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ON BETHEL ROAD: A Christmas Story

A Dramey by
Ruth Tyndall Baker

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ON BETHEL ROAD: A Christmas Story

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CHARACTERS

3W / 3M + Offstage Voices

MARGARET: Age 69, she is sometimes clear, sometimes confused, entering into a period where at times reality and memory are one. She has had recent hip surgery. A vociferous reader, she is the wife of Phillip – now deceased – and the mother of Pauline and Jerry.

PHILLIP: Age 60's, he is now deceased but alive in Margaret's mind.

PAULINE: Age 39, daughter of Margaret, she is a successful businesswoman.

DAVID: Age 40, he is a neighbor of Margaret and is Pauline's boyfriend.

SANDRA: Age 30, more-or-less, she is a caretaker/helper of Margaret.

ROY: Age 60's, he is also deceased and best friend of Phillip.

THREE VOICES: These child-like offstage recorded voices of Margaret's siblings are heard in brief, dream sequences reminding Margaret of her childhood Christmases on the farm.

MOTHER'S VOICE: Recorded.

RADIO VOICE: Male or female, Recorded.

SETTING

TIME: The present. Also, in Margaret's mind, in the past and in eternity.

PLACE: Margaret's living room in the Mid-West. Also, a fishing spot.

ACT I

A week before Christmas

ACT II

Scene One: *Several days later*

Scene Two: *Christmas Eve*

PRODUCTION NOTES

SET: The living room is furnished with memorabilia of the family including a large photo of Phillip, Jerry and other family portraits placed where Margaret can easily view them from her chair. Books and magazines are plentiful. An electric lift chair (like Lazy Boy) is being unboxed. A telephone is nearby. A board with pegs holds keys by the front door. A generous arch frames the hallway upstage which leads to an outside door SR and to the kitchen SL. There is a closet door. A small porch stoop is suggested R apron. A Christmas tree is added in Act II. In several places, dialogue flows from real time to flashback and forward again, and lighting will do much to clarify these changes. If possible, at the end of the play, stars should be seen first on the stage and then spill overhead into the audience space. Music preshow and at curtain.

ETC

ON BETHEL ROAD: A Christmas Story premiered with allforOne Productions in Fort Wayne, Indiana under the title *A Christmas Key* directed by Lauren Nichols and featuring:

Cindy Stehlik as Margaret

Lisa Ellis as Pauline

Paula Young as Sandra

Dennis Nichols as Phillip

Terry Ellis as David

Michael Wilhem as Roy

ON BETHEL ROAD: A Christmas Story

ACT I Scene One

SETTING: *MARGARET'S living room, somewhere in the Midwest, a week before Christmas.*

AT RISE: *Caretaker SANDRA is in upstage hallway letting in PAULINE who carries a laundry basket past the hallway door and out of sight. SANDRA then enters the living room. PHILLIP (Margaret's deceased husband) and ROY (Phillip's deceased friend) are moving a large carton and then taking it apart. An auto-lift arm chair is out of sight behind the carton. MARGARET watches them distractedly.*

MARGARET

Who was that at the door?

SANDRA

I let Pauline in. She has her hands full of laundry.

MARGARET

Laundry?

SANDRA

I told you her washer broke down, and she's got to pack tonight for her flight.

MARGARET

Flight?

SANDRA

Now don't go into that 'She didn't tell me' sing-song. You know Pauline's going to San Francisco. Don't worry; she'll take time to listen to some Christmas music with you before she leaves. So, relax and enjoy yourself in your new chair. I've got to get the dishes washed up and tea on before David gets here. ("Tee-hees" on exit) Pauline don't know he's coming!

MARGARET

You mean she's left her laundry until the last minute? That girl! Oh, Phillip! Watch out for the lamp! Over there!

PHILLIP

Where?

MARGARET

Over there! No, no, ease it into that corner; I suppose that's where it needs to go.

PHILLIP

Make up your mind, Margaret, because we're not wrestling this box around the room one more time!

ROY

It's heavy.

MARGARET

I'm not prepared! Pauline didn't tell me, and I'm not prepared!

ROY

It's heavy!

MARGARET

Why would she buy one of these contraptions without talking to me about it?

PHILLIP

You got it whether you want it or not so stop complaining!

MARGARET

I am not complaining, Phillip. I am asking why she would buy—

PHILLIP

—That's complaining, Margaret.

ROY

Did you hear me? It's heav-y!

MARGARET

I don't know where to put it. I had everything in this room arranged just right, and then Pauline went out and bought—

PHILLIP

—Well, let's get this elephant unwrapped and see what it looks like.

MARGARET

Elephant?

PHILLIP

Oh, now, Margaret, it's not really an elephant. (*To ROY*) I've got to be careful of what I say. She's starting to get mixed up once in a while.

ROY

—Not an elephant? What're you talkin' about elephants for, then?

PHILLIP

(Continuing to remove cardboard and folding it)

It's a chair, you fool! An electric chair!

ROY

Electric? Whoa! Let me get this straight. You want to... "electrocute" her?

PHILLIP

No, it lifts the seat up so she can get out of it more easily.

ROY

So it moves.

PHILLIP

Yes, Roy, it moves. Don't let your brains go to mush on me, too.

ROY

You don't know a good joke when you hear one! I think I saw one of these on TV. I think they're called auto-lifts. I think I'd like one of them.

MARGARET

I bet that's where Pauline heard about them—on television. But it'll get in the way of your rocker, Phillip! I want your rocker brought back in here.

PHILLIP

Well, you told me to put it here. You are the fussiest woman—but *(Giving her a peck on cheek)*—love you anyway! Now we'll position it here; and if you decide you don't like it, we can move it later.

ROY

It-is-heavy, Phillip!

PHILLIP

We already put it down! Now, I'll get it plugged in. All you have to do is slide the knob up or down. *(Showing Margaret)* Up...Down. Up...Down. I'll get it plugged in, and you can try it out.

He plugs it in and exits.

ROY

(Exiting)

I'll get this cardboard out of here. It isn't heavy.

PAULINE

(Entering)

I got my last load of clothes in, but I still need to go over my travel arrangements with Sandra.

MARGARET

Wh-where'd they go?

PAULINE

Where'd who? No one was here, Mom.

MARGARET

Why, yes! They were here a minute ago; they took the contraption out of the box.

PAULINE

Those were the movers, Mom. They delivered your chair yesterday. Hope you like it.

MARGARET

But I don't think I told you I wanted—

PAULINE

—Merry Christmas! It's your surprise gift. But I have another one all wrapped up for you at my apartment; I know how you like to unwrap gifts. And remember we'll have our Christmas dinner when I get back.

MARGARET

I am not forgetting. But? Pauline, Pauline, don't take this the wrong way, but there weren't any delivery men here yesterday. It was now, right now I saw that chair for the first time when—

PAULINE

—Oh, don't tell me you think— I thought I heard you talking to Dad and—to someone, but the chair was delivered late yesterday. You've used it already.

