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Dedicated to my family—immediate family, Outreach / MHS Theatre family, and Ithaca College family—for having more faith in me than I ever did. You're all I need to see me through.

Cast of Characters

In order of appearance:

MARIA
JON
MOTHER
FATHER
KATHRYN
TONY
MRS. WATKINS
MR. FOSTER
MR. MCCULLOCH
MELISSA
LADY CAPULET
PRIEST / PSYCHIATRIST / TALK SHOW HOST
TREE
ROMEO
SAM
EMCEE
NURSE
ENSEMBLE

Character Notes

While Maria and Jon are the emotional core of the show, those around them are truly caricatures. Ensemble parts can be easily filled by actors already filling principal roles. However, feel free to expand the ensemble to any size. If more speaking roles are desperately needed, it is possible to split the “Priest / Psychiatrist / Talk Show Host” into three separate roles (though it is *not* recommended—the beauty and humor of these three characters lies partially in the fact that they are all portrayed, consecutively, by the same actor).

In the case of Jon, portraying him as overly effeminate (or stereotypically “gay,” for that matter) is not the correct course of action. “Transsexual” does not necessarily translate as “Homosexual.” At best, Jon should be played straight (no pun intended). The focus should not be on his gender—it should always be on his relationship with Maria.

Production Notes

Visually, the play is abstract. Many of the set pieces roll on and off stage as easily and often as Maria rolls from one tangent to the next. Like her mind, the set and characters around her are colorful, vivid, and fluid.

Maria fluctuates between speaking to the audience and stepping into her world to face her family, teachers, and peers. The lighting should change between the two so that the audience is able to differentiate between them.

Acknowledgments

Trapped was first performed by the Milton Jr./Sr. High School drama club of Milton, Vermont in 2007. It was also performed as part of the Vermont branch of the New England One Act Festival at the Vermont regional festival in St. Johnsbury, as well as at the Vermont state festival in Rutland. The original cast and crew was as follows:

MARIA	Liz Dulac
JON.....	Casey Rock
MOTHER.....	Laura Abbott
FATHER	Chris Lavallee
KATHRYN	Maggie Ruopp
TONY	Ben Berger
MRS. WATKINS.....	Katrina Battle
MR. FOSTER.....	David Cadreact
MR. MCCULLOCH	Wade Besaw
MELISSA	Jessica O'Brien
LADY CAPULET	Aziza Jadallah
PRIEST / PSYCHIATRIST / TALK SHOW HOST	Daniel Gallagher
TREE	Laura Abbott
ROMEO	Jamie Deuell
SAM	Sean Ross
EMCEE.....	Kristen Shaw
ENSEMBLE	Kian Floor Ulriksen, Amanda Hall, Jamie Deuell, Sean Ross, Ben Berger, Maggie Ruopp, Kristen Shaw, Aziza Jadallah, Jessica O'Brien
Director	Paul Curtiss
Technical Director	John Lindsay

The playwright would like to thank the original cast and crew, as well as the hundreds of festival participants who so warmly welcomed *Trapped* to the stage.

TRAPPED

by Laura Abbott

(Curtains are closed. The only thing onstage is a bench that is placed off to the side. MARIA and JON enter, running.)

MARIA. I can't remember the last time I had so much fun.

JON. That was definitely a blast.

MARIA. We really ought to play mini-golf more often.

JON. As long as you promise not to cheat.

MARIA. I didn't cheat.

JON. I'm pretty sure you did.

MARIA. Jon, I didn't cheat.

JON. Maria. You picked up the ball, walked to the hole, and put the ball in it. I'm pretty sure that constitutes cheating.

MARIA. I was taking a creative approach to the game.

JON. I guess there must be a fine line...

MARIA. A fine line between what?

JON. Being original and being pathetic.

MARIA. Alright, okay...

JON. It's just a game. Listen—when we go back, I'll let you play whatever way you want. I don't really care.

MARIA. You're a big man, Jonathan. Any other guy would argue with me all night.

(She hugs him. He pulls away.)

JON. Yeah... Well, I should probably be getting home.

MARIA. You don't really have to go, do you? Stay here with me for a little while. It's barely even five o'clock.

(She pulls him over to the bench and forces him to sit down.)

JON. Why? I'll see you tomorrow, Maria; it's not like I'm going away anytime soon. Is this about your father?

MARIA. It's really not late at all—maybe you could stay for dinner.

JON. You don't want to be left alone with your family, is that it?

MARIA. I don't know what we're having, but I'm sure it's good. You like food, right?

JON. You know, you have to face them *some* time.

MARIA. Or we could just skip dinner and talk.

JON. Maria, are you listening to me? Your family can't be that bad.

MARIA. Please, Jon. Don't leave me.

JON. I think you're being a little melodramatic. This isn't abandonment. It's saying a brief "good bye," to make room for tomorrow's "hello."

MARIA. That's rather...poetic of you.

JON. Good night, Maria.

(He kisses her on the cheek and exits.)

MARIA. Good night.

(The lights dim and focus on MARIA.)

MARIA. My name is Maria Catelli. And, for the past 18 years, I have been right here—tucked away in a corner of the country that very few have heard of before. Vermont. And just so there's no confusion for the few that have heard—no, I do not make my own maple syrup and, no, I do not own a cow. I do, however, live with my parents.

(The curtain opens and suddenly MOTHER and FATHER are standing behind MARIA so that they form a triangle with MARIA as the vertex. MOTHER wears oven mitts and smiles plastically. FATHER's hair is combed over and he wears clothing that recalls Mr. Rogers.)

Living with them is pretty easy. We have great familial communication. In fact, I bet we could get by every day by only saying one sentence each.

MOTHER. Everything is just fantabulous!

FATHER. Jesus is watching you, Maria!

MARIA. *(To her parents:)* Leave me alone! *(Back to the audience:)* But my parents and I are more than just one-line wonders. My mother is everyone's mother—the entire town loves her and her famous cheery-chocolate-chip cookies. Her upbeat spirit seems to make the sun shine wherever she goes...except when she walks into our house.

(MOTHER walks downstage. MARIA approaches her.)

MARIA. What are you doing, Mom?

MOTHER. I'm making my famous cheery-chocolate-chip cookies.

MARIA. Oh.

MOTHER. Aren't they just fantabulous?

MARIA. They're okay.

MOTHER. *(Pause.)* Okay?

MARIA. Yeah, they're—

MOTHER. You think they're okay? Just okay?

MARIA. I think they're—

MOTHER. Do you have any idea how much work I go through to make these?! Here I am, everyday, busting my ass in this kitchen for you and your father and every one of those thankless leeches in this God-forsaken town—and for what?! To be told the cookies I worked so hard to make perfectly are just okay?! Well, I'll tell you what—next time, MAKE YOUR OWN DAMN COOKIES!

