

## **CAGED**

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### **CHARACTERS:**

CHILD 1. A young girl from Guatemala. Left home with her mother.

CHILD 2. A young girl from Nicaragua. Left home with her mother and two little brothers.

CHILD 3. A young girl from El Salvador. Left home with her father.

**SETTING:** An Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center for unaccompanied minors. The United States.

**TIME:** In the aftermath of the US government's "zero-tolerance" policy to deter undocumented immigration. The events of this play occur on a timeline where the separation of children from their parents at the border still takes place. And it repeats itself. Over and over again.

**A NOTE ON ACTING:** The children should not come across as too young. They have been forced to grow up too fast and to endure too much. At times the children seem to exist out of time. They speak about their futures and articulate their dreams. They also know about the scars that they will carry for their lifetimes because of what they experienced. Yet, they are still children.

**A NOTE ON SOUND:** A loudspeaker plays clips from news stories and speeches throughout the play. These are meant to give the audience context for the events that they are witnessing. The first loudspeaker announcement should include segments from the May

7, 2018 speech by Jeff Sessions, as well as other relevant news stories that brought attention to the separation of children from their parents at the border. Other loudspeaker moments could be woven throughout the play as desired and include news segments about the court ruling against the policy, stories about the children that could not be reunited with their parents, and the reports of sexual abuse against migrant detainees, including children. It could also include segments of the October 21, 2020 news story that reported that the parents of 545 children separated at the border still cannot be found and that some of these children have been separated from their parents for years. The play ends with news clips that include stories from the Trump and Biden administrations to demonstrate that this is an ongoing issue of human rights abuses by the US government.

### START OF PLAY

*In black, audio clip of May 7, 2018 speech by Jeff Sessions announcing the “No Tolerance” policy of the Trump Administration. Lights up on three separate cages. Inside them, CHILD 1, CHILD 2, and CHILD 3. They are motionless, staring down, as if frozen in time. Slowly they begin to look up and into the audience. They speak, softly and quietly at first.*

CHILD 1: Mamá. ¿Dónde estás? ¿Estás enojada conmigo?

CHILD 3: Papi. ¿Dónde te llevaron? ¿Estás bien?

CHILD 2: Mamá. ¿Dónde estás? ¿Mis hermanos están contigo?

*It should all be italicized. And there is no need for the line break. It can all be one paragraph. It should be (all italicized): THE CHILDREN repeat their lines several times, overlapping as they build into a frantic and panicked state. Then, they fall to a whisper until they resume their opening pose. More clips from the evening news are heard in the darkness.*

CHILD 1: I couldn't always go to school, but I liked when I did. I had friends there and we used to play outside together. Sometimes we would share lunch and afterwards we would play tag. Our teacher used to show us how to read and write and we had books and crayons. I liked school a lot, but my mom told me that I couldn't always go. She

said that sometimes she was scared to walk me there, so some days I would just stay at home with her. My dad worked in a place very far away and he would send us money, but mamá said it wasn't enough. That we needed more money to keep us safe. Sometimes big men would come to the house and make her give them all the money and sometimes they would hit her, but they were always nice to me. One time, one of the men called me pretty and he gave me a piece of chocolate. Then he rubbed his fingers on my face and neck and even my leg. His hands were rough and it felt weird. Mamá yelled at him and told him never to touch me again, but he hit her so hard that she fell to the floor and bled. That night she told me we had to leave Guatemala forever. I told her no, that I wanted to go back to school and be with my friends. But she said it was the only way for her to keep me safe.

CHILD 3: One morning my dad told me that I had to pick out my favorite clothes and put them in my backpack. He said I had to do it fast. I told him that the dress that I wore to my cousin Fabrina's baptism was my favorite, but he told me I had to pick other clothes. That I couldn't wear dresses where we were going. He was rushing around the house, taking pictures off the walls and folding them up inside a Bible. He started putting food and medicine in his backpack and I helped him fold his socks and shirts so they could fit in there, too. He told me we were going to live in a new country. That I had to say goodbye to El Salvador. I was sad, so he let me pick out one toy to take with me. I chose my favorite doll, the one with the blonde hair and blue eyes. I wasn't scared because I always listen to papi. He always takes good care of me.