MARGARET

Why, I don't believe I have, Pauline! Phillip and Roy brought it in...and set it up...and took the box away a moment ago...unless I was dreaming. Was I dreaming?

PAULINE

I suppose you were, Mom. I guess it doesn't matter when it came or who delivered it as long as you like it. Go on, sit down. You'll find it a lot more comfortable than Dad's rocker. You can put your feet up and fall asleep in this one.

MARGARET

Maybe I'd rather have your father's rocker in here. You change so much around. Nothing's the same. Everything gets changed around, even the holidays. And what about the fruitcake? Last year you wanted to learn how to make the fruitcake so I turned that over to you. And what happens? Now you go to California. No fruitcake.

PAULINE

I made the fruitcake, Mom! I made it!

MARGARET

Well, where is it?

PAULINE

I'll bring it over. Now stop worrying about a stupid fruitcake. (*MARGARET's face reflects hurt feelings.*) Oh, Mom. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I know you always made it special for Dad. But I've got so much to do before my trip, and I'm thinking about how the clients will—

MARGARET

—Not special for your Dad. I guess you don't know everything about everything. My mother made it every year for our whole family. And her mother made it every year for them...and-so-on.

PAULINE

Yes, of course. ...Mom, I, I don't have any choice in the matter. I have to go to San Francisco. No one else in the company.... Well, it's the responsibility of my department, and I'm the head of it now.

MARGARET

I thought that meant that you're the boss. You should be able to come and go as you please as long as the work gets done. You boss the workers. That's how the 'Head of a Department' does it.

PAULINE

Sales doesn't work that way. I'm the one who closes the—oh, never mind. Now I've marked your calendar, see? Christmas is a week from today. I'll be home Tuesday after Christmas if all goes well. And you won't lack for company. Tina said she'd be over to play cards.

MARGARET

Like we usually do.

PAULINE

Sandra will stop in for breakfast to make sure you eat something and take your meds. She'll check in with you about ten thirty before you go to bed to see if everything's okay.

MARGARET

Um.

PAULINE

I've put these little yellow stickers on the times for your food and meds and when Sandra's coming.

MARGARET

There's smiley faces all over that calendar. I don't need smiley faces to remind me to eat! Good grief, Pauline, I had hip surgery—not brain surgery.

PAULINE

I don't know what I'd do without Sandra.

MARGARET

If I hear you say that one more time, I'll scream.

PAULINE

Good. It shows me you're listening. I'll be calling Sandra every day to make sure you—

MARGARET

—I feel like you're spying on me, Pauline.

PAULINE

Well, why wouldn't I want everything to go like clockwork while I'm gone? It's for my peace of mind, too. *(Beat)* Sandra tells me you've misplaced your watch.

MARGARET

No, I did not 'misplace' it. I accidentally, when I took it off to wash my hands— accidentally, mind you—it slipped right out of my hand. *(Beat)* Fell in the toilet.

PAULINE

The toilet? What did you do with it?

MARGARET

I rinsed it off, of course! It fell in the toilet, for heaven's sake.

PAULINE

Oh, mom. It's your good watch. I hope it isn't ruined. And I don't have time to get it checked out now.

MARGARET

That's why I put it back in its box, —second drawer in my Highboy. I didn't want to bother you.

PAULINE

It's not a bother, mom! It's just that I need to— Maybe Sandra can get it checked out.

MARGARET

This is why I shouldn't have stopped driving. I could've taken the watch in myself, but—I yielded to your 'suggestion.' And just because I drop something doesn't mean you have to watch me like a hawk. I am not ready for "Shady Valley."

PAULINE

I know you're not. Oh, mom... *(Beat)* Sandra and I try so hard to—

MARGARET

—Yes, you do. But it's for your convenience. I don't like Sandra standing over me telling me to take my pills like I'm a child—just like I told you to brush your teeth when you were little. And I don't like stickers! I don't like a lot of things, but I try to, to... *(Sighs)*

PAULINE

(Beat)

As soon as my last load is done, I'll be on my way.

MARGARET

(Beat)

It's a good thing our clothes washers don't break down at the same time.

PAULINE

I hate laundromats.

MARGARET

Are you taking your red dress?

PAULINE

Yes, but I'll be lucky if I get to wear it out to dinner one time.

MARGARET

It's okay if you travel and have fun. I want you to have fun.

PAULINE

It's not a vacation, Mom.

MARGARET

I'll have company anyway for Christmas. *(With a half smile, knowing this will irritate Pauline)* Phillip and Roy and Tina and I'll have a good time playing cards.

PAULINE

Get real, Mom. I wish you wouldn't joke around so much. You know you'll be playing two-handed gin with Tina. I'll have Sandra pick up some microwave popcorn for you.

MARGARET

(Grouchy)

Microwave.

PAULINE

I sure hope Sandra understands you're pretending Dad and Roy are—

MARGARET

—I am perfectly clear on everything except why you have to travel right at Christmas! It makes no sense. There's nobody to have turkey with unless you're here, and I'm not being selfish; you need family, too. I may not want a tree this year but, but I do want Christmas

MARGARET, *Continued*

dinner together. The family gets smaller and smaller every year, smaller and smaller...

PHILLIP appears while Pauline speaks.

PAULINE

...I know it's hard. I have my moments, too. I miss Dad. I miss Jerry. He was the best little brother a sister could ever have. But I'm thankful I have you and Sandra. And Tina's like an aunt to me. We just have to be a little flexible now... Do you want me to pick up something special for her in San Francisco?

MARGARET

San Francisco?

PAULINE

Yes, I could bring home a Christmas present for Tina.

MARGARET

Isn't she a good friend.

PAULINE

(Turning away; folding some clothes already in the room)

I'll pick up something with 'California' on it for her.

MARGARET

(In her mind as PHILLIP steps out)

She's going to California, Phillip. We never got that far west.

PHILLIP

I saw the Golden Gate Bridge after I was discharged from the Navy. I know why they call it Golden. It was beautiful at sunset. Did I ever tell you that?

PAULINE

Do you know where Sandra keeps the extra tissues?

MARGARET now responds to PHILLIP aloud.

PAULINE hears her mother but not PHILLIP.

PAULINE'S remarks are under, as if in the background.

MARGARET

Why, no.

PAULINE

I can always buy a travel pack at the airport.

MARGARET

Where else have you been that you've never told me?

PAULINE

Why, mother! I tell you every single time I have to leave town and where I go!

PHILLIP

I certainly told you about the Grand Canyon, didn't I?

MARGARET

No.

PHILLIP

Think hard, Margaret. I must have told you.

MARGARET

No, you didn't.

PAULINE

I'm sorry you think that. I'll try my best to get back earlier. I'm sure the other company rep wants to finish up before Christmas, too, but flights are nearly impossible to change at this time of year.

MARGARET

(To self)

Maybe I did know. I don't want to be like this; forgetful, mixed up.

PAULINE

I know that Mom.

MARGARET

...Sometimes not even knowing what day of the week it is unless I read the newspaper....
"Time is but a stream I go—

MARGARET/PAULINE, *Together*

—afishing in."

