

WHATDOESFREEMEAN?

By

Catherine Filloux

WHATDOESFREEMEAN?

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WHATDOESFREEMEAN?

For Vivian D. Nixon

*With special thanks to Joanne Pawlowski.
And to Connie Winston.*

WHATDOESFREEMEAN?

Whatdoesfreemean? was commissioned and produced by Nora's for the premier at The Tank in New York City. The cast and staff were as follows:

Nick/The Floater...James Edward Becton
Ann/Air Duct Voice/Mom...Brenda Crawley
Corrections Officer 2...Justin Jorrell
Lincoln/Corrections Officer 1/Merton/Parole Board Director...
Galway McCullough
Miss Pierotti/Corrections Officer 3/Shanna/Mouse...Liz Morgan
Mary...Lisa Strum

Directed by Amy S. Green; Scenic & Lighting Design by Phoebe Mauro; Production & Sound Design by Sadah Espii Proctor; Costume Design by Rashidah Nelson; Fight Choreography by Galway McCullough; Dramaturg: Sharon Friedman; Graphic Design: Veronica Bella; Stage Manager: Karen Oughtred; General Manager: Rebecca Lovett.

CAST: 3 Women/3 Men

MARY

ANN/AIR DUCT VOICE/MOM

MISS PIEROTTI /CORRECTIONS OFFICER 3/SHANNA/MOUSE

NICK/THE FLOATER

LINCOLN/CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1/MERTON/PAROLE
BOARD DIRECTOR

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2

Time is fluid; locales are suggested. Silence plays an important role in the play; key moments of silence are designated in the script. The play is performed without an intermission.

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“NICK’S DREAM”

We see a silhouette of LINCOLN. He reaches out his arm to sign a paper. A black woman, MARY, is emerging from a forest.

MARY. I tried to run away.

LINCOLN. Now therefore I, Abraham Lincoln...

MARY. Hid in the forest...

LINCOLN. ...do order and declare...

MARY. ...in the big pine trees.

LINCOLN. ...this proclamation...

MARY. At night runnin’ North.

LINCOLN. ...that all persons held as slaves are henceforward...

MARY. But my legs gave up. And Massa caught me.

LINCOLN. ...free forever.

MARY. Shackled me, scars on my wrists, and on my back where I can’t see ‘em.

LINCOLN. In witness, whereof, I have hereunto set my hand.

(Lincoln exits. Mary is out of the forest.)

MARY. A free moment in the sun...? Emancipation? *(A silent moment as a projection reveals that the ground has pennies scattered all over it. The dream is over.)*

“GENERAL POPULATION”

Mary is in the prison library with her friend ANN. CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2 watches. Mary reads from a test booklet.

MARY. “Based on the 1945 map of Colonialism in Africa, the two groups holdin’ the most control at this time were:” *(Ann coughs intermittently throughout the scene.)*

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ANN. The White man and the White man.

MARY. Ha, ha, no, “A) The Spanish and French. B) French and British. C) British and Portuguese. D) Portuguese and the Italians?”

ANN. Okay, the Italians, the Mob.

MARY. The Mob?

ANN. If it’s not the White Man it’s the Mob.

MARY. But what about the Portuguese?

ANN. Not sure--I suck at this...

MARY. They’re clumped together, Ann. Remember our colored map?

ANN. The blue and red had the most sections covered.

MARY. Right!

ANN. Shit, I can’t remember what the blue and red stood for.

MARY. Okay, what makes you think of the French?

ANN. I don’t know, what makes *you* think of the French? Toast?
(*Mary sketches a map to help her remember.*)

MARY. Here on the map is French Toast.

ANN. *I’m* toast.

MARY. Come on, what makes you think of the British?

ANN. Fuck. The Queen?

MARY. Here’s the Fuckin’ Queen. (*Handing her the drawing.*)
Just do whatever you need to remember.

ANN. Okay, now you. “Greek mythology uses characters to teach; and characters face moral dilemmas involving honor. The protagonists face challenges such as temptation...” (*Mary sketches to herself to remember.*)

MARY. Can you slow down?

ANN. “How has mythology evolved with new storytellers? Scholars maintain universal values, while adapting stories to their distinct cultures. It’s up to readers to seek their own truth--learn. According to the author, which is a message from Greek mythology?”

MARY. Oh, no.

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ANN. It's easy. "A) Love lasts if lovers are meant to be together. B) Resisting temptation yields ultimate success. C) Keep track of personal history. D) Not the fastest, but the longest, wins the race."

MARY. This is CRAZY.

ANN. "Just do whatever you need to remember."

MARY. I get nervous even thinkin' about it.

ANN. It's obvious, want me to read it again?

MARY. JUST GIVE ME A CLUE.

ANN: (*Singing from "The Temptations."*) "I've got sunshine on a cloudy day..."

MARY. (*Looking at notes.*) "Resistin' temptation yields ultimate success."

ANN. It's like a secret code. "Teach", "moral", "honor", they even use the word "temptation." This doesn't have anything to do with the Greeks, has to do with the "author" --the ones writing the test. And they're writing it in code--*you gotta crack the code.*

MARY. Then why can't YOU crack the code of Colonialism?

ANN. I don't remember pictures, just words. (*They sit in silence. Ann writes, Mary sketches.*)

MARY. Wanted to ask for so long...didn't know how...Why didn't you get manslaughter? (*They don't look at one another.*)

ANN. No, no, no!

MARY. He used you as his punchin' bag.

ANN. (*Changing the subject.*) I'm never going to pass this test.

MARY. We're a team.

ANN. I really don't want to go there. (*Mary sketches and Ann scribbles throughout.*)

MARY. My boyfriend shot a boy—boy was tryin' to steal from him. I walked away from that, never told a soul. Except you, now. By then I was makin' sales of my own. (*A beat.*)

ANN. At the trial his sister testified I *told* her I was going to kill him. Pre-meditated murder. After they took Leah away I didn't care anymore anyway. Did you use?

MARY. I was good at it because I didn't! The two guys I was

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sellin' with--the D.A. made them her dance partners. They got less time.

ANN. Yeah?

