

ON THE EXPECTATION OF
WHITE CHRISTMASSES

By
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ON THE EXPECTATION OF WHITE CHRISTMASES
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Character Breakdown

Mary (11): Earnest, headstrong, stubbornly loyal, naive.

Nana (55+): Cantankerous matriarch of the family, biting, sarcastic, demanding of respect, Irish brogue preferable.

Grandpa (55+): Nana's opposite—warm, open, deferential to his wife, protective of his granddaughter, Irish brogue preferable.

Katherine (late 30s-40s): Caring mother to Mary, but weak and less than courageous—defers to Nana out of self-preservation.

Lizzie (mid 20s): Hurt, angry, skeptical before her time due to her abandonment by her father, mother of two with a marriage that is threatened by her drinking.

Narrator *** (late 30s-40s): Mary as an adult, wizened, but retaining her innocence.

Jack (late 40s): World War II veteran who has not been able to keep his life together, guilt-ridden, scarred, has a drinking problem.

***Please note, the character of the Narrator can double as Katherine as well, if necessary.

On the Expectation of White Christmases was originally produced at Columbia-Greene Community College, Hudson, NY by The Michael J. Quill Irish Cultural Centre, featuring the following cast:

Narrator/Katherine.....Mary Ellen Nelligar
Mary.....Sarah Accarino
Grandma.....Terri Massimi
Grandpa.....John LeFever
Lizzie.....Ali Bernhart
Jack.....Rich Hack

This play is dedicated to the memory of Mary Ellen Nelligar.

ON THE EXPECTATION OF WHITE CHRISTMASSES

ACT I

A lower middle-class home in suburban New York, 1975. There is a front door downstage right next to an upstage front window, half-heartedly adorned with Christmas lights. The door opens up into a kitchen, taking up the majority of the center stage and upstage wall. The wall is done in wood paneling. There is an exit along this wall that leads to the (offstage) upstairs floor. Downstage left there is a plain sofa and TV facing away from the audience. In the upstage left corner there are boxes marked "X-MAS" and an unadorned artificial tree. The set should be "stiff," but not uncomfortable—the home of an older couple who have not had the need to decorate for Christmas, or entertain a child, in quite some time.

The set is dimly lit when the NARRATOR begins speaking, then slowly comes to life as the characters enter the scene. The Narrator is in her 40s, the adult version of the 11-year-old Mary character. During the opening monologue, as during the rest of the play, the other characters onstage are unaware of the Narrator's presence.

NARRATOR. I always associated my age as a girl with the grade I was in at the time. This Christmas Eve I wasn't "eleven," I was in fifth grade. I sat in the second row, third seat back, between Johnny Edgars (who never turned around) and Jean Louise Garrety (who always insisted she was my best friend.) My teacher was Mrs. Pendleton, who never liked me because I couldn't spell, a deficiency I never quite transcended. T-R-A-N-S-... And I'm no worse a person for it. Apparently, no one knew how to spell "dyslexia" in 1975 either. By the time Christmas break came that year, I was overjoyed to be home with my mother. Or rather,

in my Nana's home with my mother. *(Pause)* Christmas Eve 1975 was also the eve of the bicentennial. It was bad enough that wood paneling and stucco paint was all the rage—that year people had red, white and blue Christmas trees. Very weird. I guess after Vietnam and Watergate people wanted to believe in something again—even if it was bad taste. But that wasn't what I was thinking about at the time. I was thinking I wouldn't have to endure a spelling test for two weeks...and this Christmas would be the first time I saw my father since I was four. It snowed early in the day, a light, powdery snow—nothing with permanence. The ground was too warm in the part of New York we lived in, about sixty miles north of the city. Too close to the Hudson River for white Christmases, to my eternal disappointment. I still look expectantly into the night sky every Christmas Eve. I suppose I need to believe still. *(As the Narrator continues, MARY, 11, bounds to the front window and looks out expectantly. KATHERINE, her mother, and NANA, her grandmother appear in the kitchen, fussing over the final preparations for dinner. Katherine is 44 but appears younger, overweight, but by no means fat, with a full, open, inviting face. Nana is rail thin, dressed in a housecoat, which is her uniform, with a cigarette dangling perpetually from her lips. She is decidedly not open and inviting. The house, and especially the kitchen, is her exclusive domain. She was born in the county Cork and retains her Irish brogue.)* The year I was in fifth grade I received a birthday card in late September from an address in Manhattan I didn't recognize. There was a card inside that said, "Happy Birthday Daughter" with a picture of a duck. Inscribed in it was, "Mary, I have little right to ask, but with your permission I would like to be part of your life once more. Daddy." It's amazing how simple words can assume such profound proportions. In my mind he chose each one with utmost precision and care. Even leaving out "love" was a conscious choice. He didn't expect it back and would not stoop to manipulation. I told my mother about the card, though I didn't show it to her. I felt it was mine alone and shouldn't be lessened by sharing. She told me I had an adult decision to make. I stared at that card most of the night, wondering where he was when he wrote it. In the morning I sent him a letter with our phone number. I think my mother was happy for

me—if she wasn't, she never let on. My Nana on the other hand...
(*Light fades on Narrator and comes up bright on main set. Nana is cooking and Katherine is sitting at the table, while Mary looks out the window.*)

NANA. How long must we suffer to wait then?

KATHERINE. Daddy isn't even home yet, Mom, the table isn't even set.

NANA. The food is done. Not much to set a table.

KATHERINE. I'll do it—how many are we?

NANA. Your father and your two daughters...and the other one, if he ever decides to...

MARY. Mama, put Daddy's plate between me and you.

KATHERINE. I will, sweetheart. Isn't Lizzie bringing the kids?

NANA. She decided against it.

KATHERINE. Just her then.

NANA. I don't blame her.

KATHERINE. Of course *you* don't. (*Pause.*) I don't either.

MARY. Can I help? I feel so nervous just waiting.

NANA. If that's what it takes to get you to lift a finger around here, I'll make sure you're constantly waiting for something.