CHILD 2: I left Nicaragua with my mom and my two little brothers in the middle of the night. We rode in a van that stopped to pick up strangers in the dark. Everyone looked tired and frightened and no one said a word. We were the only kids and my mom kept my brothers as close to her as she could. She was scared when men would get into the van with us. Some were old and some were young. One of the men had a big, bushy mustache and looked like my tío Miguel. He gave me a piece of gum and laughed at my jokes, but everyone else just ignored me.

CHILD 1: The day we left home I thought my mom was walking me to school. But when we didn't turn on the street where my school is, I asked her where we were going. She told me to be quiet and to keep

looking down. She said that the bad men were looking for us and that if they found us, they would hurt us. She said that we were going to go live with papi and that I had to keep quiet so that nobody would find us on the way. I was so happy. The last time I saw him was three years ago and now I only get to talk to him on the phone when he calls. He lives in a place called Norte Carolina and he says that kids there go to school every day and read lots of books whenever they want.

CHILD 2: I hated the long car rides, but I hated walking even more. Sometimes we would only walk in the dark and have to sleep in the daytime in houses that were filled with people that smelled. Sometimes the other kids would get so hungry that they would start crying and people would yell at them. But not me. I never cried. Some of the people we met were nice and there were lots of moms with their kids and they would sing them songs and tell them stories. One of the boys kept staring at me and then asked me where I was from. His name was Juan and he was from a place called Chiapas. He was traveling with his aunt and cousins. He talked kind of funny, but we got along and played games. He said he liked me and wanted to be my friend. He even held my hand, but my brothers laughed at him, so he stopped doing it. He left with his group the next day.

CHILD 3: Papi always kept me very close to him. He never spoke to the other people and told me we could never trust strangers. “Cuidate bien, mijita” he would always tell me.

CHILD 2: I don't even know how long the journey was. Days, weeks, it felt like forever. We rode in trains and cars and vans and floated across rivers and walked in the night. Some days we were thirsty but didn't have enough water. Other days we were bit all over by mosquitos and bugs. It was awful. My belly hurt because I was so hungry and my brother Diego's legs were always tired, but the man in charge told us that we had to keep going or we would die.

CHILD 1: I cried so much because I thought I was dying. I would cry out, “Mamá I feel like I'm dying. I know I'm dying!” But we never stopped. We just kept walking.

CHILD 2: I was brave. I never cried and I never complained.

CHILD 1: The sun was hot and we were thirsty. People were running out of water and fighting with each other, but nobody wanted to share. Then I started to throw up, but nothing came out. I was so sick and people took turns carrying me. I don't remember anything after that.

CHILD 3: The last night I saw papi was when we were running across the desert. There were only a few of us in the group because la migra was trying to catch us. We ran and I fell twice. I still remember the taste of the dirt in my mouth. Then trucks with big lights surrounded us and everyone started to run in different directions. Papi picked me up and ran as fast as he could, but he wasn't fast enough. They caught everyone and made us stand in the cold night air for a long time. I was so tired. Papi just held my hand and kept telling me that we would be alright. "No te preocupes, mijita. Tu papi está contigo."

CHILD 2: I was asleep in one of the houses where we stopped to rest when la migra found us. They tried to wake me up but I was so tired that I didn't want to open my eyes. Then I heard my mom screaming and it woke me up like a gunshot. They were tying her hands and putting her into a car. She kept yelling at me to take care of my brothers.

CHILD 3: Then they started pulling me away from papi and he started crying. I knew they were going to take him away from me, so I hugged him tight and told him *te quiero*. A man grabbed me and pulled me hard, but I didn't let go. Papi kissed me on the cheek and told me not to be scared, that he would find me. They pulled us apart and started taking us to different cars. He was crying and I was screaming... papi... papi!

CHILD 2: They put us in separate vans from the parents. There was so much noise and all the kids were crying. Some even smelled like they peed themselves. I sat between my two little brothers and hugged them until they fell asleep. I didn't know what was happening or where we were going. It was a long ride and all I could think about was my mom screaming.

CHILD 3: I don't know when I will see papi again. I'm scared that they sent him back to El Salvador without me. Or that they killed him.