MARIA. *(Pause.)* Mom, are you okay?

MOTHER. *(She recovers.)* Oh, Maria, honey, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to blow up like that. Jezebel warned me, and I didn't listen. I need to, I need to learn to—she said: divvy out my anger. “Divvy

out your anger so that you're not left with a huge pile of it that winds up falling over." And—and "remember your mantra."

MARIA & MOTHER. "Everything is fantabulous, because today is a new day!"

MOTHER. I'm going to go take my pills now, dear.

(MOTHER exits.)

MARIA. Sometimes I'm glad that my mother gets angry. When she's happy I'm never sure if it's sincere or the direct result of medication and psychiatric brainwashing. At least, when she's angry, I know it's real. *(Pause.)* My father, on the other hand, is a Eucharistic minister and everyone's favorite "Catholic Brother." His hobbies include inducing the wrath of Catholic guilt and bathing the elderly. Saying that my father is "devout" is a bit of an understatement. In fact, he's rather...extreme.

(FATHER is wringing out a towel when MARIA approaches him.)

FATHER. Maria! What on earth are you wearing?!

MARIA. Clothes?

FATHER. No daughter of mine is leaving the house dressed like that!

MARIA. But, Dad—

FATHER. Did you hear me?! You're not setting a foot outside!

MARIA. Dad, I don't know what you're getting so worked up about. I mean, for crying out loud, I'm wearing a sweatshirt.

FATHER. Maria Mary Eve Sarah Esther Catelli—don't you dare talk back to me! In my day we would not call that a "sweatshirt." We would call it "exposed"!

MARIA. But, Dad—

FATHER. Jesus is watching you, Maria.

MARIA. But, Dad—

FATHER. If your grandfather were here to see you, he'd be turning in his grave.

MARIA. *(Takes a confused pause.)* Dad, please, listen to me. I'm fully dressed and I don't have time to change—I've got to get to school.

FATHER. Maria...

(MARIA zips her sweatshirt up all the way.)

MARIA. How's that?

(FATHER motions that he's not satisfied. MARIA pulls the hood of the sweatshirt over her face and tightens the ties so that her face is only partially visible.)

MARIA. Is *that* better?!

(FATHER shakes his head and puts a hand on her shoulder.)

FATHER. *(Pause.)* I'll pray for you.

(FATHER exits. Lights dim and focus is back on MARIA.)

MARIA. My father hasn't always been this pious. He said he did some terrible things in 'Nam that he just couldn't live with. Things he had to repent for—things Jesus had to forgive him for. I thought he was talking about killing someone but, when I asked him, he said, "No. Much worse than that." But he never told me what. He and I don't talk that much.

(A kitchen flat rolls onstage on a platform. MOTHER and FATHER take a seat at the dinner table, which is on the platform; their backs are to the audience.)

For my 13th birthday my father and my mother bought me a journal. It was really nice: leather-bound, built-in bookmarks, the whole nine yards. And, because I find it so hard to talk to both of them, I talk to that journal instead. I write in the journal whenever I feel especially suffocated by the world—whenever claustrophobia strikes. Do you know that feeling? Have you ever felt...trapped?

(Lights come up on the kitchen flat. MARIA takes a seat at the table with her parents.)

You're sitting at the dinner table, surrounded by your family and the four walls. The clock is ticking loudly. Your father says to pass the salt. You stare at the window, and all you see is *nothing* because it's too dark out. The only thing the window shows you is a mirror

image of the kitchen. And that's when you realize. You're trapped. But what traps us? Is it time? Work? People? The physical universe? Is it all in our heads?

(MARIA gets up from the table and walks downstage.)

But, more importantly—is there a way to break free? *(Pause.)* Certainly not when you're trapped in school.

(MARIA exits. A school bell rings, and a mass of students walk across the stage, hurrying to their classes. When the crowd dissipates, only two students remain—TONY and KATHRYN. They are slightly crouched, several steps away from each other, staring with intensity into one another's eyes.)

KATHRYN. *(Pause; she announces:)* You blinked!

TONY. Well, it's a normal bodily function. How can I keep my eyes open all of the time? That's really too much to ask of a person.

KATHRYN. You're just making excuses. Admit it! You blinked—you lost. And I won! In your face!

TONY. Why do you care? It's not that big a deal.

KATHRYN. Oh, don't be such a poor loser, Tony.

TONY. *(Pause; he glares at her.)* I challenge you to— THUMB WAR!

(That familiar Old Western showdown anthem—"The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly"—sounds [or something similar], and the two friends walk around in a circle, eyes locked. They have their index fingers resting in their pockets, and their thumbs out, as if their hands are guns in holsters. They circle around until they have switched sides of the stage, standing with their profiles to the audience, and facing one another. A basketball rolls across the stage like a tumbleweed. They walk forward until they are almost nose-to-nose. They pause. Abruptly they both pull their right hands out of their pockets and lock hands in thumb war position.)

TONY & KATHRYN. One, two, three, four, I declare thumb war!

(They battle it out, their thumbs moving rapidly. They grit their teeth. They make noises of frustration and anger. TONY finally emerges the victor.)

KATHRYN. That's not fair! You cheated! Did anyone see that? He cheated!

(A voice, MRS. WATKINS, comes angrily from offstage.)

MRS. WATKINS. Tony Robertson! Kathryn Potter! Stop that immediately!!! *(She enters.)* You better have a good excuse! Never, and I mean *never*, have I encountered such blatant disrespect in my entire career! This entire class, with the exception of the two of you, is trying to take their midterm exam! What are you doing?!

KATHRYN. We were...playing...

TONY. ...thumb war.

MRS. WATKINS. Thumb war? *Thumb* war? What, pray tell, does thumb war have to do with Henry David Thoreau?!

(MRS. WATKINS suddenly freezes, and the lights are dimmed. MARIA enters. She takes TONY and KATHRYN downstage.)

MARIA. A perfectly valid question. A question that has many answers. But we are so often trapped—so often we opt to respond with, “Nothing, ma’am. Absolutely nothing.” But do we do this because we honestly believe in our answer? Or do we do it to simply take the easy way out? Thumb war, at first glance, would appear to have nothing to do with Thoreau. But, if we take a closer look, it is, in fact, relevant. On a very elementary level, we can observe some nice alliteration among those three words. They fit together in that sense. But who was Thoreau? What did he believe? One may argue that he believed in simplicity—the simplicity of nature, and of mankind. And who among us, after all, seems to be the most blissfully simple? Children, of course. Children often play thumb war—it is a part of their nature and a part of their charm. It would appear that Thoreau would have permitted, if not encouraged, the occasional thumb war. For all we know, he was an avid thumb warrior himself.