MARY. I was asking my mother.

KATHERINE. (*To Mary.*) Don't be fresh.

NANA. You best remember whose house you live in young lady, and whose food you eat. Always with the mouth, this one.

KATHERINE. Apologize to your Nana.

MARY. No. I didn't do anything.

NANA. Stubborn as a mule she is. (*Exiting upstage.*) Just like the father.

NARRATOR. And she was having a *good* day.

MARY. When are we moving back into an apartment, Mama?

KATHERINE. When I'm done with nursing school, I told you.

MARY. Can't we go sooner?

KATHERINE. Stop that talk. (*Beat.*) I wonder what's keeping your sister.

MARY. It's not that late. Most people say they're going to be someplace at a certain time when they don't mean to come until later.

That's true, isn't it? Three o'clock can mean three-thirty, or even a quarter-to. Can't it?

KATHERINE. Sure it can.

MARY. That's probably all it is, then.

KATHERINE. Probably. (*Hearing the sound of a car,*) Is that her?
(*Mary runs to the window.*)

MARY. It's just Grandpa.

KATHERINE. Isn't that a fine "how do you do?" (*GRANDPA enters through the front door. He is nearing retirement age, but is possessed of an elfin glint in his eye that defies age. He is as thin as Nana, and also speaks with a brogue, but is warm and friendly in all the ways she isn't.*)

GRANDPA. Half-a-day's work, now, my mother would roll over and spit in her grave to know I was slacking such, as tired as she must be still.

KATHERINE. When you go, Daddy, they'll have to nail the coffin shut so you don't get up for work the next day.

GRANDPA. Very like, very like, and there's no sin in it. And how's my fine figure of a granddaughter, pretty as a Christmas postcard in the window?

MARY. (*Unconvincingly.*) Okay.

GRANDPA. Oh, but don't you sound it then. I saw her pining away from the outside when I drove up and I thought, "Well look at that, now, such the granddaughter waiting for her Grandpa to drag his weary bones back from work." And there she pines still. So much for these old bones. So, who're you waiting on you want to see more than myself? Your sister?

MARY. No.

KATHERINE. Daddy...

GRANDPA. Oh. Oh, yes the...otherfella. Well bejeezuz the buses coming up from the city, they've got to be full to the brinks. And the cabs, they're sure to be having you waiting.

MARY. It's only three-thirty.

GRANDPA. So it is, so it is, then.

NANA. (*Off.*) Jimmy, is that you? I can hear your yapping clear through the walls.

GRANDPA. (*Raising his voice.*) Oh yeah, it's me. Listen, Loo, I've got to tell you something important. (*Winking at Mary.*) Lovva lapshta shlamba frinkibink Thursday!

NANA. What!?

GRANDPA. (*Feigning exasperation.*) I said, lovva lapshta shlamba frinkibink Thursday!

NANA. I can't understand a word you're saying. (*Nana enters. Grandpa sticks out his tongue in glee.*)

NANA. Ah, you pain in my ass. Where's the check?

GRANDPA. (*handing it over with a flourish*) The fruits of two weeks' labor I humbly bestow upon thee.

NANA. Stop your tongue-wagging, you've said all you need to for the month.

GRANDPA. And don't I get a home-cooked meal for my troubles? Where's the feast?

NANA. Never you mind where it is. You'll eat when I tell you to eat.

NARRATOR. This is about the time I always wanted to scream, "Hit her! Just coil your fist and belt her a good one in the jaw." She desperately needed it, he would be the first of his clan to earn the testicles God gave him and I would have just enjoyed watching. But Jimmy came from a long line of Irish ball-less wonders who would no more consider delivering a deserved punch as they would miss a day of work.

GRANDPA. Your mother's a hard woman, Katherine. As hard as the day is long.

NANA. Sure, haven't you made me so? If you had to suffer listening to yourself...

GRANDPA. Listening to meself is the best part of talking.

NANA. Ah, shut your hole. I haven't the time for your nonsense today.

KATHERINE. Why don't you open the wine bottle, Dad?

GRANDPA. Ah yes, the spirits. It must be a holiday to have this at the table such. (*Beat.*) Do'ya think it's such a good idea? With the...otherfella coming and all.

NANA. (*Directing it at Mary.*) Nobody dictates what I serve with my dinner in my house, least of all the like of him. We were going to have wine with dinner before this and we'll have it such now.

GRANDPA. We haven't had wine with dinner since your father passed away.

NANA. Stop your yapping, nobody was talking to you.

GRANDPA. Sure, who were you talking to, the wine?

MARY. (*Defiantly.*) I think Nana's right. We should leave it on the table.

NANA. See how this one speaks to me?

GRANDPA. For the love of God, didn't she just agree with you?

NANA. Poor Katherine. That's all I have to say.

GRANDPA. Ah, now. With the Christmastime and such. I have but the half day off from work.

KATHERINE. And tomorrow too, Dad.

GRANDPA. Ah, no. Sure, I had to trade it in for the half day today.

KATHERINE. You're working on Christmas Day?

GRANDPA. It's just a few hours they need.

NANA. Don't be ridiculous, you're not working tomorrow.

GRANDPA. Sure, I agreed to.

NANA. Sure, you'll just disagree.

GRANDPA. I have to go to work...

NANA. You can work at staying off my nerves. You have the Mass to attend in the morning.

GRANDPA. Ah, we'll talk about it. (*Exiting.*) Sure, let me do my business and when I come back, we'll discuss it, like. (*Grandpa exits.*)

KATHERINE. You're not going to let him work on Christmas Day, are you?

NANA. Of course not. Those blaggards he works with always trying to rope him into working the holidays... Don't you worry, he'll be going nowhere.

KATHERINE. How can you stop him?

NANA. Easy. I'll hide his pants.

KATHERINE. Won't he be able to find them?

NANA. The old fool wouldn't be able to count to twenty if I didn't show him where his toes were.

MARY. Mama, do you think Daddy took a bus?

