

ROWING TO AMERICA

by

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Characters

GIRL - About 12, bright and inquiring, an enchanting, playful quality; she is special

SISTER - About 17, serious countenance interrupted by an astonishingly beautiful smile; more mature and responsible than her years

Notes

Both characters may be played by older actors who have not lost their childlikeness. Ideally they are not Caucasian, and the two need not be the same race. They should be totally comfortable with the lyrical, non-naturalistic speech and physical style. The tone and delivery, however, are “real” and down to earth. All actions and objects may be suggested by physical gestures, not mime movements.

A heavy dramatic interpretation should be avoided, as should any temptation to ennoble, politicize, or "victimize" these characters and their situation. They are women in a tough situation, who have the imaginative power to see their way out.

There is a magical, playful quality about this world. Simplicity and clarity should be the guiding principle.

ROWING TO AMERICA

Scene 1: *The stage is bare. The sky is midnight blue, with a crescent moon and a few stars, the sound of waves slapping the side of a boat. GIRL sits on a box or bench, rowing with oars. She is weary. SISTER is in shadow. In GIRL's first speech, SISTER may speak some of the lines simultaneously or alone.*

GIRL

I'm rowing to America. The only thing I brought with me is a picture of a smile. Here in my head. Strong and radiant like the sun. The smile of my sister. "When we grow up and go to America, everything will be all right," she would say to me. She told me all sorts of things about America. Have you heard them too? She said the streets are paved with gold lamé. A dollar a day keeps the doctor away. Apple pie and huckleberry finn for breakfast. Milk and honey flow down the avenue Fifth Avenue. A chicken in every pot-pie. Where the sun never stops shining, and spacious skies are blue, and amber grains are always waving at you. . . When we get there, we will wave back. Look, Sister—they have come to greet us! Hello! Hello! We are here—we have come to America!

(Lights up on SISTER, who frantically waves GIRL away.)

SISTER

GO! Please go! You will understand when you're older. Now row! And sing! For me!

GIRL

No! Don't leave me!

(Lights fade on SISTER. GIRL watches until she disappears from sight.)

All right all right! I'll row--I'll sing! *(sings and rows)* "Row row row your boat, gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream... Row row row your boat, gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream..." I'm tired. I wonder how far America is. Maybe I'll wash up.

GIRL (cont)

You must always look your best, sister said. What if I should suddenly run into America without warning?

(SISTER appears and combs GIRL's hair.)

I catch the rainwater to drink and wash my face and my hands. I've learned to be like a cat. It's important to stay clean and neat. She would comb and braid my hair with her strong quick hands. Two neat fat braids, like sausage twins. She never pinched or pulled, the way Mother did.

(Lights brighten. GIRL breaks away from SISTER, laughing. They are younger.)

SISTER

Hah! Now I've got you! If you don't sit still, I'm going to pinch and pull your hair so hard you will long for Mother to pinch and pull!

GIRL

You would never hurt me.

SISTER

No. I would never ever hurt you.

(Sister gives her a sudden pinch. They burst into laughter.)

GIRL

You're smiling! I made you smile! The sun has come out! Why don't you smile all the time, like you used to?

SISTER

I'm not as I used to be. Soon I will no longer be young.

GIRL

I miss your smile.

SISTER

Listen to me. When a girl is no longer young, they take away...*(she pauses)*

GIRL

What do they take away? . . . Dear sister? You look so sad.

SISTER

It's nothing. Now I want you to sing my favorite song! About the little fishermen.

GIRL

Only if you smile. I want to count your teeth! How I wish I had your shining teeth.
Like a string of the finest pearls.

(SISTER gives a huge, goofy smile. GIRL laughs with crazy delight.)

Yes! Do it again! Do it again!

(SISTER does; GIRL again goes into paroxysms of laughter.)

Again!

SISTER

Shhh. No. That's enough for now.

GIRL

Will you pinch and pull my hair when we go to America?

SISTER

Of course. When we grow up and go to America, everything will be all right.