PAULINE

I forgot you used to say that a lot! You're always surprising me, so don't talk about your memory; you remember the darndest things. So who said that originally?

MARGARET

Why, it was...what?

PAULINE

I wondered if you remember who said that originally, who you quoted...about fishing in time.

MARGARET

Oh.

PHILLIP

You told me it was Thoreau. You were always surprising me, too, with your knowledge.

MARGARET

(Back to PHILLIP)

Thoreau, yes, Thoreau. Tina thinks she'll catch up with me just because she's volunteering at the library now.

PAULINE

Even if she reads every book in that library, she'll never catch up with you.

PHILLIP

(Overlapping)

She'll never catch up with you, Margaret. *(Exiting)* See you later, when we can be alone.

PAULINE

(Sorting)

There are plenty of fresh towels for you while I'm gone.

MARGARET

This must be Monday if you're washing.

PAULINE

People don't have to wash on Mondays any more. I'm leaving tomorrow so I'll have a full week to get the project off the ground. Then I thought, as long as I was there, I thought I would, would take some time to...ah, I'll fly back home on Tuesday.

MARGARET

I hope that's all right with David. I wouldn't want him upset about your going.

PAULINE

Why, I don't think he is. He's never said anything. To tell you the truth, I never talk over my schedule with him. I don't even think he misses me; he keeps busy working on his drafting projects.

MARGARET

Maybe you'll get to see the Golden Gate Bridge, too. It's supposed to be beautiful at sunset. Promise me you'll see it at sunset!

PAULINE

(Acknowledging MARGARET's urgency)

All right. I'll plan on doing that. And I'll bring back a postcard of it for you.

MARGARET

Mail it to me.

PAULINE

W-Wha?

MARGARET

It will make it more real that you were there.

DAVID KNOCKS. PAULINE crosses to entryway.

PAULINE

David! Thought I'd see you later at my apartment!

DAVID

(Entering, flowers behind back)

Hey, there! Couldn't wait. Sandra told me about your promotion! Congratulations!

PAULINE

I wanted to tell you myself.

DAVID

Flowers for a flowering lady.

PAULINE

Oh, they're beautiful but you know they're not necessary.

MARGARET

(Calling out)

David? Just don't stand there. Come on in and have a seat.

DAVID

How's she doing?

PAULINE

She's having anxiety...worrying more than ever about everything. And she doesn't want a tree this year. We always put one up together.

DAVID

Shhh. Calm down

PAULINE

And mixed up! She thought Dad and Roy delivered the chair this morning and— I think because it's Christmas and I won't be here, but I'll make it up to her. Oh, David, she's too young to be getting so, so confused and fretful and—

DAVID

—Shhh. I know, but she's in good hands.

PAULINE

If she hadn't had that hip problem. I told the doctor it still bothers her. He said she'd get more secure eventually but— Oh, I don't want to think about it. I don't know what I'd do without Sandra.

DAVID

Between you and Sandra, you've done more than enough for her care and comfort. She's fine. Now. How are you doing?

PAULINE

On the run, but I'm down to my laundry and packing...less than twenty-four hours to go.

MARGARET

Bring him on in here for heaven's sake, Pauline!

DAVID

You need to take better care of yourself.

PAULINE

And you need to stop fussing over me.

DAVID

I worry that you spread yourself too thin.

PAULINE

Well, don't. I'm fine.

DAVID

(Entering)

How you doing, Mrs. Murphy?

MARGARET

I'm doing very well. And isn't it time you call me something other than Mrs. Murphy?

PAULINE

Mom...

MARGARET

I am not Mrs. Murphy to David. Now, David, you can pick. Whatever you want to call me is perfectly fine.

DAVID

I need to think about that, Mrs. Murphy.

MARGARET

Now that we have that on the table, did you come over to visit with me or to eat Sandra's cookies? We don't have any of the Murphy fruitcake yet.

DAVID

I thought I'd do a little of each, but I don't want to intrude on your time with Pauline.

MARGARET

(Not buying that)

Intrude on my time with Pauline.

DAVID

Actually, I thought I'd ask about installing a doorbell for you for Christmas.

PAULINE

What a great idea!

MARGARET

I don't need one of those things.

DAVID

No, you don't need one, but—

MARGARET

—Can I have one that plays a tune? Tina's plays a tune.

DAVID

That'll cost you several more sugar cookies.

MARGARET

I'd like an old-fashioned tune. Pauline would like classical, but not me. ...Oh! Flowers! For me?

DAVID

Sorry. For Pauline. Her promotion.

MARGARET

Oh, yes. Her promotion. For her reward, she gets to go away right at Christmas time.

PAULINE

(To DAVID, under her breath)

See? She pours the guilt on me.

DAVID

(To PAULINE)

Let me talk to her.

DAVID, *Continued*

(*To MARGARET*)

Mrs. Murphy...

MARGARET

(*Protesting the name*)

Ah-ah-ah!

DAVID

Mrs. "M"...

MARGARET

Only Sandra calls me that.

DAVID

Pauline's Mom, then, for now. Do you know I'd rather be here with you than anywhere else? In fact, on Christmas eve I'm going to come over, drink tea and—

MARGARET

—eat Sandra's sugar cookies—

DAVID

—until they're all gone, and listen to your stories. Now what do you think about that?

MARGARET

You are so, so transparent, David. You came over tonight to be with Pauline.

DAVID

I'm glad you see through me. Now I don't have anything to hide.

SANDRA

(*Entering carrying several large wrapped boxes*)

Except these packages you left by the back door. I'll put 'em here. (*Exits*)

PAULINE

(*To DAVID*)

You didn't go and spend more on me, did you? I told you one present is enough.

DAVID

I wanted you to have this sooner but the order didn't come in until—here, open it.

PAULINE

It can keep until I get back. We'll do Christmas then.

DAVID

No, it can't wait. You might need it on your trip.

PAULINE

I don't need anything this big. You've got to quit giving me so much.

SANDRA

(Entering with cookies)

Oh, stop complaining and open it! I want to see the look on your face when you— Oh. It's the big box. Well, open it anyways.

PAULINE

What did you— I can't believe you went to all this trouble when I told you I don't want or need another thing— *(Pulling out a red, designer travel bag)* Oh, David! I love it! *(Hugs him)*

DAVID

Will you take it on your trip and think of me?

PAULINE

Ouuh, guilt, guilt, guilt! I wish I didn't have to go but I have no choice!

DAVID

No guilt. No problem, really. I know you love your work or I would be upset.

MARGARET

Don't coddle her, David. Put your foot down. She'll be out there in, in wherever, all alone at Christmas. I can't think of anything worse.

DAVID

I can't put my foot down. She's a grown woman.

PAULINE

(To DAVID)

She can't see it any other way except my being here with her.

SANDRA

Have a sugar cookie. I baked 'em this morning.

DAVID

(To MARGARET)

I'm so proud of Pauline. She got a wonderful scholarship and her business degree and a job that she loves!