KATHERINE. Probably.

MARY. Do buses from New York have that place underneath to put luggage and stuff?

KATHERINE. Thinking of planting a bomb?

MARY. No, I'm thinking about the bicycle...

NANA. Och, here again with the bicycle.

MARY. Daddy said he would bring it with him.

NANA. He's said a lot of things he didn't follow through on. He should be bringing seven bicycles, from training wheels on up.

MARY. You're just mad because you thought he'd never come back. You'll see.

NANA. I'll see all right. What'd I say since the girl was knee high, Katherine? She'll be the death of us all. It's bad enough I have to feed the man in my own home, I have to listen to this lip from the other one...

KATHERINE. Would you rather us go someplace else for dinner, Mama?

NANA. Ah no. Ah now that's not the thing. Ah Katherine, my poor Katherine. Sure, if the world could have treated you the way I would have it for you.

NARRATOR. I was never satisfied with the way Mama handled Nana's outbursts. Sure, she succeeded in getting her off my back. But it was always in the name of inspiring pity for herself. And her playing into that "poor Katherine" bit...I always took that as a tacit disapproval of me, as if Mama was agreeing that my presence, my very birth, was a hindrance to her happiness. I know she really didn't feel that way. But she was willing to let Nana think she did, and that was almost as bad.

Mama met Daddy when she was just seventeen. In the early fifties optimism after the Second World War. Within a year they were married, and my sister was born. I don't think my mother ever recovered that lost part of her childhood—but she attempted to each and every day with my

Nana. By the time I came along twelve years later, my parents had been split up for years. I was born in September of 1964, so I can only surmise that I was the result of a one-night, New Year's reconciliation. As I would sometimes say to my sister, at least the accident of my conception was romantic.

NANA. Let me check on your father. He's probably in there staring at the toilet paper wondering what to do next. *(Nana exits.)*

MARY. Why do you let her say those things?

KATHERINE. She has the same right to an opinion as you do. I'm not going to tell her what to say in her own house.

MARY. It's not even hers. Grandpa makes the money.

KATHERINE. Try telling Nana that.

MARY. I will.

KATHERINE. No, you will not. Don't be fresh.

MARY. I don't care how small our apartment was, at least it was ours.

KATHERINE. We couldn't afford to stay. Don't make me feel guilty on Christmas.

MARY. I'm sorry, Mama. *(Beat.)* Daddy's bringing me a bike. I don't really need anything else this year, so maybe we can save some money and...

KATHERINE. There's always enough for Christmas. *(Mary goes back to the window.)*

KATHERINE. Stand away from that window, you'll catch a death.

MARY. Do you feel the way Nana feels?

KATHERINE. *(Beat.)* Your father's had a difficult life.

MARY. He's just running late, Mama. Right?

KATHERINE. I hope so, sweetheart. *(Beat.)* Would you look at all this food!

MARY. I know. It's like shopping day.

KATHERINE. Ah, the feeling you get when the table's full and the refrigerator is stocked. It's better than...

MARY. Sex! You were going to say sex!

KATHERINE. I was not.

MARY. Yes, you were, you're turning red!

KATHERINE. Stop your fresh mouth. (*Beat.*) Let's eat as much as we can before Nana gets back.

MARY. You're the adult—if we get caught, I'm blaming you.

KATHERINE. Not if I blame you first. (*They begin to eat quickly as the Narrator speaks.*)

NARRATOR. The unbreakable bond in my relationship with my mother was our all-consuming passion for food. After school she would meet me at the door with an elfin glint in her eye and I knew she had somehow gotten money to shop. Without speaking a word, she would usher me into the kitchen and open the cabinet doors one by one to reveal her newfound booty, ending with the *coup de grace*, the refrigerator. It was like *The Price is Right* for fat people. Call it unhealthy if you will, but if you ever lived anywhere near the poverty line, you know whereof I speak. Or if you really, *really* like food. (*Nana enters, leading an obviously compromised Grandpa.*)

NANA. All right, all right now, stop your bellyaching. Just sit down at the table and rest your bones.

GRANDPA. Who can eat now?

NANA. It's not my fault you have a colon like a steel drum.

KATHERINE. What's the matter, Daddy?

GRANDPA. Ah, something is radically wrong.

NANA. Don't start the nonsense with the dinner on the table. If only your mouth shut as tight as your arse.

GRANDPA. I'm sitting on it, I tell you. Just sitting on it.

MARY. What's it feel like Grandpa?

NANA. Don't you start him going, now.

GRANDPA. Like someone bricked up my chimney. Tut, tut, tut, tut. Ah, it's terrible.

NANA. (*Noticing that the food has been picked over.*) Who's been at the food, now? (*Mary and Katherine point at each other.*) It's like to have little children again with the nonsense that goes on in this house.

MARY. I hear a car! (*Mary rushes to the window.*)

KATHERINE. (*Primping.*) Mama, do I look alright?

NANA. What do you care what you look? Would you primp for the man?

KATHERINE. I just don't want to look the mess.

NANA. Ah, stop, you're grand. She's grand, isn't she Jimmy?

GRANDPA. Who can tell with a chimney full of bricks?

KATHERINE. I'll be right back. (*Katherine exits, fussing over her clothes.*)

MARY. It's just Lizzie.

NANA. Well don't leave her out in the cold, go get the door for her.

(*Mary opens the door for LIZZIE, who enters with no jacket, carrying a shopping bag. She is 28, but appears older, lacking the vivacity one would normally associate with that age. She already has two children of her own and like her mother married young. Lizzie and Katherine can sometimes look (and act) like contemporaries rather than mother and daughter. Lizzie has had a few drinks, and while it should not be readily apparent yet there is the whisper of it.*)

LIZZIE. (*Whispering.*) Is Daddy here?

MARY. (*Matching her.*) Not yet.

LIZZIE. Oh. I thought he'd be here by now.

MARY. So did I. Why are we whispering?

LIZZIE. I don't know.

