

PLAYTIME

AT THE CURTAIN: *MAUREEN is seated on a bench, a picnic basket by her side. On the ground is a large garbage bag stuffed with assorted items and pieces of clothing for NICOLE. For several moments, MAUREEN sits patiently on the bench. Then...*

MAUREEN. Nicole, I'm not gonna sit here all night. Midnight is late in the day for me. I'm gonna pick my butt up off this bench, take this lovely picnic lunch I made you...and go. *(Beat.)* I've got good things in the bag, honey. *(Beat.)* Nicole...you there? Don't make me feel stupid.

(After another moment, MAUREEN gathers up the garbage bag and the picnic basket. As she begins to leave, NICOLE enters. She is as far from MAUREEN as she can be.)

NICOLE. What did you make? Did you bring me any books?

MAUREEN. You do this every time. You make me beg. You shouldn't do that, Nicole. I'm your mother. I don't have to be out here. I don't have to come.

NICOLE. Yes, you do.

MAUREEN. No, I don't!

NICOLE. Yes, you do!

(Beat. MAUREEN returns to the bench, puts down the garbage bag and picnic lunch basket and sits. NICOLE doesn't move.)

NICOLE *(cont'd)*. Where'd you get the picnic basket? It's cool.

MAUREEN. First Baptist.

NICOLE. They're nice at First Baptist.

MAUREEN. The folks at First Baptist, they don't ask a lot of questions. They just give you stuff. You say a coupla prayers, makes 'em feel good. The ones at the Congregational Church, they talk to you so they can get to know you better. Hell, I don't want nobody to know me any better.

NICOLE. How are you feeling, Mama? You getting your beauty sleep? —

MAUREEN. Do you want me to give all this stuff back? I could maybe sell it myself maybe and—

NICOLE. I cut my arm. Yesterday. I fell down some stairs, the ones up behind Pitkin Drugs? Out back? I fell down. See?

(NICOLE extends her arm to MAUREEN, who glances over.)

MAUREEN. What were you doing on those stairs? Are you staying in those apartments there, Nicole? Those are terrible places, you know that?

NICOLE. I might not live, I might get blood poisoning. Randy Black did.

MAUREEN. I know Randy Black. He's a viper. A despicable human being. Nothing can kill him. And his mother's no better.

NICOLE. She's a real good cook. Randy got a chocolate pie from her three days ago. I had a piece for breakfast. Uuummm good!

(The tension between mother and daughter is palpable. This is a ritual they play out. To see who is the weakest, who wants the other the most. MAUREEN indicates the basket and the garbage bag.)

MAUREEN. What do you want me to do with all this?

NICOLE. Just leave it on the bench. Step back. Over there.

(NICOLE points to a spot some distance from the bench. MAUREEN complies. NOTE: if the setting and props permit, the continuing action/blocking should integrate the playground equipment, positioning NICOLE on the bars, perhaps, or both could be seated on either end of a teeter-totter. It is important that NICOLE puts an obstacle between herself and MAUREEN. This is done out of habit. She behaves this way with anyone. She lives defensively.)

NICOLE *(cont'd)*. Don't move now. You move and I'm gone! I'm fast. I've got everything I need. Don't need you! You don't move! You don't touch me!

MAUREEN. I know the rules. I'm not movin'. 'Sides, you're too fast for me.

(NICOLE crosses to the bench and begins to look through the items: sweaters, sweatshirts featuring a major university such as Michigan or Alabama, a few pair of sweat pants, two pair of sandals. The clothes are old, well used.)

MAUREEN *(cont'd)*. I thought you could cut the sweats if you wanted. For shorts. For the rest of the summer... maybe keep one for the fall? The sweatshirts should fit. Got those for seventy-five cents each.

NICOLE. ~~That's a good price.~~ (*Holding up one of the sweatshirts.*) Hey, look at me! I'm going to Michigan (appropriate school). Gonna get me some learnin', right, Mama?

MAUREEN. Got to finish high school first.

NICOLE. Nope. Don't have to. I'm already too smart for my own good, that's what you said.

MAUREEN. You have everything you need? Where are you stayin' now? In case I have to contact you.

(*MAUREEN takes one step toward NICOLE. NICOLE moves quickly. She is highly accomplished in the art of disengagement.*)

NICOLE. You do this every time! Every time! You get me lookin' one way and come at me from the other! I can't trust you.

