

Problem Girl

A Play in Three Acts

Characters:

Anne – a sixth-grade girl with Asperger’s

Caitlyn – Anne’s best friend

Dad – Anne’s father

Miss Miller – Anne’s sixth-grade teacher

The other girls in the sixth-grade class:

Svetlana – immigrated from Russia in fourth grade

Susan – Svetlana’s best friend

The Socially Aware Girls (SAGs): Lindsay, Lori, Lisa, Leslie, Lily

The rest of the girls: Connie, Corinne, Gina, Jackie, Marlene, Merrill

Rob and Thomas, two boys in the class

Denice – Anne’s hiking group leader at camp

Mr. Trazom, the music teacher

Act One

Scene One

Setting: A typical sixth-grade classroom at a typical elementary school nestled in a typical upper-middle class suburb. It’s the first day of sixth grade. Students are standing in groups chatting. The school bell rings.

MISS MILLER: All right everyone, take your seats. [*students sit down*] Welcome to sixth grade. I’m Miss Miller and I’ll be your teacher this year. We’re going to study lots of exciting things this year, like ancient world history, geography, current events...

ROB: Miss Miller?

MISS MILLER: Yes, Rob?

ROB: When are we going to camp?

MISS MILLER: I would have gotten to that, Rob, if you could have been patient for five minutes. But, since you bring it up... As most of you know, it has long been tradition at this school for the sixth grade to go to camp in the mountains for a week. This year our school is scheduled to go in March, so we will have plenty of time between now and then to discuss this in more detail. For now, all you need to know is that we will board the bus to camp on Monday morning and come back here to school on Friday afternoon. We will be joined by classes from two other schools. You will get a packing list a month or two ahead of time. Cabin assignments will be made two weeks before we leave, and once those assignments are made they will not be changed for any reason, no exceptions. If there is someone you really want or don't want to be in your cabin you can write me a note. We will try our best to accommodate everyone but we can't make any guarantees. And yes, the cabins will all be either all girls or all boys. Now, for the roll call...

THOMAS: Miss Miller?

MISS MILLER: What is it, Thomas?

THOMAS: Is it true they make you kiss a banana slug at camp?

The whole class, except Anne, giggles.

MISS MILLER: No, Thomas, and that is enough talk about camp for today. We have a lot of learning to do between now and camp. Right now I need to take the roll call and after that we'll start our first math lesson. Thomas Arrowhead, I already know you're here. Anne Blakewell?

ANNE: *(looking down at her desktop and with her shoulders crunched)* Here.

MISS MILLER: Anne, remember that when we speak to someone we need to look at them, not down at our desktop or the floor. Try to look me in the eye when you speak to me. And keep your shoulders down. Would you like to try this again?

ANNE: *(relaxing her shoulders but still looking down)* No.

MISS MILLER: What was that, Anne?

ANNE: *(looking up at Miss Miller's forehead)*: No, Miss Miller, I do not wish to make another attempt at responding to my name being called. Please continue with the roll call.

MISS MILLER: That's much better, Anne. You looked at me and spoke in complete sentences. You need to do that more often. However you were a bit overly formal for what the interaction called for.

CAITLYN: She can't help it, she has...

MISS MILLER: *(quickly cutting Caitlyn off)* I know, Caitlyn, but we all need to learn to follow social expectations for communicating with each other, even though it is harder for some of us to learn than others, just like we all need to learn math and reading even though those are harder for some of us to

learn than others. And we also need to learn to let the teacher get through the roll call without interrupting. Jacqueline Cantu?

JACKIE: *(making perfect eye contact with Miss Miller)* Here.

Scene Two

Setting: The sixth-grade classroom. Anne and her father are talking to Anne's teacher.

MISS MILLER: Thank you for coming to see me, Mr. Blakewell. And thank you Anne for agreeing to stay after school.

DAD: It's the first day of school. She can't be in trouble already.

MISS MILLER: She's not in trouble, Mr. Blakewell. I wanted to talk with you both about Anne's options for junior high.

DAD: What do you mean? She's going to the district junior high school just like everyone else in this class.

MISS MILLER: Well, that may or may not be the best choice for her. I want to tell you about another option that I want you and Anne to consider. Anne will need to think carefully about the advantages and disadvantages of each choice. I hope the two of you will discuss this at length at home. You can advise her on what choice you think is best, Mr. Blakewell, but I recommend you to leave it up to Anne to make the final decision.

ANNE: What decision?

MISS MILLER: There is a specialized junior high and high school for children on the autism spectrum called Constellation Academy. They have a complete curriculum for teaching social skills, communication skills, all the things that children like Anne struggle with. They also offer advanced math and science classes and a good selection of extracurricular activities. Surely Anne can find something there that interests her.

DAD: Sounds perfect for her.