NANA. Well, her highness has decided to grace us with her presence. Lucky for you you're worth the wait.

LIZZIE. Hi Nana. I brought presents. (*To Mary.*) There's a surprise for you too, kiddo.

NANA. Ah, why'd you go and do that for? Look Jimmy, Elizabeth brought a present.

GRANDPA. Is it a pick-axe?

LIZZIE. Sitting on it again Grandpa?

GRANDPA. Ah, go on with you. Neither you nor your ancestors need feel what I'm feeling now.

NANA. Sure, didn't Elizabeth bear two children?

LIZZIE. They were Caesarian, Nana.

NANA. Even so. (*Katherine enters, having primped.*)

KATHERINE. Oh, Lizzie. It's you.

LIZZIE. Hi Mama.

KATHERINE. Why were so late. Trying to find your courage?

NANA. Sure, wasn't that what you were just doing in the bathroom?

GRANDPA. Sure, if only I could do anything in the bathroom!

NANA. Shut your fool hole. (*A beat as Grandpa begins to respond.*)
The other one.

KATHERINE. How are the boys?

LIZZIE. Fine. They're with Dave.

KATHERINE. I was hoping to see them.

LIZZIE. You'll see them tomorrow.

NANA. Sure, you will. We're just so happy to see you Lizzie, late or otherwise.

Lizzie, How could I miss another chapter in the never-ending saga of Grandpa's bowels? Has he said, "Something's radically wrong" yet?

MARY. Yeah, and the "bricked up chimney" thing too.

GRANDPA. Ah, this is more than a soul can bear. Tut, tut, tut, tut.
What's a soul to do?

NANA. Do something useful with yourself and open up the wine. Sure, didn't I ask you to do that a half-hour ago?

GRANDPA. All right, all right. (*Grandpa struggles to his feet and attempts to pull the cork out of the wine. After a brief struggle, he succeeds with an audible "Pop!"*)

Hallelujah and thanks be to God!—I'll be right back! (*Grandpa exits hurriedly.*)

NANA. Will a morsel of food pass our lips this day?

GRANDPA. (*Off,*) Start without me!

NANA. Well, there it is. If we don't eat now the food will be stone cold before long. Let's pray.

MARY. We can't eat yet. Daddy's not here.

NANA. Sure, we won't wait another seven years.

KATHERINE. He can eat whenever he gets here, sweetheart.

MARY. I'll wait for him.

NANA. You'll do no such thing. He's already set us back an hour.

MARY. Lizzie was late too.

NANA. We knew Lizzie was coming.

KATHERINE. Mama...

MARY. What do you mean?

NANA. Ah, stop your malarkey and come eat. *(To Katherine.)* It's your fault, you know, letting her get all excited about bicycles and such. Tut.

LIZZIE. Nana's right. How many times does the same thing have to happen? My graduation, my wedding, my sons being born...

MARY. Tell them to stop, Mama. Defend him.

KATHERINE. Let's just try to have a nice dinner...

MARY. *(To Lizzie.)* He's not coming to see you. *(To all.)* Not any of you. I'm the one he wrote to. He's coming to see me. And I'm not eating without him. *(Mary goes to the window and stares out.)*

NANA. You fresh thing you! You selfish, stubborn slip of a thing! Fine then, you set in that window all night long if you want, set there like that other fool in the toilet and wait. Your foolery won't ruin a dinner in my house. Now for the love of Christ and all that is holy, let us say a damn prayer! *(Grandpa enters, much relieved.)*

GRANDPA. Good God almighty in Your infinite mercy, from the bottom of me bowels I thank thee!

Katherine and LIZZIE. Amen!

NANA. We'll be lucky we don't choke after such a blessing.

LIZZIE. It's an Irish blessing, Nana.

NANA. Yeah, from the patron saint of stupid himself.

GRANDPA. Call me what you will, I'm a free man! *(Grandpa moves to carve the ham.)*

NANA. Did you wash your hands?

GRANDPA. Sure, what kind of man do you think I am?

NANA. Don't ask questions you already know the answer to. G'head and carve for the rest of us, then.

GRANDPA. Mary, will you be taking yours in the parlor now?

MARY. *(Without turning around.)* I'm not eating.

GRANDPA. What's with herself?

NANA. None of your business, just carve as I asked of you.

GRANDPA. But I think...

NANA. Well stop thinking when it comes to my family. *(Beat as Lizzie helps herself to a too-full glass of wine.)*

GRANDPA. Lizzie, will you be having some ham with your wine?

LIZZIE. I'm not very hungry.

KATHERINE. You seem to have quite the thirst.

NANA. Ah, don't be starting that now, sure isn't it Christmas Eve? I may be indulging in a spot myself.

LIZZIE. You Nana?

NANA. Aye. There's not a thing wrong with the bit of vice, as long as it's in moderation. It's when the bit controls a soul, there's where the problem be. Not my problem, no. Only those with a weak will and character are susceptible. A soul who has a fear of life uses the spot to puff out his chest, to hide the coward beneath. And sure, I've no use for such a soul.

MARY. Mama, I want to be excused.

KATHERINE. But you haven't eaten...

MARY. I'll eat later.

KATHERINE. Take a little something upstairs. Just to snack on.

MARY. I'll wait. (*Mary exits.*)

NANA. Tut, tut. Stubborn slip of a thing.

LIZZIE. She'll learn soon enough.

KATHERINE. Listen to you. Half in the bag just at the thought of seeing him again.

LIZZIE. What are you saying?

KATHERINE. Thirty degrees outside and you with no jacket...

LIZZIE. I am *not* half in the bag!

NANA. Sure, she's not.

LIZZIE. And if I were I'd have every reason to be. If he ever shows up, you'll be glad I took the edge off. It'll keep me from saying something I shouldn't.

KATHERINE. He's still you father.

NANA. Some father. Sure, was he ever such? Was he ever a husband...?

KATHERINE. When he could be.

NANA. They're not part-time jobs. A soul who doesn't earn his keep for his family...I'd hesitate to even call him a man!