MAUREEN. I just want to... Come here. Just let me hold your hand.

NICOLE. No.

MAUREEN. Please?

NICOLE. Don't beg! Begging is weak. Begging is dirty. Begging means you don't have enough. We don't beg in this household, Nicole! That's what you always told me. Did you bring any pop?

MAUREEN. It's in the basket.

NICOLE. All right.

(*MAUREEN moves slowly to the picnic basket and removes the contents.*)

MAUREEN. I made you some chicken salad. No onions. And two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

NICOLE. I don't like grape. I hate grape. I'll scrape the grape off, you know that.

MAUREEN (*laughing*). Don't get your panties in an uproar. I didn't do you any grape.

NICOLE. What kind?

MAUREEN. Guess.

NICOLE. I'm not a little girl anymore, Mama. I wash my face every day. I even know how to get a ride on the road. I know how to keep drivers happy.

MAUREEN. Don't tell me such stuff. You lie! I don't wanna know. (*Stepping back from the bench so NICOLE can approach safely.*) Eat this nice picnic lunch I fixed you.

(*NICOLE moves to the picnic basket and begins to eat. She is ravenous.*) /

NICOLE. You want to know, Mama. Every mama wants to know. "Don't let 'em touch you, sweetie. Look both ways before you cross the street. Don't get in an elevator alone with a man. Don't look a man in the eyes, he'll think you're interested in him." Well, I do look 'em in the eyes, Mama. My hormones are raging! They're smelly and stinky, Mama, and they burp a lot. But they feel good. Real good. (*Sees a can of pop.*) Strawberry, thanks.

MAUREEN. You finished shockin' me now? Ready for some apples? Granny Smiths, and three hard-boiled eggs, a jar of olives and two bananas.

NICOLE. Got 'em. Right here.

(*NICOLE "fires" the bananas at MAUREEN as if they were pistols.*) /

MAUREEN. And some Twinkies. (*Beat.*) Happy birthday, sweetie.

NICOLE. It's not my birthday, Mama. You know that. You gettin' old in the head?

MAUREEN (*beat*). You ever going to come back home?

NICOLE (*talking with her mouth full while keeping one eye on MAUREEN*). Did you bring me any books? And magazines? Who's hot 'n who's not? Got to keep up. Gonna be an American Idol some day. Famous. Real famous. Famous for something...just don't know what it is yet. But I'm not gonna sit around here talkin' to you all night, that's for sure. I got things to do, people to see.

MAUREEN. I forgot the books.

~~NICOLE. You can bring 'em next time, books on the Romans and the Vikings! None of that Young Miss stuff. Give me war, death, sex and destruction! I wanna be just like a big person.~~

~~MAUREEN (*beat*). I like your hair. You look good.~~

~~NICOLE. Amber cut it for me. She cuts mine, I cut hers. She's nice. She's my new best friend. I've got a lot of friends, Mama. Can't keep 'em all straight. You want a banana? Here.~~

~~(NICOLE places a banana on the ground half way between herself and MAUREEN, then steps back.)~~

~~MAUREEN. Where are you sleeping, Nicole? I won't tell the police. (*Beat*.) I won't tell Marty.~~

~~NICOLE. Don't you mention his name! (NICOLE viciously stomps on the banana.) Farty Marty! Farty Marty! Does he know you're out here? Did you take two buses like I told you? Is he out there in the dark (*Calling*.) You out there, Farty Marty? (NICOLE pulls a knife from her pocket.) I got me a knife. Wanna see it, wanna see it? You come at me and I'll slice you in half!~~

MAUREEN (*beat*). Do I know Amber? (*Beat*.) Do you always have a knife, sweetie? That's dangerous.

NICOLE. I suspect you don't know my friends, Mama. And of course I have a knife, you think I'm stupid? On the streets and no knife? It's dangerous out here, Mama. Don't you watch television?

MAUREEN. Where did you meet Amber?

