster's Dictionary defines my summer as perfect.

**HAZEL.** My perfect summer: Practicing my cello, taking art classes, reading Tolstoy and T.S. Eliot. Oh, and I took care of all my early-admission college applications. In five months, I'll have a future.

**ZACH.** My parents took me on the road. They played forty-nine cities in eight weeks. Somewhere, in one of those hotels, I lost my rake.

*(One of the others hands him a new rake.)*

But I got a new one!

**JARED.** I spent some serious quality time with Led Zeppelin.

**MARIA.** Me, too.

**PILAR.** Leaving me. Well. I hugged my mom until she found a way to stop crying. She's a crisis counselor for the schools. In fact, she was one of the ones who came and talked to us when we first went back. And she was good. She helped. But at home, on her own? Can't leave anything at the office, y'know? And my dad, he was away, following the melons. Mostly watermelons. That's what he does, pick and sort melons—until fall, and then it's up to New England for the apple crop. I see him maybe five times a year. But he called, last week. I was in the basement. I just about live down there—Mom, too. And it's not in any way a nice basement, you know? But upstairs...too many windows, too much sky. Whatever. I told my dad I'd prayed to St. Christopher—and to St. Francis, just in case St. Christopher isn't the real deal—which the Pope says he's not, but that's a whole 'nother story. The key is, they both said pretty much the same thing: That my dad should stop and find a local job right here. I tell this to my dad and he goes, “*¡Dos santos me exigen que tu vuelvas a la casa!*” I go, yeah, 'cos if you're *home*, then the next time a tornado starts stalking us, it won't be me playing tough guy, picking up the pieces. 'Cos that's what I did this summer. I grew up. I grew up and I glued us back together—but glue doesn't set with one-third of the family five hundred miles away. It just can't.

**ZACH.** Hey.

**PILAR.** Hey, yourself.

**ZACH.** *(To everyone else:)* Will you go away, please? I'm trying to have a private conversation.

**HAZEL.** Fine, if we're not wanted...

*(Everyone else slinks out of the area, one ear cocked back to where ZACH and PILAR converse.)*

**PILAR.** So what's up?

**ZACH.** How come you're always in the driver's seat?

**PILAR.** How come you're not?

**ZACH.** What's that supposed to mean?

**PILAR.** You're this big champion rescue-worker, but all you do is go 'round with this teddy bear that just happens to look like a rake.

*(In saying this, PILAR takes ZACH's rake. ZACH makes furtive attempts to retrieve it...)*

**ZACH.** Is that what you think?

**PILAR.** Yeah, that pretty much is.

**ZACH.** Is that what everyone thinks, that this is my teddy bear?

**PILAR.** Zach, how would I know what everyone else thinks?

**ZACH.** It should've been you playing the hero. You actually like organizing people, being in charge.

**PILAR.** Do I?

**ZACH.** You don't?

**PILAR.** I don't think people always love what they're good at.

**ZACH.** Like growing up.

**PILAR.** Which I don't want to do, personally—but the way my family is right now, it's like out of my hands.

**ZACH.** If I admit something stupid, will you make fun of me?

**PILAR.** Yes! No. Definitely not.

**ZACH.** I still collect Pokemon cards.

**PILAR.** No way.

**ZACH.** Pokemon everything, really. Before, I had a really good collection—and now I'm trying to rebuild. But if I go around telling people... *(Off PILAR's smirk:)* Forget it.

**PILAR.** I have tea parties. For my dolls.

**ZACH.** No way.

**PILAR.** Right now, I've only got like half a doll and a plastic cup with a crack, but...

**ZACH.** Will you promise me something? Don't treat me like I'm grown up.

**PILAR.** Only if you promise not to let me boss you around. And we tell nobody about tea parties and Pokemon.

**ZACH.** It's a deal.

*(PILAR returns the rake, turns to leave, then turns back.)*

**PILAR.** Hey, Zach?

**ZACH.** Yeah?

**PILAR.** The place I'm in right now, I can't be anyone's girlfriend.

**ZACH.** No, that's cool. *(He indicates his rake.)* I mean, look: I'm totally spoken for.

*(The rest of the cast floods back to life.)*

**MARIA.** And now, it's August twenty-ninth. Welcome to National Katrina Day.

**HEATH.** Another "Act of God."

**AMANDA.** That is so unfair.

**MARIA.** It's only a name.

**AMANDA.** And names have power! Ask Pilar!

**TONI.** Hey, Tyler? Could you sign my yearbook? That photo spread is e-lectric.

**TYLER.** Hey, thanks.

**MARIA.** I think—if Tyler and Toni can get back with the program—I think it would be appropriate to have a moment of silence. For Katrina. For all the world's storms and fires and tsunamis and earthquakes. A moment of silence to remember that we are still alive, living and breathing...that we still have the luxury of knowing what silence can be.