(MARIA exits and the lights return to normal.)

MRS. WATKINS. I would appreciate an explanation.

TONY. Well, Mrs. Watkins, you see...who was Thoreau? What did he believe in?

KATHRYN. Simplicity! The simplicity of nature—

TONY. —and of mankind. And who among us is the most blissfully simple?

KATHRYN. Children!

TONY. Of course!

KATHRYN. Thumb war is a part of the lives of children; a part of their nature.

TONY. And don't forget: a part of their charm.

KATHRYN. It would appear that Thoreau would have permitted—

TONY. —if not encouraged—

KATHRYN. —the game of thumb war. In fact, I would not be surprised if he played thumb war himself!

TONY. He was probably an avid thumb warrior!

MRS. WATKINS. *(Pause.)* Well...I, uh... Get back to your exam!

(KATHRYN and TONY sit down at their desks and resume their game of thumb war. MARIA enters and raises her hand.)

MRS. WATKINS. Yes, Maria?

MARIA. Mrs. Watkins—what is the meaning of life?

MRS. WATKINS. Maria, shouldn't you be taking your midterm exam?

MARIA. I don't seem to have a desk.

MRS. WATKINS. Well, there were some recent budget cuts.

MARIA. Would that also explain why our copies of *Romeo and Juliet* are from the sixties and missing the entire balcony scene?

MRS. WATKINS. No, dear. That was the direct result of a budget cut in the sixties.

MARIA. You still haven't answered my question.

MRS. WATKINS. Perhaps you should answer some yourself—specifically the ones on your exam.

MARIA. I hate Thoreau.

MRS. WATKINS. Well, that is why you will never become a writer.

MARIA. Because I hate Thoreau?

MRS. WATKINS. Yes. A good writer learns from the great thinkers who came before them. You need to have a grounding in their philosophies and ideas; an appreciation for their thoughts. Without that, you will never succeed in the literary world.

MARIA. But I love to write.

MRS. WATKINS. Dear, I love to dance ballet...but it doesn't mean I'm any good at it. Or that I have the body for it. Even though it would have been nice to shove it in my mother's face—look Mommy! I did it! Teacher said my pirouette was flawless. Now I own my own studio and dance company! Now I'm a prima ballerina! I did it when you never said I could! I'm on the top of the world! How do you like THEM apples?! HUH MOMMY?!?! *(Pause. She's slowly drawn back to earth.)* But, no. Some things are just not meant to be.

(MRS. WATKINS exits.)

KATHRYN. Don't worry about her, Maria. I think you'll be a great writer.

MARIA. What else could I possibly do with my life?

TONY. Well, you could always become a housewife.

KATHRYN. Yeah—a stay-at-home mom.

MARIA. Trapped by the four walls...

(The curtains close and FATHER and MOTHER enter, each carrying a chair. MOTHER places a chair on the stage for MARIA, kisses her on the head, and exits. FATHER places his own chair downstage of MARIA.)

FATHER. ...and that is why I never want you kissing a boy until you're 30 years old.

MARIA. But I thought you wanted me to get married once I'm out of high school—I thought you wanted grandchildren by the time I turn 20?

FATHER. Yes, that's true.

MARIA. Well, I don't see how that can be accomplished if I can't kiss my husband until I'm 30.

FATHER. You're missing my point, Maria. I want you to maintain some level of modesty—a certain level of decency. All I want is for you to live a happy life that revolves around God—have as many children as you possibly can—but do no indecent things with your husband. What sort of example would you be setting for your children? You'll never understand until you have children of your own.

MARIA. Father, I have to confess...lately I've considered turning to atheism.

FATHER. What? Why?! What on earth possessed you to do that?!

MARIA. *(Pause.)* Being a Catholic for 18 years.

(FATHER exits.)

MARIA. Nothing boxes you up like religion. You close yourself off to new ideas. You look at the world through a keyhole. What makes you think that what you believe is true and what everyone else believes is false? *(Pause.)* The television tells me that Scientology is crazy. The way I see it? It's no crazier or far-fetched than any other religion. Yet people still argue. And so the entire world argues. No one takes the time to understand the opposite side of the argument. And here we are—*trapped*—continuously tumbling in a cyclical fight that brings us...absolutely nowhere.

(The school bell rings once again, and the students head to their next class. When the crowd leaves, only TONY and KATHRYN remain, seated at their desks, continuing their game of thumb war. Their math teacher, MR. FOSTER, enters.)

MR. FOSTER. Tony! Kathryn! I did not go to make photocopies and expect to come back and find such a childish display of unacceptable behavior! What are you doing?!

KATHRYN. We're playing thumb war.

TONY. Just like Thoreau used to do.

MR. FOSTER. That's fine if you want to do it on your own time, but not in my classroom! I just don't see what thumb war has to do with mathematics.

(The lights dim. MARIA enters and takes TONY and KATHRYN aside, explaining to them:)

MARIA. One might think to oneself—"Thumb war? How can that possibly relate to math?" Again, we are inclined to make no connections. However—look at the situation. If Kathryn and Tony play thumb war, what is the probability that Kathryn will win? If she does, and she plays x amount of opponents after she defeats Tony, how many games, statistically, will she wind up playing? Better yet, if Tony and Kathryn stand on top of train tracks while they play thumb war, and Train A leaves from Boston heading in one direction at x miles per hour, and Train B leaves from New York, heading in the opposite direction at y times two to the power of sixteen miles per hour, while one variable is negative, which train will hit Tony and Kathryn first?

(TONY and KATHRYN exchange horrified glances. MARIA shrugs, mouths "sorry," and exits. Lights return to normal.)

MR. FOSTER. I'm waiting. What does thumb war have to do with mathematics?

TONY & KATHRYN. *(Pause.)* Absolutely nothing.

MR. FOSTER. Exactly. Now, please, finish your work.

TONY & KATHRYN. Yes, Mr. Foster.

(They take their seats. JON enters and begins to head toward an empty seat. MR. FOSTER stops him.)

MR. FOSTER. Jonathan, you're five minutes late.

JON. The clock in my last class said it was five of one.

MR. FOSTER. I don't go by the clock in your last class, Jonathan; I go by *these watches*. *(He pulls up his sleeve to reveal several wrist*

watches climbing up his arm.) And these watches say it's five after one. I think you need to improve your time management skills.

JON. *I think—*

(MARIA enters.)

MR. FOSTER. *I think you need to take your seat. (Begins to exit but runs into MARIA.)* Maria? No, I don't know the meaning to life!

MARIA. No! No, that's not what I wanted to ask. Um, Mr. Foster...I need to talk to—

MR. FOSTER. You're not even in my class.

