

HOW I LEARNED TO SPELL

or

AND READ ALL OVER

by Jennifer Maisel

The following play is copyrighted and is to be used for classroom or audition purposes only. For production rights please contact the author or her representative.

Jennifer Maisel [maiselj@dogearplays.org](mailto:maiselj@dogearplays.org)  
representaion: Susan Schulman 212-713-1633 [Schulman@aol.com](mailto:Schulman@aol.com)

CAST:

MARA

MADLINE - her daughter

MAN'S VOICE

A.S.K. Theatre Projects in Los Angeles sponsored Paula Vogel's playwriting bootcamp for twelve playwrights, a weeklong intensive that ended in a thirty-six hour bake-off, where each participant wrote a play really really fast. The group continues to meet monthly, and when Paula won the Pulitzer for *How I Learned to Drive* we did another bake-off in tribute to her...hence - "How I Learned To Spell". "How I Learned to Spell" was produced by Mothers Finding in New York in 2003 and was a finalist for the Heideman Award at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

- *BLACK*

-*SOUND OF A MAN'S VOICE, miked,-*

-*his heavy breathing-*

-*AND A WOMAN, MARA, responding to him-*

MARA

Oh yes, oh yes yes yes yes -

-*LIGHTS UP ON-*

-*MADELINE, puberty looming-*

MADELINE

When I was growing up my mother worked at home.

-*SOUND OF MAN BREATHING, miked-*

-*lights up on MARA, ordinary, phone in one hand-*

MARA

What do you want my name to be, baby?

MADELINE

She listened to some radio talk show host who had said it was important for the mother to be there when the kids come home from school. There should be someone waiting at the end of the day -

MAN'S VOICE

(miked, soothing)

to talk to them, ask about their day, someone to help them with their homework

MARA

Maternal

MADELINE

m-a-t-e-r-n-a-l, maternal

MARA

Abstruse

MADLINE

a-b-s-

MAN'S VOICE

Abstruse?

MARA (into phone)

Not you baby, you I can understand perfectly.

MADLINE

It took a while before Mom found the career that was right for her - Telemarketing....

MARA

Mrs. Winchell, well, Mrs. Winchell today just maybe the day you've been waiting for all your life -

MADLINE

the scripts were too rigid and the r-e-j-e-c-t-i-o-n began to tear at her heart strings after a while -

MAN'S VOICE(angry)

When do you people eat dinner? Is it some other time than other Americans, other humans eat dinner?

MARA

But but but but -

MAN'S VOICE

I'm eating!

MADLINE

Psychic Tarot 900 number operator.

MARA

OK I see a man in your life. Your husband. He drives a truck. Right. I see roads - oh - the two of you travelling America together. Yep - well maybe he's taking you with him on the next one. I see it quite clearly. You're blonde, right - oh - well maybe it's red, I'm kind of color blind and the road it stretches out before him and her - you - until the deer, until the blood on the blonde, until the brakes screeching - oh

Collision

MADLINE

C-o-l-l-i-s-i-o-n

MARA (hanging up)

Prescient

MADLINE

That wasn't on the list.

MARA

It doesn't mean you shouldn't know it.

MADLINE

It wasn't on the list.

MARA

You don't always get what's on the list Maddy, other stuff, stuff not on the list -

MADLINE

Test me from the list - That's what I need to know.

MARA

Prescient.

MADLINE

Mom, that was not the next word.

MARA

Sound it out.

MADLINE

I'm not spelling it if I don't know it. Mr. Sellito doesn't test not from the list.

MARA

Prescient.

MADLINE

I'll get it wrong.

MARA

So?

MAN'S VOICE

Prescient.

MADLINE

It wasn't on the list!!!!

MARA

Try it.

MADLINE

The next word on the list was

MADLINE and MAN'S VOICE

Pulitzer.

MARA

What do you need me for then? If you know the fucking list by heart what do you need me for?

MADLINE

Food. Clothes. Shelter.

*-silence-*

MADLINE

OK, how do you spell it?

MARA

Look it up.

*-MARA leaves-*

MADLINE

How am I supposed to look it up if I don't know how to spell it?

*-MARA returns with a headset on-*

MADLINE

Finally she found something where she could make sure the customer was always satisfied. And something where - where she could be who-ever she wanted to be, look however she wanted to look without leaving the house.

MARA

And my body - e-x-t-r-a-o-r-d-i-n-a-r-y.

MADELINE

Right. I mean she's fine, my mom, pretty even, beautiful some days and with no confidence in anything but her ability to create fictions about herself.

MARA

A real redhead. I swear.  
Prevaricate.

MADELINE

P-r-e-v-a-r-i-c-a-t-e.  
And I won the school spelling bee.  
Which only made me happy because it meant Mr. Sellito broke the school's rigid code of ethical student-teacher interaction and carefully, sweetly, tenderly, patted me on the back after I spelled the word that that teacher's sycophant Paula Litman had missed.

MAN'S VOICE

Herculean.

MADELINE

h-e-r-c-u-l-e-a-n  
Mr. Selitto's eyes were so...blue.  
Herculean.

MARA

Hercules?  
Hello Hercules. Am I Xena?

MAN'S VOICE

You're Paula.

MARA

Paula. Paula and Hercules. I don't think I've heard that myth.