**JARED.** That's really beautiful.

**HEATH.** I think I'm gonna heave.

**PILAR.** Can we show a little respect?

**CHRIS.** Hey, I got one hundred percent respect, but I don't see why we can't take a little time out to feel sorry for ourselves and not displace our whatever it is. Our grieving. I don't have to go and rubber-neck at Katrina to feel bad.

**AMANDA.** We aren't the only ones hurting, and when other people have loss—

**CHRIS.** —Oh, gimme a break! You won't even admit you been hurt!

**AMANDA.** I don't have to admit anything.

**CHRIS.** Really.

**AMANDA.** Even if I have been hurt, I can handle it! God will help me handle it!

**CHRIS.** Yeah? How's he doing so far?

**AMANDA.** In His time, in His way...fine.

**CHRIS.** Then look around, look at the rest of us. I mean, is anyone here actually over this?

**PILAR.** I hate to admit it, but—a fair question.

**CHRIS.** Yeah, it is.

**PILAR.** People, if you're over it—if your personal tornado is old news and you've moved on, over there. And if your psyche's an open, bleeding, blood-red welt, over here.

*(No hurrying this time. People shift back and forth. CHRIS, KIM, and KELSEY more or less anchor the "open welt" side.)*

*(Only ZACH seems sure. He plants himself firmly in the middle—and then, as if blown by sudden winds, everyone migrates to the middle, joining and surrounding ZACH. They form a tight circle, a huddle...and stop. From the mass of bodies, MARIA and PILAR peel off and lead us forward in time.)*

**MARIA.** September. Tyler starts a web page devoted to local tornado experiences. In the first week, he gets seven hundred hits and over fifty people donate stories and jpeg photos. Oh—and Heath decides to give school one more try.

**PILAR.** October. Chris breaks a collarbone playing football. Hazel breaks a collarbone playing soccer. Irony is alive and well.

**MARIA.** November. The county confiscates Heath's ferrets. He immediately drops out of school.

**HEATH.** But only for a week. It's weird: I got lonely.

**PILAR.** December. FEMA cuts off the last of the housing vouchers. A lot of people wind up homeless just in time for the holidays.

**MARIA.** January. Cold. But Hazel gets into Swarthmore.

**PILAR.** February. Colder.

**MARIA.** March. Jared asks me to go the prom. I say yes.

**PILAR.** Early April. Spring. Azaleas and dogwoods. Flowers everywhere. God is in His Heaven and all is right with this beautiful world.

**MARIA.** Almost all. We're actually kind of on edge. Mr. Rojas, the Spanish teacher, he says that this year, we're celebrating Day of the Dead early. So suddenly there's an altar, a tornado memorial, right in the middle of his classroom—

*(The rest of the cast bring on the A/V cart or some combination of tables and benches, draped with cloth. The effect should be that of a tiered shrine, already decorated with a crucifix, candles [lit or unlit], photos, drawings, flowers, and all manner of personal effects.)*

—and we're supposed to contribute.

*(One by one, the cast does so. First up is PILAR, who adds a twist of decorative bread. Next: TYLER, who adds a mouse from his computer. TONI finds a home for her photo of Skunk. CHRIS adds a single long-stem rose. HEATH contributes a chunk of pink insulation [in a Zip-lock]. HAZEL finds a spot for her bicycle helmet. AMANDA donates the cross from her neck. JARED, with no hesitation at all, strips off his beloved Led Zeppelin shirt and leaves it on*

*the altar. KIM adds a Kenny Chesney scrapbook, with two unused concert tickets on the cover. MARIA emplaces a framed photo of her family. ZACH and KELSEY approach together. KELSEY adds a warped snapshot of her mother, and ZACH—for good, this time—lays down his rake.)*

**MARIA.** So there we are.

**PILAR.** One year later.

**MARIA.** Twelve unfinished stories—

*(The voice of weatherman STEVE BURNS interrupts, emanating from above, from behind, from everywhere at once...)*

**STEVE BURNS.** —This is Steve Burns at StormCenter Twelve, and we're tracking a line of powerful storms moving across the area, so if you'll bear with me a second, I'm going to put the Doppler radar up here so you can see what *I'm* seeing...