MARIA. No, I'm not. I came to speak to Jon.

MR. FOSTER. Well, Jonathan is busy—he's in class right now. You can talk to him later.

MARIA. It's very important.

MR. FOSTER. Unless it's a life or death matter, I suggest you head to class, Ms. Catelli.

MARIA. I can assure you, Mr. Foster, it is a life or death matter.

MR. FOSTER. Well...okay. But don't keep him from class very long. *(Pause.)* I hope everything's alright, Maria.

MARIA. I don't know if it will be, Mr. Foster. *(Crosses to JON.)* Jon, I need to talk to you.

(JON joins MARIA downstage as the curtains close behind them.)

JON. What is it, Maria?

MARIA. As you know, Jon, last month I finished *The Great Gatsby*, which is one hundred and eighty pages long. It took me two weeks to read. Then I read *The Catcher in the Rye*, which is two hundred and twenty-four pages long, but it only took me a single week!

JON. And?

MARIA. Don't you see?! Theoretically, it should have taken me longer to finish *The Catcher in the Rye*, when, in fact, it took me half the time! The entire experience defied logic, and I don't know what

to do! It seems like an entire world of reason is unraveling around me! How can I measure truth? Does it exist? How can I ever put faith in anything again?!

JON. Don't you think you're overreacting?

MARIA. No!

JON. Not even just a little?

MARIA. Oh, Jonathan... I know it seems that I'm making a big deal out of nothing. It's not the fact itself...it's the concept that frustrates me. There's a faulty logic we're all programmed to believe in—a logic which traps us. "Everything works a certain way—there's a natural order and process to all things around us." But that's not true—it's not true at all. How can our world stay perfectly linear and predictable when everything is constantly changing and evolving? I think people are scared. Change is a scary thing.

JON. Yes, I know it is. *(Pause.)* Maria, I've been meaning to tell you something...something very important...something I haven't told anyone...something that I have to—something that—

MARIA. What is it, Jon?

JON. Maria, as my girlfriend, I feel you deserve to be the first to know... Like I said, it's very important and—

MARIA. Jon?!

JON. I love you...

MARIA. I know that—

JON. I'm a woman.

(JON exits. The curtains open; MARIA remains where she is. A large group of high school students rush around her, preparing for a Shakespearean production. The drama teacher, MR. MCCULLOCH, enters, barking orders to the cast and crew. He approaches MARIA.)

MR. MCCULLOCH. Maria, why aren't you getting ready? Dress rehearsal starts in ten minutes!

MARIA. Mr. McCulloch, I'm feeling a bit depressed. You see, this afternoon my—

MR. MCCULLOCH. You know the rules in here, don't you, Maria? Leave your problems at the door! Onstage, you must be in character! Now go get into your costume!

MARIA. I didn't bring my costume, because I was going to ask you if—

MR. MCCULLOCH. Maria, you are testing my patience! Forget the costume—just get up there! I want to see your scene in Act Four with Melissa before we get started; it still needs some work. (*Calling to an actress offstage:*) Melissa! Act Four, Scene Three! Let's run it one time before we run the entire thing! (*To MARIA:*) Get set for your entrance, please.

(MR. MCCULLOCH takes a seat in his director's chair off to the side of the stage. In the background students are painting set pieces; some rehearse lines. MELISSA and MARIA take center stage. MARIA is adjusting Melissa's robe.)

MELISSA. Ay, those attires are best: but, gentle nurse, I pray thee, leave me to my self to-night, for I have need of many orisons to move the heavens to smile upon my state, which, well thou know'st, is cross, and full of sin.

(A third actress, playing LADY CAPULET, enters and opens her mouth to say her line, but MARIA cuts her off.)

MARIA. You *bet* it's full of sin! You're doomed! For Pete's sake you're a thirteen-year-old girl! How do you know this is love?! Why do you have the gall to die for some kid you barely even know?! He says you're pretty—that's it! Is that really enough to kill yourself for?! Is that anything to base a relationship upon?! For all you know, Romeo could stand under your balcony and say, "But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, Juliet is the sun, *and I am a woman!*" You don't know! You don't *know!* You don't know anything! You really have—

(MR. MCCULLOCH, who has been looking frantically through the script, jumps into the middle of the scene to stop her.)

MR. MCCULLOCH. Stop! Stop it, Maria, just stop! *(He attempts regaining his temper.)* I appreciate your attempt to improvise and add your own interpretation to the show, but I'm afraid Shakespeare just isn't the best place for improvisation. Just stick to the lines for now, alright? We're going to try this one more time.

(All exit, except MARIA, who walks downstage to address the audience. The curtains close behind her.)

MARIA. But why? Why must we always stick to the script and never question it? If we don't wander from the original page, how will we ever write something new? We'll be stuck with the same lines forever.

(MELISSA enters and approaches MARIA.)

MELISSA. Hi, Maria. How are you?

MARIA. Terrible. How are you?

MELISSA. Good, thanks for asking. Nice weather we've been having lately, huh?

MARIA. Not really. There've been flood warnings all week.

MELISSA. Crazy Vermont weather! Always so unpredictable.

MARIA. Yeah.

MELISSA. Yep.

MARIA. Mhmm.

MELISSA. Yes ma'am!

MARIA. Guess so...

MELISSA. Yeah, you betcha!

MARIA. Uh-huh.

MELISSA. Yyyyyyep. *(Pause.)* So, uh...thank goodness it's Friday!

MARIA. *(Sardonically:)* Yeah. Been a long week. What with learning that my boyfriend's transgendered and all.

MELISSA. *(Laughs.)* I know, right!

MARIA. Do you?

MELISSA. A stitch in time saves nine!

MARIA. What?

MELISSA. I mean, that's just killing two birds with one stone.

MARIA. I don't follow...

MELISSA. There sure is more than one way to skin a cat! Don't count your chickens before they hatch! Let's let this cat out of the bag!

MARIA. *(Overlapping:)* Stop it! You're not making any sense! Stop it!

MELISSA. *(Chanting:)* There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

MARIA. *(Yelling over her:)* Stop! Stop it! *(Etc...)*

(One by one the entire cast enters, threatening MARIA with their own catch phrase [Shakespearean lines used for the ensemble members.] MARIA runs among them, bouncing from one side to the other like she's the object of a frantic ping-pong game. After each line is delivered the characters line up on both sides of the stage, standing diagonally so that, when they're all onstage, they create a giant "V," with the vertex far upstage, locking MARIA in.)

ENSEMBLE MEMBER. Out, out damn spot!

FATHER. Jesus is watching you!

MOTHER. Everything is just fantabulous!

ENSEMBLE MEMBER (ROMEO). Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.

TONY. I challenge you to thumb war!

