



Maya lives and breathes musicals. When her chance to finally be a part of the summer musical camp at the community theater comes up, Maya is convinced she will get the lead. No one knows *The Drowsy Chaperone* better than she does, and Maya is used to playing a part: ever since her autism diagnosis, she constantly keeps the rules of how to be Maya in Public in her head. But one by one, things start going off-script . . .

“A highly recommended read, for autistic and allistic readers alike.”

—Meg Eden Kuyatt, author of *Good Different*

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**PLAYS
THE
PART**

“A wonderful book . . . authentic autism representation shines on every page.” —A. J. Sass, award-winning author of *Ellen Outside the Lines*

CALYSSA ERB

PRAISE FOR MAYA PLAYS THE PART

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“*Maya Plays the Part* is an engaging, accessible story with authentic autism representation that shines on every page. Calyssa Erb has crafted such a charming character in Maya, whose reliance on her carefully crafted summer plans and the challenges she encounters interacting with old and new friends felt so relatable to me. This story will resonate with young readers on many levels.” —**A. J. Sass, Sydney Taylor Honor award-winning author of *Ellen Outside the Lines***

“We inhabit Maya Robertson’s body, mind, and soul as she treads and trips over friendships, theater camp, and ‘how to be’ in the world. This is a heart-pounding and honest peek into a world we all need to know more about. Go Maya go!”
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“An in-depth and loving portrayal of the elation, heartbreak, and offstage drama that comes with community theater. A must-read for theater kids.”
—**Vikki VanSickle, author of *P.S. Tell No One***

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CALYSSA ERB



To the neurodivergent kids who
have been told they feel *too much*, say
too much, are *too much*.

You deserve to shine.

—Calyssa

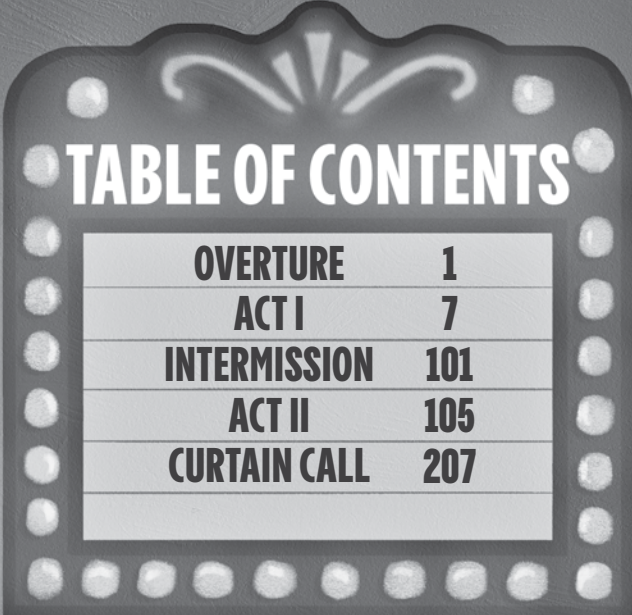


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OVERTURE

Inside my head is a marquee. A white background, so bright it makes my eyes hurt, with my name in huge letters. The words are surrounded by a box of flashing yellow-y lights that flicker and dance around. Because it's in my head, the lights are brilliant and silent. I've decided they won't make that annoying whine that lights sometimes do.

For a long time, it's just been my name all alone up there. But for the first time ever, I can see three words before it:



Tomorrow, I will be going to my very first musical theater camp at Grand Theater. It doesn't have a marquee like the one in my head, just a stone sign near the entrance, but if you want something to happen, you need to see it clearly in your mind! I know that tomorrow is the first step to my shining debut on center stage. I'm not going to waste my opportunity to show THE Irene Brown, legendary theater

director, that I'm the most amazing performer she's ever seen. I've practiced and rehearsed and prepared myself for this moment. And you, my wonderful audience, get to see everything happen in real time. I'm so excited for you!