MARY. Nick said there was no way we'd win at trial. D.A. was all into sayin' the coke I was sellin' was "rocked up." There were six counts, but Nick tried a plea bargain for four--but she added on "obstruction of justice."

ANN. Uh-huh.

MARY. You know, checkin' all the little boxes, waivin' every freedom you ever had like a sick magic wand. "Guilty." (*Mary slaps the table.*)

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. Keep it down! (*She nods and lowers her voice.*)

MARY. And half of the nineteen cents I get an hour for makin' baloney sandwiches goes to the fine. (*Mary sketches more rapidly.*)

MARY. But the *real* guilty verdict, the boy shot through the chest, eats me up...

ANN. You never told anyone?

MARY. Right. That's not why I'm in prison.

ANN. Your boyfriend he never got arrested?

MARY. Not for that. (A beat.)

ANN. See, why did you have to go there?

MARY. Bar bell heart. (*Mary shows Ann her heavy heart. Ann shows Mary her heavy heart. This becomes a secret gesture for them.*)

MARY. Let's study. (*They both work in their test booklets. Ann looks up from her book, watching Mary work. Ann stares off, distracted.*)

ANN. Never gonna pass...(*They begin to sing from "Sanford and Son" and Corrections Officer 2 breaks it up. Lights shift as MISS PIEROTTI, a correctional therapist, appears with a book. Ann is still coughing and appears tired.*)

MISS PIEROTTI. We're reading sections from Dr. Seuss!

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ANN. What...?

MISS PIEROTTI. It's a tradition. High schools always read from "Oh, the Places You'll Go."

MARY. But we're goin' *no place*, Miss Pierotti.

MISS PIEROTTI. Don't fight! What did I tell you, Mary? Don't fight. Seriously, we want you to read this.

ANN. Not another code.

MISS PIEROTTI. This is your GED, there is going to be cake.

ANN. Can we choose something ourselves to read?

MISS PIEROTTI. You're going to sparkle, Ann. Don't you want to sparkle?

ANN. No.

MISS PIEROTTI. You're both going to sparkle.

MARY. *(A beat.)* Look, fine, give me the *(very softly)* damn...book.

MISS PIEROTTI. Mary!

MARY. *(Taking the book.)* I'm sorry, thank you, Miss Pierotti. *(Miss Pierotti exits.)*

MARY. We're a team.

ANN. Of bozos.

MARY. It shows you can read.

ANN. Ha ha.

MARY. Miss Pierotti's got power.

ANN. "You're going to sparkle?" I could give a fuck about Miss Pierotti.

MARY. Give a fuck about me. Please. *(Lights shift as we hear "Pomp and Circumstance"; Mary and Ann wear caps as Miss Pierotti looks on.)*

ANN. Music gives me the creeps, like a funeral.

MARY. Hey, Ann, that's what happens when you crack the code and get your GED, they play you a fuckin' funeral march. But we did it!

MISS PIEROTTI. *(Waiting for them to speak.)* Mary...Ann?

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(Under duress, they do the presentation with moves they have prepared.)

MARY. “You have brains in your head.

ANN. You have feet in your shoes.

MARY. You can steer yourself any direction you choose.

ANN. And will you succeed?

MARY. Yes! You will, indeed!

MARY/ANN: 98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ guaranteed.” *(Applause.)*

MISS PIEROTTI. It’s time for cake!

ANN. *(To Miss Pierotti.)* That’s not what I wanted to read.

MISS PIEROTTI. You did an excellent job, Ann.

ANN. Miss Pierotti, I want to read my own thing. Didn’t get the GED to say this weird Doctor shit.

MISS PIEROTTI. Now, Ann, Dr. Seuss is a classic.

MARY. Let her read her poem, Miss Pierotti.

MISS PIEROTTI: Mary... *(Ann has it memorized.)*

ANN: “I imagine. Little flashes. Through time. The last time I saw her. A cop was picking her up. A big guy, so that Leah was dwarfed in his arms. Tucked the blanket round her. Tucked the blanket round her. My hand was bloody, and it left blood on the blanket And the cop looked in my eyes.” *(Hesitant applause.)*
Leah, hey baby, I graduated. Life it rips you apart. R.I.P. Rest in peace.

MARY. Are you okay? You look good in that hat.

ANN. *(Ignoring her.)* 98 and $\frac{3}{4}$, why wouldn’t Dr. Seuss give us fuckin’ 100 percent?

MARY. Almost 100. This is the dude wrote “Green Eggs and Ham.”

ANN. Just like ours.

MARY. Let’s get cake.

ANN. Can you get me some water?

MARY. Sure. What’s wrong? *(Lights shift. Mary and Ann are back in the library. Mary is reading. C.O. 2 watches.)*

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MARY. *“Inmate brought civil rights action against the corrections department medical director and correctional officials, claiming that he was subjected to cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth Amendment...”*

ANN. What time is it?

MARY. You’re changin’ the subject. You need to see the doctor. *(Referring to what she is reading.)* It’s “Estelle v. Gamble.”
Withholding medical care. Cruel and unusual punishment.

ANN. Hate the doctors here, I’m fine. It’ll go away. Even though they cut the courses, you can still study for college--for when you get out...

MARY. You too.

ANN. GED’s good enough for me, I’m never getting out.

MARY. Wrong about that...

ANN. I’m a lifer.

MARY. ...just keep bein’ good. And push the doctor. *(Mary sketches to feel better.)*

ANN. You okay?

MARY. Think so, slept okay. So much can go wrong. Just lookin’ at the ceiling, tryin’ to be good, thinkin’ even if I blink, might get in trouble. Like, I look at the ceilin’ and it falls down and I get in trouble for breakin’ it.

ANN. It’s always stepping-stones. What you drawing?

MARY. Pine trees. And beyond the trees, a lake. Gray...

Thought about that color for a long time, which one to choose. It had a lot of blue in the purple.

ANN. It’s in pencil.

MARY. Writin’ down the colors. And then beyond the lake there’s a canyon. I put a chair. That was the best part, that chair. Then I got rid of the forest because it didn’t fit anymore. Made me feel trapped. Wanted open air, space. So then, there was the lake, the canyon, and the chair.

ANN. *(Looking at sketch.)* What’s the chair for?