MARGARET

I know. She doesn't wash on Mondays any more, like I did.

SANDRA

Nope.

DAVID

She'll be back before you know it, and you'll have a wonderful Christmas dinner together. You can't tell me you're not proud of her.

MARGARET

Well, of course I'm proud of her. (To PAULINE) Pauline, you know I'm proud of you. (To DAVID) It's just that, when she was a little girl, she'd run down those stairs in her flannels with her little brother to see what was under the tree and—

SANDRA

—Don't anyone hear me? I said, have a sugar cookie!

MARGARET

—Just like my mother made. You eat one, too, David. (Eating) You ought to chase her harder, you know.

PAULINE

Mother!

DAVID

Walked to school with her every day in eighth grade. Chased her one day and kissed her; never walked with me after that. Next time I got a kiss from her was at the Junior Prom.

PAULINE

David!

SANDRA

I happen to know *she* was chasing *you* then.

PAULINE

Sandra!

MARGARET

Oh. I made the dress she wore to the prom...how long ago?

DAVID

A *long* time ago...

MARGARET

...time ago.... "Time is but a stream I go a-fishing in... Time is but a stream....

FLASHBACK: PAULINE, DAVID, and SANDRA freeze. LIGHT CHANGE. MARGARET drifts into thoughts of earlier times. PHILLIP enters and sets a bucket DL. He then crosses to DR and "fishes" over the edge of the stage.

PHILLIP

“I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. It’s thin current slides away...”

PHILLIP gives MARGARET a fishing hat.

MARGARET

“...but eternity remains. I would drink deeper, fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.” Henry David Thoreau. ...Here, put this wiggly on the hook for me.

PHILLIP

After all these years, I don’t see why you can’t bait your own hook.

MARGARET

I have to cut off the heads and gut ‘em so I shouldn’t have to touch a squishy worm if I don’t want to. Now you can either bait the hook or gut and cook the fish yourself.

PHILLIP

What’s gotten into you, Margaret?

MARGARET

Nothing.

PHILLIP

Something.

MARGARET

Nothing.

PHILLIP

And I said ‘something.’

MARGARET

And I said ‘nothing.’ Now bait my hook.

He bates her hook.

PHILLIP

It’s done. *(Pause)* What’s wrong, Margaret?

MARGARET

Nothing.

PHILLIP

Okay. Then that’s settled.

MARGARET

I sent in a prayer request to Billy Graham yesterday.

PHILLIP

Oh.

MARGARET

Why didn't you talk to Jerry this morning?

PHILLIP

There wasn't anything to talk to him about.

MARGARET

He came in at two o'clock last night.

PHILLIP

He's a grown man, Margaret.

MARGARET

He's still under our roof.

PHILLIP

What do you expect me to say? —Hey, I got a nibble!

MARGARET

I expect you to tell him that he's under our roof; and when he's living on his own, he can come in at two a.m.

PHILLIP

You don't have to wait up for him. Just go to bed and forget about him. He's a big boy.

MARGARET

I know, but he's the one who gets my worry. He always gets into trouble somehow.

PHILLIP

He's a good boy, Margaret; now let's fish.

ROY enters with an identical bucket and we see him in silhouette fishing, occasionally looking over his shoulder at PHILLIP. During the following scene, ROY goes to PHILLIP'S bucket and trades buckets or gets a very large fish out of PHILLIP'S bucket and replaces it with one of his own. He is pleased and returns to fishing apart.

MARGARET

I wrote Billy Graham to pray for him to keep him safe.

PHILLIP

I'm not sure prayers will help our Jerry.

MARGARET

I saw him on T.V. He said to write him, and he wrote me back.

PHILLIP

Oh, now, Margaret, you know that Reverend Graham doesn't have time to write each and every person back who writes to him about their problems.

MARGARET

Maybe not, but I kept the letter, and he is going to pray for our son.

PHILLIP

Did he ask for a donation?

MARGARET

Of course he did. How can he keep his work going if he doesn't get donations to support all his missions!

PHILLIP

And you believe the Reverend Billy Graham is praying for our Jerry.

MARGARET

I hope so. *(Beat)* I know he is.

PHILLIP

Sometimes...sometimes I worry about you, Margaret.

MARGARET

You're the one who forgets to take out the garbage.

PHILLIP

So I do. *(Beat)* By the way, I told Jerry before you put the coffee on this morning, that he can't use the car next weekend.

MARGARET

But it's his birthday!

PHILLIP

So it is.

MARGARET

...They've stopped biting, Phillip.

PHILLIP

No they haven't.

MARGARET

Yes they have.

PHILLIP

I just got a bite.

MARGARET

Good for you. I'm taking my catch and cleaning them. I'll be enjoying pan-fried Bluegill before you're done cleaning yours.

PHILLIP

Wait a minute! That's not how we do it! I dig the worms and bait the hooks; you're supposed to clean and cook 'em.

MARGARET

(Exiting)

Just changed the rules, dear; you complained about baiting my hook. When I've fished enough, I stop and get ready for supper. You coming?

PHILLIP

Darn it, Margaret! In a minute.

MARGARET

(Passing ROY as she crosses)

Hey there, Roy. Don't talk too long. Supper time.

ROY

(To MARGARET)

Just got to rub the size of my catch in a little! *(Chuckling to PHILLIP)* Sorry about the competition, Phillip, but mine was the biggest Bluegill ever caught in Noble County!

PHILLIP

You son-of-a-gun!

ROY

Now don't take it so hard. After bein' friends all these years—

PHILLIP

—Don't give me that, Roy Jackson! I measured—measured!—that prize-winning fish when I caught it, and the one I laid on the board wasn't the same one I pulled out of the water!

ROY

Are you implyin' that my winnin' fish isn't the one I personally—per-son-al-ly!—caught?

PHILLIP

I'm not implying it at all, Roy. Someone—whoever fished nearest my bucket—changed it out on me!

ROY

Now I wonder whoever that could be? Naughty-naughty!

PHILLIP

Roy, it's the record. My father held that record fifteen years ago, and now it should belong to me. If that isn't enough to make you fess up to what you—

ROY

—He did? Your father? —I wouldn't do any such thing, Phillip; you know I wouldn't do that to you, my best buddy.

PHILLIP

Yeah, well, somebody ought to think about what that friendship means before he puts his hand in someone else's bucket.

ROY

Aw, come on, Phillip. Don't be like that.

PHILLIP

I know you somehow traded that Bluegill on me, and I hope you don't sleep tonight.

ROY

Even if I did, I wouldn't think you'd be upset over a little fishin' joke.

PHILLIP

I hope you don't get a good night's sleep every time you go fishing.

ROY

Now don't be that way!

PHILLIP

(Exiting)

In fact, I hope you don't get a good night's sleep— *(Long beat)* —for all eternity!

ROY

(Exiting after PHILLIP)

Why can't you accept that sometimes I'm the better fisherman!

PHILLIP

And you can pay me back that nineteen dollars and fifty-two cents you owe me!