First, imagine yourself sitting in the plush seats of the community theater. For a moment, it feels like you're alone. You're not, because I'm also there in this imagining, sharing a plush armrest with you. The red curtains are pulled together. The stage is quiet and dark.

Remember that this theater is small, just the one downtown, and someone behind you is opening a snack wrapped in foil. Someone else is probably coughing. The floor is a bit sticky because it's like that, and you're squished right in the middle of the row. But it has the best seats! If we sit in these ones, we can see everything. It's like wearing headphones for your eyes. Mom always tells me that the aisle seats are the best, because then you can get up whenever you want. She's definitely wrong. Sitting in the middle is like staring right into the soul of the stage.

Think about all the actors getting into their characters backstage. They have their scratchy outfits, and all that makeup on their faces so that we can see them even from the seats at the back. I think that they're probably feeling like I do some mornings. Like when I get all the buzzing in my body, when I'm not sure if I can play my part today. *For this performance, Maya Robertson will be playing the part of Maya in Public.*

Maybe you feel like this or maybe you feel like the rules are obvious. But when I'm talking to people, I feel like someone is holding cue cards for everyone else, and I can't see what they say. Luckily, my mom tells me what I should and shouldn't do most of the time. I keep her instructions in my head, the lines of my script, like the actors do when they're on stage. That way I won't say the wrong thing or do the wrong move.

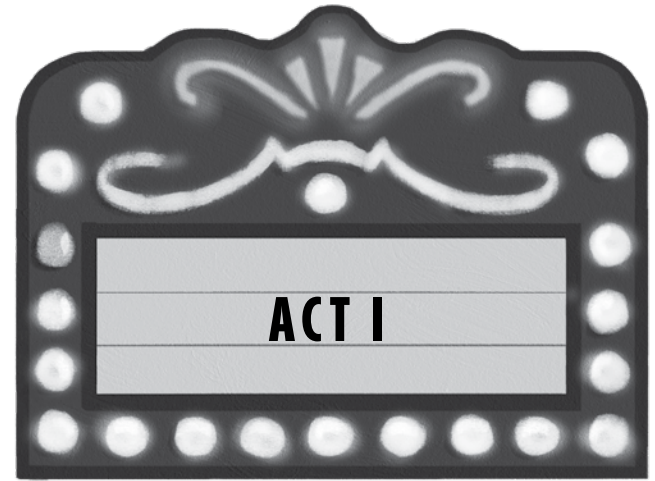
Why am I telling you all this on the night before my first day at theater camp? Because this is that magical moment, like the moment just before the play starts, where anything and everything is possible. That's my favorite part. There are no rules to break. No rules to follow. No one saying "Maya, why are you doing that?" or asking me to calm down or telling me to behave differently in public.

For now, I'm thinking about all the things I want to talk about with you after the play, like *Did you see how those actors entered the stage like nothing else exists?* and *Wasn't that choreography amazing?* Oh, just thinking about it all makes me so excited!

Listen: the overture music is starting. It's a sign that the good stuff is about to begin. The house lights are coming down. Since no one's looking at me, they're looking at the stage, I know that I can wiggle in my seat with joy. There's no worry about being Maya in Public in this imagining. No one will look at me weird. I know that once the play starts, I can mouth the opening lines or the dialogue at the end and no one can tell me to stop. There's no one to keep me from enjoying every single minute of this performance.

This summer, when my name is on that cast list and I finally get my spot in center stage . . . that's when I'll know that everything is possible. That I can be myself and the star of the show. The magic of theater will make everything better, just like it was before everything changed.

But for now, maybe we can just look at each other in the dimming light and smile and be wrapped up in the anticipation together. Until it all starts: the curtains open and the lights come up and the actors start to sing.