MARY. I’ll let you sit in it. We’re a team, Ann.

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ANN. Then what'll I do?

MARY. Just look out at the view. And bring me back a rock. And then go to the doctor.

ANN. Would *you* really want to see that doctor?

MARY. (*Shoving the book at her.*) "Estelle v. Gamble." Cruel and unusual punishment.

ANN. Exactly.

MARY. Ann, when you read your poem, you said you imagine her, your baby? Leah? Do you know where she went?

ANN. Some Christian organization, then foster care.

MARY. Could you ask?

ANN. I tried calling once. No one could tell me nothing.

MARY. Where do you imagine her...?

ANN. Stupid.

MARY. (*Referring to drawing.*) I showed you my stupid shit.

ANN. School. Raising...her hand way high. Basketball? Ball going through the hoop. Maybe she went to some other country...?

MARY. Where?

ANN. Caribbean.

MARY. That's a lot of places to look for someone...

ANN. Walking on a road. She waves. In the distance. When you feel that "bar bell heart" think of me. (*They do their secret gesture.*)

MARY. (*Beat.*) Breathe, close your eyes.

ANN. Is this what you do in "yo-ga"?

MARY. Try it.

ANN. Now you're a swami? (*Ann exits. Lights shift. Mary approaches the CORRECTIONS OFFICERS*)

MARY. Look, she needs to go to the infirmary.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. You saw him make the call.

MARY. She's getting worse.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. We got it covered, okay?

MARY. Thanks, appreciate it. I really do. But could you help...?

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CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. Washington, you were right there when I called, get back to the kitchen, you're blowin' it.

MARY. Could I talk to the doctor?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. You are on thin ice.

MARY. Could I...?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. Not sayin' it again! GET BACK TO WORK. (*Lights shift. Mary is talking to her public defender, NICK, who is on a screen via direct feed, from his computer at his desk in his office.*)

MARY. I waited for you for an hour!

NICK. They said they were backed up.

MARY. They're doin' it on purpose!

NICK. Hey...I had a dream about you.

MARY. Awww, shucks. What was I doin'?

NICK. You were trying to escape. (*She laughs.*)

MARY. No kiddin'.

NICK. You came out of a forest. You were free. Then there were pennies everywhere. Lincoln is on pennies all over the streets. But no one bothers to pick them up.

MARY. Thanks Nick, what does free mean? (*A long pause.*)

NICK. (*Looking at paperwork.*) Hey, I am working on your post-conviction relief. You are doing great, I am proud of you.

MARY. I'm an expert in the world of makin' baloney sandwiches. Look, you got to help me.

NICK. Good news—promotion to fry cook. There is talk of reinstating some of the academic courses--you can still work for a college degree.

MARY. Yeah, right, they cancelled the computer course.

NICK. We will get you a *Dummies* book.

MARY. You're callin' me a dummy?

NICK. Seriously, I taught myself to code that way. HTML. Good you signed up for the yoga class, it will go in your next parole package. Good, good and good.

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MARY. Basically we sit on the floor and stare off into space. Half the people are sleepin'. Snorin'. You HAVE to help me with Ann.

NICK. They say they are trying to treat her.

MARY. That's not good enough, I'm startin' to lose it!

NICK. Me too, I bitch and moan to my wife night and day. She took me to the zoo to cheer me up. It was the day all the kids were out of school. It was so crowded we could not see any animals.

MARY. You know I grew up in the Bronx, never went to the zoo...

NICK. Just *one hyena*—came up to the fence and I swear he would have eaten us in a second if it had not been for the fence. Ever seen a hyena's jaw?

MARY. Everyday, dude.

NICK. I read on the plaque, a pack can devour a zebra in fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes.

MARY. Why you tellin' me this?

NICK. Because I love my job, but sometimes I get really angry--I feel just like that hyena. I believe in you, Mary. I will try again about your friend, Ann.

MARY. Lucky there was that fence, Nick. (*Lights shift. Ann is doubled over, emitting sounds. The C.O's enter.*)

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. D'you watch the game last night?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. No.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. Total disaster.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. Glad I didn't see it. (*Mary confronts the C.O.'s*)

MARY. She needs medication—we've been asking for months!

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. We told the doctor.

MARY. They gave her aspirin!

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. Let it go, Washington.

MARY. They gave her fuckin' aspirin.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. That's enough!

MARY. SHE NEEDS MEDICATION. THEY PROMISED HER SOME. DON'T YOU HEAR HER? "Estelle v. Gamble."

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CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. I'm giving you one more chance.

MARY: SHE NEEDS MEDICATION.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. Shut the fuck up!

MARY. I WON'T STOP TILL SHE GETS IT.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. (*Referring to Ann.*) She's a lost cause anyway.

ANN. (*Trying to warn her.*) Mary...no...(C.O. 1 turns to look at C.O. 2. Mary leaps on C.O. 1.)

MARY. I WILL KILL YOU MOTHER FUCKER! GET HER HER MEDICATION. (*Lights shift to shadow and slow motion. C.O. 3 enters wearing a helmet*)

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 3. Clear. (*C.O. 3 Tasers Mary. Mary falls to the floor. C.O. 3 checks under her breasts for contraband.*) Cough. (*Checks if she's hiding anything in her vagina.*) Harder. (*Checks if she's hiding anything in her anus.*) Harder, harder. (*Mary is placed in a solitary confinement cell.*)

“SEGREGATED HOUSING UNIT - THE SHU”

A long pause. We hear sounds from the SHU as Mary tries to deal with the reality of being in the SHU cell. She groans.

SHANNA'S VOICE. Shampoo my hair? Please? (*Crying.*) (*Mary tries to drown out Shanna's voice.*)

MARY. Think you can think yourself out of anythin'? Right?

THINK. THINK. THINK. THINK. (*We hear WOMEN*

SCREAMING intermittently: “Get me out.” “Good night.” “I love you.”

SHANNA'S VOICE. I wanna shampoo my hair. (*Crying.*)

My hair. It's so dirty. (*Mary hears a voice coming from the air duct.*)

AIR DUCT VOICE. Hey...?

MARY. ...What?