CHILD 2: They took me and Alex and Diego into a big building with bright lights. We saw our mom standing in a line with the other moms, but they didn't let us go to her. She looked so tired. Later they brought us into a room together. She hugged us and told us no matter what happened we needed to take care of each other. I promised. The guards gave us water and they told us to stand against a wall so they could take our pictures. I smiled and my mom smiled, but I could see

the fear in her eyes. Then one of the guards came in and started to take her away. She fell to the ground and started screaming, “Mis niños! Déjame con mis niños!” They were pulling her away and had to carry her out of the room. She was crying and my brothers were crying, but I just stood there. I froze. I should have done something. I should have protected my mom. Three days later they moved me to another building. I haven’t seen my brothers again.

*Movement piece. THE CHILDREN emerge from their cages and re-create their journey north: packing their bags, walking, running, crossing the border, and being chased, caught, and detained by immigration officials. The piece ends with THE CHILDREN back in their cages. They begin to play games by themselves. Then they begin to sing “Tortillitas” (a Mexican children’s song similar to patty cake).*

Tortillitas, tortillitas  
Tortillitas para mamá  
Tortillitas, tortillitas  
Tortillitas para papá  
Las quemaditas para mamá  
Las bonitas para papá

*THE CHILDREN repeat the song and their motions begin to grow frantic and violent. They sing faster and lose the playful rhythm until it devolves into a chaotic noise. They speed through it, pound on the floor and cage, and work themselves into a climax.*

THE CHILDREN: Mamá. Papá. Mamá. Papá. Mamá. Papá. Mamá.  
Papá.  
CHILD 3: Papi.

*Pause. THE CHILDREN look out to the audience. Shift.*

CHILD 1: I’m so bored. When do you think they’ll let us go home?

CHILD 3: I don’t think they’re going to let us go.

CHILD 2: I wish they would at least let us go outside. Then we could play soccer. Or baseball.

CHILD 1: I’m not very good at sports.

CHILD 3: Me either.

CHILD 2: Don't worry, I'll teach you.

CHILD 1: I'm the best at jump rope.

CHILD 3: And I'm the best at summersaults and cartwheels. My friends told me that I was so good I could be famous and on TV one day.

CHILD 2: I want to be famous, too. I'm really good at a lot of things. Sports, puzzles, games.

CHILD 3: I bet you could beat everyone at my school.

CHILD 2: Probably. When we used to go to the carnival, the people who won games would get prizes.

CHILD 3: I bet you won all of them.

CHILD 2: No one ever likes losing to a girl. But I beat them!

CHILD 3: That's so cool! I love the carnival.

CHILD 1: One time my mom took me to the carnival and she bought me ice cream and we went to see the animals. There were birds and rabbits and even a monkey. They were locked in cages and we could pet them.

CHILD 2: I love little animals!

CHILD 1: I thought they looked happy and that they wanted to be our friends, but now I know that they probably just wanted to be with their moms and dads.

CHILD 3: That's so sad. I don't think I like the carnival anymore.

CHILD 2: When we get out of here, we should set them all free.

CHILD 3: All of them!

CHILD 1: All over the world!

CHILD 2: I'll be a superhero that rescues trapped animals.

CHILD 3: Can I be a superhero, too?

CHILD 2: Yeah.

CHILD 1: What about me?

CHILD 2: We all can! (*Superhero pose*) Save the trapped animals!

THE CHILDREN: (*They all copy the pose*) Save the trapped animals!

*THE CHILDREN laugh. Beat.*

CHILD 3: I wish someone would save us. How long have we been in here anyway?

CHILD 1: Forever. I hate it in here. Nothing different ever happens.

CHILD 2: Sometimes it's different.

CHILD 1: Like when?

CHILD 2: Like yesterday. People with video cameras came to look at this place. The guards didn't let them talk to us, but they walked around and were whispering and pointing. I didn't even understand a word they said.

CHILD 3: And sometimes they bring new kids in here and put them into different rooms.

CHILD 2: I wish we could meet them.

CHILD 3: The older kids locked in the other room make a lot of noise and sing and dance and laugh at each other's jokes.