MAN'S VOICE

Make it up. Tell it to me. Tell it to me good. Hard. Fast. Long and short.

MADELINE

I didn't bring my mother to career day. If I had maybe it would have circumvented -

MAN'S VOICE

Circumvented.

MADELINE

Yeah right.

MAN'S VOICE

Circumvented.

MADLINE

Would you use it in a sentence, please?

MAN'S VOICE

Ah ah ah ah ah AHHHHHHHH! Sir Cum vented!

MARA

And I, your lady, am grateful.

*-MARA polishes her nails-*

MADLINE

At this point my mother was doubletasking with efficiency - she'd heard that term on oprah or sally jessie - doing two tasks at once. Sometimes she'd even do three - watching a closecaptioned Jerry Springer, cooking dinner and

MARA

Ahh, ahh, ahh

MADLINE

Faking an orgasm all at the same time. But career day -

MARA

It never occurred to you that I might want to go. That I might want to get out some time. Meet the other parents. Meet your teachers. Mingle with real people.

MADLINE

No.

MARA

Selfish.

MADLINE

Too easy.

MARA

No, you. Selfish.

*-MARA leaves, throwing down her headset -*

MADELINE

I'm not selfish. I'm waiting for breasts! I'm coaxing my period to start. I'm seeking estrogen. I'm busy. I'm preoccupied. I'M NOT SELFISH!

*-the phone rings-*

*-it rings again-*

*-again-*

My mother gets a boyfriend - kinda - and I get nothing except a little trophy and the chance to compete on a county level which escalates my feelings for Mr. Sellito with his perfect dulcet spelling instructor tones, his educated know-how, his elitish education and long chalky fingers. Mr Sellito- for whose benefit I am trying to get puberty to HURRY UP! SHE was really happy, for the first time. Ever. Gross.

MARA'S VOICE

Stop making me laugh.

MADELINE

Mom?

*-LIGHTS UP ON MARA, on the phone, all giggly-*

MARA'S VOICE

You know these jokes are what has made our relationship... unprofessional...but you still can't come over.

MAN'S VOICE

What's black and white and red all over?

MARA

What's black and white and red all over?

MAN'S VOICE

A bashful zebra.

MADELINE

Mom!

MAN'S VOICE

A skunk with a sunburn.

MADELINE

An oreo with blood on it.

*-MARA waves her away-*

MADELINE

An interracial couple after a meeting with the Ku Klux Klan.

MARA

So clever, Hercules.

MADELINE

A groom whose bride just threw up on him.  
A dalmation burger with ketchup.

MAN'S VOICE

A newspaper!!!

MARA

A newspaper?

MAN'S VOICE

A newspaper.

MARA

Oh.

MAN'S VOICE

R-e-a-d.

MARA

OH!

MADELINE

Carrie's prom dress. Carrie's prom dress! Get it? Get it?

MARA

Excuse me Hercules. My jealous little shit of a daughter doesn't want me to have a moment of enjoyment to myself!!!!!!

MADELINE

Get it?

MARA

Call me later baby -

MAN'S VOICE

We didn't finish.

MARA

I know. I know. You'll teach me a thing or two later.

*-MARA dumps the headset-*

insufferable.

*-MARA leaves the room-*

MADLINE

I-n-s-u-f-f-e-r-a-b-l-e. You call that work!

*-the phone rings and rings*

*MADLINE puts on the headset-*

MADLINE

This is Paula.

MAN'S VOICE

It's me. And you. You with your white skin and black lashes and real red hair everywhere.

MADLINE

Oh Hercules. You want to touch me? You want run your fingers into my real red hair? You want to kiss my alabaster skin?

MAN'S VOICE

Oh...oh....Paula -

MADLINE

I'm a good student.

MAN'S VOICE

Almost...almost...right -

MADLINE

Stop!

MAN'S VOICE

What?

MADLINE

Why don't you come over?

MAN'S VOICE

What?

MADLINE

Come over.

MAN'S VOICE

You never said I could before.

MADLINE

I want you to see me. I want to see you.

I want you to see me.

Hercules couldn't resist meeting the woman with the real red hair.

( A DOOR BELL RINGS.)

MADLINE

I want you to see me. I want to see you.

I want you to see me.

Hercules couldn't resist meeting the woman with the real red hair.

( A DOOR BELL RINGS.)

MADLINE

I'll get it.

(Mara reenters as she hears - --)

MAN'S VOICE(not miked)

It is I, Hercules, here to spear you with my lance in person.

MARA

Hercules? Oh shit.

MAN'S VOICE

Paula?

MADLINE

I'll get it I'll getitI'llgetitI'llgetit.

MARA

Madeline, don't!

-LIGHTS UP on the MAN, normal, average, disappointed-

MARA

-let him in...  
Hercules?

MAN

Paula?

MADELINE

Mr. Sellito?

MAN

Madeline.

*(a moment of the three looking at each other. Then lights out on Mara and Mr. Selito.)*

MADELINE

There is no prize at the end of this contest. There is no credit card receipt, no hang-up, no  
j-o-b-w-e-l-l-d-o-n-e.

*(she listens)*

MARA'S VOICE

(Miked)

Mrs. Williams, today may be your lucky day because today I can offer you -

MAN'S VOICE

(Miked)

Thor. That's my name. Thor.

*(lights hold on Madeline a moment and then quickly -)*

-black out-