AIR DUCT VOICE. Are you sleeping? (*Mary nears the duct.*)

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MARY. No.

AIR DUCT VOICE. Me either.

MARY. *(Breathing.)* Breathe. Doesn't always work. I'm tryin' to find out what's happening to my friend Ann. No one will tell me nothin'. It's the silent treatment.

AIR DUCT VOICE. What's wrong with her?

MARY. She's real sick. *(Too softly for her to hear.)* I miss her.

AIR DUCT VOICE. How long you in the SHU for?

MARY. They didn't say. How about you?

AIR DUCT VOICE. Feels safer here. When I get out, I find a way to get put back in.

MARY. You're kiddin' me? I'm really startin' to wig out.

AIR DUCT VOICE. You'll get used to it. Hope you hear from your friend. *(Sounds in the cell accentuate.)*

MARY. It's like a haunted house, sometimes the memories start feelin' more real than what really is--tappin' of the vent--gunshots, then the screamin'...*(Suddenly THE FLOATER appears, floating; ephemeral but somehow sharp at the same time.)*

THE FLOATER. Baby, hey...What happened? Come here.
(Mary panics, fighting to ignore The Floater completely.)

MARY. Count. My feet, right here on the floor, one, two. My hands, three and four. Five, stomach. Face, six. Hair, seven.

THE FLOATER. Aren't you even gonna talk to me? What'd I do, baby? What'd I do? Come here.

MARY. Eight, my back,

THE FLOATER. You gonna cry, big cry-baby?

MARY. FUCK YOU. *(Mary listens to a woman clanging something against her cell. The sounds of footsteps going by; the tapping sound of a vent. The Floater lurks.)*

THE FLOATER. I'm still here...

SHANNA'S VOICE. Shampoo my hair? Pleazzzzzz? *(Crying.)*
(The tapping sound of the vent grows.)

THE FLOATER. You don't want to remember...*(The tapping sound shifts as Mary suddenly hears rapid gunshots.)*

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MARY. Eats me from inside like a fire, you can hear the suckin' sound, eatin' my barbell heart, this is a fuckin' bake off...*(She makes the sucking sound.)* Can you hear it? But the heart never burns out—never disappears into ashes, into dust, into nothing—instead this fucking guilt can't kill the heart, only makes it suffer. It's a full-time job fightin' this guilt. Sometimes I try to take deep breaths and the oxygen makes it better. Oxygen's supposed to be life, right? 'Cause this is living death, and "death," that's the real killer. Oh, ha, ha. Not funny. And you know who is guilt's partner in crime? Fear. They're "co-dependent." Miss Pierotti loves that word. *(Gunshot.)* I see him shoot: I hear the screaming, the writhin' of that black boy's body. I try to turn on the fan in the bathroom, I run the water, but I can't drown any of it out. And there's nothing I can do, except turn and walk away. What kind of human being let's that happen? What kind of monster would watch that happen and do nothing? *(The Floater disappears into the shadows, listening. Lights shift to the C.O.s taking her to "rec"--a cage which serves as "recreation area" --in the SHU.)*

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. You got twenty minutes for rec.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. No talking. *(Through the wires of the cage, Mary tries to hand SHANNA, who is in another "rec" cage, a small shampoo bottle.)*

SHANNA. Why you doin' this? How'd you get it? What you want?

MARY. Just put it in your pocket, Shanna, hurry.

SHANNA. They'll give you a tradin' and traffickin' ticket--whip your ass. Just shut up and leave me alone. *(Shanna retreats, as Mary continues to try.)*

MARY. Put it in your pocket.

SHANNA. Where'd you get it?

MARY. Asked a guard to buy it. I *already* got the ticket. And another thirty days. Fuck.

SHANNA. Not talkin' to you.

MARY. You need to ask for things, Shanna.

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SHANNA. Not talkin' to you.

MARY. Save your throat for better things.

SHANNA. Fuck you.

MARY. What was happenin' the other night?

SHANNA. Not talkin' to you.

MARY. But you are, I hear you.

SHANNA. Not to you.

MARY. Then who?

SHANNA. No one.

MARY. I hear you...

SHANNA. Who are you?

MARY. ...in the SHU...

SHANNA. What ya want from me?

MARY. Don't let him get away with it.

SHANNA. You haven't been here long enough to tell me how to survive this place.

MARY. Take the shampoo. *(Shanna doesn't. Lights shift. Mary is back in her SHU cell. C.O. 2 brings her a plate, then exits. Mary calls out.)*

MARY. More green eggs and ham? *(She eats. Mary sets down the plate. She breathes in and out.)*

MARY. *(Sings.) "How can you just leave me standing
Alone in a world that's so cold
Maybe I'm just too demanding
Maybe I'm just like my father, too bold
Maybe you're just like my mother. She's never satisfied
Why do we scream at each other?*

This is what it sounds like when doves cry." (Lights shift as Miss Pierotti interrupts Mary and hands her a letter through the slot in the cell.)

MISS PIEROTTI. You received a letter. From Jacky Loman.

MARY. Who? *(Mary takes the letter.)*

MISS PIEROTTI. He's your cousin?

MARY. ...Yeah... *(Mary glances at it.)* You read it?

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MISS PIEROTTI. We have to. (*Mary reads the letter.*) I'm sorry for your loss. (*Silence.*) Were you close to her?...your mom?

MARY. There were rules on the street--you had to be one of the guys--to be tough. (*Mary is remembering: a fight within not to cry.*)

THE FLOATER. Hey, baby, what happened? Come here. (*Miss Pierotti exits.*)

MARY. Glass in my foot. (*Mary's MOTHER appears, smiling, replacing The Floater.*)

MOM. "It's a special day."

MARY. Was it an ocean?

MOM. (*Laughs.*) Looked like one to me!

MARY. Atlantic? Or a Bay? Haven't thought about this in a long time...

MOM. (*Laughing.*) You just loved that beach! What you readin', "Mary, Mary quite contrary?"

MARY. (*Referring to her book.*) It's called "The Seven Storey Mountain."

MOM. Nature book?

MARY. No, it's by Thomas Merton.

MOM. Who's he?