MISS MILLER: Yes, but we need to consider the downsides as well. First of all, she won't get to go to school with any of her friends. When she first starts there she won't know anyone, and you know as well as I do how children like Anne have a hard time making friends, although the school does provide help with that. Second, the gender ratio is skewed in the male direction and Anne may be the only girl in her class, which she may not like. On the other hand, if Anne goes to the regular junior high she can be with all the girls she already knows and they can help her navigate the social minefield that junior high is.

DAD: And we live close enough that she can walk to school.

MISS MILLER: Yes, that is another advantage to the regular junior high. The disadvantage is that she will not get the specialized assistance that Constellation Academy can provide. She will be stuck with the standard-issue special education services, and frankly Mr. Blakewell, those leave a lot to be desired. They are geared toward students with low test scores. Because Anne consistently gets good grades and high test scores her junior high teachers may not even believe she has a real problem. Or they might mistakenly attribute Anne's social difficulties to her being motherless, like we did before we recognized Anne has Asperger's.

DAD: Isn't there a law that says Anne's teachers have to give her the help she needs?

MISS MILLER: Yes, but law or no law, teachers can only do so much. It's not that the teachers don't want to help. They are just so overwhelmed with trying to keep all the other kids from joining gangs and using drugs that they have nothing left to give kids like Anne. Kids who get in trouble get most of the attention. Kids like Anne who get good grades and don't stir up trouble get rewarded for it by being ignored. That's just how it is with large suburban junior highs, and high schools are even worse. I believe Constellation Academy is the best place for Anne, but like I said before, she will have to make her own decision.

ANNE: How am I supposed to decide?

MISS MILLER: You don't have to decide right now, Anne. You have the whole school year to think about it. We'll talk more about this closer to the end of the year.

DAD: Thank you for your time, Miss Miller. It sounds like Anne has a big decision to make.

Anne and her father leave the classroom and meet Caitlyn waiting outside.

CAITLYN: Hi Mr. Blakewell. Are you OK Anne? What did Miss Miller want?

DAD: I'll leave you girls to chat. I have to get back to work.

Dad exits the stage.

ANNE: Bye Dad. [*Anne turns to face Caitlyn*] It's fine, Caitlyn. She just wanted to tell me about a special school she wants me to go to next year.

CAITLYN: What do you mean? What kind of special school?

ANNE: A special school for kids with au..., I mean Asp..., I mean, you know, kids like me. The weird kids who are so smart but have trouble making friends. They have special classes for all the stuff I'm no good at.

CAITLYN: Oh. So do you want to go there?

ANNE: I don't know. Maybe I should go to the regular junior high with you.

CAITLYN: Are you sure that's what you want?

ANNE: We've been going to school together since first grade.

CAITLYN: Even if you go to a different school that doesn't mean we can't be friends.

ANNE: I don't know.

CAITLYN: You should at least go visit the other school and see what it's like there.

ANNE: Are you saying you want me to go to the other school? You don't want me to go to school with you?

CAITLYN: No, no. Of course I would be happy to keep going to school with you. But I'm your best friend and I want what's best for you. I want you to go to a school where you will be happy. I don't know if you can be happy at the regular junior high. Remember I have an older sister. She's not very happy at the regular junior high and says none of her friends are either.

ANNE: Why not?

CAITLYN: She says it's a giant popularity contest and the teachers and administrations act like the sole measure of your worth as a human being is your grade point average. Do you really want to go to a school like that? If you have a chance to go somewhere better you should take it.

ANNE: So you do want me to go to the special school.

CAITLYN: This is not about what I want. This is about what you want. Are you really sure you want to go to a school that is a giant popularity contest? We need to be honest here. I don't mean this to hurt your feelings and I'm only saying this because I know you already know: You'll never win a popularity contest. You belong in a school where you don't have to try.

ANNE: I guess you're right.

CAITLYN: Well think about it at least. I'll see you tomorrow.

ANNE: Bye Caitlyn.

Scene Three

Setting: The street in front of the school. Anne and her father are driving home from the grocery store. Anne sees Lindsay, Lori, Lisa, Leslie, Lily, Connie, Corinne, Gina, Jackie, Marlene and Merrill on the sidewalk and does not react.

DAD: Do you know those girls?

ANNE: Yes.

DAD: (*slightly exasperated*) Then why didn't you wave to them?

ANNE: It didn't occur to me that I should.

DAD: Honey, why is it too much to ask of you to make simple friendly gestures like waving to someone you know? If you don't do those things then everyone will think you don't like them and you don't want to be friends with them. Of course I don't know those girls so maybe you really don't like them and you really don't want to be friends with them. Is that true?

ANNE: No. They're nice.

DAD: Can't you ever say more than three words at a time?

ANNE: I guess not.

DAD: (*sighing*) Your packing list for camp has been sitting on the kitchen table for days. Have you started gathering the items you will need?

ANNE: Sort of.