SCENE 1

On the way to Grand Theater, Mom keeps saying that I need to “keep my hopes realistic” and “be reasonable” so that I don’t get myself worked up. She doesn’t understand. This isn’t something that I can just be reasonable about! My parents have finally agreed that I’m old enough to go to musical theater camp at Grand Theater, run by THE Irene Brown, where I can play the lead in my favorite play of all time. Mom wants me to be reasonable? That isn’t possible!

I can’t help bouncing in my seat on the car ride there. I’m dressed for comfort in my favorite shirt, but I still feel like jumping out of my body. I know as soon as I get into the building I’ll have to “keep it in,” so I need to get all these feelings out now. My ponytail swishes against the headrest, pulled up high so that it doesn’t touch my neck in this heat, but my shirt is already starting to stick to me. I pull on

it to try to air it out. It's made of super soft cotton and it's red with an image of a vintage record and the words *The Drowsy Chaperone* written over it. Mom and I made the shirt after we saw the musical performed for the first time, so that I could wear the playbill around everywhere. It made me feel like even if no one else understood how much I loved musicals, that at least one person did.

The trees outside all blend into one long line. Even though this is the same way I take to get to school, none of it feels as important as it usually does. The maple tree where the birds and squirrels fight for the best branch, like they're in *West Side Story*, even though there's room for all of them. The house with the tiny chihuahua that just stares at me as I walk by, as if it knows all my secrets. All of this is part of school-time Maya's life: a backdrop kept in storage until September while Grand Theater Maya takes the stage.

Grand Theater isn't actually "grand" or big. It's pretty tiny. It's part of the rec center downtown, this little beige block dropped in between a row of townhouses and the high school. Sometimes the high schoolers hang out there after school and they make it all dirty and stuff with their bags and their snacks and their noise and—The important part is that every summer they have a theater camp. I've wanted to go since I saw them perform *Les Mis*. That's short for *Les Misérables*, a super sad play set in France where this guy got into huge trouble for wanting to eat some bread.

This summer, they're going to perform an abridged version of *The Drowsy Chaperone* at the end of camp. Abridged, meaning that

they took out a bunch of the boring scenes to make it shorter and better. I hope they kept the monkey song. That's the best part of the whole show. It's when Janet sings about having to choose between the two things that are most important to her: her fiancé and show business. I always feel for her when I watch that scene.

Anyway, Grand Theater doesn't do musicals every year, so this summer is extra lucky! I can't wait! I just know it's going to be amazing because I'm going to be one of the leads in the showcase. Irene Brown doesn't know it yet, since I haven't even auditioned or anything, but I've already memorized all the words. Ideally, she will recognize me and my talent and choose me to be the star on the spot. That would be perfect.

We're stopped at a red light, so Mom looks over at me. Her face is all serious now.

"Maya, I don't want you to get your hopes up too high about getting the lead, okay? You just have to try your best."

I pretend not to hear her. She doesn't understand! I've been dreaming of this since registration opened a few months ago. This could be the start of the rest of my whole life! Especially since Grand Theater, even though it's super tiny, is known for their amazing drama camps and performance school. Dad even said he'd consider letting me join the weekend classes during school if I do really well at camp. Mom already agreed since she always says that it's important for us to "nurture our interests," but Dad isn't so sure about it. He's concerned that I will get overwhelmed and have a meltdown or something.

The light turns green, and to my relief, Mom sighs and turns her eyes back onto the road.

My parents have worried about me for a long time, ever since they found out when I was six that I'm autistic. So, my mom and I have had a lot of conversations like the one this morning. She talks to me about how to behave in public so often that her telling me to "keep my hopes realistic" is just another thing to add to the list. Other things on the list include:

- Don't chew on your hair (especially in public).
- Don't walk away from someone when they're still talking to you (no excuses!).
- Don't talk too much about musicals.