MARY. World-famous "monk". (*From book.*) "I find I serve the world best by keeping my distance and freedom." He's a best seller. But he don't know nothin' about solitary.

MOM. Oh, really? Enjoyin' it?

MARY. Yeah, especially when he screws up—he got a girl pregnant, but left her and the baby to die in World War Two. Then he goes and joins a fuckin' monastery.

MOM. Now, now, Mary!

MARY. My bad, Ma. Sorry can't offer you nothin'.

MOM. There's nothin' like a cup 'o hot coffee after a long day...

MARY. Not here. We lived in the Bronx then, felt like we were on the train forever to get to that ocean...

MOM. One fare gets you from one tip 'o the island to the other!

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MARY. I couldn't believe it went above ground so much.

MOM. (*Laughing.*) You were so surprised when we went over the river!

MARY. The bridge felt so high and the sun was shinin' bright on the water.

MOM. You had your nose glued to the window. "Where is it? Where is it? Where is it?" You were always so chatty. (*Pointing.*) Shhh, it's way over there. You thought you could see the ferris wheel from the Manhattan Bridge! (*Mom takes Mary's hand and pats it repeatedly.*)

MOM. Patience is a virtue, Mary.

MARY. Never had an ounce...

MOM. (*Scolding.*) Now, now.

MARY. We're not made of the same mold. Always some sneaky motor in my blood wantin' to speed things up...

MOM. We'll be in Coney Island soon. (*A beat.*)

MARY. Thought if I could just get a leg up, I could help you, Ma. But the rules: You have to be one of the guys. So easy to get robbed. You don't snitch. No--cryin' is for girls. If I was around you, felt like a girl—you made me feel that way...But to survive out there, just had to get some distance. Then I was ashamed, didn't want you to know. But...

MOM. "Why's it a special day, Momma? Why? Why? Why?" People on the train smiled at ya. Guess they were waitin' for my answer. Ya got everyone's attention!

MARY. You never said why.

MOM. Now you listen to me. This place is crowded. If ya wander off like ya always do—Missus Explorer—you're never gonna find me again.

MARY. Even if I ask your name?

MOM. Noone'll know my name, Mary. It's a beach!

MARY. A beach!!

MOM. We're goin' to the beach, that's why we have the sheet, towels. And ya can't swim so ya can only go where your feet

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touch--I can't swim either...Now the sand's hot, keep your shoes on. Put our sheet here, shoes on corners so the wind won't blow it up. We go in our shorts and remember what I told ya 'bout feet touchin' bottom. (*A beat. They admire the view. Mary takes a step.*)

MARY. The glass went in deep.

MOM. Coke bottle or somethin'. (*Laughing.*) Sight of blood always made ya hysterical. Crocodile tears. (*Comforting her.*) Now, count. My feet, right here on the floor...

MOM/MARY. ...one, two...

MOM. My hands...

MOM/MARY. ...three 'n four.

MARY. I really liked that lifeguard.

MOM. Ya liked his first aid kit!

MARY. And all the people 'round me. "Don't cry, don't cry." I loved that day!

MOM. (*Laughing.*) Oh, Mary, the day you stepped on a piece of glass! At the beach.

MARY. You never said why it was "a special day." You scraped together the subway fare. (*Mom is gone. Mary cries.*) Haven't cried since that day, the glass stabbed me on the beach. Fuck. My mom. I love you. (*Mary sits in her SHU cell, and to make herself feel better, she starts to follow instructions from an old book, drawing.*) Line, line, line. Box. Circle, spokes on wheel. Sun. (*Lights shift as her correctional therapist Miss Pierotti pulls up a chair at Mary's cell door and they speak through the slot.*)

MARY. They killed Ann, Miss Pierotti.

MISS PIEROTTI. No, cancer did.

MARY. "Cruel and unusual punishment." The SHU is gonna kill me. Your brain could leave and go away forever--torture--proved it on mice—read some stuff about that in the library...

MISS PIEROTTI. Now, now...

MARY. They fuckin' watch me when I'm showerin'.

MISS PIEROTTI. You're in the home stretch, Mary.

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MARY. How do you know what the home stretch is?

MISS PIEROTTI. I play the horses.

MARY. You what?

MISS PIEROTTI. No, seriously.

MARY. You play the horses?

MISS PIEROTTI. Video game. Relaxes me. If you hate the SHU, DON'T FIGHT.

MARY. Did you hear what I said? Estelle v. Gamble...

MISS PIEROTTI. *(Ignoring her.)* I'm working on getting that *HTML for Dummies* book you asked for. When you get out of SHU you can try it on a computer.

MARY. They killed her--I'll never stop sayin' it!

MISS PIEROTTI. That's not going to help, Mary. *(Handing her a book.)* Now, you said nothing under 400 pages. You liked the first Merton book--here are his journals.

MARY. I'm makin' pictures of his cabin in nature... *(Mary shows a drawing to Miss Pierotti through the slot.)*

MISS PIEROTTI. Draw your way through the pain. Hey, there's a drawing prize for prisoners I'm going to submit you for.

MARY. Give me more paper.

MISS PIEROTTI. Our budget ran out, we're reprinting on used paper. And we can't give you used paper 'cause it's a confidentiality breach... *(She exits. Lights shift as two C.O.'s enter the hallway.)*

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. Go take care of that now.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. Sure, Sarge.

MARY. *"When society is made up of men who know no interior solitude it can no longer be held together by love: and, consequently, it is held together by a violent and abusive authority..." (Corrections Officer 1 comes into her cell.)*

MARY. What the fuck you doin'?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. Checking for something. *(He puts his hand in his pocket. She panics.)*

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MARY. One, two—feet. Hands--three, four. Five—stomach.
Face, six. Seven, hair---

THE FLOATER. (*Appearing.*) Baby, hey. What happened? Come here.... (*C.O. 1 turns and stares at Mary. Something in him shifts.*)

MARY. What's goin' on? Get the fuck out of here!

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. I'm just checking stuff...

MARY. Neck, nine, ten hips, knees eleven, twelve.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. I just want to look at you.

MARY. What are you doing?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. I just want to look at you.

MARY. I'm going to scream.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. Don't scream.