DAD: Did you even bother to *read* the packing list?

ANNE: I know what it says.

DAD: It says one of the items you need is a bathing suit. Would you care to tell me what for? Are you going swimming at camp?

ANNE: It's for the showers.

DAD: Well unless you want to shower with no bathing suit I suggest you find yours and make sure it still fits and if it doesn't you ask Caitlyn if she and her mother can help you obtain one that does. And I suggest you that *today*, not the night before you leave.

ANNE: All right, I'll do it.

DAD: All right. Have you given any thought to where you want to go for junior high?

ANNE: Caitlyn thinks I should go to the Asperger school.

DAD: But what do you think?

ANNE: I don't want to go to school without Caitlyn. I don't want to go to a school where I don't know anyone.

DAD: I know you and Caitlyn have been in the same class for a long time and in many ways you rely on her to be your social tutor. I know the idea of not having her at school with you anymore is a scary one. Is that what this is about? Are you scared to be separated from Caitlyn?

ANNE: Yes. Without Caitlyn I won't have anyone to hang out with and I'll never know if I'm doing or saying the right thing when I'm talking to someone. How am I supposed to handle that?

DAD: I'm sure the teachers there will be able to guide you on that. They're professionals. They have years of experience helping kids who are just like you. I know it won't be the same as having Caitlyn there, but I think you'll be better off with the trained professionals than relying solely on Caitlyn. I know Caitlyn is your best friend and I know she means well and she cares about you, but she doesn't know everything and she can't do everything for you.

ANNE: I know. But I still won't have any friends at school.

DAD: Maybe not at first, but you'll make new friends. I'm sure all the other kids at that school will be just as nervous as you on their first day. A lot of them will probably have all of their friends from sixth grade go to other schools too. They will probably have the same feelings about it as you do. You can make friends with those kids. And you and Caitlyn will still be friends. You just won't be going to the same school anymore, that's all.

ANNE: I guess.

DAD: Honey, I know it's hard moving to a new school and having to deal with unfamiliar situations and people. It's hard for kids who don't have Asperger's too. Everyone feels a little bit scared of it. But we have to do it and we have to have courage. Courage doesn't mean not being afraid. It means doing the right thing even though we are afraid. I think going to this Asperger's school is the right thing for you, Anne. But if you really can't stand the idea of going there then I won't force it on you.

ANNE: Thanks Dad. I need some more time to think about it. Miss Miller says I don't have to tell her my decision until June.

DAD: I know it's a big decision. It's not the kind of decision that should be rushed. Maybe by June you'll feel more certain about which decision is best.

ANNE: Maybe.

DAD: We're home. Can you get the door?

ANNE: Yes, Dad.

Scene Four

Setting: A row of tables outside the classroom. Anne and Caitlyn are eating lunch with Svetlana and Susan.

SUSAN: I can't believe how much homework we have to do for that history project.

CAITLYN: Cheer up. It's Friday afternoon. It's only two more weeks until we go to camp and get a break from homework for a whole week.

SUSAN: Didn't Miss Miller say we would get our cabin assignments two weeks before camp? She hasn't given them to us yet.

SVETLANA: She'll probably give them to us today. She's probably waiting until the very end of the day so we won't be distracted thinking about our cabins instead of our history reports.

SUSAN: It's not working on me. I keep thinking about who she'll put me with. Do you think she'll put the four of us together? I really hope she does.

CAITLYN: We don't even know how many cabins there are or how big the groups will be.

ANNE: There are fifteen girls in this class. Fifteen only divides evenly into three and five. So she has to make either three groups of five or five groups of three, otherwise the groups won't all be the same size.

SUSAN: We already figured that out for ourselves genius.

CAITLYN: My older sister said that if we are in the same cabin we won't be together during the day because they split all the cabins up into different hiking groups. And we won't get to eat together either because they split all the hiking groups up into different tables in the cafeteria.

SVETLANA: So we'll only be together when we're sleeping?

CAITLYN: We can still hang out together during the rec period.

SUSAN: You mean they don't split all the cafeteria tables up into different groups for rec period?

CAITLYN: No, you can be with whoever you want during rec period. And for games they won't let us split ourselves into teams based on school vs. school, cabin vs. cabin, hiking group vs. hiking group, cafeteria table vs. cafeteria table or boys vs. girls.

SUSAN: So how are we supposed to form teams for games?

SVETLANA: Maybe we're not.

SUSAN: Maybe we're not what? Allowed to play games?

CAITLYN: We can play games. We just have to find creative ways to form teams.

SVETLANA: We'll think of something.

CAITLYN: Anne, aren't you happy about going to camp? Think how much fun it will be.

ANNE: [*forcing a smile*] Yeah, super happy.

SUSAN: She doesn't seem happy.

CAITLYN: What's wrong, Anne?