KATHRYN. You cheated!

ENSEMBLE MEMBER (PRIEST /...). Is this a dagger I see before me?

ENSEMBLE MEMBER (LADY CAPULET). Oh, I am fortune's fool!

MR. MCCULLOCH. Leave your problems at the door!

MRS. WATKINS. You'll never be a writer!

ENSEMBLE MEMBER (SAM). Methinks the lady doth protest too much!

JON. This isn't abandonment!

ENSEMBLE MEMBER. To be, or not to be!

MR. FOSTER. You're five minutes late!

(After the last line is delivered, they begin to close around her, chanting their lines over and over, progressively getting louder. Their chanting becomes unbearably loud and MARIA can no longer combat it with her pleading. She unleashes a piercing scream. They are all silenced abruptly, at the same time.)

MARIA. *(Quietly:)* Help me.

(After a moment, they all pivot, turning from her quickly. Slowly, and at the same pace, they all exit. MARIA is left alone.)

MARIA. And, such as in any time of trouble and doubt, I seek guidance from others far wiser than I. Every night I pray to the Tao within, to Allah, to Buddha—to L. Ron Hubbard. I pray for a week straight. I try to reach into that abyss of spiritual immortality. But everything is out of reach. So I turn to others.

(MARIA kneels down. A PRIEST enters, placing a hand on her shoulder.)

MARIA. Father, forgive me, for I have sinned.

PRIEST. Maria, my child, this is not a confessional. This is my office in the parish rectory.

(MARIA stands up.)

MARIA. That just seems to be the right way to start off conversation. I am, after all, living and breathing...

PRIEST. No one can help you but Jesus, my child.

MARIA. How?

PRIEST. Our Lord speaks to those who listen. What questions are burdening you, child?

MARIA. Well, Father, you see, I have a bit of a dilemma. My question is about my best friend, Jonathan. He recently told me that he's a woman and—

PRIEST. No man can be a woman, and no woman can ever be a man. God gave us our bodies for a reason. If your friend is set on being something that he is not, he is not following the path of God. *(Pause.)* You see, my dear, your friend is going to Hell. Does that answer your question?

MARIA. *(Beat. To the audience:)* And so I turned to others still.

(The PRIEST takes off his robe to reveal the garb of a PSYCHIATRIST. He takes a seat in a chair while MARIA sits in another chair that is in front of and facing away from him.)

MARIA. Doctor...I feel trapped.

PSYCHIATRIST. And you feel trapped, you say?

MARIA. *(Irritated:)* Yeah.

PSYCHIATRIST. By what?

MARIA. That's exactly it—I have no idea!

PSYCHIATRIST. Think about it for a moment. Remember your childhood. What memories haunt you the most? Did anyone hurt you in the past? Did your parents hurt you...emotionally?

MARIA. Did anyone hurt me? What kind of question is that?! People hurt each other all of the time! We're human—that's what we live for!

PSYCHIATRIST. It seems that you have bottled up your emotions for far too long, Maria. Release! This is healthy!

MARIA. Of course I bottle everything up and then explode! That's how we work! We're time bombs, for crying out loud!

PSYCHIATRIST. Tell me, Maria—are you angry with your family?

MARIA. Yes!

PSYCHIATRIST. And your boyfriend...did this situation upset you?

MARIA. *Yes!?*

PSYCHIATRIST. So, what you're saying is...you are having emotional difficulties?

MARIA. YES!!!

PSYCHIATRIST. Well then...there's your problem. You're angry and depressed.

MARIA. *(Beat.)* NO SHI—

(A STAGE MANAGER cuts her off before she can finish her profane statement. He walks across the stage, improvising dialogue to the effect of: "Alright everyone, places! We go on air in two minutes! Is the makeup crew ready? Do we have the sound boom?" etc. A platform is rolled onto the opposite side of the stage. On it are three chairs—the one on the right contains a pregnant woman, the one on the left contains a man in a wife-beater, and the middle chair is empty.)

MARIA. And that's when I got *desperate*.

(The PSYCHIATRIST takes off his psychiatrist's jacket to reveal the outfit of a TALK SHOW HOST. A makeup woman comes from stage left, bringing him a microphone and a chair to sit on, quickly dabbing his face with a makeup puff. MARIA takes an uncomfortable seat—between the feuding couple—in the middle chair on the platform.)

HOST. Soon we'll reveal the results of the paternity test—but first! She's 18. She's confused. She's lost. And she's *trapped*. Please welcome to the show: Maria Catelli!

(All applaud from offstage.)

HOST. So, Maria, tell us what's going on.

MARIA. I think you summed it up pretty well. *(Beat.)* Please, help me! Please—make everything better!

HOST. That's what America's all about!

MARIA. You mean it? You can help me find happiness after an emotional hurricane? You can help me find purpose in a life that suddenly feels void of meaning?

HOST. You bet, Maria Catelli, because you, and our entire studio audience, are receiving a—**BRAND-NEW CAR!**

(The HOST exits. The lights dim and MARIA walks downstage, the curtains closing behind her.)

MARIA. Well, Mr. Shakespeare, here we are. It's been tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow *(Pause)* and tomorrow. I strut and I fret. But there must be more to life. There must. If we believe otherwise, we shall strut and fret our lives away until humanity is but a hieroglyph on the wall of a barren cave. Nothing but primitive scribbles. A language for someone else to decipher.

(MARIA walks down to the very edge of the stage. She peers downward; she considers. She dangles one foot off the stage experimentally. JON enters and stands behind her, trying to figure out what she's up to.)

JON. Maria...?

MARIA. Life is but a stage. *(Pause.)* If life's a stage—where's the applause? Where's the happy ending? Where's the *resolution?*

JON. Maria, I want to talk to you.

(Silence. MARIA folds her arms over her chest and stares into the audience.)

JON. Maria...I know all of this was so—so sudden. And—and, *did* I hurt you? I'm sorry if I hurt you.

MARIA. Did you hurt me? What kind of question is that?

JON. I know! I know, I'm sorry, it was a stupid question. I just...didn't think you'd react like this. *(Pause.)* I thought you'd be more, well...more supportive.

MARIA. I'm stuck in a conundrum. Do you see a stage? Do you see curtains? Do you see lights?

JON. No—and you're changing the subject.

MARIA. If we decide to walk off this stage, where do we go?

JON. Maria—*(Out of frustration he answers her:)* Home.

MARIA. No. Into the audience. Into the lobby. But we're still in the building! We're in a box in a box in a box. How do we get out?!

JON. Maria, I have no idea what you're talking about. I wish you'd listen to me. I just wish you'd be responsive!

MARIA. What happens if the theatre locks up every night? Where do we go...if we can't get home?