MARY. I mean it mother fucker.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. (*Re-entering.*) Sarge?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1. (*To Mary.*) Shhhhh. (*C.O. 2 exits.*
C.O. 1 is in suspended animation)

THE FLOATER. Baby, hey...What happened? Come here.

MARY. He just kept on repeatin' it. His voice was so fuckin' creepy.

THE FLOATER. You couldn't scream, right?

MARY. Afraid. I hate myself for bein' so afraid. What is wrong with me? I just can't lick the fear--can't lick it.

THE FLOATER. He showed you...

MARY. Did he really do it?

THE FLOATER. His hand down his pants.

MARY. He just came in to look for razor blades? Someone spread a rumor...?

THE FLOATER. He touched his hard cock. You didn't want to be hurt. That's why you couldn't scream. Come here.

(*Singing.*) *Where the air is fuzzy, you know this place, on top of the ceiling, lookin' down, freedom to float. At least you're not there, you can say, At least you're not there anymore. Come here.*

MARY. Fuck, I'm wiggin' out! I gotta get back.

THE FLOATER. Where?

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MARY. To the cell.

THE FLOATER. *(Laughing.)* Why?

MARY. I don't know. *(Trying to pull herself together.)* I gotta break it down.

THE FLOATER. Come here.

MARY. Fuck, my heart's whackin' so hard against my chest. Can you see it?

THE FLOATER. Yeah, baby. Come here, away from that hammer heart.

MARY. But I need to live...what's your...?

THE FLOATER. The Floater.

MARY. He was checkin' for razor blades!

THE FLOATER. You're not safe.

MARY. I want to be safe here.

THE FLOATER. In a prison?

MARY. Why can't I? Every day I say, I'm goin' to try again...

THE FLOATER. Because you're normal...everyone's like you.

MARY. Where will we go?

THE FLOATER. Into the forgotten. It will all be erased, promise.

MARY. But then I won't remember, I'll be a zombie.

THE FLOATER. You just couldn't bear to go through it again with that C.O. You're exhausted. You need a sunny day. Sittin' under a tree. *(Singing.) You need a sunny day. Simplicity. Sitting under a tree. See how the squirrels play.*

MARY. Yeah, Ann said that once, she said, "I'd just take a sunny day, sittin' under a tree." Didn't say nothin' 'bout squirrels though...

THE FLOATER. *(Singing.) "This is what it sounds like when doves cry"*

MARY. Can't get off this fear train...

THE FLOATER. You already have.

MARY. No, I need, I really need to count. Right here on the floor, one, two.

THE FLOATER. No, you are floating!

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MARY. Three, four.

THE FLOATER. Why did he come inside? Why didn't you scream?

MARY. Okay, I'm comin' up!

THE FLOATER. Yes, it's too heavy to bear! Come up into the sun, the clouds, the puffiness, the cotton, you can float up, it's nothing up here.

MARY. *(Counting.)* Five, stomach.

THE FLOATER. The doctor says, "You're fat, get on the treadmill."

MARY. Says that to everyone. He doesn't even look. Got to count. I have thirty-nine days left in the SHU. Gonna be strong, gonna let him search my cell for blades.

THE FLOATER. *(Yawning.)* You're soooo boring. He was about to get on top of you, and come inside you.

MARY. Somethin' in his eyes, the way he stared. He stares that way when I take my shower.

THE FLOATER. His voice was so fuckin' creepy.

MARY. He put his hand in his pocket.

THE FLOATER. He put his finger to his mouth to say... *(C.O. I repeats the action.)*

THE FLOATER/ CORRECTIONS OFFICER 1.

Shhhhhhhhhh...*(To Mary.)* Hey, I'm looking for contraband. *(He exits)*

MARY. *(To herself.)* Breathe.

THE FLOATER. Each time you breathe up here, it's like you're taking a step towards the forgotten, until you can't remember. Nothing. The nothing tunnel.

MARY. Get the fuck away! I'm screamin'. See!

THE FLOATER. I can't hear you, baby. Come here. *(“Come here” continues as a disappearing echo under Mary's lines.)*

MARY. I'm countin, my heart is beatin'. It's okay. I wish I could go with you, but I can't...I want to fly, I want to, can't, I have to

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look out, organize, bye, bye, bye. I won't be in your air up there.
(*The Floater is gone.*)

MARY. I won. This is my day one. He didn't find no blades.
There ain't none. I'm just sittin' here. Breathe. (*She takes a long, deep breath. She cheers for herself. Mary draws again, following instructions from the old book.*)

MARY. Long line, short line, long line, short line, "draw your way through it." (*She crumples the paper and tosses it into a pile of paper that is growing. She draws.*)

MARY. Circle, eyes, ears, whiskers... (*A MOUSE appears.*)

MOUSE. You okay?

MARY. Terrific.

MOUSE. What's your brain doin'? Currently the element-binding protein, in mine, CREB...It's an acronym...

MARY. Right, Confinement Recks Everyone's Brain.

MOUSE. Wrecks starts with a W.

MARY. (*Laughs.*) Who the hell are you?

MOUSE. They call me the neuroscientist's baby. Solitary confinement decreases the CREB in my brain inducing anxiety and other symptoms. Torture, it's been proven. I am really anxious. Are you? Humans don't make good test specimens, too many variables.

MARY. They have to look at a rat's brain...?

MOUSE. I am *not* a rat. I'm Dr. Jarlsberg's mouse.

MARY. They have to look at a mouse to know that stickin' a human in a cell for twenty-three hours a day without seein' anyone, includin' the light of fuckin' day, for weeks, months, years, is bad?

MOUSE. Anhedonia-like symptoms means the inability to experience pleasure from activities usually found enjoyable. That's what solitary does.

MARY. What's enjoyable here?

MOUSE. No. *After.* After you get out. You'll never get to experience pleasure from activities you usually found enjoyable.

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Like I'll never enjoy eating cheese again. It will taste like meaningless cardboard. That's been proven by Dr. Jarlsberg.

MARY. Oh, I get it...Are you anxious a cat is gonna come in here and eat you? You hallucinatin' cats?

MOUSE. Yeah, do you hallucinate?

MARY. Hell yes!