ANNE: Nothing. [*The school bell rings. Anne picks up the remains of her lunch and walks toward the trash can.*] See you in class.

SVETLANA: You're right, Susan. She doesn't seem happy.

Scene Five

Setting: The sixth-grade classroom, later that same afternoon.

MISS MILLER: ... and that's how the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids. Now, I know you're all anxious to hear your cabin assignments for camp so I won't keep you in suspense any longer. I'll start with the girls' cabins. In Cabin One will be Lindsay, Lori, Lisa, Leslie and Lily. In Cabin Two will be Anne, Caitlyn, Svetlana, Susan and Jackie. In Cabin Three will be Connie, Corinne, Gina, Marlene and Merrill. Now for the boys' cabins: in Cabin One will be Rob, Thomas...

[The teacher continues reciting names as the clock moves toward dismissal time and then the dismissal bell rings. Anne quickly packs her things and bolts from the classroom without speaking to or making eye contact with anyone. Miss Miller appears not to notice but all the girls in the class do.]

LINDSAY: *[speaking to Caitlyn]* What was that?

CAITLYN: What was what?

LINDSAY: What's with the way Anne just ran from the room like she couldn't get away from us fast enough?

SVETLANA: Was she crying?

SUSAN: She looked like she was crying.

LINDSAY: Crying about what? What's wrong with her?

CAITLYN: I don't know. She was upset at lunch too. But she wouldn't say a word.

JACKIE: Isn't that typical for her? She hardly ever says anything.

SVETLANA: Yes, but something seems different this time.

SUSAN: She looked like she was crying.

LINDSAY: You already said that. I'm going to get the teacher. Miss Miller?

[Miss Miller walks over to the group]

MISS MILLER: What is it, girls?

LINDSAY: Did you see Anne running from the classroom?

MISS MILLER: No. Why? Should I have?

LINDSAY: She ran out like she couldn't get out of here fast enough. Susan says Anne was crying when she left and Caitlyn says Anne was upset at lunch but wouldn't say anything.

MISS MILLER: I see. Thank you for telling me this. I'll have a talk with Anne when she comes to school on Monday. Now why don't you all go and enjoy your weekend?

Scene Six

Setting: The front of the school on Monday morning. Anne arrives at school and is greeted by Miss Miller, who is seated on a nearby bench.

MISS MILLER: [*indicating the empty space next to her on the bench*] Anne? Come over here, please.

[*Anne approaches Miss Miller on the bench*]

MISS MILLER: Take a seat.

[*Anne sits on the bench next to Miss Miller but looks down at the ground instead of at her teacher*]

MISS MILLER: Anne, the other girls said you left school in tears on Friday. Were you upset about your cabin assignment? I put you in the same cabin as your best friend. I thought you would be happy. Is it Jackie? I put her with you because I needed to get the same number of girls in each cabin and aside from your three closest friends you seem to get along with Jackie best.

ANNE: [*still looking down at the ground*] No, it's not Jackie.

MISS MILLER: Is it Svetlana or Susan then? Surely it's not Caitlyn. She's your best friend!

ANNE: It's not them.

MISS MILLER: Then what is it?

ANNE: I know I'm supposed to be happy about going to camp. Everyone loves it. But...

MISS MILLER: But?

ANNE: But I don't know if I can handle it: having to deal with all those people I've never met before, being in an unfamiliar environment, having to adjust to a whole new routine, not having Caitlyn with me in my hiking group or in the cafeteria to tell me how to act or what I should say to people. I try so hard to fit in and do what everyone else does but I can barely manage that here at school. How will I ever be able to do that at camp?

MISS MILLER: I know it's hard, Anne, but you're going to be having to adjust to new situations throughout your whole life. Practice makes perfect, and there is no better time to start practicing than now. Did you feel anxious when you started school for the first time? You were able to handle that, weren't you? You'll do the same thing at camp. Most of the time you'll be in a group about the size of this class. Just watch what the other kids in your group are doing and then do what they do. You'll be fine.

ANNE: I guess.

[*The school bell rings*]

MISS MILLER: Let's go to class.

End Act One

Begin Act Two

Scene One

Setting: The cabin at camp. Anne, Caitlyn, Svetlana, Susan and Jackie are unpacking and meeting the other girls in their cabin and their cabin leader, although Anne is more focused on the former while the other girls are more focused on the latter.

JACKIE: Girl, here we are. A whole week at Camp Thoreau.

SUSAN: A whole week of no homework.

SVETLANA: And taking long walks in the woods...

CAITLYN: And hunting for banana slugs...

JACKIE: And singing campfire songs...

SUSAN: And watching nature documentaries...

SVETLANA: And tracing outlines of leaves in our journals...

CAITLYN: Don't you think it will be fun, Anne? Anne? Earth to Anne!

ANNE: [*turning around from facing her bunk to facing Caitlyn*] Huh?