ROY

That's nineteen dollars and forty-three cents!

Soft LIGHT: PAULINE and DAVID are kissing in the entryway arch.

MARGARET

(Returning from her reverie to the present)

“...I would dive deeper...fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars...”

PAULINE

I wish we could spend the whole evening together.

DAVID

And I wish we could spend longer together; but I'll be waiting at the airport when you get back. We'll swing by to see your mother and then— *(Kisses her)*

PAULINE

Do you suppose you could sneak out and do a big favor for me? Buy a fruitcake? I lied to mom. I didn't have time to make one.

DAVID

You—? Yeah, I can get one.

PAULINE

If you'd get it at the Third Street Bakery. They're open late. And make sure it's oblong, in a loaf pan. I don't want Mom to know I didn't make it if I can help it.

DAVID

(Putting on coat hanging in entryway)

Gotcha.

PAULINE

And put it on the platter I left in the kitchen or have Sandra do it. Take it out of the wrapper.

DAVID

I know; I know. Be back soon.

PAULINE

And I hope I can get my business call through. I've tried a dozen times.

DAVID

(Stopping his exit)

Business call? Can't you put business aside for a few hours? If not for me, then for your Mother?

PAULINE

It's not that I— I'm in a pinch, David. I thought you understood.

DAVID

(Sarcastically)

I do.

DAVID slams the door on exit. PAULINE exits in the other direction. LIGHTS RESTORE.

MARGARET

(Seated, trying to work the chair)

No, that's not right. I want to go forward. Forward and up. *(Pushing again; the chair raises her up to an easy standing position)* This will be handy. *(Crossing to PHILLIP'S large photo on wall)* Remember when you got a pocketknife from my Dad? I put it in your underwear drawer. It's still there. That was the year we got a sled for Jerry and a cry-baby doll for Pauline. And you gave me my first blue robe and my pearls. ...That's the one Christmas I remember after all these years. Oh, and I gave you the best rod and reel money could buy! All those nice presents...but lighting the candles and reading the story—that's icing on the cake. *(Long beat)* I don't know if it sunk in with Pauline. She's not going to be home with us this Christmas, Phillip. ...She's not going to be home. First time since Bethel Road they'll both be gone...Everyone is gone. Gone! *(Crosses to peg that holds keys by the front door; takes a key)* This key... This key! I don't know why that car is still in the garage!

MARGARET throws the key down hard on the floor as SANDRA enters.

SANDRA

(Entering suddenly with wreaths)

Mrs. M! I got a good deal on these wreaths at the dollar store and thought I'd get 'em hung so Pauline can see—

MARGARET, startled, whirls around, stumbling, almost falling. SANDRA drops the wreaths and catches MARGARET'S arm. BOTH ad-lib as Sandra helps Margaret to her chair.

SANDRA, *Continued*

I'd never forgive myself if you'd fallen! That was a close one.

SANDRA lowers the chair to a sitting position.

MARGARET

It was! You scared me to death! I wasn't expecting you! Why'd you come running in like that?

SANDRA

I'm shaking more than you are. Oh, my, we can't have you falling; I couldn't take it; almost had a heart attack. I'm going to run home and get the walker my mother used. Thank heavens I hung on to it.

MARGARET

Walker? I don't need one of those things! I stumbled because you half-scared the wits out of me! Now, don't be silly; sit down and collect yourself, and I'll have Pauline fix you a cup of tea for a change. ...Pauline! Pauline!

SANDRA

She's in the laundry room, Mrs. M. She can't hear you. Besides, I don't need your approval or Pauline's. I'm getting the walker—that's all there is to it—and you're going to use it! Now just relax in your chair. Here, I'll turn some music on, and I'll be back in a flash. —fifteen minutes at most—and we'll all have cookies and tea together. I'll make Pauline stop doing her laundry and have tea with us; that's all there is to it!

SFX: Soft radio MUSIC comes up: "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear", "Hark the Herald Angels Sing".

SANDRA starts to exit. As she does, she stops at the door, picks up the key and rehangs it.

SANDRA, *Continued*

How'd this key get— ...Now you stay in that chair 'til I get back—just this once—till I get back with the walker.

MARGARET

Oh, go on. Scoot-scoot. I'll be okay. —I don't need a walker! I walk just fine! I don't need a—a contraption chair! I like Phillip's rocker! —And I don't need you bossing me around! *(Long beat as they exchange looks)* ...Oh, my dear Sandra. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean...I really didn't mean...I don't know what came over me. I've had some things on my mind, but I never should have said those bad words to you of all people.

SANDRA

If something is that heavy on your mind... *(Rolling her eyes as though she can't believe she's saying this)* ...maybe you should talk it over with Phillip.

MARGARET

Oh, I couldn't do that. He's the last one I need to tell about— No, no I can't talk it over with Phillip.

SANDRA

Well, take a deep breath and say a little prayer like you always tell me to do. I'll be right back.

MARGARET

(Letting out a breath, speaking to PHILLIP'S photo)

Oh, they don't know how hard it is to pretend I 'don't need.' If I could handle your rocker more easily, I'd sit and rock until I couldn't rock any more. *(Long beat)* ...Hard to believe...Christmas already...a beautiful time of the year. Christmas...

*SFX: MUSIC up and fades under as
MARGARET yawns and dreams.*

MARGARET, *Continued*

(Dreaming)
...Christmas music...

MOTHER'S VOICE

Margaret...

VOICE ONE

Get up, Margaret!

MARGARET

...It's snowing...

VOICE TWO

Santa's coming!

MOTHER'S VOICE

Margaret...

MARGARET

The farm ...Oranges...

VOICE THREE

We got sock dolls!

[Echoing] VOICE ONE/TWO

Sock dolls, sock dolls...

VOICE ONE

Sister, sister, come on!

VOICE THREE

Get up!

VOICE TWO

Get up, Margaret!

MOTHER'S VOICE

Margaret...

MARGARET

Tinsel on trees...

Tinsel! VOICE THREE

Oranges... MARGARET

Oranges! VOICE THREE

—Chores first! VOICE ONE

—made Divinity! VOICE TWO

Divinity! VOICE ONE

VOICE THREE MOTHER'S VOICE
Get up! (*ECHOING under as needed*)

VOICE TWO MOTHER'S VOICE
Up! I am...am...am...

Walnuts... MARGARET

VOICE TWO MOTHER'S VOICE
The boys got— I am...am...am...

[*Echoing*] VOICE ONE/THREE
—pocket knives!

VOICE ONE MOTHER'S VOICE
Knives! I am...a vessel...vessel...vessel

VOICE TWO [*Echoing*] VOICE ONE/THREE
And the girls—spoons! Spoons! Spoons!

[*Echoing*] VOICE ONE/TWO/THREE
Up...up...up...

MOTHER'S VOICE
...Vessel.

PHILLIP

(Entering, his voice overlapping)

Wake up, Margaret.

MARGARET

(Awakening)

Phillip? Is that you, Phillip?