MOUSE. What do you do?

MARY. Breathe in.

MOUSE. Okay. *(They breathe. The Mouse relaxes, entering a yoga state.)*

MOUSE/MARY. Ommmmmm.

MARY. What ya thinkin'?

MOUSE. Uh, my mom and me in a field outside. We play in the grass, she licks me. There's a secret about us being cute. We're not, we're vicious. I would rip open anything that is less than our size in a second. *(Yoga state.)* Omm, what I want is to find myself.

MARY. Yeah? My mom always made me pancakes on Sunday till she couldn't afford the mix. And then sometimes she stole the mix, so she could make the pancakes.

MOUSE. I feel used. For my brain. *(Mary quickly picks up a book to find a passage.)*

MARY. *"There is something you cannot know about a wren by cutting it up in a laboratory and which you can only know if it remains full and completely a wren, itself, and hops on your shoulder if it feels like it."*

MOUSE. Who wrote that? *(A monk, THOMAS MERTON, enters and crosses the stage very slowly, not aware of Mary or the Mouse.)*

MARY. Thomas Merton. Miss Pierotti gave it to me—he was a monk, he thinks he lived in solitary...

MERTON. It is in deep solitary that I find the gentleness to truly love my brothers.

MARY. Try lockin' yourself in your bathroom for an hour. See what that feels like, Tommy.

WHATDOESFREEMEAN?

MERTON. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have.

MARY. He doesn't get it. *He* had a choice.

MOUSE. We're all S.A.D., Mister. Seasonal affective disorder...

MERTON. Solitude teaches me to love my brothers for what they are, not what they *say*.

MARY. You're never alone and you're always talkin' about it.

MOUSE. So why do you read his books?

MARY. I like what he has to say about freedom, but your solitude stuff is whack.

MERTON. Solitary reveals itself as a word of great power.

MARY. THIS "SOLITARY-REVEALS-ITSELF" CRAP HAS GOT TO STOP!

MOUSE. Maybe if he's forced to stay here with us?

MARY. He's a free agent, honey, he comes and goes, back to his "heaven" in nature. You're always listenin' to birds, pickin' flowers and shit.

MERTON. Thine own self...

MARY. That's it! Put up your fists!

MOUSE. Go, Mary! (*Mary begins to try to box with Merton.*)

MERTON. For I, Solitude am thine...

MARY. For I in the *fuckin' World*, is all I dream about!

MOUSE. Good one!

MERTON. I, Nothingness, am thy All.

MARY. THAT MAKES NO SENSE!

MOUSE. He's not violent.

MARY. He's a pacifist.

MERTON. I...

MARY. (*Overlapping.*) I dream of the Birds Singin'...

MERTON. ...Silence...

MARY. ...Voices talkin', me answerin'...

MERTON. Am thy Amen. (*Mary delivers a definitive blow.*)

MARY. That's my fuckin' Amen. (*Mary wins the fight because Merton doesn't believe in fighting at all. Merton is on the floor.*)

WHATDOESFREEMEAN?

MOUSE. Seven, eight, nine, ten, and he's down for the count.
(They exit. She continues to draw, and she listens to the woman clanging something against her cell. The sound of the vent, tapping louder.)

MARY. *(Drawing.)* Thomas Merton and a Mouse, that's what it's come to. *(C.O. 2 enters and hands her some paper through the slot.)*

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. What did you say?

MARY. Nothin'.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. You said you saw a mouse?

MARY. A monk.

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. What? *(Mary draws.)* They say you're good.

MARY. Who?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. There's plenty of paper, just let me know.

MARY. *(Suspicious)* Where you getting' it?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. Don't worry. *(A beat.)* Ever heard of paper *maché*?

MARY. Yeah?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. We did it in school...Little animals...I made a fox. *I* won a prize too. But then when I brought it home it melted...It rained that day...It was just made of pieces of newspaper stuck together. When I showed it to my mom it was a wet ball. She didn't believe me. She said, what was that crazy teacher doin' in the first place? Anyway, *that* mother kicked me and my brother out. *(Realizing he's gone on too long.)* Really, let me know about the mouse. *(They look at the pile of crumpled paper in her cell.)*

MARY. Can you take this?

CORRECTIONS OFFICER 2. Sure. *(He takes it, then closes the slot.)*

MARY. Thanks. *(C.O. 2 exits. Lights shift. Mary is on direct feed with Nick, her public defender.)*

WHATDOESFREEMEAN?

NICK. Big news, there are new sentencing rules for nonviolent first offenders.

MARY. I don't give a shit...

NICK. Yes, you do. Listen. It is a retroactive vote, adjusting the offense levels down two. This is huge!

MARY. What is?

NICK. And the drawing prize thing is great, Mary. We are going to get you out! I want you to take this anger management course.

MARY. MAKE *THEM* TAKE THE COURSE.

NICK. (*Overlapping.*) Just take it, Mary.

MARY. WHAT ARE THEY GOIN' TO FORCE ME TO DO THIS TIME? WRITE ANOTHER LIST OF ALL THE THINGS I REGRET? CHECK MORE BOXES? THE KIND OF ANGER *THEY* HAVE IS LETHAL! FUCK THEIR COURSE. ANGER IS ALL I HAVE. THEY GONNA TAKE THAT AWAY FROM ME TOO?

NICK. Look Mary, I totally get it, I hate *everything*. Most of the time I think I CAN NOT LIVE IN THIS COUNTRY ANYMORE.

MARY. Oh, so you leavin' me now?

NICK. I live in this country. My kids are in school. I love my family. I feel useless. This job, I am afraid if I do not stop, I will do something violent.

MARY. Nick.

NICK. I am such a wimp, afraid I will get arrested for not recycling my plastic milk jug.

MARY. Nick, yo, you good. Breathe. (*Nick breathes.*)

NICK. So, this is the deal—the most important thing is to really communicate remorse. “I am taking full responsibility.” Show them that Come-to-Jesus moment--crocodile tears.

MARY. Why should it fuckin' work this time?

NICK. Eh, watch your language. And I am sorry about your friend Ann. (*Lights shift as Mary is back in the SHU “rec cage” and tries again to give Shanna some shampoo.*)

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SHANNA. Are you fuckin' bugged? What is your fuckin' problem?