GIRL

When we grow up and go to America, everything will be all right.

SISTER

Now warm my heart, dear sister. But softly. For safety's sake.

GIRL

(sings) Wynken, Blynken, and Nod one night
Sailed off in a wooden shoe,
Sailed on a river of crystal light
Into a sea of dew.
"Where are you going, and what do you wish?"
The old moon asked the three.
"We have come to fish for the herring fish
That live in this beautiful sea;
Nets of silver and gold have we!"
Said Wynken, Blynken, and Nod.

(Lights change back. SISTER recedes into shadow.)

GIRL

Where is your smile now, dear sister? Does it still hurt?

SISTER

ROW!

GIRL

I better row. "Row row row your boat / gently down the stream / merrily merrily merrily...(etc)"

(She sees something float by.)

Oh. Another piece of paper!

(She fishes a magazine out of the water.)

(reads) "Among the universe of component CD players, it seems senseless to buy a single-play model for \$100 when it's possible to buy a changer for as little as \$125."

The "universe of component CD players." What does C-D stand for? *(searches page)* The D is for disk. The C is for...cosmic? What else could it be? A universe of cosmic disks"

GIRL

(sings) Hello, Moon
 Good night, Moon
 I row by your light
 I sleep in your arms
 I sing to your charms
 A cosmic disk in the sky.
 A thrill of hope
 A glow of hope
 I keep on rowing
 But why am I going?
 Hello, Moon
 Good night, Moon
 Good night, Moon. Good night.

SISTER

"Such a lovely voice—it made you feel," they always said. "Better not to sing too much."

Scene 2. GIRL catches a fish.

GIRL

Come on, little fish. What's the use of fighting? I'm famished!

Aha! Now I shall wrap you in seaweed, and what a tasty sandwich!

(She watches the fish thrash in the moonlight.)

Pearly little fish. How can I eat you? *(starts to throw it back)*

SISTER

Eat!—or you will not live to see America.

GIRL

Forgive me! I have to eat you.

(She eats it. She sees another magazine float by.)

More paper! "Tests show how you can eat real eggs again. Egg World's eggs are better than other eggs." WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? Why can't people in America eat real eggs? What are real eggs? Why do they need tests to show how to eat an egg?

SISTER

Always so many questions! You must row!

(GIRL, annoyed by ad, turns the page.)

GIRL

"Lascivious Lucy lurks in every lustful heart. Call 1-9-0-0- L-U-S T-F-U-L."

(Disgust turns to curiosity. She examines Lucy's face.)

Her smile. It's so false. It makes her ugly.

SISTER

It's a custom in many countries, when a young girl is no longer young. . .

GIRL

Yes?

SISTER

They take away. . .

GIRL

What, Sister?

SISTER

They take away her crowning glory. Her greatest gift. . .

GIRL

Her greatest gift?

SISTER

Whatever is her greatest beauty. Her greatest strength.

GIRL

I don't understand.

(She looks at the magazine picture of Lascivious Lucy.)

Her smile. It is so big. But it has no beauty, no strength.

SISTER

They take away our greatest strength. That way people will love us more and fear us less.

GIRL

Why will people will love us more if we have no strength? That doesn't make sense.

SISTER

One or two modest gifts in a girl is safe. But to shine like a star, is to arouse Fear. Envy. Lust. . .

GIRL

Why?

SISTER

. . . And disrupt the harmony.

GIRL

That doesn't make sense! We should get more love! Make more harmony!

SISTER

This is how it is!

GIRL

HOW do they take away our gifts?

SISTER

All peoples have devised their own way. It is always painful.

GIRL

(fearful) Me too? What will they take away from me?

SISTER

Shhh. Not you, my dearest heart. I won't let them hurt you.

(SISTER fades into shadow.)

(GIRL sits quietly, staring, trying to understand.

Sounds of wind and rough seas grow. She starts up as if from a dream.)

GIRL

WHERE ARE YOU TAKING HER?