PHILLIP

Time to wake up. To quote Thoreau, “The Sun is but a morning star.” Did you sleep well?

MARGARET

I had the nicest memory or—a dream! It was about Christmas on the farm. My dreams are getting more and more beautiful, and more real...and more not real.

PHILLIP

And what is it you used to love saying when you had your moments of awakening?

MARAGET

You’ll have to help me out. How does it start?

PHILLIP

Oh, you know. ‘Quote:’ “To stand on the meeting of—

PHILLIP/MARARET, *Together*

“two eternities: the past and the future, which is precisely—

MARGARET

—the present moment.”

PHILLIP

Ah, yes. Tell me about your dream.

MARGARET

I was hearing my family calling to me. It was Christmas, and it was time to get up. We were all excited about the special treats. But then, the strangest part. I heard my mother say, ‘I am a vessel.’ She was a vessel bringing me from somewhere. I don’t know where I was before, but then I was in a garden...maybe the farm, growing up. Then I met you, Phillip. We fell in love, instantly, across a crowded room, like the song says.

PHILLIP

Yes, just like the song.

MARGARET

And we had the babies...and you were the father, and I was a vessel, like my mother was; and they came to us—here—to this planet, to this town, to our arms. In all God’s universe, Jerry and Pauline came to you and me. Isn’t that wonderful, Phillip?

PHILLIP

Wonderful.

MARGARET

And then Jerry went away...

PHILLIP

He's safe with me now.

MARGARET

Yes, safe with you. And my brothers and sisters, all of them, came through the same earthly vessel! Oh, Phillip! I almost got it! I almost! Then I get mixed up and have to start thinking about it all over again—about the stars and the planets and the vessels and, and—time and eternity!

PHILLIP

—It's a wonderful mystery, isn't it? And farther along, you'll understand; just like the song says: 'farther along'. You rest now, Margaret.

MARGARET

What're you going to do?

PHILLIP

Think I'll go fishing. Where's my rod? (Exiting)

MARGARET

I hung it on the rack in the hallway.

DAVID passes across the entryway on his way to the kitchen carrying the fruitcake. Then SANDRA enters with the walker, placing it near MARGARET'S chair.

SANDRA

Well, here it is! And I don't want any if, and's or but's about using it. You're going to have to make friends with it sooner or later so, come on, think up a name for it.

MARGARET

Who ever heard of such a thing.

SANDRA

Go on, give it a name.

MARGARET

Well, then. Johnny. Johnny Walker. I never touch the stuff!

SANDRA

That better not mean you'll never touch this walker. Listen. I won't tell Pauline about your fall if you promise to—

MARGARET

—Blackmail! I didn't think you would ever, ever— And I didn't fall! I stumbled and it was all because you jumped into the room and scared me half to death. And you put a throw rug there where I don't need one.

SANDRA

It's for your own good, Mrs. M. You know if you start fallin' you'll have to—

MARGARET

—Don't say it, Sandra. I only want to be here in my own home...with Phillip. That's all I ask. We've lived here more years than I can count. Only place I've ever lived except on the farm with the folks. This is my home. Our home. Phillip's and mine, and I plan to die here whether you like it or not.

SANDRA

...I hope I can always—because you know I don't ever want you to go away...ever.

MARGARET

Thank you, Sandra. Thank you. (*DAVID enters; to him*) So you can't talk her out of going?

DAVID

Nope. I guess we'll have to make the best of it without her.

SANDRA

(Hanging wreaths around room)

I told Mrs. M. we'd make Pauline slow down and take time to have cookies and tea with us.

DAVID

Or fruitcake. It's in the kitchen. She sent me...to her apartment to get it.

MARGARET

She forgot to bring it. That girl!

SANDRA

(Exiting)

She should be getting the last load out of the dryer any minute. I'll go check on her. Figure I might have to give a quick press to that red dress of hers.

MARGARET

Good. Now we can have a chat. I want Pauline to pay you for all the chores you do for me. I told Sandra to keep a list so Pauline can make it right.

DAVID

I don't want you to do that.

MARGARET

I'm no charity case, and I will pay you if I have to write that check myself.

DAVID

And I won't get any points towards my angel wings if I take money for my little deeds. Now what I want to hear is one of those wonderful stories you're so good at telling; that's my pay. Come on, now; tell me one, a winter one.

MARGARET

Well, we rode ol' Red to town even in the winter because we didn't have a fancy car like yours to get around in. Ol' Red was our cow. Now you tell me one about you.

DAVID

I'm not letting you get off that easily. Too short and I'm not counting that as a winter story. Go on.

MARGARET

Let me think. Did I ever tell you how we'd get in a line on the north side of the biggest tree in the front yard? All seven of us would take a turn grabbing a big branch hanging down, heavy with snow, and swing as hard as we could, and drop off in the snow pile. That branch came slapping back, making a snow shower. And the next one caught hold of it and off they went for their ride—screaming to high heaven! And now your turn. Tell me: why aren't you married?

DAVID

That's not a very interesting story. And I think I've told you before.

MARGARET

I think I would remember if you had.

DAVID

I know it'd be hard for you to understand, to accept, why, why I'd ever get a divorce.

MARGARET

You got a divorce? Why, David, I had no idea. That's an awful thing to happen.

DAVID

The good part is now I have time to go fishing.

MARGARET

But a divorce!

DAVID

We fell in love too fast, and it didn't take very long for us to find out...we couldn't, ...couldn't make it work. Our marriage was, was...

MARGARET

Don't go on! I won't tell anyone. It's your own business; forgive me for prying. Does Pauline know?

DAVID

Yes, she knows.

MARGARET

If I didn't know, I don't think she'd know. Don't know how she'd find out but don't tell her.

DAVID

Mrs. Murphy...Pauline's Mom...

MARGARET

How about 'Mom Murphy'?

DAVID

That works. Mom Murphy, I told you she does know. It, it happened a long time ago so maybe you've forgotten—

SANDRA

(Entering with tea and pouring)

—Pauline's got her laundry done. She's bringing the fruitcake.

DAVID

Done?

MARGARET

Fruitcake.

PAULINE

(Carrying in the fruitcake on a platter)

Well, here it is! The Murphy tradition!

SANDRA

It's a good thing you finished up. We've been waiting. Let me cut it. You sit down and visit with your mother.

PAULINE

No, before we have the 'cutting of the fruitcake,' I have an announcement.

DAVID

Pauline?

PAULINE

I'm staying home for Christmas.

Silence: They look at each other.

DAVID

What happened? Did you ask to postpone your trip and they fired you?

SANDRA

Whoop-ty do! Who cares! We're eating Murphy fruitcake tonight!

MARGARET

Oh, Pauline! Did they fire you?

PAULINE

I finally got through to the 'Head of the Department' in San Francisco and talked some sense into his head. But I had to promise that I'd catch the first flight I could get after Christmas. And I have to bump his company up to the head of the line and promise early delivery at no extra charge.

MARGARET

I didn't want to cause you any trouble. I don't know what to say, Pauline.