(*NICOLE continues looking through the garbage bag, pulling out numerous items and flinging them over the bench, on the grass, anywhere. She also remains alert to her mother and to her surroundings.*)

NICOLE. At the tennis club, where I meet all my friends. Out and around, Mama. Shawna, and Dougie, and Raphael. I like Raphael a lot. He's my new best boyfriend. Bobby could be—I love Bobby's hair, Mama—but I don't like his laugh. Laughs real high up, like a girl. (*NICOLE takes out a bunny doll that has seen its day.*) Hey, Roscoe, what's happenin', bunny boy? Let's see what Mama put in my goody bag, OK? Hey, you got me some pajamas, Mama! Thanks. (*NICOLE steps into her pajama bottoms.*) I can trade these with Amber. She's got two belts I want. And some suspenders. Suspenders are cool. (*NICOLE reaches into the bag and pulls out a package wrapped in birthday paper appropriate for a young child. A gaudy oversized bow flops over the edges.*) It's not my birthday, Mama. I told you that. (*NICOLE puts the package on the bench.*)

MAUREEN. You still leavin' next month?

NICOLE. Frank and Billy and Sarah Lynne and little Roscoe here and me and Jeffrey are thinkin' maybe we'll go to Los Angeles. Walk along the Avenue of the Stars. Go to Universal Studios. Get discovered. Get me

~~a great tan. On the beach. Naked! Fall in love with a movie star. Just your everyday run-of-the-mill American dream. What's in this package, Mama?~~

MAUREEN. I don't want you leavin'. It's not good to be out and around at your age.

NICOLE. Of course it's not good, Mama. I'm still a punk kid. But it's all a part of life, right? That's how we learn what you can take and what you can't. Like you and Farty Marty. You keep takin' what Farty Marty keeps throwing your way and you keep coming back for more. Why do you do that, Mama?

MAUREEN. You lost a little weight, maybe, since last month? You look good.

NICOLE. You been to the dentist like I told you to? I bet Dr. Johnson said, "Looks like a broken jaw to me, Maureen. That sure must hurt."

MAUREEN. There are things you don't understand!

NICOLE. And I bet you said, "No, Dr. Johnson, I just ran into a tree playin' hide 'n seek with my baby girl."
(With passion.) You're too old to be playin' hide 'n seek, Mama. I'm not your baby girl anymore! You see me standin' here? Do I look like a baby girl to you?

MAUREEN. He doesn't mean it, Nicole.

NICOLE. How can he not mean it, Mama? He walks over to you and smashes his fist right into your face! Did you think he was just shadowboxing on his way out to the kitchen to take out the trash, and you just happened to be standing in front of him with a big smile on your face?

MAUREEN. I hit back.

(NICOLE is suddenly very tired. And frightened. And very much the little girl. She begins to put items back into the garbage bag.)

NICOLE. I know, Mama. You hit him good. Both of you are real good hitters. I've been watchin' for a long time. Both of you gonna get in the hall of fame. I'm proud of you. You can take a hit and keep on tickin'. That's an old commercial, Mama. About a watch. They were doin' golden-oldie commercials on television this week.

MAUREEN. Where do you watch television?

NICOLE. In the woods, Mama. In the trees with the other monkeys!

MAUREEN. Where are you living, Nicole?

NICOLE. No one else reads but me, Mama. They just sit around watchin' TV and snortin' crap and—

MAUREEN *(overlapping)*. Nicole, you answer me this instant!

NICOLE. —sayin' how they're so smart and everyone else is so dumb and how they should be makin' a lot of money but the system wants to keep 'em down! I gotta get me away from here!

(MAUREEN sits on the edge of the bench.)

MAUREEN. Oh, baby, don't—

NICOLE. All I do is the cooking, Mama. Anybody mess with me and I'll put doo-doo in their hamburgers. *(Beat.)* I gotta go. You follow me...I'll never come here again. You got Farty Marty in a car out there somewhere? He follows me, I'll kill him. You know I will. *(NICOLE continues to put everything back into the garbage bag)*

MAUREEN. You don't do things with men, do you, sweetie?

NICOLE. Blah, blah, blah.

MAUREEN. You can't make it easy for men.

NICOLE. Time to go, Mama. I heard this song before.

Thanks for all this stuff.

MAUREEN. Most men are nice enough. Your daddy was.

He was nice. But some men are mean, not right in their hearts.

