

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 Playhouse 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.)*

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