CAITLYN: Isn't there anything about camp you're excited about?

ANNE: Um, sure. [*Anne turns around and goes back to unpacking her bag*]

JACKIE: [*speaking to no one in particular*] I can't believe I got stuck in the same cabin as her.

SVETLANA: It wasn't our choice to put you in this cabin.

SUSAN: Yeah, Miss Miller said she had to put you with us so there could be five girls from our class in each cabin. Blame math, not us.

JACKIE: I wasn't blaming you. I just don't see why I don't get to be with Connie and Gina. She could have put Marlene or Merrill with you.

CAITLYN: But she assigned you to be with us and there's nothing any of us can do about it so why don't we just try to get along and make the best of it?

JACKIE: [*gesturing toward Anne*] Why don't you tell *her* to try to get along for a change?

CAITLYN: She can't help being the way she is. She has...

JACKIE: Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. Miss Einstein is going to win a Nobel Prize someday. Still, would it kill her to have a normal conversation every once in a while?

SVETLANA: Would you ask someone in a wheelchair if it would kill them to stand up every once in a while?

JACKIE: That's totally different.

SUSAN: No it's not.

JACKIE: She's not physically incapable of talking. She just doesn't want to.

SVETLANA: [*gesturing toward Anne*] *She* is right over there and *she* can hear every word we're saying.

SUSAN: Svetlana's right. We shouldn't be talking about her in front of her like this.

CAITLYN: Isn't there anything about school that you think is hard, Jackie?

JACKIE: Yeah, so?

CAITLYN: So, having a normal conversation is like that for Anne. It's hard.

JACKIE: How hard can it be to just have a normal conversation with someone?

CAITLYN: How hard can it be to do the thing you think is hard?

JACKIE: Oh.

[*The door to the cabin opens*]

MISS MILLER: Come on girls, it's time to go to the cafeteria for our first meeting.

[*The girls follow Miss Miller out the cabin door and off the stage*]

Scene Two

Setting: Outside at camp. While everyone else is playing foursquare during rec period, Anne is sitting on a bench by herself reading a book. Denice, Anne's hiking group leader, comes over to talk to Anne.

DENICE: Hello there.

ANNE: Hi Denice.

DENICE: Your name is Anne, right?

ANNE: Yes.

DENICE: Can I talk to you for a few minutes, Anne?

ANNE: Sure. About what?

DENICE: I'm a little curious about why you're sitting here by yourself reading a book instead of playing with any of the other kids.

ANNE: I like to read.

DENICE: More than you like playing with any other kids?

ANNE: I spend all day with other kids. I just wanted some quiet time alone.

DENICE: I see. Anne, I know this may sound intrusive but I'm going to ask anyway. Do you have Asperger's syndrome?

ANNE: Yes.

DENICE: How long have you known?

ANNE: Since second grade.

DENICE: You were lucky.

ANNE: Lucky? What do you mean, lucky?

DENICE: You were identified at a young age. I've suspected for years that I have Asperger's but I was never identified by my school.

ANNE: Why not?

DENICE: Because Asperger's didn't exist when I was in elementary school. Or rather, it did, but no one recognized it. If teachers recognized anything at all, they recognized that I got high test scores and studied during class time instead of socializing, and they tried to get all the other kids to be like that too, and their trying took up every resource the school system had so there was nothing left for me. So my needs were always ignored.

ANNE: Gosh, that must have been awful.

DENICE: It was.

ANNE: So what makes you think you have Asperger's now?

DENICE: Because I was a lot like you when I was your age. I liked reading poetry and nature guides more than I liked anything the other kids were doing. I think that's why I became a biologist. I've always been fascinated by plants and animals, and I relate to them better than people.

ANNE: Really? But you do such a good job leading the hiking group. I never would have guessed if you hadn't told me.

DENICE: That's because over the years I've learned to compensate. Have you ever heard the phrase "fake it till you make it"?

ANNE: Yes.

DENICE: Well, I never was able to make it but I did eventually learn to fake it. And it's really not that hard to give nature talks, compared to some things. I can talk about banana slugs just as easily to a brick wall as I can to a group of sixth graders. The hard part comes when I have to deal with someone who won't play along like they should, or at least like I think they should. Thankfully that doesn't happen too often here. Most kids are happy to be here. After all, it means a week off from doing homework.

ANNE: Yeah, that was all anyone could talk about last Friday. A whole week without homework.

DENICE: Are you happy to be here, Anne?

ANNE: Mostly. My shoes got soaked while we were crossing the stream on today's hike, so now I have to wear my old ones that are too small. I know I'm supposed to focus on having fun instead of my shoes being too tight but...

DENICE: But it's not as easy as it sounds. I have a hard time focusing on what I'm supposed to be doing too when I'm distracted by uncomfortable shoes or clothes. But when you look back on this years from now you'll remember the good parts about it, not the annoyance caused by your shoes. So tell me about school, Anne. Are you happy at school?