These rules are my stage directions. They tell me what to do when I'm playing Maya in Public—when I'm outside "representing our family." Maya in Public is this character I have to be so that I don't accidentally do something embarrassing or rude. Especially after that one time where I did all three things one after the other, and Mom was super annoyed with me. Which still doesn't make a lot of sense. Firstly, I was chewing on my hair, so what? I didn't even realize I was doing that. Secondly, I thought that the conversation was over. Uncle Daniel wasn't talking anymore. So I just left. And thirdly, how can you even know how much is "too much"? If someone else doesn't know the name of the longest running musical or the

difference between a jukebox musical and a book musical, shouldn't I tell them? The first type is like a jukebox, it uses already recorded and well-known songs, but a book musical means the songs are original to the musical!

Anyway, at the end of the day, Maya in Public is just a persona, a part to play. She's not really the me on the inside, the person I really am. It's like when I'm watching someone act on the stage. I know that when I watch them, they have lines and directions to their performance. And when I'm being Maya in Public, I can pretend that I'm on stage and other people are just playing a part in the scene, and I don't get so stressed out. If I just mirror what they're doing or how they're acting, then I can usually get through everything okay.

Even though I try really hard, sometimes I still make mistakes. Especially lately. The trouble comes from trying to be interested in what other kids like, because the only thing I want to talk about is musicals. They don't always come up when I'm talking to someone. My mom's always telling me not to "insert my own agenda into the conversation," but I really want to make people love musicals as much as I do. There's all these moving parts that come together to tell the story: the actors, and the lighting, and the stage props, and the score. They're so interesting, but I have to stop myself because it's "monopolizing the conversation." Sometimes I wish I could just walk onto the stage with the light shining on me and explain why this musical or that one is important to me. Just like Irene Brown did the first time I saw her.

This summer, though, it will be impossible not to talk about musicals at camp. It is a musical theater camp, after all! Which is really important to me, since I will definitely have to talk to other campers. My best friend Jules was supposed to come with me, and she's a lot better at knowing what to say. We talked about it all of last year.

But her family decided to move across the country to care for her Bà Linh with no warning! Well, it was two weeks of warning. That is not nearly enough warning, for anyone, ever. Especially when this summer is so important and it's been something I've dreamed about for years. So I should be really upset and angry at her for abandoning me during the most important summer of our entire lives, but it's not like she wanted to move far away. She told me that she wanted to be in the front row to see me perform, just like she always was when I'd act out scenes at home. She promised she'd always be there for big stuff like this. Since kindergarten, I've never done anything important without her next to me. That's how I know that if I get the lead in the showcase, Jules will have to come back. We've never broken a promise to each other.

And on top of that, my parents chose this summer to be the one where they stop worrying so much about me. Mom decided that she wanted to go back to school to be a lawyer. She told me that she thinks I can "manage on my own" which is weird when the whole point of her being at home was to help me after she and my dad learned that I'm autistic. I guess she's decided that if I'm old enough

for theater camp, I'm old enough to do everything else.

Well, not everything-everything since Dad still isn't sure if I can do the fall classes while school is happening. And I'm definitely not old enough to drive. Or own a phone, apparently. I asked Mom about that one after I found out Jules was moving across the country. Jules and I agreed that we would talk every day after I came home from camp until her family moved back, since it's only temporary. So, obviously, I needed my own phone to do that. Otherwise, what happens if someone calls my mom's phone and I can't use it to call Jules? I told Mom all this, that it was super important, lots of eleven-year-olds have phones, and I needed some way to talk to Jules. Instead she shook her head and took me to get one of those ancient phones. I have to plug it into the wall. It's probably like the ones my great-great-grandparents used! At least I don't have to worry about Mom's phone being busy when I want to call Jules tonight.

Now that we're in the parking lot, my feelings are doing that thing where they stop telling me what they are. When I feel a lot of emotions all at once, it can be hard to know what I'm really feeling. But I'm sure that I'm excited. Just being near Grand Theater makes me feel like everything is possible. As soon as my feet hit the pavement, I can focus on the ground, solid and certain, unlike the jumble of emotions inside me.