Then I heard my mother's voice. "Go to sleep, we're taking a walk." I am not a child! We don't take walks in the middle of the night. *(looking out window)* I watch my sister, my mother, and all the other mothers march across the moonlit field, like a procession of ravens...smaller and smaller. I wait by the window all night. Deep inside me, in a place that has no name, I begin to feel afraid.

(Lights change. Morning. GIRL jumps up and watches SISTER enter.)

They're coming back. Why is that old woman wearing my sister's clothes? Her body bowed in pain, her mouth split wide in silent grief. . .It's Sister! She lifts her head to look at mother. I see. . .not the moonlight glistening against her teeth. . . but blackness. Her mouth. . .HER MOUTH IS EMPTY! SHE HAS NO TEETH!

(Lights change. GIRL bangs on a door.)

Please let me see her. I won't disturb her rest. I WANT TO SEE HER! I WANT TO BE WITH HER!

(She beats her fist as if against her mother.)

I hate you, Mother! How could you do that to her? How could you hurt her?— your own daughter. Your mother. *(pause)* Your mother did that to you. . . when you were no longer young?. . . I don't understand. . .No, I will never understand! **WHY?**

(Lights change. SISTER enters. They embrace.)

Sister!

SISTER

My dear.

GIRL

What did they do to you? What did they take away?

SISTER

They gave me false teeth, cast from a mold of Little Brother's mouth. Look at me. Now I am ugly and invisible.

GIRL

No, my precious sun. You are beautiful. *(touches her mouth)* Does it still hurt?

SISTER

Harmony is preserved. The people are safe.

GIRL

I hate the people! I hate their harmony! Their harmony is wrong!

SISTER

Hush. Come quickly.

(She takes GIRL's hand and they run to the boat.)

GIRL

America?

SISTER

Yes. Goodbye, dear sister. Get in the boat.

(SISTER hugs her fiercely for a long time. Then tries to push her into the boat, She won't let SISTER go.)

GIRL

Wait! No! No!

SISTER

Get in! Go! Do as I say!

GIRL

No! Not without you!

SISTER

It's too late for me. You are still young and whole.

GIRL

No! I won't go without you!

SISTER

(her words like a slap) Do you want them to slit your throat? Turn your larynx to a hard knot of scar tissue? Smother your voice forever? Get in the boat!

(GIRL starts to cry.)

GIRL

You hurt me. You said you would never hurt me.

SISTER

Please forgive me, my dear sister. I want you to sing and be strong. I want you to shine like a star.

(SISTER pushes the boat off. They now stand in exact same postures and relationship as in first scene.)

GO! Please go! You will understand when you're older. Now row. And sing. For me.

GIRL

No! Don't leave me!

(SISTER fades from sight. GIRL watches her for as long as she can. She sits and starts to row listlessly.)

I'm rowing to America. Where the streets are paved with gold lamé, and I can shine like a star. But deep inside, in a place that has no name, I feel the sun has died.

(Something floats by.)

Another American shopping paper. Every day, I see more and more. I must be getting closer.

(She flips through. She stares at a picture.)

What a beautiful smile. It's her smile! It's my sister's smile! *(reads)* "Smile whenever you like! Never feel self-conscious about less than perfect teeth. Get laminated!" I will get her smile back for her. I will get it in America and take it back to her! You can get anything in America!

(Rows with renewed spirit.)

I'm rowing to America. I'm doing it—for her!

(sings) Smile, smile, whenever you like.
In America everybody smiles.
It is good if you smile.
If you smile, you are good.
(Repeat verse)

(A crescent of lights of a Western city skyline appears. It grows bigger and brighter.)

Look, Sister. Look at all the lights. Shining like your smile. You haven't left me. I see it everywhere. All around me like the sun. Here in my head, and in my heart.

SISTER

Goodbye, little sister. Please forgive me.

(SISTER exits.)

GIRL

They have come to greet us! Hello! Hello! We are here! We have come to America! . . . Now everything will be all right.

THE END