PAULINE

It's fine, Mom. I didn't want to go at Christmas time in the first place; you know that, don't you? Everyone acted like that was my choice, but— So now can we put up a tree?

MARGARET

Oh, yes, let's do it tonight!

SANDRA

—I'm serving the fruitcake!

She cuts and serves, and they eat during the following.

MARGARET

Right now, right this very minute, it feels like Christmas.

DAVID

It does. Guess what I remembered coming back from the...ah, getting the fruitcake. I remembered how Mom Murphy told the Christmas story to my Sunday School class when I was, oh, about nine, ten years old. (*To MARGARET*) You made it seem so real, the trip Mary and Joseph took...the shepherds coming to the manger...the wise men. You even made the sounds of the animals—the baby being born...right down to the angels singing. And at the end, you burst out singing, "Glor-ei-a!"

MARGARET

Did I do that?

DAVID

Yes, you did. (*Singing*) “Inex-cel-sis-De-o!”

MARGARET

You remembered. Thank you, David. (*Beat*) Moooooo!

DAVID

Baaa!

SANDRA

Eee-aww! (*THEY laugh*) Talk about Christmas on the farm, Mrs. M.

MARGARET

Well, you know we always had animals in the barn. ‘Ol Red. Four plow horses. Tucker, our sheep dog. Good ol’ Tuck. And lots of barn cats. And pigs and sheep—and wild turkeys in the woods, too. We always had good food on the farm. That’s one thing we always had: a huge Christmas dinner. And I always got to roll the dough with Mother for noodles the night before. And of course we had plenty of mashed potatoes and gravy. Then came the pies! Apples from our own trees! Oh, those apples made the best pies! And sugar cream pies and mince-meat pies! And when our stomachs were about to burst, we sat down at Mother’s feet, and she read the Christmas story...There was something in her voice that was...different on Christmas eve. (*Beat*) “And Mary had a baby, and they called him Jesus, and they laid Him in the manger because there was no room for Him in the inn.”

DAVID

I was a Wise Man in a play once. “Where is the child born to be king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him!”

MARGARET

Yes, yes! Then we’d all bundle up and go out in the cold and look up at the sky and see all the stars. I can see them in my mind now, a million of them! My, aren’t they awesome! And for once, all of us kids would be silent. ...It was so real. ...We knew that He was King.

PAULINE

...Want to read the story now, Mom?

SANDRA

I’ll get your Bible.

MARGARET

Okay, but wait a minute; wait a minute before I forget. I’ve got something I want you to have, David. It’s in the hallway...mounted on the wall. You’ll see what it is.

DAVID looks at PAULINE and she nods approval. HE exits, and SANDRA looks up the story in the Bible.

MARGARET, *Continued*

I didn't want to forget.

SANDRA

Here you are, Mrs. M.

DAVID

(Returning, carrying an old fishing rod)

This? —Are you sure you want to give this to me?

MARGARET

Oh, yes. When you said you had time to fish now, I remembered. It may be old but it was top of the line when I bought it. I'm ready to part with it now; happy to give it to you, David. Phillip caught many a fish with it.

DAVID

(Reeling in a little line)

Thank you, Mom Murphy. I'll take good care of it.

MARGARET

(As HE leans in to kiss her forehead, she lifts her hands to his face)

Merry Christmas, David.

DAVID

Merry Christmas.

MARGARET

One of my best Christmases ever. Pauline's home.

SANDRA

(To DAVID, handing MARGARET the Bible)

I was afraid you were goin' to act the story out, and she wasn't goin' to get to read it.

MARGARET

(Not looking at the BIBLE)

“Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet who said: Behold, a virgin will be with child and will bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel which means ‘God with us.’ *(Beat)* Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod, behold there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him.’” ...What a story.

SANDRA begins to collect the cups and dishes.

MARGARET, *Continued*

(As SANDRA comes to gather her things)

No, no! Refill my cup. I'm going to sleep right here tonight in my new chair with my head back and my feet up. I'm going to listen to Christmas Carols, enjoy the decorations, and have another bite of the Third Street Bakery fruitcake.

PAULINE

Oh-oh.

MARGARET

You all can scoot-scoot and leave me in peace.

SANDRA

Well, she does have her Johnny Walker if she needs to get up in the night.

PAULINE

What?

SANDRA

I brought over a walker for her to use (Beat) —whenever. She named it Johnny Walker.

MARGARET

Did not.

SANDRA

(*Exiting*)

Did so! I'll be over with breakfast in the morning, Mrs. M.

MARGARET

(*Smiling sarcastically at PAULINE*)

That's fine, Sandra. Don't know what I'd do without you. (Beat; To PAULINE) I expect you to get rid of that Johnny Walker thing.

DAVID

If you're settled for the night, Pauline and I need to get going, too, so you can get some rest.

MARGARET

No-no. I've, I've got something to tell Pauline.

DAVID

Oh, then I'll just wait for her out in the—

MARGARET

You stay, David. I know Pauline tells you everything anyway, and that's all right; I don't mind at all.

PAULINE

What is...? You're being so, so—

MARGARET

—Dramatic? Maybe I have to be to get you to listen to me this time.

DAVID

Ah, I don't need to be—

MARGARET

—You can help her listen, David. I want you to stay.

DAVID

If you think I can help.

MARGARET

It's about that key, Pauline. I can't look at it any longer.

PAULINE

That key? It bothers you? That's not a problem, Mom. I'll put it in the drawer over here and—

MARGARET

—I want you to sell the car.

PAULINE

S-Sell the car?

MARGARET

Your Dad never did get around to restoring it, but I want you to sell it. It's doing no one any good out in the garage.

PAULINE

But you know how much Dad loved that car!

MARGARET

For all I know he still does.

PAULINE

We don't need to sell it now; you don't need the money. After all, it increases in value every year. Hardly any miles on it. Someday it will go for—

MARGARET

—I want you to sell it, Pauline. There's no point in keeping it now that Phillip can't drive it. It's too late for that.

PAULINE

I, I don't think it's a good idea, Mom. Besides, I never had it fixed when you asked me to and that's been—

MARGARET

—You didn't? (*Beat*) I see. You didn't get it fixed because that way it's in no condition to sell.

PAULINE

I couldn't...deal with it. It probably won't even start now.

DAVID

What kind is it?

PAULINE

Sixty-two Corvette. Black with red leather seats.

MARGARET

His Black Beauty.

DAVID

Wow. A collector's dream. It'll be easy to move that baby.

MARGARET

(*To DAVID*)

I don't care how special that car is, Phillip had no business hanging onto it. —Maybe you wouldn't mind handling the sale for me?

PAULINE

No!...No, Mom. Don't sell it. I think you should—

MARGARET

—I think I should do my own thinking! And I think I should get rid of that car. Every Christmas I think about it, and every Christmas I wish it was sold. It happened so many years ago, and yet—there's that car key. So, if you don't want to do it and David is willing, I guess now is the time to—

PAULINE

No.

MARGARET

It's mine to do with as I—

PAULINE

—Dad loved that car. Please.