With each step, my thoughts get clearer: I have a plan. This summer's theater camp is my chance to make everything right again. When I get the lead in the camp showcase, Jules will have to come

back to see me perform. Then, her family will realize how much they miss it here and they will move back. They can even bring her Bà Linh with them, I guess, as long as they're here and Jules can live next door again. And at the same time, my parents will be there, seeing how perfect I am for this. They'll finally let me pursue my dream of being on the stage and everything will be just like I want it to be.



SCENE 2

“**M**aya, hurry up, I can’t be late!” My mom tugs on my sleeve to get my attention, something she often has to do when I’m standing in front of the rec center. Usually I’d be shaking out my hands a little or doing my happy wiggle. Today, since there are a lot of people around, I’m trying to do the happy dance in my head. I feel like a supercharged battery, and I know I can’t let out all these feelings in my body. I want to dance. I want to laugh. I want to yell and be happy that this is finally happening. But my mom already told me that I have to “act reasonably” in public. I’m pretty sure that’s just another way of saying “dance inside your head.” So that’s what I’m trying to do.

“Maya, please!” Mom says, tugging once more before dropping my sleeve and marching up the sidewalk to Grand Theater. Since she decided that this summer was time for me to be “more independent,”

I feel like all I see lately is her side or her back. Today, her blonde hair is up in a lopsided bun with strands of hair trying to escape. She could have worn her matching *The Drowsy Chaperone* t-shirt, but she chose a plain white one today. Her arms swing quickly, the freckles blending in with her pale skin. I'm like a shorter copy of her, but not in the way we act. For one, she walks way faster than me. I like to stop and look at everything. It helps me to process everything and not feel so overwhelmed.

I inhale, taking as much breath as possible into my nostrils, before I tear myself away from this moment to follow after her. When she notices me following, she starts to explain some of the rules she's already told me a hundred times. I nod along, not really paying attention.

As we walk through the front doors, I see all the metal poster frames are filled. Between the posters of different musicals that Grand Theater has performed over the years, there are framed photos of famous actors who got their start right here! I stop for a minute in front of one frame that holds a photo of the actor who's dressed up as Janet. Her arms are flung out to the sides with her head thrown back, and I can hear the note that she's holding. The date in the corner of the photo is the same as the day that my mom and I went to see it! Looking at this actor on the stage, I realize that could be me up there one day . . . front and center, in a triumphant pose . . . the spotlight on me . . . my parents and my best friend in the front row, cheering me on. . . .

It makes me fill up with excitement, like a balloon ready to float away.

But then my mom stops ahead of me, turning on her heel.

"Maya, were you listening to me?" She adjusts her purse on her shoulder and stares at me.

I have no idea what she was saying, but I can't tell her that. I also hate lying, but sometimes it's like stretching my leg out when it gets all tingly. Necessary to get feeling into my toes again. In this case, it's to keep my mom talking long enough so I can find out what she was asking me. We are so close to the registration booth that I know if I can get signed in, I can talk to other kids about musicals and not have to worry about listening to rules and explanations and my mom reminding me not to "hog the conversation."

I decide to go with the lie even though it makes me shift from one foot to the other.

"Yes."

She raises an eyebrow at me, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "Then what did I just ask you?"

I glance over her shoulder to where kids are getting their name tags and t-shirts. Even though we're early, there are lots of people in line at the registration booth. That's a good sign that everyone else is just as excited as me! But it also makes me worry that we didn't get here early enough. I rock back and forth on my toes. I look back at Mom. It's no good. If I want to get to the registration booth, I have to tell her the truth. I cave.

“I’m sorry, Mom, I wasn’t actually listening.”

She sighs. “Maya, we talked about this. You shouldn’t pretend to listen when people are speaking to you.” She reaches out to stroke my head but I twist away. “If you didn’t hear something, you should . . . ?”

“Ask them to repeat it. I know.”

“Exactly.”