ANNE: Yeah, I'm happy. I like the stuff that we're learning. My best friend is in the same class as me and we eat lunch together every day. Usually we eat with two other girls in our class.

DENICE: That's wonderful. And what do you talk about during lunch?

ANNE: TV shows, movies, what we did last weekend, you know, stuff like that.

DENICE: Do you ever talk about what you'll do next year when you go to seventh grade?

ANNE: No. I don't even know where I'm going to go to school next year. All my friends are going to the regular junior high but my teacher wants me to go to this special school for Asperger's kids.

DENICE: There's a special school for Asperger's kids?

ANNE: Yeah, and my teacher says if I go there I'll get special counseling to help me interact with people better. But my best friend won't be there. And no one else I know will be there either. So I don't want to go there.

DENICE: Are you kidding me? Anne, when I was in junior high I would have given *anything* to get to go to a school like the one you're describing.

ANNE: Really? What kind of junior high did you go to?

DENICE: I was lucky. My junior high school was as autism-helping as any regular public school in America ever gets. There were only 350 students for two grades so everyone knew everyone else and every teacher knew every student. I had many of the same teachers for both years. And I got to do things like the yearbook, the school newspaper and the volleyball team even though I wasn't the best at any of those things. I wish every school could be like that.

ANNE: But they're not.

DENICE: That's right, they're not. Don't go to the regular junior high school, Anne. You'll regret it for the rest of your life, trust me. Go to the Asperger's school. It's your best chance. You won't get your needs met at the regular school. Regular schools don't have the resources to meet the needs of kids like you, even if they want to, and most of them don't.

ANNE: The regular school says it meets the needs of everyone.

DENICE: Schools say that but the reality is they meet the needs of no one. Then they say this is OK as long as everyone's needs are equally unmet. But they can't even succeed at not meeting everyone's needs equally. There's always someone whose needs are more unmet than others. And kids like you and me, Anne, are usually at the top of that list. If you have a chance to go to a better school you should take it.

ANNE: That's exactly what my best friend said.

DENICE: Your best friend is absolutely right. You should listen to her.

[The dinner bell rings, announcing the end of rec period.]

Scene Three

Setting: The cafeteria on the last morning at camp. The girls in Anne's cabin are assigned to be hoppers for breakfast.

MISS MILLER: All right everyone, we're going to draw numbers from a bag, and the number you draw will be the number of the table you will hop at this morning.

[The girls all reach into the bag to draw their numbers. Miss Miller walks away with the bag once the drawing is complete.]

SVETLANA: *[turning to Anne]* What number did you get?

ANNE: One.

SVETLANA: I got three. Would you be willing to trade with me?

ANNE: Sure.

[The hoppers begin setting their tables while the other students at camp file in for breakfast. Once everyone is seated Anne sees that Rob and Thomas are sitting at table three. The hoppers begin bringing food out to their tables.]

ROB: Scrambles eggs again? We've had scrambled eggs every day this week. I hate scrambled eggs!

THOMAS: I'm so sick of scrambled eggs I'm gonna puke if I have to eat any more scrambled eggs.

ANNE: You don't have to eat the eggs. You could just eat the bacon.

ROB: I hate this bacon. It's hard as a rubber tire and tastes like one too.

ANNE: Then just eat the toast.

THOMAS: *[mocking Anne]* Then just eat the toast.

[Everyone at table three giggles. Students at nearby tables turn to stare.]

THOMAS: I can't eat toast that tastes like cardboard. I want real food. I want pancakes!

ROB: Pan-cakes! Pan-cakes!

[Thomas joins Rob in the chant to demand pancakes. All other students at table three quickly follow suit. Anne, helpless to respond, grows increasingly distressed. Finally Miss Miller comes over to table three.]

MISS MILLER: All right everyone, that is ENOUGH! You can all pick up your plates and empty them into the compost bin. Breakfast is over for you. Everyone! NOW!

[Students at table three begin picking up their plates and filing toward the compost bin, sneaking final bites of bacon or toast on the way. Rob turns to sneer at Anne after picking up his plate.]

ROB: Nice going Anne. Thanks to you we don't get any breakfast.

ANNE: *[chocking back tears]* You said you didn't want any breakfast!

THOMAS: We didn't say we didn't want any breakfast. We said we didn't want this *[pauses while indicating his plate]* scat for breakfast.

[Rob and Thomas begin snickering again]

MISS MILLER: Move it, you two! Leave her alone!

[Rob and Thomas walk away with Miss Miller. Anne walks over to Svetlana's table.]

ANNE: Now I know why you wanted to trade tables with me.

SVETLANA: I didn't know, Anne. I'm sorry. I didn't know Rob and Thomas were at that table. I didn't know they would act like that. I'm so sorry.