JON. My first doctor's appointment is in about a month. I'm afraid to go on my own. My parents don't know. Nobody knows. *(Pause.)* Except you.

MARIA. I'm afraid to know what lurks backstage.

JON. I wanted to know if you'd *go* with me. I want you to be there.

MARIA. I need to go.

(MARIA begins to exit. JON stops her.)

JON. Please, Maria? It would mean the world to me. It would mean the entire universe. Please—*be* there for me.

MARIA. To *be*...

JON. Please.

MARIA. ...or not to be...

(JON walks away, starting to exit. He stops, turns around, and addresses her one final time.)

JON. I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I hurt you.

(JON exits. MARIA walks to the center of the stage.)

MARIA. On one hand, I love my friend very much. I always have. But, on the other, when that boy disappears forever, he'll take our relationship—and all we used to be—with him. And he will be replaced by a new person—a confident, content person who has found his true self and identity. How can I stand by and watch Jonathan discover and take what *I've* been looking for all this time?

Selfish as it may be, I can't make a decision. So I flop in the puddle of my confusion, trying to make sense of it all. And that's when I knew what I had to do. I had to write.

(MARIA goes up to the set pieces and begins to mime writing on them.)

I had to write like there was no tomorrow. So I wrote nonstop for three days. I completely tore apart my journal. I wrote all night, into the morning. At school I scribbled in my notebook, I wrote on the back of my hands, on the back of my friends' hands, over the napkins at lunch and worksheets in class. I poured out every drop of verbal emotion. From my soul to the page. And when I was done, when my spirit had been annotated, I collapsed.

(The lights blackout, save for a black light which allows the audience to see the fluorescent writing appear on the set. MARIA collapses on the stage. After a moment, the lights come back up. MR. FOSTER jogs by her, does a double-take, jogs in reverse, stands over her and offers a hand to help her up.)

MR. FOSTER. Ms. Catelli, you shouldn't lie around in hallways. It can be dangerous.

MARIA. I'm sorry, Mr. Foster.

MR. FOSTER. You know, today in class Tony showed me all that writing you did on his arm.

MARIA. I'm sorry, Mr. Foster.

MR. FOSTER. No, I thought it was quite...interesting... I appreciate your creativity. People think, because I teach math, I don't appreciate that sort of thing—but I certainly do. Math can be abstract and creative as well, you know. Ever heard of *imaginary numbers*?

MARIA. Yes...thanks, Mr. Foster. *(Pause.)* Mr. Foster...what do you suppose the meaning of life is?

MR. FOSTER. 42. *(Beat.)* Well, I don't want to hold you up—you must have a class to get to. Oh, and before I forget—see Mrs. Watkins at some point today. She's got information about a contest that may be right up your alley. If you harness that creativity of yours, I'm sure you could do very well.

(MR. FOSTER *pats her on the shoulder and jogs offstage. Mrs. Watkins' classroom is brought on stage. MELISSA, KATHRYN, and TONY sit at their desks, looking rather comatose. MARIA takes a seat in the front, next to KATHRYN, and falls asleep. MRS. WATKINS sits off to the side on a stool near her desk.*)

MRS. WATKINS. And furthermore, we can conclude that Sylvia Plath did not appreciate shoes—black, or otherwise. Though, one has to marvel at her literary skill to make us question: Is it possible for an entire person to fit inside a shoe? One of the great questions of our time indeed... Did you know that Sylvia Plath would always capitalize the first letter of every noun in her poems—just as the Germans used to? And, also, we must note that...

(MRS. WATKINS *mouths her lecture silently as the following dialogue is spoken. This silent lecture can be as creative as the actress wants it to be—accompany it by hand gestures and odd facial expressions—as long as it does not draw too much attention away from the dialogue. KATHRYN elbows MARIA in the side. MARIA sits up with a start, looking around.*)

KATHRYN. Get much sleep lately?

MARIA. (*Yawns.*) No. I've been writing. For three days straight.

KATHRYN. *Why?*

MARIA. I had to. What else can I do with my life?

KATHRYN. You're so smart, Maria—you could be an A+ student. You could pay attention in class.

MARIA. Class gets out in thirty minutes. I need to strive for purpose with a little more permanency.

KATHRYN. But you wrote for three days straight? You're really insane. I mean...seriously insane.

MRS. WATKINS. ...Sylvia also makes use of such imaginary words as: "Opus." How would you like to make up your own words? Doesn't that sound delightful? If you find you may be interested in doing just that, perhaps you will want to pick up one of these fliers.

(*She waves around a stack of fliers.*)

There's going to be an All-State Poetry Festival a month from now. One student will be selected from every county to display their work at the festival. I know it's a bit late to be informing you—but entry forms are due by the end of the week. If anyone here is an aspiring poet, you may want to pick one up.

(MRS. WATKINS mouths her words once more while the dialogue between MARIA and KATHRYN occurs.)

KATHRYN. *(Elbows MARIA.)* Maria! You should enter that contest!

MARIA. Hmm?

KATHRYN. The poetry contest—you should enter.

MARIA. I don't know...

KATHRYN. Why not?

MARIA. I don't think my writing's good enough. I couldn't possibly win.

KATHRYN. Do it anyway.

MARIA. Nah...

KATHRYN. Yes!

MARIA. No.

KATHRYN. Yes!

MARIA. *No.*

KATHRYN. YES!

(KATHRYN jumps up, nearly knocking her desk over.)

KATHRYN. I challenge you to a THUMB WAR!

(“The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” plays as it did in the beginning. MARIA sits there, staring at KATHRYN. KATHRYN looks back at her, expectant. Nothing happens. The music abruptly stops [or winds down, anticlimactically.] Dejectedly, KATHRYN sits back down.)

MARIA. I'm new to poetry, Kathryn. Expecting to beat out all of the kids in the entire county would be a stretch.

KATHRYN. How will you know if you never try?

MARIA. Well...I... I'm just trying to be realistic.

KATHRYN. And since when are you realistic?

MARIA. Having a messed up family to start with, and then learning a shocking truth about someone you're very close to is like gravity pulling you back down to earth. *(Pause.)* But...but maybe you're right. You know, Mr. Foster seems to think I can do it. Maybe I need to take a chance... I'm just so sick of disappointment.

MRS. WATKINS. ...and, of course, that's only one example of the profound effect Teflon has had on our society. Does everyone understand the homework?

(MARIA raises her hand.)

MRS. WATKINS. Yes, Maria?

MARIA. Mrs. Watkins, what is the meaning of life?

MRS. WATKINS. If you had been listening to my lecture, Maria, you'd know that I have already addressed that question.

(MARIA gets up from her seat and walks downstage; the curtains close behind her.)

