

I mean, absolutely nowhere in sight. I did a quick sweep with my eyes before the bottom dropped out of my stomach, and my heart lurched violently. A dozen nasty scenarios flashed through my brain: the childless woman who always wanted a little boy, the predator hanging around kids' stores just waiting for an unattended child to wander... I called his name, fear in my voice; no answer. Frantically, I began searching up and down aisles, looking at other moms as I tore through the racks, calling his name louder and louder, sure he would appear at any moment, and just as sure that he was gone... I started to cry as I called again and again, and just as I thought my heart would burst, there he was, humming happily under a round rack of clothes, totally oblivious to my terrifying search. Relief flooded my body, my legs went like jelly. The whole episode had lasted about a minute and a half, but it felt like a lifetime, and I know I aged ten years.

(MARIA crosses to the bench, ELLEN enters.)

ELLEN. From the moment my first child was born, all my lifelong tendencies toward neurotic, worst-case scenarios became exacerbated – to an excruciating point. I mean the emotion and love I felt for this little girl, and the protective maternal instinct, just served to make my fear of “when bad things happen to good people” bubble over and come this close to exploding... But I tried to maintain a grip, and after the first year and the first child it got a little easier... And after successfully bringing my kids through the gamut of baby and toddler illnesses and accidents, I began to let go a little and convince myself that it was all going to be OK... But chronic habitual paranoia doesn't die easily... So, one day I am putting sunscreen on my kids and I notice a raised dark red bruise on the back of my daughter's thigh. Got to be some sort of horrible disease causing it, right? It wasn't a regular bruise, and it was isolated and not in any place that she could've bumped or hit. My mind leaped through all the various scenarios – my

husband and me pacing the halls at Children's Hospital, family members arriving to take care of my other kids, concerned medical staff, bike rides organized as fund-raisers, e-mails sent to caring friends, the whole nine yards – I've got it all played out. Then we go outside and my husband joins us and I ask him to take a look at it in the sun. And he does, and all of a sudden I hear my daughter say, “Stop Daddy, that hurts” and I look over and my husband says to me: cherry bubblegum. CHERRY BUBBLEGUM. And it's gone, and obviously, so is my mind...

(ELLEN crosses to table up left, CHARLOTTE enters.)

CHAR. Tubal ligation. Sounds more like a ride at Water Country than a surgical procedure. Come on down to Water Country and ride our newest thrill sensation... the Tubal Ligation! And be ready for FUN! Not. I had it done a month after giving birth. And most of me is relieved. Phew! Three healthy children, no more pregnancies, no more birth control, all set. Onto the next chapter. I'm 43, I mean really! So this is our house, this is it. These are the three people I will know to my core. No others. No more seeing a face for the first time. No more feeling life inside me. No more telling people you love that a new baby is on the way. No more letting someone feel the baby kick. No more smelling the baby's head, no more tiny toes to kiss, no more of any of it. So I know it was right, and I know I am blessed, but I can't help but wonder who else might have joined us if I skipped my ride on the Tubal Ligation. Who else I could have loved so truly.

(CHARLOTTE moves stage right – STEFANIE enters to center stage.)

STEF. In one way, I was so excited to see the end of the summer, that I was sending my oldest daughter to school – real school – finally. I could face a day without the silent inventory of what's up my sleeve if she and my other kids got whiny or bored...are they reading enough, playing with each other, what about sunscreen