**Fever, 1793**

**by Laurie Halse Andersen**

a readers’ theater script for 10 readers adapted by Kristen Trent

**Mother Eliza Matilda Narrators 1-7**

**Narrator 1:** August 16th, 1793 Oh then the hands of the pitiful Mother prepared her Child’s body for the grave... —Letter of Margaret Morris Philadelphia, 1793

**Mother:** “Dead? Polly’s dead?”

**Narrator 1:** I couldn’t have heard her properly.

**Matilda:** “Polly Logan?”

**Narrator 2:** The sweat on my neck turned to ice and I shivered.

**Matilda:** “Our Polly? That can’t be.”

**Narrator 3:** I tried to remember the last time we had played together. It was before she started working for us.

**Narrator 4:** Last Christmas—no, well before that.

**Narrator 5:** Her family had moved to Third Street at least two years ago.

**Narrator 6:** She had been a cradle friend, the girl I played dolls with.

**Narrator 7:** We sang nonsense songs together when we churned butter. I could see it then, my small hands and Polly’s together on the handle of the churn.

**Matilda:** I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Mother led me inside by the elbow and I sat heavily on a chair.

**Narrator 1:** She quickly told Eliza what happened.

**Mother:** “There was no doctor in attendance,”

**Narrator 2:** Mother explained.

**Mother:** “She shook with fever briefly, three quarters of an hour, cried out once, and died in her own bed. They don’t know what it was.”

**Eliza:** “It could have been anything. There are so many fevers at summers end,”

**Narrator 3:** Eliza said.

**Eliza:** “Is anyone else in the house sick?”

**Mother:** “Sick with grief,”

**Narrator 4:** Mother said. She poured herself and Eliza each a mug of coffee.

**Mother:** “It’s a large family, she still has seven children under ten years, one a babe in her arms.”

**Eliza:** “We’ll pray they don’t take sick,”

**Narrator 5:** Eliza said as she took the mug.

**Eliza:** “Are any neighbors ill?”

**Narrator 6:** Mother blew in her cup and nodded.

**Mother:** “An old man who lives across the alley is rumored to be sick in bed, but you know how these stories catch fire. It’s strange though. She was a healthy girl, robust. Never saw her so much as sneeze before.”

**Matilda:** I kept my eyes closed, trying to see Polly happy, joking, maybe stealing a kiss with Matthew, then bursting through the door to tell me. It couldn’t be real. How could Polly be dead?

**Mother:** “Matilda, are you well? She looks peculiar, don’t you think, Eliza? Are you feverish?”

**Narrator 7:** She laid her hand on my forehead.

**Narrator 1:** Her fingers were rough but cool, and smelled faintly of lavender.

**Matilda:** I wanted to lay my head on her shoulder, but that would have been awkward.

**Narrator 2:** Mother slipped her hand to the back of my neck.

**Mother:** “She did not suffer, Matilda. We must be grateful for that.”

**Narrator 3:** She removed her hand and peered into my eyes.

**Mother:** “This heat is not healthy. You must tell me straight away if you feel peckish.”

**Matilda:** I waited for her to say something more about Polly. She did not.

**Eliza:** “We should send along something for the family. Her mother is in no condition to cook. Mattie could take a ham over.”

**Mother:** “No,”

**Narrator 4:** Mother said quickly. She set the coffee mug on the table with a thump.

**Mother:** “I don’t want her near there, not with a sickness in the air. Besides, she hasn’t played with Polly for years. The girl was our servant, not a friend.”

**Matilda:** “Yes, she was! Let me go, please. I’ll take some food, you know they need it, and I’ll pay my respects to her mother. It’s the proper thing to do.”

**Mother:** “I’ve already paid our respects. You’ll just upset her mother more. I’ll take a food basket there myself. Tomorrow. Now put on a clean apron, Matilda, and wash your hands. It’s time to get to work.”

**Matilda:** “I want to see her!”

**Mother:** “No.”

**Matilda:** “What about the funeral?”

**Narrator 5:** I asked, blinking back the tears.

**Matilda:** “You must let me attend that.”

**Mother:** “No. Absolutely not. I forbid it. You’ll have nightmares.”

**Matilda:** “She was my friend! You must allow me. Why are you so horrid?”

**Narrator 6:** As soon as the angry words were out of my mouth, I knew I had gone too far.

**Mother:** “Matilda!”

**Narrator 7:** Mother rose from her chair.

**Mother:** “You are forbidden to speak to me in that tone! Apologize at once.”

**Narrator 1:** The sun coming in the south window cast deep shadows under her eyes and cheekbones.

**Narrator 2:** She held her jaw tight, her eyes flashing with anger.

**Narrator 3:** She looked old, much older than she should.

**Narrator 4:** She hadn’t always been so pinch-faced and harsh.

**Narrator 5:** When Mother allowed herself a still moment by the fire on winter nights, I could sometimes see the face she wore when Father was alive.

**Narrator 6:** Back then Mother smiled at me with her eyes and her laughter and her gentle hands.

**All:** But no longer.

**Narrator 7:** Life was a battle, and Mother a tired and bitter captain.

**Matilda:** The captain I had to obey. “My apologies.”