*(The effect on the group is electric. All eyes turn skyward, the lights dim and the noises of distant but approaching thunder and rising wind swirl under the continuing broadcast.)*

...We've got the primary cells here and here. It's a pretty classic cluster with high winds and we're getting reports now of some hail in the *[insert town]* area. Of course we're keeping an eye on any areas of rotation, but for now the main threat seems to be straight-line winds and very heavy rain, especially here along the county li—

*(The power goes out. The lights and STEVE BURNS go with it.)*

**AMANDA.** *(Unseen:)* Oh, my God.

**ZACH.** *(Unseen:)* Okay, everybody stay calm. Hang on. Here.

*(Heavy-duty flashlights click on as ZACH passes them around, one for each.)*

It'll be okay. Everything's going to be okay.

*(AMANDA begins to sing, and the others join in one by one [in order, after each speaks]).*

**AMANDA.**

“All night, all day, angels watching over me my Lord...

All night, all day! Angels watching over me...”

**HEATH.** I don't like the dark.

**JARED.** I'm heading straight for the closet.

**CHRIS.** I'm in the bathtub.

**PILAR.** I'm at work, at Starbucks. No power here, either.

**HAZEL.** They'd better not have storms like this at Swarthmore.

**TYLER.** I'm in the basement with my computer, and I'm just burying it in pillows, blankets, anything I can get my hands on.

**KELSEY.** I'm outside. If it's coming for me, I want to see it.

*(All exit, still singing in ghostly, a cappella harmony. All exit, that is, except for KIM, who holds her flashlight clutched to her chin so the beam lights her from beneath in a spectral, eerie glow. The winds still whisper in the background...)*

**KIM.** I wasn't home the night of the tornado. I had a half-shift at *[insert grocery store name]* and I was just getting off. I got in my car. My cell rang. I wish I hadn't answered. The I.D. said it was Wayne. Wayne, who doesn't look anything like Kenny Chesney, and I didn't want to talk. I figured he was wantin' me to come over, even though it was a school night—for me. Not for him. Wayne's oldest kid is twelve! So obviously it was time to break it off. And I was tired and angry and I didn't want to be pushed into the breakup speech, 'cos I've had that done, and it sucks, but I answered, I figured, "I'll just get it over with." God! Why did I pick up? See, Wayne had a ranch house, like a half-mile from Prairie Sunset. His thing was restoring old Mustangs, mostly at night, 'cos he's like a serious insomniac. He'd heard a storm was coming, and the sump pump was busted, so he figured—like me with the breakup—might as well get it over with. So down he went...

*(One female and one male member of the cast enter upstage. The former becomes KIM [a year ago] and the latter, WAYNE. "WAYNE" brings a pew or bench and lies down on it, facing the floor, his head dangling over the edge. Below that, "KIM" sets the large basin of water, much more full now. The two actors begin to mime the action present-day KIM now describes.)*

...but when the storm hit, the house kind of jumped off its foundation, and he got wedged underneath, legs squashed, arms pinned. He could just reach his cell phone. I knew right off something was wrong, 'cos he said, "Hi, Kim. D'you mind if I maybe call you Kim tonight?" Which he never does. To him, I'm always Kimmie. I said, "Wayne, what's wrong?" And he said, "Well, just one little thing, really. But it'll prob'ly be enough." The thing is, see, he was testing the pump, filling up the sump pit with a hose, and the hose was still on, it's still pumping in water, so the water's rising, and his head—he's got his head hanging in over the lip of the pit, and he can't move. He's got a joist or something pressing down on his neck. So I'm talking to him, right, in my very dry, very safe car in the [*grocery store name*] parking lot, and he's watching the water rising up right toward his face, rising like an inch a minute, and I go, "Did you dial 9-1-1?" and he says, "I did, and they're swamped." So I'm on the other line, right? 9-1-1! I'm *screaming* for police. I give them the exact location, but it's chaos, there're people in trouble all over the place, roads blocked, trees down, and I switch back to Wayne and I can hear the water over the phone line. I can *still* hear it...it sounds like a dishwasher. And then Wayne, he says, "Kim, it's okay. It's okay, you did everything you could. This isn't your fault, all right? Not your fault. And maybe this is good, 'cos you can't hang around with me. I'd wreck your life." And I try to interrupt, but he says, "No, I'm gonna hang up the phone. You don't have to say 'Good-bye' or anything you don't want to. Just, you know, tell my kids I love 'em, yeah? Because, you know what? Everything really is going to be okay." But it's *not* okay! How can what happened to Wayne be okay? "Okay" means normal, "Okay" means it happens every day—and I don't give a flying crap that he would have wrecked my life! He was so wrong. Everything okay? No. I am terrified of telephones and nothing is okay.

