

DON'T TELL THEM

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by  
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## Cast of Characters

- MOTHER: An immigrant woman, aged in her early 40s at the start of the play. Face is lined and makes her appear older than she truly is.
- DAUGHTER: An 18-year-old girl finishing high school at the start of the play. Near mirror of MOTHER in her youth. Of Persian descent.
- THERAPIST: A young white woman in her mid-thirties who has recently began practicing psychotherapy.

## Scene

Suburbs of Los Angeles.

## Time

The present.

ACT I

Scene I

SETTING:

Inside the home of MOTHER and DAUGHTER in the late afternoon. The audience is looking into a living space that opens up into the kitchen. There are dishes in the sink. We see evidence that the space is well lived in, but tidy. There are coats on the arm of a couch that could fit a small child as well as a large man. Red lights and booming voices indicate a heated version of an alternate reality.

(MOTHER and DAUGHTER enter stage left.)

MOTHER

(trailing DAUGHTER)

I don't understand. You didn't apply? Do you know what Stanford would mean for us, after all these years? Do you think of us at all when you make decisions?

DAUGHTER

(turning around)

You don't get it! *I* didn't want to.

(rewinding positions, MOTHER and DAUGHTER retrace steps backward until they return backstage.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene II

SETTING:

As in SCENE I; however, lights and sound return to standard conditions, yielding a clarity that indicates the true path of events.

(MOTHER and DAUGHTER enter stage left.)

MOTHER

(trailing DAUGHTER)

I don't understand. You didn't apply? Do you know what Stanford would mean for us, after all these years? Do you think of us at all when you make decisions?

(MOTHER halts before the threshold of the kitchen and stares incredulously at DAUGHTER.)

(DAUGHTER dips her head and stays silent. She slips off into kitchen to begin preparing dinner.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

### Scene III

SETTING:

We are seated in the office of THERAPIST. DAUGHTER sits across THERAPIST in a leather forest green armchair while THERAPIST fiddles with her skirt and adjusts her glasses as she takes a seat at her desk.

THERAPIST

(singing)

Hello!

(resumes with a speaking voice, still beaming at DAUGHTER)

I am absolutely delighted to meet you. Please tell me about yourself. All about you, that's what today is. I'm wondering on how you're feeling. How has today been like for you?

(Throughout her questioning, DAUGHTER remains stoic. THERAPIST retains upbeat tone.)

Have you been feeling tired-- more-so as of late? What's been bugging you? How do you feel about dying? How should we try medicating you first? What is home to you? When does it stop hurting to exhale? How do you feel about your parents?

(Here, DAUGHTER interrupts. She looks up at

THERAPIST and sharply meets her eyes)

DAUGHTER

(with hostility)  
Don't tell them.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene IV

SETTING:

We are in the bedroom of MOTHER who sits perched at the end of her king-sized bed, patching a button of a boy's plaid shirt. She looks noticeably younger.

(DAUGHTER is now 11 years old)

(DAUGHTER runs into the bedroom with a gash on her arm.)

MOTHER

Oh no, *bachem!* What did you do?

(MOTHER holds DAUGHTER and pats down her hair. MOTHER wraps DAUGHTER's arm and kisses the top of her head)

MOTHER

Go get washed up now.

(DAUGHTER walks into the bathroom to shower)

(The water runs and muffled sobs are heard. MOTHER is seen listening with an ear at the door.)

ACT II

Scene V

SETTING:

We return to the scene of THERAPIST's office. THERAPIST and DAUGHTER are positioned as they were in SCENE III. DAUGHTER is once again a senior in high school. THERAPIST, no longer wearing glasses, sits with her legs crossed. DAUGHTER is nearly as stone-faced as before. Now, there is a spotlight on the daughter and she is at the foreground.