NICOLE. Amber says you're scared you won't know who you are if you don't have a man in your life. She watches Oprah. Why don't you leave? Just leave. When he's out drunk, you get his keys and you start driving. Drive until the road stops, Mama. Then get out of the car and start walkin' 'til you drop. Then start crawlin' 'til you can't crawl anymore. (*NICOLE is exhausted. She sits on the other end of the bench, an apple in her lap.*) You ready to do that and I'll go with you anywhere. Just like Thelma and Louise, only we'd be Maureen and Nicole! But we'd make it, right, Mama?

MAUREEN. I think I'm going to kill him, Nicole.

NICOLE. Hey, there's an idea.

MAUREEN. I've thought about it.

NICOLE. You'll need some energy.

MAUREEN. I've done it in my head.

NICOLE. Want a bite of my apple?

MAUREEN. If I don't...stop him for good...he'll come after me.

NICOLE. Walk out. Slam the door! That's all you need to do.

MAUREEN. You walk away, he wins! I won't let him win! He just sits and laughs at me. "You leavin' me again, Maureen?" He knows I'll come back. 'Cause that's what we do. We fight. We yell. We scream. That's what keeps me going! I'm gonna get him, Nicole, for all the things he's done to me. *(Beat.)* And to you.

NICOLE. You know he's never touched me, Mama. You know that. This is just about you and Marty. And you must like it, Mama. And that's...not good, I don't think.

MAUREEN. I'll fix my famous potato salad...the one you really like with the little green olives all cut up...and we'll sit down and have a talk. Just like families do. All three of us. Turn off the television, pull up our chairs. And be civilized. And if it starts up again—and he hasn't been drinking, Nicole, not for a week now... almost a week, I think...coupla days now—but if it starts up again then you and me will take his keys and open the door and we'll...we'll just...leave. Marty'll understand. Will you?

(NICOLE refers to the package.)

NICOLE. What's in this thing, Mama?

MAUREEN. When he's sleeping...

NICOLE. Where'd you get the ribbon?

MAUREEN. I'll just get the frying pan from the kitchen...

NICOLE. My birthday isn't until next month, Mama.

MAUREEN. Then he won't come after us. 'Cause he'll be dead. *(Beat.)* I'm so tired, sweetie.

(NICOLE steps behind MAUREEN and fixes her hair. She touches her mother lovingly.)

NICOLE. You talk that every time I come out here! You've killed Farty Marty a thousand times. I've got to fix dinner, clean out the trailer and do everyone's laundry and then I have to read my books and learn new vocabulary words because I don't want to sound like trash anymore and then I've got to pillage—that's one of my new words—pillage a few tasty morsels—that's another one— from the grocery stores to hold up my end of the trailer commune thing. And all you got to do is kill little old Farty Marty. Does that seem fair to you?

MAUREEN. I won't be here for your birthday next month, baby.

NICOLE. 'Course you will. 'Cause it's my birthday. Mama? *(Beat.)* Has anything happened? Mama?

MAUREEN. Just blowing off a little steam, sweetheart. Just talking to Doctor Nicole. You're a good listener. *(MAUREEN reaches her hand up and touches NICOLE's hand. Then she brings NICOLE's hand to her lips, then to her cheek.)*

NICOLE *(beat)*. You need a haircut, Mama. Bad. Maybe I'll get you a coupon for your birthday. Would you like that? Mama, let go. Next month you can do my hair, OK? *(Beat.)* Let go of my hand, Mama. *(NICOLE tries to pull her hand away. MAUREEN holds on tight.)* Let go, Mama! Let go! *(MAUREEN releases NICOLE's hand. NICOLE stands back.)* Don't you touch me! You know the rules! I make all the rules! *(Beat.)* You gonna be here next month?

(MAUREEN rises from the bench.)

MAUREEN. Take the basket with you, OK? Happy birthday.

NICOLE. I'll leave a note.

MAUREEN. I got to go now, baby.

NICOLE. Tell you where to meet me, OK? OK?

MAUREEN. You be good.

(MAUREEN exits. For a moment, NICOLE is motionless. Then she calls off.)

NICOLE. Mama? Come back here! Where you goin'?

Mama? You comin' back? *(LIGHTS begin to fade. The birthday package is left unopened on the bench.)*

Mama? I don't want you to leave. Come back here right now...or I'll leave you, Mama. I swear I will. You know I will. Mama?

END OF PLAY