MARIA. And to think—the day we learned the meaning of life, I fell asleep in class. *(Pause.)* But another matter was at hand. The creation of a poem. Where do you start? For three days I had written—but nothing seemed quite good enough to enter into the contest. *(Pause.)* Where to begin... Nature? A tree? Trees are nice. And plentiful. A tree.

(One of the actors from the Shakespearean play enters and stands off to the side of the stage, stationary, arms up like branches. The actor is a TREE.)

MARIA. A tree is beautiful. It stands strong. Except for when it sways in the wind.

TREE. *(Sways.)*

MARIA. The wind sings, rustling the tree's leaves.

TREE. WoooOOOoooOOoooo.

MARIA. I said the wind *sings*.

TREE. (*Pause; irritated. Singing:*) “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound—”

MARIA. Literalist! You better pack up your trunk and leaf!

TREE. But—(*TREE begins to exit, pauses, turns around, and retorts:*) I’ll never *root* for you again!

(*TREE exits.*)

MARIA. I’m tired of this ready-made poetry. This mass-produced imagery. Forget trees. I don’t find them *that* beautiful anyway. What I need is something with substance. Something symbolic.

(The rest of the cast enters one by one as they speak their lines, standing in a staccato formation behind her. MARIA does not join in the recitation of the poem until the end of it. The rest of the time she speaks in an aside, not quoting from the poem, but revealing the literal meaning. [Divide the numbered segments of the poem among the cast as you like.])

MARIA. I thought a lot about the recent events in my life—all that’s been troubling me. And just like warm tears can abruptly flood your eyes, this poem suddenly flowed from my pen.

1. I ride
2. the tumultuous waves

MARIA. I’ve been trapped in this storm...

3. And wonder
4. How does one
5. Take arms against
6. a sea of troubles?

MARIA. ...and there’s no way to fight it...

7. What knife will pierce
8. the ocean?
9. What munitions can scar

MOTHER & FATHER. the sea?

MARIA. ...I feel defenseless...

ALL FEMALE. You left me with no means

ALL MALE. By which to defend myself—

MARIA. You left me here.

10. You

11. swam to land,

12. Sun-drenched

13. and warm with life

MARIA. And you *left* me here, Jon.

(*JON exits.*)

14. You left me here

15. with the seagulls above—

16. They shriek content nothings into the air.

MARIA. My mother is so absent, Jon...

(*MOTHER exits.*)

17. In the distance I sense

ALL. sharks—

18. Ready to destroy with their lying teeth.

MARIA. Sometimes I feel that everything my father has ever told me is a *lie*.

(*FATHER exits.*)

19. I feel my life—

20. all that I believe—

21. Is but a drop in this

ALL. vast ocean.

MARIA. I feel so insignificant...and suddenly alone...

21. Soon to be

22. And easily

ALL. Evaporated.

MARIA. Life is so short—I just want to find purpose before it's too late...

24. But before I am forced into

25. nature's cycle

26. I must

27. wonder

28. Not

ALL FEMALE. “To be or

ALL MALE. not to be?”

ALL. But

MARIA. *(Joining the poem:)* “How to be?”

ALL. For that, indeed,

MARIA. Is the question.

(All exit, except for MARIA, who lingers in the light for a moment. Maria's Shakespearean peers come back onstage, painting sets once again and rehearsing lines. LADY CAPULET enters and stands next to MARIA.)

MARIA. Now, by my maidenhead, at twelve year old, I bade her come. What, lamb! what, ladybird! God forbid! Where's this girl? What, Juliet!

(MELISSA enters.)

MELISSA. How now! Who calls?

MARIA. Your mother.

MELISSA. (*To LADY CAPULET:*) Madam, I am here. What is your will?

(*LADY CAPULET opens her mouth to say her line, but is cut off when KATHRYN runs onto the stage and up to MARIA.*)

KATHRYN. Maria! Maria, you're never going to believe this!

MARIA. Kathryn, what's going on?! We're in the middle of rehearsal.

KATHRYN. I was in the principal's office just now for—well, never mind, that's not important—anyway, the principal just got a phone call—and you're not going to believe this—he was getting ready to go to a meeting, but suddenly the phone rang, and I overheard him—you're just not going to believe it!

MARIA. Kathryn! Calm down. What happened?

KATHRYN. YOU WON!

MARIA. What?

KATHRYN. The poetry contest! They want you to represent our county at the poetry contest!!!

MARIA. *Oh my g—wait...you're not serious. You're joking.*

KATHRYN. Why would I interrupt your rehearsal just to play a prank?

MARIA. I don't understand. My poem wasn't that good...

KATHRYN. Now all you have to do is win the state contest and you can move onto the national level! Which, of course, you'll do. Easily!

MARIA. Well, I don't know about that...

KATHRYN. Don't doubt yourself, Maria! You're *going* to win. You're going to inspire the rest of us with your heart-warming victory. (*Beat.*) I'm so excited for you!

MARIA. (*Pause.*) I'm not sure what to say.

KATHRYN. *That's a first.*

MARIA. I just can't believe it. *(It suddenly hits her.)* This is such an enormous honor. Last week I never would have dreamed of winning—and this week I've *won*.

(MR. MCCULLOCH enters. ROMEO enters after him.)

MR. MCCULLOCH. What is going on out here?! Maria, this is our last dress rehearsal! Our Romeo is getting very angry!

ROMEO. I'm getting very angry.

MR. MCCULLOCH. He's sick of waiting for your charades to end.

ROMEO. I'm sick of your charades!

MR. MCCULLOCH. He wants to hurry this up and move on to the death scene!

ROMEO. I want to die! *(He takes a confused pause.)*

MARIA. Mr. McCulloch, once this show is done...I'm...I'm not coming back to drama club!

MR. MCCULLOCH. Excuse me?

MARIA. That's right! I'm going to be focusing on my poetry-writing from now on—if I want to win the state contest, I've got to put in as much effort as possible. So...so...once *Romeo and Juliet* is finished, so am I!

MR. MCCULLOCH. But...Maria, I think you're being too spontaneous. You could do both.

MARIA. Not to the best of my ability.

MELISSA. Mr. McCulloch, I've forgotten the rest of my lines. I can't work like this!

(LADY CAPULET opens her mouth to protest as well, but MR. MCCULLOCH cuts her off.)

MR. MCCULLOCH. *(To MARIA:)* We'll discuss this some other time. *(To KATHRYN:)* This is a closed rehearsal. *(Calling to backstage:)* Let's take it from the top, people! This is our last shot before opening! *(Back to MARIA:)* No more interruptions.

(All, except for MARIA, exit. The curtains close behind them.)

MARIA. Is this it? Have I found it? Is writing my purpose?