[Anne, not knowing how to respond, says nothing. She walks away from Svetlana and takes a seat at the empty table.]

End Act Two

Begin Act Three

Scene One

Setting: The classroom at school on Monday morning after return from camp.

MISS MILLER: So, did we all have fun at camp?

WHOLE CLASS: Yes, Miss Miller.

MISS MILLER: And we learned a lot too, didn't we?

WHOLE CLASS: Yes, Miss Miller.

MISS MILLER: One thing we learned about was ecosystems. Can anyone tell me what the word ecosystem means?

JACKIE: An ecosystem is all the plants and animals that live together in a certain environment.

MISS MILLER: That's right, Jackie. You got to visit many different ecosystems at camp, like the redwood forest, the oak forest, the chaparral, the meadow, the flowing stream and the pond. They're all very different but they all have some things in common. Can anyone think of something all ecosystems have in common?

ANNE: All ecosystems have energy and nutrients flowing and cycling through them in a systematic way.

MISS MILLER: Yes, Anne. Anyone else?

LINDSAY: All the plants and animals in an ecosystem interact with each other and depend on each other to survive.

JACKIE: And every individual plant and animal has a unique role to play within the ecosystem, and every species is adapted to its role in the environment.

MISS MILLER: That's very good class. Now I want you to think about how the lessons we've learned about ecosystems in nature apply to human society. Does anyone have any ideas?

LINDSAY: What do you mean?

MISS MILLER: Well, think about just one ecosystem: The pond. What kinds of animals live in the pond?

JACKIE: Fish.

MISS MILLER: Yes, fish live in the pond. And don't other kinds of animals live near the pond?

ANNE: Sure, there are frogs and salamanders and dragonflies and turtles and ducks and...

MISS MILLER: All right, Anne, that's enough. We get the idea. There a lot of different kinds of animals that share the pond as an ecosystem. Now let me ask you this: Are all of those animals exactly the same? Do they all do the same things? Or do they have different characteristics which make them good at doing different things?

LINDSAY: They're not all the same. Fish have fins and gills which make them good at swimming in the water. And ducks and other birds have wings which make them good at flying.

MISS MILLER: And do you think people have different characteristics which make them good at doing different things? Or are all people exactly the same?

JACKIE: All people are not all the same. Different people are good at doing different things. Some of us are really good at sports, and some people are really good artists, and other people are really good at math, or science, or music.

LINDSAY: And some of us have a lot of emotional intelligence and are really good at helping other people.

JACKIE: Like you, Lindsay.

MISS MILLER: That's exactly right, class. We are all good at doing different things. Now, back to the ecosystem. Why do you think ecosystems have different animals doing different things? Wouldn't it be easier if all the animals looked the same and did the same things?

JACKIE: The animals in the ecosystem have to do different things. If they all did the same thing then there wouldn't be enough room for all of them in the world. The habitat would be too small for all of them to fit and there wouldn't be enough resources for all of them. If all the animals in the pond ecosystem swam under the water like the fish, the pond would not be big enough to hold them all, and they wouldn't have enough food to eat or oxygen to breathe. So that's why some animals like the fish live under the water, and others like the ducks swim on top of the water, and others like the turtles live next to the water. That way there's room for everyone.

MISS MILLER: That's a very good point, Jackie. Nature has room for many different kinds of animals that do different things in their environments. So what can this teach us about human society? Does our society have room for many different kinds of people who are good at doing different things?

LINDSAY: Well, there's a lot of different kinds of jobs.

JACKIE: And you have to be good at different kinds of things to do different kinds of jobs.

MISS MILLER: Do you think the reverse is true, Jackie? Should people with different kinds of jobs be good at different things?

JACKIE: Yes, I think that's true.

MISS MILLER: What about people with exactly the same kind of job? Do they all have to be good at exactly the same things, or can some of them be good at some things and others be good at other things?

JACKIE: [*meekly*] I don't know...

MISS MILLER: Don't feel bad that you don't know. This world is full of adults who don't know either. Now I'd like to ask you all a different question: What do you think of the idea of forcing fish to climb trees?

[*Everyone in the class laughs.*]

MISS MILLER: Why is that so funny?

LINDSAY: Everyone knows fish can't climb trees.

MISS MILLER: Why couldn't they if they really wanted to?

JACKIE: Because fish have fins, and fins are meant for swimming, not tree climbing.

MISS MILLER: And how do you think the fish should feel about that? Should the fish be ashamed that they can't climb trees? Or should they be proud that they can swim so well?

JACKIE: I think the fish should be proud of their swimming ability and they should leave the tree climbing to other animals.

LINDSAY: Yeah, what would a fish need to climb a tree for anyway?

CAITLYN: Like we were saying before, if all the animals were tree-climbers there wouldn't be enough trees in the world for them all to climb.