I roll my eyes, even though I know I shouldn’t, even though she’s told me a hundred times that it’s “incredibly rude.” I know she’s just trying to help, but right now I don’t want another Maya in Public conversation. When she agreed to sign me up for this camp because she thought it made sense that I “started being more independent,” I thought that meant no more conversations. I just want to talk about musicals with other kids!

Or even better, I want to talk to Irene Brown about my big debut.

Mom rests a hand on my shoulder. “I know that it’s going to be a bit challenging being at camp without Jules, but remember what we talked about and you’ll be fine. And you have your earplugs if things get too loud in the gym, right?”

“Yes, Mom.” I tap the little container that’s in my pocket. I don’t always need them, but it’s nice to have them with me. “Plus, I know things will be fine since I’m going to be the lead in the showcase.” I can’t see them myself but I know my eyes light up just thinking about it. Unfortunately, my mom’s eyes do not light up with mine.

She looks like she’s thinking really hard about what to say next.

“Remember, there will be lots of kids auditioning here. I really don’t want you to be disappointed if you don’t get it,” she says, squeezing my shoulder. My face starts to feel hot, so I shrug her hand off. I play some of my favorite musical numbers in my head until they mix together: “Electricity” and “Defying Gravity.” Weightless and full of energy is just how I feel.

And, there’s no more line at the registration booth. I curl my fingers into fists, trying to keep the worries in my palms. If there’s no one else in line, that means I’m almost late for my first day of camp!

After I finish checking in at the registration booth and get my yellow camp t-shirt, Mom decides that I’m ready to go ahead without her. She directs me to the entrance of the gym, where a familiar-looking Black woman with cropped hair is standing. She’s holding a clipboard and wearing a bright yellow t-shirt that matches the one campers get, except hers reads “Grand Theater Productions” on the front. She also has on bright red glasses and white sneakers. I know exactly who she is. It’s the one and only Irene Brown! She waves at me and my heart starts jumping in my chest. I need to make sure I stay “calm and collected” so that she’ll see my professionalism right away. I take a sharp breath in and then slowly let it out.

She directed the first theater performance I ever saw here, and I remember the way she came out onto the stage. She walked out with her signature look: red glasses, white sneakers. She looked so

cool and at ease up there. When she started to speak to the audience and welcome us to the show, I felt this small seed of happiness plant itself in my chest. Ever since, I've wanted to attend one of her theater camps.

"Hi Ms. Irene Brown," I say. "My name is Maya Robertson."

She smiles at me. Her brown eyes are warm and inviting. Even though I don't like to do it, I keep eye contact with her and smile back. I want to "make a good first impression!"

"That's a cool shirt you have, Maya. Looks like you're prepared for this year's showcase," she says.

"I made it myself. Well, with some help."

"That's very impressive. Welcome to the Grand Theater!"

As I walk into the gym, I can almost hear how loudly my heart is beating in my chest. I can't believe that just happened. Irene Brown complimented my shirt! I could faint right here probably, but that would be terrible.

None of the other campers even turn to look at me when I enter the gym. They're all focused on finding their friends. They yell and wave and bounce around as they come into the gym. Everyone else has changed into their yellow camp shirts. Maybe I should do that too? I take a deep breath and squeeze the shirt in my hands. I'm going to stay in my *The Drowsy Chaperone* shirt for now, since I know how it feels against my skin. And I guess it's okay that no one has talked to me yet, since I don't need a new best friend. Just someone to help me learn lines while Jules isn't

here. Mom said I should "try to connect" with the other campers, and how hard can that be? We're all here because we love musicals. I'm sure that if I just start listing off some of the facts that I know, someone else will get just as excited as I am about the history of musicals.

I try this a couple times and surprisingly, none of the other campers even seem that excited about it. A few of them turn away from me when I start talking, which is super weird. I even "introduced myself and held out my hand" like Mom suggested!