GRANDPA. Let's not be so quick to be taking that away from him, now. Sure, didn't he serve in the big war?

NANA. Ah, stop jabbering of what you don't know.

GRANDPA. Sure, isn't this the topic I do have a degree of knowledge in, having been in the service myself.

NANA. Don't be turning this discussion into some tired old Army story.

GRANDPA. No, that's not the thing. That's not the thing at all. You see things, that's the point there. You see things that change you around—inside-like. The other fella was a gunner on a battleship, which is a lot easier to say than it is to be, I can tell you. With the Jap planes diving in suicide-like and such. You can't deny him being the man for all that.

NANA. Sure, didn't you come home and work for a living and have children and such. Didn't a million who'd been in the war do as well? Sure, didn't you come back and stay the man?

GRANDPA. I suppose I did.

NANA. Then shut up and carve the meat like I asked of you. (*Beat.*) No man should ever need another to make his excuses for him. And you Katherine, letting the girl go on with herself with bicycles and such.

KATHERINE. What do you want me to say to her?

NANA. You can tell her what to expect.

LIZZIE. Maybe I should talk to her.

NANA. You'll do no such thing. If she wants to starve her headstrong self she'll get little measure here.

GRANDPA. Ah now, let's be having the Christmastime and such.

NANA. For once in your life you speak some sense.

GRANDPA. I do have the moments, as they say.

NANA. Well, the moment at least.

NARRATOR. If you're wondering why I know about this part of the conversation, it's because I'm behind this wall over here (*As she gestures to the upstage wall.*) listening. The best way to find out what adults in my family were thinking was to leave the room. They loved to talk, and more than that they loved to talk on the sly. They'd gossip about the cat when it left the room, and all the creature did was walk to its food bowl and back. My Nana stayed 110 pounds her whole life because she could keep a morsel of food perpetually waiting on her fork while she went on and on. The Christmas Eve meal got eaten, I suppose, between argument and song—and each minute was torture for me. Not because my father wasn't there; just look at all the food I was missing!

For reasons unknown to mortal man, God granted my cantankerous, nasty, skinny-assed Nana the ability to cook like an angel. I don't know how angels cook, but I'm assuming they have to be good. Otherwise, what would be the point of heaven?

GRANDPA. (*Tapping a glass.*) Ding ding ding ding! A toast, a toast. To the connoisseur of cookery herself, who brought us this lovely meal this day.

NANA. Ah, go on with yourself.

KATHERINE. It was fantastic, Mama.

NANA. Ah, we haven't had dessert yet. 'Twasn't anything...

LIZZIE. I could never put together a meal like this.

NANA. That's true. You're no cook.

LIZZIE. Thanks a lot.

NANA. Sure, there's no shame in it. Everyone's got different hands. (*Gesturing toward the upstage door.*) The younger one, she's got cooking hands.

LIZZIE. Are you telling me that my eleven-year-old sister is a better cook than I am?

NANA. She will be someday. She's got the hands. Everybody's got their thing, everybody gets a share.

GRANDPA. What would be my thing, then?

NANA. Do you even realize how easy you make it?

KATHERINE. You're a hard worker, Daddy. Your thing is work.

GRANDPA. You see there? Katherine says I've got a thing. I work..

NANA. More than could be said for that deadbeat family of yours.

GRANDPA. Ah now, they're old country still.

NANA. Still living in the same apartment as when they got off the boat. And don't tell me all of Erin was unemployed just because your folk were on the dole.

GRANDPA. Ah now, that's not the thing to be saying at the table and such. And haven't I a job since age ten?

LIZZIE. Ten years old, Grandpa?

GRANDPA. Sure. Sure, in those days it wasn't a choice.

KATHERINE. Tell her what you did, Daddy.

NANA. Ah, don't start him now...

KATHERINE. I like this story.

GRANDPA. I used to run errands. I was an errand boy.

LIZZIE. That made you money?

GRANDPA. Sure, it did. Took me to some fancy places, too. Big, old, fancy Dublin estates, right proper, with the plumbing inside and all. And me knocking on the front door with me knickers with the holes in the knee and all, patched 'till you couldn't tell what color they were to start. They'd see me there with their package and practically drag me off the front stoop. Imagine that, the fancies having the like of me in their homes. One gentleman even gave me a bit of change to get myself some new knickers, so's I would look like I belonged there in the neighborhood, and such. Marvelous folks.

LIZZIE. What were you delivering?

GRANDPA. Sure, how would I know? The man at the office told me he'd hide me and put me out if I ever so much as peeked in the bag. I'd have been a fool to do so.

LIZZIE. Hold on—what type of office was it?

GRANDPA. A government office of some type. The man was a clerk there, or some such. Wasn't always a pleasure. Had my up half the night with the errands sometimes. But he was always happy when I'd return with the packages the fancies gave me back. I'd get a shilling—sometimes more if he were in a generous mood. Ah, that was good for eating in those days.

LIZZIE. Grandpa, are you saying a government clerk would send you to a fancy estate with a package, and they would give you one to bring back?

GRANDPA. Sure, isn't that what an errand is?

LIZZIE. And you never once looked in the package?

GRANDPA. Not on my life.

LIZZIE. Grandpa. You were running bribes.

NANA. Glory be to God!

KATHERINE. Do you really think so?

GRANDPA. Sure, the fancies were fine people. People with chimneys!

KATHERINE. So Daddy was a ten-year-old mobster?

GRANDPA. Ah now, cut out that talk...

NANA. Doesn't surprise me, knowing your family.

KATHERINE. That's why the man bought you new knickers! So you wouldn't look suspicious in the neighborhood!

GRANDPA. How can you talk about those high-class folks such? Sure, some of them fancies were the most generous people I ever knew. Didn't one of them give me fare to come to the States? And money in my pocket too, to buy some proper shoes. Now what would possess a man to do such a thing?

LIZZIE. He was paying you off Grandpa. He was probably in some kind of trouble and needed to get you out of the country to protect himself.