MISS MILLER: So do you think we should appreciate and value all of the different kinds of animals, even though not all of them can climb trees?

WHOLE CLASS: Yes, Miss Miller.

MISS MILLER: What about people? Does what we just said about animals apply to people, too?

JACKIE: Yes, Miss Miller, I get what you're saying. Animals don't all do the same things but every animal does something important in its environment. And people don't all do the same things but every person can do something important for society. And we should appreciate those differences and value people for what they can do.

MISS MILLER: Well said, Jackie.

[*The lunch bell rings and students head for the door.*]

MISS MILLER: Don't forget that you have your spelling test after lunch.

Scene Two

Setting: Music class. The sixth-graders are singing "Danny Boy." The song makes Anne cry. She does her best to hide it until the bell rings, announcing the end of the school day. She runs from the classroom and is quickly followed by Lindsay.

LINDSAY: What's wrong, Anne?

ANNE: I don't know.

LINDSAY: Is it the song that's making you sad?

[Anne nods.]

LINDSAY: Wait here.

[Anne sits on the ground with her head down while Lindsay goes back inside the classroom and returns a few minutes later with Mr. Trazom.]

LINDSAY: As I was saying, Mr. Trazom, Anne was upset by the song.

MR. TRAZOM: Anne?

[Several seconds pass and Anne does not move or respond.]

MR. TRAZOM: Anne, can you look at me please?

[Anne looks up at Mr. Trazom's forehead but still does not speak.]

MR. TRAZOM: Are you feeling overwhelmed by the emotion from the song?

[Anne nods.]

MR. TRAZOM: That happens to me sometimes too. Music has a way of stirring up primal emotions within all of us, and sometimes they can overwhelm us. When it happens to me I think of something dumb, like carrots.

ANNE: Carrots?

MR. TRAZOM: You know, carrots. They're orange and they're pointy and rabbits love them. Focus on that and it will distract your mind from the power of the emotion.

[Anne smiles.]

MR. TRAZOM: There, do you feel better now?

ANNE: Yes, and now I'm hungry.

[Caitlyn appears.]

CAITLYN: There you are, Anne? Are you OK?

LINDSAY: She started crying because of the music.

CAITLYN: Again? She did that all the time last year but we thought she'd gotten over it.

ANNE: I don't know what's wrong with me.

MR. TRAZOM: There's nothing wrong with you. It just means you're a really sensitive girl.

CAITLYN: Come on, Anne, I'll walk home with you. If this happens during next week's music class, I'll bring you a candy bar, and if you can make it through the whole class without crying I'll bring you two.

[Anne and Caitlyn leave in one direction. Lindsay leaves in the other direction. Mr. Trazom goes back to the classroom.]

Scene Three

Setting: The second-to-last day of school. The bell rings announcing the end of the school day. Students begin packing their backpacks and leaving the classroom.

MISS MILLER: Anne, can you stay behind for a few minutes?

[Anne walks from her desk to the teacher's desk.]

ANNE: What is it, Miss Miller?

[The last student leaves the classroom.]

MISS MILLER: Tomorrow is your last day of elementary school, Anne. How do you feel about it?

ANNE: I'm glad it's almost summer.

MISS MILLER: I thought you might be. But you know you won't be coming back to this school next year. How do you feel about that?

ANNE: I guess I am a little bit nervous.

MISS MILLER: Well, that's perfectly normal. Everyone feels a little bit nervous about changing schools.

ANNE: I guess.

MISS MILLER: I need to talk to you about which school you're going to go to next year, Anne. Have you made your decision?

ANNE: Yes. I've decided to go to the Asperger's school.

MISS MILLER: And you understand that means you won't be going to school with Caitlyn anymore, or with anyone else you know?

ANNE: I know that. It is a little scary, thinking of going to a school where I won't know anyone, but if I go to the regular junior high it will be just like it is here at this school: all day, every day with no one who really understands me. You and Caitlyn and Svetlana and Susan and even Lindsay, you all mean well and try to help me, but it's just not the same as being around people who really understand what I have to go through.

MISS MILLER: You're making the right choice, Anne. I'm sure you'll be happier and do better at the specialized school. I promise you I'll do everything I can to get you in.

ANNE: Thank you, Miss Miller.

MISS MILLER: You're welcome. Now go enjoy the rest of your afternoon.

[Anne leaves the classroom. Caitlyn is outside waiting for her.]

CAITLYN: What did you say to Miss Miller?

ANNE: That I want to go to the special school next year.

CAITLYN: You're making the right choice. I'll miss seeing you at school every day but I'm glad you'll be in a place where you can get the help that you need.

ANNE: Thank you.

CAITLYN: Want to walk with me to my house?

ANNE: Sure.

[Anne and Caitlyn walk hand-in-hand off stage, toward Caitlyn's house, the end of sixth grade and their uncertain futures.]