CHILD 1: But they get yelled at for being too loud.

CHILD 2: I wish we could play with them.

CHILD 1: One time I saw one of the other girls crying when she walked out of the bathroom. Then one of the guards, the tall and mean one, came out of the same bathroom and told her to stop crying. I don't know why he was in the girl's bathroom, but the girl looked so scared. When I asked her why she was upset, all she said was...

CHILD 3: Don't ever go into the bathroom alone.

CHILD 1: I remember my mom told me that some people do bad things to little girls.

CHILD 2: They do them to little boys, too.

CHILD 1: No they don't.

CHILD 2: Yes they do.

CHILD 3: But boys can fight and take care of themselves.

CHILD 2: Trust me, they can't. Not in here.

CHILD 3: What happened?

CHILD 1: Did you see something bad?

CHILD 2: I don't want to talk about it.

CHILD 3: That's ok. You don't have to.

CHILD 1: There's a lot of things we'll never want to talk about.

*Shift.*

THE CHILDREN:

*Chanting, in unison, as if healing themselves. At each line they rub their stomachs, then their chests, then their heads. This is a popular*

*rhyme that mothers use when they want to make their children feel better.*

Sana sana colita de rana, si no sanas hoy, sanarás mañana.

Sana sana colita de rana, si no sanas hoy, sanarás mañana.

Sana sana colita de rana, si no sanas hoy, sanarás mañana.

*Shift. The CHILDREN step out of the cages. It's almost as if they step out of time.*

THE CHILDREN: Ten years from now....

CHILD 3: Will a boy ask me to the school dance? Will my dad buy me a dress as pretty as the one I left behind in El Salvador?

THE CHILDREN: Ten years from now....

CHILD 2: Will I get job and save enough money to buy my own car? Will people see me driving around and think that I'm the coolest girl they've ever seen?

THE CHILDREN: Ten years from now....

CHILD 1: Will I be the smartest girl in my class? Will I graduate from high school and will I make my mom proud?

CHILD 3: Will I fall in love?

CHILD 1: Will I go to college?

CHILD 2: Will I buy a house where my mom and brothers can live in forever?

CHILD 1: Twenty years from now!

CHILD 3: Thirty years!

CHILD 2: Forty years!

THE CHILDREN: How many years from now will I forget all of this?

CHILD 3: I'll never forget. I know it. But the thing is, I don't want to remember being away from papi.

CHILD 1: I wish I could forget all of it.

CHILD 2: I'm the best at forgetting. My teachers used to tell me I forget things all the time.

CHILD 1: This isn't school. It's different. Nobody here likes us.

CHILD 2: Mmhmm. Some people are nice.

CHILD 1: No they aren't. Don't you miss your family?

CHILD 2: Yeah. I feel like I haven't seen them in forever.

CHILD 3: Papi used to tell me forever is a very long time. When do you think I'll see him again?

CHILD 2: Maybe this year? And maybe I'll be back with my family, too.

CHILD 1 and 3: Maybe.

CHILD 2: And maybe I'll live in a house with my own room and my own bed and my own toothbrush.

CHILD 3: Maybe next year I'll see papi again.

CHILD 1 and 2: Maybe.

CHILD 3: But will he be the same?

CHILD 1 and 2: Maybe.

CHILD 2: Or maybe the next year?

CHILD 3: This year.

CHILD 1: Next year.

CHILD 2: Five years.

THE CHILDREN: Will I still wake up at night screaming? Haunted by the nightmare of my memories? Feeling small, strangled, suffocated in my sleep? Imagining that I'm still trapped inside this cage?

CHILD 2: And then the year after that? Will a social worker open a case to see why I get into so many fights at school? Will they blame my mom and take me from her again?

CHILD 1: And the year after that? Will my teachers tell my mom that I can't concentrate in my classes? That I'm not learning the way the other kids in class are learning and that I need to repeat a grade?

CHILD 3: Will the doctor tell papi I need medicine to fix whatever is happening inside my brain? Will he tell me we can't afford it, but that I need to pray so that the memories of this place will leave me forever?

CHILD 1: Will I still hold resentment toward my mom for letting me stay in here so long?