GRANDPA. Ah, what's the use of talking? I never did a dishonest deed in my life.

NANA. She's not saying you were dishonest, she's saying you were stupid. That I can believe.

GRANDPA. Well like it or not, you all owe your lives to those people you're calling thieves right now. If it wasn't for them I'd still be in Ireland right now, and I never would have met your mother. Think about that for a minute.

NANA. I could think about that all year.

LIZZIE. It's amazing to think that Grandpa grew up in a completely different place that I'll probably never see. And my boys are one hundred percent American.

NANA. Ah, they've the map of Ireland all over their faces.

GRANDPA. Especially the one with the big head.

KATHERINE. Daddy!

GRANDPA. More room for the brains...and such.

NANA. If only you could borrow some.

KATHERINE. Are the kids all right alone with Dave?

LIZZIE. Of course. He's great with them.

NANA. You could call them up to come over now. There's plenty of food and it's not so late—and the other one won't be showing his face, I'm sure.

LIZZIE. No, Dave doesn't like it when... He's gotten to be a real teetotaler, now with the kids. He gets all over me if I have more than one. This from the man who used to win drinking contests in college.

KATHERINE. Sounds reasonable with the boys around.

LIZZIE. Of course it sounds reasonable to Saint Katherine the Abstemious.

NANA. Ah now, she's good as gold, my girl. She's never been a bit of trouble.

LIZZIE. Except at my wedding.

NANA. Ah, you're a wicked girl to bring that up.

GRANDPA. Oho, the wedding! Katherine, you were like a candle lit at both ends.

NANA. She was not.

GRANDPA. Sure, she was dancing with a Brazilian busboy!

KATHERINE. I did no such thing.

GRANDPA. Got to the point he'd see you coming and run back into the kitchen screaming something in Spanish.

LIZZIE. Mama, are you blushing?

NANA. Now, you all leave my poor Katherine alone. Sure, if anyone had the right to...

LIZZIE. Get herself annihilated?

NANA. Sure, it was one night of her life. She didn't go making a career of it. We've had enough of that kind.

LIZZIE. Well this is my first night out from under the tyranny of my husband's drink counts since Matthew was born. I'm making the most of it.

GRANDPA. I never developed a taste for the spirits myself. My mother told me when I was a wee thing that there were two type of man—the kind that came home on Friday with his pay and the kind that fed his liver before he fed his children. I will never forget that wisdom.

NANA. Neither will we, with you repeating it every day of your life.

GRANDPA. Sure, it's the reason I don't drink.

NANA. The reason you don't drink is that you have the constitution of a nine-year-old girl. In the middle of your second drink you'd fall asleep

face down on the bar and get tossed out for snoring. Besides, you know that if you ever came home in such a state, I'd kill you in your sleep.

GRANDPA. If I had a nickel for every time you threatened to kill me in my sleep.

NANA. If I had one for every time I was tempted.

KATHERINE. Look, it's an Ozzie and Harriet Christmas!

NANA. I'm going to make the tea. Jimmy, put together that tree before dessert.

LIZZIE. Nana, how about a "please?"

NANA. Jimmy. Please don't screw it up like you did last year. (*Grandpa goes to the tree and begins assembling it, while Nana goes to the kitchen to make tea.*)

KATHERINE. So what happened between you and Dave?

LIZZIE. What do you mean?

KATHERINE. There must be a reason you didn't bring the kids.

LIZZIE. There is. His name is Jack Sullivan.

KATHERINE. It's not that. You wouldn't be away from your family on Christmas Eve unless something happened.

LIZZIE. Nothing happened, all right? (*Beat.*) He's just been all over me, like I said before.

KATHERINE. About your drinking...?

LIZZIE. I knew you'd take his side.

KATHERINE. What side did I take? I'm just asking.

LIZZIE. You're not asking, you're judging.

KATHERINE. I am not.

LIZZIE. You are so.

KATHERINE. Double am not.

LIZZIE. Double are so plus one.

KATHERINE. Am not infinity.

LIZZIE. Cheater.

KATHERINE. I know it wasn't easy coming here today.

LIZZIE. If I told that man everything I wanted to, I think I'd just...I'm not a kid anymore. I've got kids now. Oh, I don't know what I'm saying.

KATHERINE. Tell me what you'd tell him.

LIZZIE. Why?

KATHERINE. It might help.

LIZZIE. I don't want to curse in front of Nana. *(Beat.)* I'm just so angry. And angry that he can still make me angry. You cut him slack and tell yourself he can't help himself and he's a good man when all is said and done, but you still...want to punch him for every important moment he missed, or every time you had to see him lessen himself. Or for every Goddamned bicycle he promised... *(Beat.)* No more. I'm afraid I won't be able to stop once I start.

KATHERINE. It's okay.

LIZZIE. *(Pause.)* I bought her the bike. It's out in front of the house.

KATHERINE. What did you go and do that for?

LIZZIE. At least she'll have that under the tree.

KATHERINE. You're a good girl, Elizabeth.

LIZZIE. *(Very much a girl again.)* Thank you, Mama.

KATHERINE. She's been building this up more than Christmas itself. *(Beat.)* She must be hungry. Maybe I should talk to her.

LIZZIE. I'll do it.

KATHERINE. Are you sure?

LIZZIE. Don't worry. I'll get the drama queen to come eat. *(Lizzie exits through the upstage door.)*

NARRATOR. At this point, I was tear-assing up the stairs thinking hateful things about my sister. Drama queen? How dare she? In retrospect, though, she had me dead to rights. Everything back then was "always never, never always, why, why, why?" And if you think that sounds bad, you should hear *my* son. But that's material for another play. Maybe two. *(During the Narrator's following lines, the lighting changes and focuses on a spot where Mary sits in her "bedroom.")* But by the time I reached the top of the stairs, I realized she said she had bought me a bike. Why would she do that, when she knew I was already getting one? I didn't know what to think, but I guessed that being angry about it was not the proper response. *(At the edge of the light, Lizzie takes a flask out of her purse and takes a drink. Mary notices while pretending not to. Lizzie returns the flask and enters proper.)*

LIZZIE. Hey kiddo.