Well, the only thing to do is shake it off. Maybe they're just nervous because it's the first day of camp. I know I would be super nervous too if I didn't know what part I was going to play in the showcase. But these are theater kids and I know we will definitely get along. It won't be like at school, where Jules is my only friend. She'll still be my best friend, but I'll also have camp friends who understand me. If I can just follow the rules that Mom gave me for Maya in Public, it'll be easy. Like reciting lines from the script.

I take a minute to "compose myself" before trying again. It's so busy and loud in here. It doesn't feel like it did when I came to watch the performance a few years ago. Camp leaders are unfolding chairs and dragging them across the room. The metal scraping slams into my ears like they're dragging the chairs across my face. Time to block it out and imagine that the curtain is opening and I'm walking on stage—

The stage.

I take a few steps to the side to look past all the campers in yellow shirts jumping and hiding the most important part of the whole room.

You wouldn't know how special it was at first. It's one of those things that Mom calls "unassuming," which is just her way of saying that it's quiet. I don't mind that it's unassuming. I take in the way the red velvet curtain falls across the stage. One camper is running a hand along the bottom edge, their fingers just barely touching the fabric. The curtains sway a bit from the movement. I wish I could do that, but it doesn't seem like something that Maya in Public should do.

Oh, I want to wrap myself up in them. Then I could unfurl into the spotlight, just like Jules and I always talked about, and she would be back and everything would be the same as it was before. I imagine myself on that stage as Janet Van De Graaff singing like it's what I was meant to do. I can almost pretend that everyone else is gone and the noise disappears if I focus really hard. I can go into this little shell of my imagination.

It's the big night. I'm peeking out from the curtains, which are full and drawn closed to hide the stage. I'm in my costume. It's probably itchy, but I can handle it. I can handle anything when it comes to musicals. In the audience, my parents are waiting to see me perform. Jules and I hug each other before stepping onto the stage. Everything is perfect.

I exhale and unwrap myself from that perfect moment. What

would Maya in Public do now? Alone, without Jules, as she tries to get the lead?

I scan the room. My mom's advice is in my head as I take in all the different campers. I need to look for someone who will "accept my differences" and probably someone who isn't in a group of people will be best.

At the far side of the gym, there's a girl with dark brown fishtail braids. They're done in the same way that Jules had hers when we first met. That has to be a good sign! She's also standing by herself, watching all the other campers with her arms crossed on her chest. Maybe she'll be interested in teaming up with me. Pushing my way through some of the campers, I walk over to her.

"Hey! Are you new too?" I ask.

She jumps a little, clutching her lunch bag a little tighter to her chest. "Oh, wow, you scared me."

I nod. "Sorry about that. Are you new?"

Her face relaxes, making the same kind of expression that my mom makes when she's thinking of a good memory.

"No, this is my third year. I started coming when I was 10," she says.

She's a bit taller than me, but my mom's reminder to "make sure you look people in the eyes when you're talking to them" makes me try to meet her eyes. They're gray, and there's a perfect halo of yellow eye shadow around them. It's bright against her brown skin and matches her camp t-shirt. It makes me want to look her in the eyes

more, even though it usually feels weird to me.

“Oh, this is my first year. My parents didn’t think I was old enough last year, when I was still 10.”

We stare at each other, or at least, I pretend I’m staring without actually staring.

I extend a hand. “I’m Maya.”

She blinks and shakes my hand. “I’m Aislinn, but my friends call me Ash.”

“Oh, my friends call me Maya.”

She starts to laugh and I wonder if she’s going to be like my classmates who laugh at me in a way where it doesn’t feel good. But then she smiles and something about it feels like when an actor talks directly to the audience: like we’re in on a secret that only the two of us know.

“Do you, uhm, have any friends coming to camp?”

“My best friend Jules was supposed to come but then her family moved even though it wasn’t in the plan so . . . no, I guess not,” I say.

“That sucks.” She gestures to the record on my shirt. “I like your shirt.”