MARY. Wonderin' what it is with them and your shampoo.

SHANNA. Why you listenin' to me?

MARY. Can't help not listenin'! You're up all night.

SHANNA. Not sleepin' ?

MARY. No.

SHANNA. I don't know why you wanna get me in trouble. Just wanna be left alone. Never should've come to rec in the first place. Every time I come out here somethin' bad happens. *(Beat. Mary changes the subject.)*

MARY. I won a prize.

SHANNA. What prize?

MARY. Hundred bucks. Drawin' prize. Made it for my friend. Lake purple blue but it's in pencil. Her chair, looks out at the canyon.

SHANNA. If I take the shampoo, will you shut up? *(Shanna puts the shampoo in her pocket. They exit. Mary is back in SHU cell. She can't stand it another second. She picks up her pencil.)*

MARY. ...blunt fuck... *(She does as much damage to her arm with a blunt pencil as she can. Ann appears.)*

ANN. Why are you doing this now?

MARY. I can't do this anymore, I DON'T HAVE ANY MORE PATIENCE.

ANN. Step into the suffering. Always coming up against it. It's like prepping for the big race.

MARY. I don't know...

ANN. It's always stepping-stones. But they add up, in ways you never know.

MARY. I miss you. NOTHIN' ADDS UP.

ANN. "When you feel the bar bell...

ANN/MARY. ...heart think of me." *(They do their secret gesture.)*

WHATDOESFREEMEAN?

ANN. A heart is just a heart, Mary. We all have one. Now you know the depths of what it can do. (*Ann departs. Lights shift. Mary is with Miss Pierotti, who is excited.*)

MISS PIEROTTI. The *Dummies* book, Mary...!

MARY. Forget it! Why has it taken so long to get one book? What do they think I'm gonna do? Hit someone over the head with it?

MISS PIEROTTI. (*Smiling.*) It is a thick book.

MARY. Fuck you 'n everyone.

MISS PIEROTTI. Now, Mary.

MARY. "Now Mary." Fuck you.

MISS PIEROTTI. Your arm?

MARY. Bashed it doin' sit ups.

MISS PIEROTTI. Sit ups?

MARY. Before I do laps 'round my cell. And the yo-ga.

MISS PIEROTTI. Stop. Stop! You are "property of the state."

MARY. Fuck you, I can tell you about property. We have always been their fuckin' property... (*A beat.*)

MISS PIEROTTI. I know. Truly, with the new sentencing rules you can be out by the end of the year. It's the homestretch.

MARY. Okay, it won't happen again.

MISS PIEROTTI. I am not going to.... it better not!

MARY. Thank you, Miss Pierotti. I'm tryin' to mind my own business. So much can go wrong. I don't want to flop. I'm prepping. But I'm scared to get out, Miss Pierotti.

MISS PIEROTTI. We'll enroll you in a program—"Destiny House." (*Smiling.*) And what I was trying to tell you, before I was so rudely interrupted--hello?-- was the *Dummies* book is in the library!

"GENERAL POPULATION"

Mary is back in the library, having been released from SHU. She is alone. There is an empty chair. She is reading a book and writing.

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After a moment she shows the book to an invisible person in the empty chair.

MARY. I made it out of the SHU. *HTML for Dummies*, Ann. I'm designing a website. By the time I get through this book, there'll be all new software. Fuckers. So much can go wrong. *(She looks up.)* Just lookin' at the ceiling, tryin' to be good, thinkin' even if I blink I might get in trouble. I'm just gonna read and read and read *Dummies*, memorize it. Keep my mouth shut. Smile. Call the C.O.'s "sir," "ma'am." And say "dee-licious" when I eat the grub. This is gonna be my *fifth* time in front of the board. French Toast and Fuck the Queen. *(The PAROLE BOARD DIRECTOR is seen on a video screen, holding a sheath of papers. Mary faces the Director on the screen. Miss Pierotti sits near Mary. Nick is on another small screen. Mary breathes with difficulty.)*

PAROLE BOARD DIRECTOR. Miss Washington...?

MARY. I want to express to the board my remorse for what I've done: the selling of crack cocaine. I take full responsibility for my crimes. I understand that distributing drugs is a severe crime against the good of society and I am truly sorry. During my time in prison I have worked consistently in the kitchen, first learning how to assemble sandwiches, then I was promoted to fry cook, a job that I take enormous pride in doing well. I apologize for my behavior when my friend got sick. *(She cries. And lies.)* There was no reason for my anger. Though I have never been a drug user, I have learned that anger is like another kind of drug. I have completed an anger management course. And I was fortunate to win a drawing prize for inmates. I have also acquired computer software skills. I'm making a website for women. My counselor Miss Pierotti has been a strong mentor for me. The SHU taught me to cooperate, and my time in prison has allowed me to be rehabilitated. I respectfully promise you and the board that I will no longer be a detriment to society. I am now equipped to make

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significant contributions. *(The Director shuffles paper and makes some notes.)*

PAROLE BOARD DIRECTOR. Due to the change in resentencing guidelines, the Board has decided to grant conditional release: the terms are Destiny House for a minimum of six months; drug testing; and supervision by a parole officer. The documents here further outline Miss Washington's obligations and restrictions. *(During the Parole Board Director's speech, his voice slowly fades until we see the director only mouthing the words on the screen, and then the image also fades, while Mary begins to walk out of prison.)* Not leaving the city and/or state limits without permission, maintaining regular employment, not changing residence or employment without permission, not possessing firearms or other hazardous weapons, not associating with persons who have criminal records, obeying all state and local laws... *(Ann's ghost appears. Mary looks at her.)*

MARY. I knew I could cry when I talked about you.

ANN. Why you a "dummy"?

MARY. I'm building a website: "whatdoesfreemean?" Using my drawings--now there's color. One of the services is for mothers and children to look for each other.

ANN. Leah.

MARY. When I am writing HTML I forget.

ANN. Yeah. *(Silence as Mary watches Ann exit.)*

MARY. Gotta crack the code. *(Mary walks away.)*

END.

WHATDOESFREEMEAN?

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