MARY. Hey.

LIZZIE. Hungry yet?

MARY. I'm starving.

LIZZIE. Why don't you come down and eat?

MARY. I won't give Nana the satisfaction.

LIZZIE. You can't win that one, kiddo. She'll be satisfied whether you eat or not. You might as well lose with a full stomach.

MARY. I hate her.

LIZZIE. Don't say that.

MARY. I do.

LIZZIE. How could you hate Nana?

MARY. You never had to live with her. Besides, she likes you.

LIZZIE. She likes you too.

MARY. Then why is she always... If it were just cleaning my room or doing the dishes, I could deal with it, but... It's like she's mad at me for being the way I am all the time.

LIZZIE. It's not you. It's Daddy.

MARY. It's because I'm like Daddy. She's mad because I don't hate him.

LIZZIE. She's known Daddy a lot longer than you have.

MARY. Whatever he did to her, I hope he got in a good shot for me.

LIZZIE. He left. He got in a good shot at all of us.

MARY. Then you and Mama should be mad at him, not Nana.

LIZZIE. You know how old Nana was when she married Grandpa?
Sixteen.

MARY. So.

LIZZIE. So, Nana got married when she was still a girl and she didn't want Mama to make the same mistake. But Mama was stubborn and thought she was in love—or she really liked the dress, I'm not exactly sure which.

MARY. I like "in love" better.

LIZZIE. Okay, then. Mama was in love and went ahead and married Daddy anyway, after Nana warned her not to do it. And then Daddy left.

MARY. Why wasn't Nana happy? She was right.

LIZZIE. I don't think she wanted to be right about that one, kiddo.

MARY. Nana would rather be right than President.

LIZZIE. Where did you hear that one?

MARY. I dunno. TV.

NANA. (*Off.*) Elizabeth! You leave off up there. We're nearly done with dessert.

LIZZIE. I'll be down in a bit!

MARY. You see?

LIZZIE. I tell you what. If I tell you a secret about Nana, will you come downstairs?

MARY. Who told you?

LIZZIE. Aunt Ellen.

MARY. Is it a good one?

LIZZIE. Does Aunt Ellen ever tell a bad secret?

MARY. Tell me, tell me, tell me.

LIZZIE. Okay, but this goes to the grave with you, all right? I must be getting stone drunk to even consider telling you this...

MARY. Stop stalling.

LIZZIE. (*Beat.*) The night Nana got married to Grandpa...she got scared and ran back home to her mother!

MARY. She didn't.

LIZZIE. She did. She stayed there for three weeks while Grandpa waited for her. Finally, our great-grandmother had to talk her into going back and becoming his wife.

MARY. Poor Grandpa. How did he ever get ready for work?

LIZZIE. I have no idea.

MARY. Wow. So that's it...Nana's afraid of sex.

LIZZIE. What?

MARY. She is, isn't she? That's what happens the night you get married, isn't it?

LIZZIE. Where did you hear that?

MARY. School.

LIZZIE. Shouldn't you be finger-painting and taking naps.

MARY. I'm in fifth grade.

LIZZIE. Nevermind. I never told you anything. And if you ever repeat what I just said, I will deny you're my sister at Nana's trial for your murder.

MARY. I won't tell. I promise.

LIZZIE. Good.

MARY. You'll see. Ask me next week if I told anyone, and you'll see...

LIZZIE. Okay...

MARY. So if you ever want to tell me any *more* secrets...

LIZZIE. One will do. Now come downstairs, you promised.

MARY. Okay. But I'm still not eating.

LIZZIE. Suit yourself. *(Mary begins to exit, then pauses before she leaves.)*

MARY. Don't you miss him?

LIZZIE. No.

MARY. Do you hate him?

LIZZIE. He's just a man. I don't need him anymore the way... I'm an adult now. I don't feel anything towards him.

MARY. Doesn't that make you sad?

LIZZIE. It used to. *(As Mary exits, Lizzie sneaks another drink. Lights slowly fade on "bedroom" during Narrator's lines.)*

NARRATOR. I hardly see my sister anymore. Which is a shame, because there was a time in my life when I quite literally adored her. I'd get up early in the morning to watch her putting on her make-up in the bathroom mirror as she prepared herself for work. There was magic in the way she could extend her eyelashes with a few gentle strokes and gradually, meticulously turn her lips into roses. I loved the stockings she wore, the mysteries in her pocketbook, the way her blouses smelled of perfume. I was completely in awe of her. And completely up her ass. So much so that she took to sneaking out of the house in the morning. I remember running to the window to see if her green Mazda was still there. If it wasn't, I was inconsolable—I missed my Lizzie! Because in those few morning moments she *was* mine. I'd run to the bathroom and see the dew on the mirror and the whole world was desolate. Corny, I know. Idolization usually is. I grew up. The contract changed. She couldn't stay my ideal older sister any more than I could stay an adoring little girl. But I still miss my Lizzie. *(Mary enters to original set.)*

GRANDPA. Ah, there's the girl! 'Tis herself!

NANA. At least you came to your senses. I'll get a plate...

MARY. No Nana. I mean no thank you.

NANA. Ah, you...you'll be getting no dessert without dinner!

MARY. You can give mine to Mama.

KATHERINE. I had a piece already. No more for me.

NANA. Sure the piece you had wouldn't feed a squirrel.

KATHERINE. I have to watch myself.

MARY. I have to watch myself too.

NANA. Do you see the way she talks?

KATHERINE. She isn't hungry, Mama.

NANA. She's never had a non-hungry day in her life.

NARRATOR. That was fairly accurate.

MARY. I'm not eating until it's time.

GRANDPA. Well while you're waiting, m'lady, do you happen to know any elves who might be in the mood to assist me in the decoration of a Christmas tree?

KATHERINE. That's a good idea, help your Grandfather.