“Thanks, I made it with my mom. I actually have a lot of shirts like this. With playbills on them and stuff. It’s too bad I have to wear my camp shirt after today, otherwise I could have shown you.”

“Cool! Maybe you can show me another time.”

“Yeah.” My heart is beating so fast. I’m not sure what else to say to Aislinn.

She sets her lunch bag on the ground near her feet. “Which character is your favorite from the camp showcase this year?”

“Janet, of course.”

She smiles. “Of course! You get it, not like Gio.”

“Gio?”

“He’s the one over there with the red hair,” she motions to the other side of the gym, where a taller camper is joking around with a group. “He’s been my neighbor forever, but he’s always trying to goof around.”

“Oh. I’m not here to goof around. I want to be the lead,” I say, for the first time to someone other than Jules. I can feel my stomach squeeze, hoping that I haven’t said the wrong thing.

Her eyes light up. “Me too. This camp is really important to me. Maybe we can be friends and help each other?”

“Yeah, except I already have a best friend, so we can just be regular friends,” I blurt out. That was definitely not the right thing to say but I’ve already said it. I wait for Aislinn’s reaction. Hopefully she won’t get upset and take her friendship offer back because I really need someone to help me practice my lines.

“That’s okay with me,” she says. Her face relaxes and her eyes go soft. I get a feeling in my stomach that maybe she’s the camper I was supposed to meet.

Calling

“Five . . . four . . . three . . .”

“Hello?”

“Jules! That was faster than yesterday by
two seconds!”

“Haha, hey Maya. Oh, guess what?”

“What?”

“We’re going to check out the local pool and then go
to this dinner tonight with Bà. It’s all-you-can-eat so
no one can tell me not to have two desserts. Mom

even said they’ll probably have my favorite! You
remember? She made rau câu for my birthday last
summer.”

“Oh, yum! When do you have to leave?”

“We can talk until someone calls for me. We’re finally
all unpacked here and you wouldn’t believe how big
Bà’s house is. It’s like both of our houses combined! I
wish you were here though.”

“I wish you were *here*.”

“Yeah . . . but I wish you could see how cool Bà’s
house is first. It’s ancient! Maybe you and your mom
can come visit next summer, after school’s done.”

“Hm . . . maybe. Or maybe you could come to
theater camp with me next summer! We’ll be twelve
then, so your parents will have to let you stay over at
my house.”

“It’d be like one long sleepover! We could watch so
many movies!”

“Movies every night! With popcorn and then pancakes in the morning, and we could go to camp just like we planned.”

“That would be cool. Things are still pretty boring here. Except when we get to talk.”

“Yeah. It would be way better if you were here. Oh, I did make a friend at camp today. Don’t worry: she won’t replace you as my best friend!”

“I . . . we can have more than one best friend. Sorry, I have to go now, Bà is calling for me. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Bye now!”

“Bye now!”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Maya's story is the story of one autistic person, and it's shaped by my own experience growing up. But while Maya and I share a love of theater, I didn't grow up knowing I'm autistic like she does. Unfortunately, there are many others like me who don't learn they're autistic until they're adults, especially women, nonbinary individuals, and people of color.

Growing up without an understanding of one's own autism means hearing that you're doing things wrong and being confused about why. We are often told that we're not doing things the right way, that we're doing things strangely, that we shouldn't act the way that we do. This can start to feel like a little voice in your head, telling you how to act, just like Maya hears. "Masking" is something that a lot of autistic people do to try and fit in. Masking can help keep us safe, but it's also exhausting. Through awareness, compassion, and proper support, autistic individuals can live a life that fits

them rather than being forced into a box.

In writing this story, I wanted to add one more voice to the tapestry of autistic stories. If you're interested in learning more about autism, I encourage you to read more stories from autistic writers or learn from organizations run by autistic individuals, like Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) and Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network (AWN).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Calyssa" followed by a heart symbol.

Calyssa Erb