(JON enters and hesitantly approaches MARIA.)

JON. Congratulations, Maria.

MARIA. Thanks.

JON. I always told you that you'd go somewhere with your writing. This is really cool.

MARIA. I know! I'm so unbelievably happy! I just—alright, enough about me. I've been talking about this contest 24/7. How about you? Did they schedule your appointment yet?

JON. March 13th. Lucky 13.

MARIA. Oh. *(Pause.)* Oh.

JON. Is something wrong?

MARIA. No, nothing's wrong.

JON. After two years of dating, I know that tone of voice all too well—something's wrong.

MARIA. Jon—nothing's wrong. I swear.

JON. Okay...

(JON exits. MRS. WATKINS enters.)

MRS. WATKINS. Congratulations, Ms. Catelli!

MARIA. Thanks, Mrs. Watkins.

MRS. WATKINS. This is the first time our school is sending one of our students to the poetry festival. I hope you realize what an enormous honor this is, Maria.

MARIA. I do, Mrs. Watkins...

MRS. WATKINS. You don't sound very *excited* about it.

MARIA. It's just that—you see—I sort of...forget it. *(Beat. Half-heartedly:)* I'm *very* excited.

MRS. WATKINS. What's wrong, Maria?

MARIA. I...well...um...Mrs. Watkins, I have this friend...

MRS. WATKINS. Yes?

MARIA. And...well...she's—she's having a ballet recital.

MRS. WATKINS. Oh, that's lovely!

MARIA. And it's very important to her, because I'm her best friend, that I be there to see it. It's very, very important.

MRS. WATKINS. Well, by all means, Maria, go to her recital.

MARIA. That's just it—it's on March 13th.

MRS. WATKINS. I don't see how that ha—*Oh*. Oh, dear. Well, you can't go to her recital then, can you?

MARIA. But she needs me there.

MRS. WATKINS. Well, we need you at that poetry festival!

MARIA. But—

MRS. WATKINS. I can identify with your appreciation of ballet, Maria—it is probably the loveliest art form that exists. However, you have a prior commitment. And, as much as it kills me to prevent you from watching ballet, I must insist that you do not attend that recital. You can have someone video tape it for you—or go another time. Your friend isn't going to have just one recital, is she?

MARIA. *Well...*

MRS. WATKINS. Exactly my point! You can go see her any time. This poetry contest, Maria, is a once-in-a-lifetime experience!

MARIA. But...

(**MRS. WATKINS** *exits.*)

MARIA. I wish I weren't 18. I wish I were just a kid again; oblivious yet completely self-assured. And I...I wish emotions were as simple as childhood. As simple and base as some of the classic writers make them appear. If only jealousy could make me instantly turn on the Desdemona I've loved for so long. If only lust could eradicate decades of feuding. If only false hope could make me

slaughter my best friend in a heartbeat. But that's just not realistic. Emotions are, stubbornly, more complicated than that.

(MOTHER enters. She abruptly gives MARIA a suffocating hug.)

MOTHER. Oh, Maria, your father and I are so proud of you!

MARIA. Why?

MOTHER. Don't be silly! For winning the poetry contest, of course! I always knew you were a winner!

MARIA. I've never heard you say *that* before.

MOTHER. Sure you have. *(Pause.)* You haven't, have you?

(MOTHER takes off her oven mitts slowly; the façade has ended.)

MARIA. Look, you're baking... I've got to go do homework...

(MARIA begins to exit.)

MOTHER. Honey, I've never said it because it doesn't matter. Win or lose—I will always be proud of you.

(MOTHER gives MARIA another hug. This time it is gentle and sincere.)

MOTHER. You know what? I'm going to go make something healthy!

(As MOTHER exits, FATHER enters. MOTHER mouths words, i.e., "Go talk to your daughter," as he crosses in front of her.)

FATHER. Maria, I just came in to say goodnight.

MARIA. Well...goodnight.

(FATHER approaches MARIA.)

FATHER. You've got a big day tomorrow.

MARIA. Yeah.

FATHER. Seems like just yesterday you were in kindergarten, writing your first little book.

MARIA. You mean to tell me that it wasn't?

FATHER. Time flies.

MARIA. If only we could catch it...

FATHER. You seem sad.

MARIA. Wouldn't that be something? I'd close my fists around it and never let go.

FATHER. Don't be sad, Maria. Jesus loves you.

MARIA. Really?

FATHER. Absolutely—no matter what happens tomorrow, win or lose, Jesus always loves you.

MARIA. He'll always love me? No matter what?

FATHER. No matter what.

MARIA. Even if I become a mass murderer?

FATHER. If you become a mass murderer and refuse to repent, you'll probably go to Hell...but Jesus will still love you.

MARIA. I don't understand. Jesus would let me go to Hell? Why would you abandon someone you love? Why would you let them slip away?

FATHER. People make bad choices, Maria. They make terrible choices all of the time.

MARIA. ...yeah...

FATHER. Even you and me. *(Reflectively:)* Even me. But, no matter what happens, Maria...whether you become a mass murderer or a rich brain surgeon...I'll always love you.

MARIA. Thanks, Dad.

(FATHER hugs MARIA.)

MARIA. I...love you too.

(FATHER exits. MOTHER enters again and the curtains open, revealing the poetry contest. The seats are filled with audience members facing toward a podium. At the podium stands the EMCEE, and

SAM, a student. SAM recites his/her poem in pantomime as Maria's MOTHER meets her center stage.)

MOTHER. Maria, honey, are you nervous?

MARIA. Yeah, I'm pretty nervous.

MOTHER. Don't be! You're going to be just fine.

(FATHER enters, a coat draped over his arm.)

FATHER. Sorry I'm late. *(Beat.)* Good luck, sweetie.

MOTHER. Good luck, Maria. We'll see you out there.

(MOTHER and FATHER exit. SAM begins to read his/her poem out loud.)

SAM. *(Reading:)*

You're a squirrel,

Yes you are;

You've got a tail

And you'll go far—

Because you're a squirrel.

You've got little paws,

And little eyes,

And little ears,

Look!—Ninja spies!

...And you're a squirrel.

(MOTHER and FATHER enter at the tail end of Sam's poem [no pun intended] and rush to take two seats in the very front next to MRS. WATKINS. The audience applauds SAM. The EMCEE steps up to the podium.)

EMCEE. Thank you very much, Sam. Next up we have our tenth contestant, high school senior Maria Catelli, reading her poem, "Oceans Surround." Please welcome Maria Catelli.

(The audience applauds. MOTHER throws out a "Fantabulous!" for good measure. MARIA hovers downstage, looks both ways, considering both of her options.)

EMCEE. Maria Catelli?

(MARIA makes a run for it, racing offstage.)

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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