DAUGHTER

We don't cry in my family. It's not that my mother is cold. She loves hugs and smiling and telling us all the things she likes best about us. But she loves too hard. My parents—they love me, I know. It makes me feel impossibly ungrateful. I cannot pretend that my happiness doesn't mean everything to them. Sadness is a slight to their sacrifice. Don't tell them the truth. That I'm not happy most of the time.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene VI

SETTING:

MOTHER and DAUGHTER are in the same kitchen seen in SCENE I. MOTHER is at the stove and DAUGHTER is kneading dough at the island.

MOTHER

(not looking up from the pot)

Could you pass me the—

(DAUGHTER hands MOTHER the cumin. MOTHER nods in thanks)

MOTHER

You know that movie, with the sports guy?

DAUGHTER

Are you talking about Tom Hanks? Who spoke to a volleyball in Castaway?

MOTHER

(laughs in delight)

You spoil me. No one else predicts what I am going to say like you do.

DAUGHTER

We *did* only watch Castaway three times last week.

MOTHER

Your brother is definitely obsessed.

DAUGHTER

What about the movie were you going to say?

MOTHER

Shoot, I forgot.

DAUGHTER

Do you want me to return it to the library?

(MOTHER turns and smiles tenderly at DAUGHTER)

MOTHER

By tomorrow please.

(MOTHER squeezes her cheek as DAUGHTER squirms away flicks flour at MOTHER, laughing)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

### Scene VII

SETTING:

In the THERAPIST's office, DAUGHTER and THERAPIST seem more at ease this time, still seated as they were in SCENE V. DAUGHTER is at the foreground and begins the scene by replying to a question THERAPIST had asked offscreen.

DAUGHTER

In our house, when we need to express something important, we don't use words. There's a piece of culture my parents brought over that remains persistent, even after we stopped speaking the language or watching the news of their country. That piece is an unspoken-ness or an understanding that runs through our family tying us closer together than even our blood, sometimes.

We hold each other to the expectation of anticipating each other's needs, and we don't have to say what we want, because such things are known. For our birthdays, we don't tell them what we want, because they're expected to know us, inside and out. It's how I know when my mom would really like another cup of tea, but is too tired to get one herself, and why I always make sure there is hot water in the kettle.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene VIII

SETTING:

MOTHER and DAUGHTER are back in the kitchen-space of SCENE I. MOTHER chops vegetables while DAUGHTER stirs the pot on the stove. Scene begins in comfortable silence.

MOTHER

I heard you cry once in the shower. I will never forget it.

(DAUGHTER puts down the ladle she was stirring with and looks out the window behind them.)

DAUGHTER

Tears should not fall so heavily.

(looks at MOTHER)

Let me cry, *madar*, and don't hold it against me for another 8 years.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene IX

SETTING:

In the same bedroom that appeared in SCENE IV. MOTHER sits at the end of her bed, but her hands are empty, closely resembling her position the last time we saw her on this bed, except her posture is slouched, as if she is carrying a weight on her shoulders, and she looks much older.

(DAUGHTER enters the bedroom)

DAUGHTER

I heard you didn't go to work today. That's unlike you. Are you sick?

(MOTHER does not reply and looks down at her hands.)

(DAUGHTER joins MOTHER on the bed, taking MOTHER's hands into hers. DAUGHTER begins crying and MOTHER looks up, terrified, upon seeing her tears. DAUGHTER smiles up at MOTHER and cups her hands around MOTHER's face, wiping imaginary tears MOTHER does not shed. DAUGHTER smiles.)

DAUGHTER

Sometimes it hurts on the inside.

(MOTHER smiles and tears fall as DAUGHTER wipes them away. DAUGHTER strokes MOTHER's hair and kisses the top of her head, as MOTHER had done for DAUGHTER in SCENE IV and countless other times. They spend a time crying together at the edge of the bed.)

DAUGHTER

Go get washed up. I'll be here when you're done.

(DAUGHTER smiles and gets off the bed, lifting MOTHER with her. MOTHER moves to the adjacent bathroom and smiles back at DAUGHTER)

MOTHER

I love you, you know.

DAUGHTER

I do.

MOTHER

And you make my life easier, even when you don't realize it.  
Ever since the beginning.

DAUGHTER

Can I tell you something?

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)