CHILD 2 and 3: Maybe.

CHILD 1: Will I secretly think she's never coming back every time she walks out the door to go to work?

CHILD 2 and 3: Maybe.

THE CHILDREN: How long will I carry the scars and trauma from all of this? Will I ever be able to escape the fear, the anger, and the confusion of this cage?

CHILD 3: Will I ever trust anyone again?

*Shift.*

CHILD 2: I like it in here now.

CHILD 1: No you don't.

CHILD 2: Uh-huh. Sometimes. I don't have to do homework or clean the house. I like that.

CHILD 3: Yeah. I don't have to brush my teeth anymore and I don't have to take a shower if I don't want to.

CHILD 2: Yeah. (*Chanting*) No more showers, no more showers.

CHILD 2 and 3: No more showers. No more showers. (*They laugh*)

CHILD 2: Come on. What's wrong with you?

CHILD 1: I miss taking showers. And I miss combing my hair. Everybody at school used to tell me I had the prettiest hair.

CHILD 3: Nobody here cares about any of that. Remember when the older girls were asking for soap and the lady guard told them that they didn't have any?

CHILD 2: Yeah. Who cares about soap anyway? That's a dumb thing to want. If I could ask for anything, I would ask for a pillow.

CHILD 1: I would ask for a bed. I'm tired of sleeping on the floor.

CHILD 3: I would ask for them to turn off the lights at night. I can't sleep right with them on.

CHILD 1: At least with the lights on we know there aren't any monsters in here.

CHILD 2: No monsters, huh? I wouldn't be so sure of that!

CHILD 3: Yeah, the world is filled with monsters.

CHILD 1: Stop trying to scare me!

CHILD 3: Sometimes you can't see them. Even if the lights are on.

CHILD 2: Like that one there!

CHILD 3: And that one there!

CHILD 1: Stop it!

CHILD 2: And there!

CHILD 3: And there!

CHILD 1: You're being mean! You're going to make me cry.

CHILD 3: Ok, I'm sorry. We were just kidding.

CHILD 2: Yeah, we're not the ones you should be afraid of.

CHILD 3: We're like you.

CHILD 2: We're just kids.

CHILD 1: I know. But I miss my family. What if I never see them again?

CHILD 3: Papi told me that when I get scared, I should pray. If we pray together, maybe someone out there will hear us.

CHILD 1: You really think so?

CHILD 3: Yes, I do.

CHILD 1: Ok, let's pray.

CHILD 2: Like in church? Church is so boring. Do I really have to pray?

CHILD 3: Yes. It'll make her feel better.

CHILD 2: But I don't want to.

CHILD 3: Just do it.

CHILD 2: No.

CHILD 1: Please.

CHILD 3: Come on. Maybe it'll work. And then you can see your mom and brothers again.

CHILD 2: Ok. Fine. Let's do it. But not too long.

CHILD 3: OK. Ready?

*CHILD 3 kneels and signals to the others to do the same. They do. They pray.*

THE CHILDREN: En el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo. Amén.

CHILD 3: Good job. Now let's pray to la virgencita. She's a mom. She'll help us. She has to.

THE CHILDREN: Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia, el Señor es contigo. Bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres, y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesús. Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros, pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amén.

*The sound of a buzzer announces bedtime. THE CHILDREN return to their cages and cover themselves with silver emergency rescue blankets.*

CHILD 3: Goodnight, papi. I hope you're still alive.

CHILD 2: Goodnight, mamá. Please don't be mad at me for losing my brothers.

CHILD 1: Goodnight, mamá. Wherever you are, you can come and get me now. I'm ready.

*THE CHILDREN lie down and fall asleep. Slowly the lights fade as sounds from the evening news are heard, announcing more statistics about the children separated from their families and held in detention centers along the US-Mexico border. The news clips include stories from the Trump and Biden administrations. The final news clip is Vice President Harris speaking in Guatemala on June 7, 2021. Her direct message to Guatemalans thinking of migrating to the United States was: "I want to be clear to folks in this region who are thinking about making that dangerous trek to the United States-Mexico border: Do not come. Do not come." She added, "The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our border."*

## **END OF PLAY**

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