GRANDPA. The girl? Sure, I never thought of her. Tell me young lady, do you have any experience in the hanging of lights and the pinning of bows?

MARY. Yes sir. I have two years of lights and bows are one of my specialties.

GRANDPA. Are you with a union?

MARY. United Tree Decorator's Local 101.

GRANDPA. Hm. Tell me, where do you see yourself in five years?

MARY. I hope to be a sophomore in high school...

NANA. Ah go on and decorate the tree before I strangle the both of you.
(Mary joins Grandpa in decorating the tree.)

NANA. Flouts me is what she does. Flouts me in my own home.

KATHERINE. She's not trying to flout you, Mama.

NANA. Sure, she is. She's not dumb, that one. She's soft, like you were. Soft for the like of that father of hers. She's got your soft and his stubborn, and neither trait is admirable. She needs them burned out of her. She needs...

KATHERINE. A better mother...

NANA. Ah, now. Ah, now that's not the thing. Sure you've done the best you could with the circumstances such. Ah, my poor Katherine. My poor, poor Katherine. (*Lizzie enters, now more noticeably drunk.*)

LIZZIE. Poor Katherine. Poor, poor, poor Saint Katherine of Perpetual Misery.

NANA. What's wrong with this one, now?

KATHERINE. She found her courage.

NANA. On that cheap wine?

LIZZIE. Nana. There are no cheap wines. Only cheap...

KATHERINE. All right, it's time to lie down on the couch.

LIZZIE. Mama, I love you. I love ya, love ya, love ya. I love you so much I wanna...squeeze you until your head pops off. You know that?

KATHERINE. I know it.

LIZZIE. And Nana. You're the best Nana I got.

NANA. I'm the only Nana you got.

LIZZIE. There you go.

KATHERINE. (*Leading Lizzie to the couch.*) C'mon, little girl, it's time to lie down and watch some TV...

LIZZIE. (*Noticing the Christmas tree.*) What a beautiful tree. I love this tree.

KATHERINE. The tree loves you too.

LIZZIE. Do you think so?

Katherine, I know so. Everybody loves you.

LIZZIE. Except Daddy...

KATHERINE. Your father loves you too. (*Beat, then to Mary and Grandpa, who have stopped decorating.*) What are you two staring at?

GRANDPA. We need something shiny for the top of the tree. We thought we'd use Lizzie.

NANA. Ah, go on with you. (*Katherine gets Lizzie set up on the couch, then sits down and looks at the decorating job on the tree.*)

KATHERINE. Look at the job they're doing on the tree, Mama. It's just beautiful. (*Beat.*) Except...Mary there's a spot right down there...no, a little higher...there you go. And Daddy, up on the left...it needs more light, I think. Oh, and there's another bare spot...

GRANDPA. Katherine, you wouldn't want to get off your duff and hang a bow yourself, would you?

KATHERINE. No, you two are doing a wonderful job. (*Beat.*) Just that spot near the top...

LIZZIE. Mama look! It's the Yule Log!

MARY. The Yule Log is on? Grandpa, can I take a break?

GRANDPA. According to union guidelines, you have to work a minimum of two and one half hours...

MARY. I'm underage—I'll sue!

GRANDPA. You'll make a fine rep someday. Go on with your Yule Log.

LIZZIE. "Live from Gracie Mansion...it's a log on fire!"

NARRATOR. For the uninitiated, a few words of explanation. The Yule Log was a peculiar Christmas Eve tradition in New York. Basically it consisted of exactly what my sister said: somebody at WPIX sent a cameraman out to Gracie Mansion to film a fireplace, and then they set it to Christmas music. That's it. No plot, no car crashes, no ghost stories—just hours and hours of flickering fire. Every once in a while they'd pull back for the wide-angle shot, but they always moved right back in for the close-up. It ran for twenty years. It's just a paranoid theory of mine, but I think they were secretly hypnotizing people. (*"Let It Snow" begins to play.*)

NANA. What are you watching this nonsense for? Sure, it's just a fireplace. (*Pause.*) What in the world...is that Andy Williams?

KATHERINE. Yep. (*They watch for a bit in silence.*)

NANA. It's kind of pretty now, isn't it?

MARY. It never stays the same. (*They watch some more. "Do You Hear What I Hear" is heard.*)

GRANDPA. Now what would possess a television station to point a camera at...?

NANA. Shush yourself. Bing Crosby is on.

NARRATOR. Now, I don't want you good people to think we did nothing all Christmas Eve but watch the Yule Log. "The Bishop's Wife" came on at nine. (*Nana and Grandpa exit together. Mary is curled up next to Katherine on the couch as Lizzie sleeps.*) And as soon as Nana

and Grandpa went to bed, my mother the Catholic rebel passed over the Midnight Mass in favor of “Scrooge” with Alistair Sim—still the one and only definitive version as far as I’m concerned. I always fell asleep in exactly the same place... (*Marley’s Ghost is heard, saying “Business? Humanity was my business! Their common welfare...”*) At which time I buried my face in my mother’s bosom and immediately passed out, dreaming of Dickensian ghosts and my mother’s cool hands. (*Katherine leads Mary offstage. She reenters with a blanket and covers Lizzie, sighs, walks to the phone and dials...*)

KATHERINE. Dave? Hi, it’s Katherine. (*Beat.*) She’s here. I’ll make sure she gets home before they wake up, don’t worry. (*Beat.*) Okay, kiss the boys for me. I’ll see you tomorrow. (*Beat.*) Bye-bye. (*Her jobs done, Katherine goes to the refrigerator and takes out the remains of a pumpkin pie and a can of egg-nog. She brings them over to the couch and settles in for a night of “Scrooge” and eating.*)

NARRATOR. I’m assuming this part—but believe me, it’s an informed guess.

My Daddy hadn’t come. But Jacob Marley’s ghost promised middle-of-the night visitations. How prophetic he would be. The ghost of my Christmases past would soon be making his long-awaited arrival.

END OF ACT I

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