*(A violent thunderclap explodes the tableau and suddenly they're all back [with the only lights their own hand-held flashlights] to the night of the tornado: History repeated.)*

**HEATH.** I mean I really don't like the dark.

**MARIA.** Well, if the power's out, I might as well go to bed.

**ZACH.** This is ridiculous. I've got SATs in what, two weeks?

**JARED.** At least it's quiet.

**ZACH.** No rain at all.

**HEATH.** Dead silent, but something coming...

**TONI.** It's real windy. Hard rain.

**CHRIS.** Is that hail?

**HAZEL.** The cats are going nuts.

**PILAR.** My house just...can houses groan?

**CHRIS.** The dogs are barkin', going totally crazy.

**TYLER.** Wait. I hear something.

*(A tornado siren wails, together with gusting wind.)*

**KELSEY.** Mom? Where are you?

**TONI.** Skunk! Skunk, come here, boy.

**HAZEL.** Is that a siren?

**CHRIS.** In the middle of the night?

**AMANDA.** My ears just popped.

**PILAR.** I do hear something.

**JARED.** Like a train.

**TYLER.** Like a jet airplane.

**HAZEL.** That *is* a siren.

**KELSEY.** Mom! Mom!

*(The sound of the storm rises so fast, it seems to lunge out from the stage—and as it does, it pushes the cast out into the audience with it. They surround [and intermingle with] the audience, enacting their own tornado experience as it happens—as it happened—and the roar continues, building, growing more ominous by the moment...)*

*(The overlaps [below] go off in three groups, with the speakers widely spaced so different audience members hear different parts of the whole. As one speaker ends [and drops to the ground], another immediately picks up until the entire ensemble [minus KIM] has been*

*felled by the storm. KIM remains apart, on-stage, watching the glow of her cell phone.)*

**HEATH.** (*Overlapping:*) It's a freakin' tornado. I run for the ferrets, I wanna get them with me and maybe get in a doorway or something—or is that for earthquakes? Don't matter. Something hits the wall—Wham!—and the whole place goes over, I mean up in the air, then down on one side. I fly face-first through a wad of insulation, it's everywhere, my mouth, I can taste it on my tongue—

**JARED.** (*Overlapping:*) The whole trailer pops open like some kinda egg, and there's my dad, his clothes getting sucked right off his body. There he goes...up in the air...gone. Next thing you know I'm up there, too, but not even going the same direction, and I put out my arms like Superman but I keep gettin' hit by birds and bits of wood, and then—the ditch.

**KELSEY.** (*Overlapping:*) Oh my God, the wall's gone. The wall, the ceiling—Mom! I'm hanging on to the door, but it's pulling at me, it's tugging, my hand slips, I can't keep hold, Mom! I'm in space, it's totally dark, I can't hear, something hits me across the face and I land hard on metal, more metal over top...I'm down.

*(Next group:)*

**PILAR.** (*Overlapping:*) Then the house, it just—it groaned. I go running for the bathroom, 'cos it's small and safe, right? My mom's doing the same thing, we run smack into each other—Whack!—and we're both like lying there in the hall except now it's not a hall any more, it's like we're outdoors or something, and here comes our maple tree, look out!

**TONI.** (*Overlapping:*) Skunk! Skunk, get over here! I gotcha, I gotcha, don't worry, don't worry, baby—then the door blows out, and the windows, and Skunk just like leaps out of my arms and he's gone, and next thing I know it's me and the couch goin' round and round in circles and bumpin' across the grass. Now I'm under a pickup or something. How'd that happen?

**TYLER.** (*Overlapping:*) I can hear sirens now, it's totally clear what's happening: this is a tornado, and we gotta take cover. We got a basement, right, so I head for that, but there goes my nut-case sister, she's racing for the door, so I tackle her, and my mom and me,

we're draggin' her downstairs and she's screamin' and glass all over the place and I'm thinkin', dang! My computer!

**ZACH.** (*Overlapping:*) The whole room explodes. No warning, just wham! I've got stuff flyin' all around me, big things, little things, books, SAT practice tests, toilets, there goes a ladder and there goes my neighbor, doesn't even see me, his eyes are glazed, I'm thinkin' maybe he's dead and I'm *about* to be dead, this is it, and I land all twisted up but I can breathe, I think I can move...

(*Next group:*)

**AMANDA.** (*Overlapping:*) I rush for the closet, I get inside, the house is shaking, the walls are creaking...and the roof tears away with a rending shriek like I've never heard before and my bedroom ceiling gets sucked up into the sky—the birdcage!—and where'd the floor go? I'm up, I'm spinning so fast, I can't see!

**CHRIS.** (*Overlapping:*) The dogs are goin' loony, I can't hear a thing, I'm shoutin' for my dad and he's not answerin' so I realize, this is it, a tornado, gotta save myself. I run for the bathtub. I dive in, the window blows out, the shower starts spittin' water, I'm soakin' wet, I got glass all over me 'cos the mirror busted...and it's over.

**HAZEL.** (*Overlapping:*) Okay, the garage is obviously a bad place to be. The litter box can wait—gotta get to the basement. But maybe first—yes! My bike helmet. I get it on, I race inside, the cats are right under my feet, and suddenly there's this gap in the ceiling and my brother's bunk bed comes falling through the hole, slams into the helmet and I'm down: Pinned.

**MARIA.** (*Overlapping:*) The window's gone, the wall's gone—and now it's coming right back in, the frame turned sideways, it's coming right at my head, and I know I ought to dodge—and I am screaming— (*She screams.*) —but there's all this stuff just flying in behind it, it's like an army of everything that's ever been broken, and then—

(*The roar of the storm winds fades quickly. It's very dark. We hear coughs, panicked breaths, a whimper or moan. The only flashlight still on is KIM's.*)

**CHRIS.** I smell gas.

**HAZEL.** Try not to breathe it.

**TONI.** It's killing my eyes.

**CHRIS.** *(To HAZEL, helping her up:)* Are you okay?

**HAZEL.** I'm fine. Thanks.

**ZACH.** Is there anybody up there?

**KELSEY.** Mom? Mom?

**ZACH.** Listen, anybody with a phone! A cell phone! We need to call the police! Dial 9-1-1!

*(A telephone rings in the dark. KIM answers her cell.)*

**KIM.** Wayne? What do you mean you've got a situation?

**MARIA.** I took a college writing class. I should be able to describe our collective situation—how we've been wrapped in the palm of something so much more powerful than ourselves—but I am currently unconscious and I remember only a window racing through darkness at two hundred miles an hour—a window through which I used to have a marvelous view.

*(ZACH clammers to his feet and clicks on his flashlight.)*

**ZACH.** Hey, are you hurt? You're all right? Then give me a hand here. We've got people buried, I can hear them. Come on, all together now. On three. One, two, three!

*(The ensemble "rescues" HEATH, KELSEY, and MARIA, literally hauling them up from the floor and carrying them back on stage.)*

**KIM.** No, Wayne, don't hang up. Stay with me. They're on the way, they're gonna get you out! Don't hang—Wayne! Wayne!

*(KIM's flashlight clicks off. In the darkness:)*

Wayne?

*(An awful heartbeat of a moment. Then:)*

**STEVE BURNS.** *(Voice-over.)* This is Steve Burns again at Storm-Center Twelve, and I'm happy to report that all the major cells ap-

pear to have weakened and frankly, I'd say all we're going to get out of this is, well, some intermittent rain and a few strong gusts...

*(Lights up at last...)*

**MARIA.** Back to the present, now. Fourth period, the day after the storm warning.

*(The ensemble, subdued, crosses back and forth in a reprise of the other hallway sequences, but the ad-libs are quieter, forced and sober. An embrace or two.)*

**KELSEY.** Hey, Amanda? Can we talk for a sec?

**AMANDA.** I guess, sure.

**KELSEY.** I think maybe I've got a message for the Man Upstairs.

**AMANDA.** Then you should probably deliver that message yourself.

**KELSEY.** Tell Him I'm still on strike...but I think I might be ready to negotiate.

**AMANDA.** Okay.

**KELSEY.** You'll tell Him?

**AMANDA.** I'll try.

**KELSEY.** Okay, then.

**AMANDA.** Hey, Kelsey?

**KELSEY.** Yeah?

**AMANDA.** Is that really what we just said?

**KELSEY.** I think so. Does that work for you?

**AMANDA.** Yes.

**KELSEY.** Good. Oh, hey: If the offer's still on the table, I'm a total sucker for pancakes.

*(With a rare smile, KELSEY merges back into the crowd.)*

**MARIA.** So there we are.

**PILAR.** One year later.

## **THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!**

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