MARGARET

Yes. The car of his dreams. Jerry loved it, too. But it's time, Pauline. Time to let go. I need it gone from the garage.

PAULINE

And maybe...just maybe...I need it in the garage!

LIGHTS fade to black.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

Scene One

SETTING: *Same, several days later; a Christmas tree is present.*

AT RISE: *MARGARET has been sleeping in her chair all night. She gets up, drags the walker to the closet and puts it away. She crosses to the hallway and disappears. PHILLIP enters carrying a large plaque with a mounted fish as if looking for MARGARET; he sees how it looks on the picture wall or on a shelf and then exits. SFX: A toilet flushes. MARGARET enters, returning to chair, pulling up an afghan, and sleeps. LIGHTS UP. PAULINE now enters with SANDRA hanging coats in the hallway.*

PAULINE

(Seeing MARGARET asleep in chair)

I told you she'd love it; she's slept all night in it again.

SANDRA

But I don't see the walker. Apparently she ain't goin' to use it.

PAULINE

(Wrapping a gift; adjusting an ornament)

If we could convince her it's like, like insurance.

SANDRA

She believes in insurance.

PAULINE

I don't know, Sandra. Does she really need a walker?

SANDRA

What about getting her one of those walkie-talkie things to wear around her neck? I've seen those on TV!

PAULINE

Maybe.

SANDRA

(Crossing to closet)

Does she think I won't find it in here? Yep, here it is. *(Getting out the walker and tying a Christmas ribbon on it)* I'll just keep puttin' it by her chair until she gets used to the idea. Betcha can't wait 'til Christmas eve!

PAULINE

I love Christmas, and it wouldn't be the same without a tree. Thanks for helping.

SANDRA

Somebody had to keep the conversation going. *(Beat)* Every year I look forward to her reading the story.

PAULINE

You know she doesn't need to read it.

SANDRA

It'll be really special this year. Her stories about the farm are the best.

PAULINE

I know. *(Beat)* Mom'll make a big deal out of my being home after all.

SANDRA

Well, I mean, it'll be *really* special.

PAULINE

I don't know what you're talking about, but don't go getting any ideas. *(Beat)* Did you tell Mom about the fruitcake?

SANDRA

Give her credit, Pauline. She'd know her own fruitcake recipe. *(Beat)* You'd think she'd have enough sense to use the walker. Scarred me to death when she almost... I'd better scoot-scoot home and get my own work done. See ya later!

PAULINE

What did you say?

SANDRA

‘Scoot-scoot.’ Your Mom says it all the time. I said I’m going to—

PAULINE

—When she almost fell?

SANDRA

Not exactly.

PAULINE

Not exactly.

SANDRA

Right.

PAULINE

Sandra, Mom doesn’t have to do pirouettes across the room to have a fall. Now tell me what happened.

SANDRA

She made me promise not to tell, but I did bring her a walker to take care of the problem.

PAULINE

Problem.

SANDRA

You didn’t hear it from me, but I guess I kind of startled her when I came in. I guess I was kind of loud, and the throw rug was right there, and when she turned around so fast—

PAULINE

Oh, no!

SANDRA

I caught her! If she hadn’t been so deep in thought. You know how she gets when she talks to your Dad’s picture.

PAULINE

(Picking up the throw rug)

What else do we need to do to keep her from not—

SANDRA

—I think we’ve thought of everything.

PAULINE

The bathroom. Those grab bars aren’t enough. The tub needs to come out.

SANDRA

But she loves to soak in the tub!

PAULINE

A walk-in shower. Now's the time to do it—before she falls and hurts the other hip.

SANDRA

She'll have a fit.

PAULINE

I know, but she'll be a good sport about it once we get it put in.

SANDRA

There's no 'we' about it. Count me out. I'm not tellin' her.

PAULINE

You're so good with her; she'd listen to you.

SANDRA

Hu-ah, no way! You've got to talk to her about it.

PAULINE

If I did, she'd say no. Then we'd really be in for a fight about changing it.

SANDRA

Just prepare her in some way.

PAULINE

Like give her a shower cap? I have to hit this head-on. And then there's my other problem. I need to redeem myself, make a fruitcake before Christmas, and I can't find the recipe she gave me. Do you—

SANDRA

—Well, I don't have it, but I do know she uses brandy and rum.

PAULINE

Both?

SANDRA

And I know she feeds it.

PAULINE

What?

SANDRA

Pours more brandy and rum over it every few days. Alternates, actually.

PAULINE

Oh.

SANDRA

And I know her fruit don't sink to the bottom of the cake.

PAULINE

Oh.

SANDRA

And I know she uses brown sugar and molasses. More molasses than sugar.

PAULINE

Really?

SANDRA

That's why it's darker than the Third Street one. And I know you can't make it by Christmas because the fruit has to soak two weeks, minimum. Your Mom feeds hers three more weeks.

PAULINE

Oh. Well, maybe I can buy the ingredients and mix it up now; and we can have it when I get back from California—if you'd do the feeding. You don't know what I need to buy?

SANDRA

Lots of brandy and rum! Some fruit and nuts. I'll ask her how to make it and let you know. Now I'm going to scoot.

PAULINE

I'll be here awhile so you don't have to come back until tonight. Maybe I can find her recipe file.

SANDRA

So David's coming over here this afternoon, eh?

PAULINE

Scoot-scoot!

SANDRA

I'm goin'! I'm goin'!

PAULINE crosses to phone book and looks up the plumber's number. SANDRA slams the back door OFF STAGE and MARGARET stirs but nestles back down. PAULINE exits into the kitchen talking on her cell phone.

PAULINE, *Continued*

(Exiting)

Yes, hello. I'm calling about getting a shower put in, a walk-in shower. Yes, the tub needs to be removed also. ...I want to get it scheduled as soon as possible. ...Well, I know it's Christmas, but— Oh, your work is slow now? Well, how soon could you come and do the work? You see, my mother —

PHILLIP enters carrying a plaque behind his back. MARGARET wakes and moves the chair to an upright position and stands.

PHILLIP

I'm glad you gave David my rod.

MARGARET

You'll have to use a cane pole now. Remember when that's all you had?

PHILLIP

Yep, but didn't catch my prize-winning Bluegill until I got the rod and reel. I can't believe that Roy could do such a low-down dirty thing! Took that fish of mine right out of my bucket and deprived me of the championship plaque hanging in The Green Frog Inn next to my Dad's plaque! Well, I fixed him.

MARGARET

What do you mean you fixed him?

PHILLIP

He doesn't have the satisfaction of having a plaque with his name on it hanging on that wall any more. *(Pulling plaque out from behind him)*

MARGARET

Phillip Murphy, you didn't!

PHILLIP

I am not going to take it lying down!

MARGARET

You didn't!

PHILLIP

I told him I'd never let him forget it, and I won't! He's a low-down cheat and a sneak!

MARGARET

You, you mustn't talk like that about your best friend.

PHILLIP

You don't do what he did to a best friend!

MARGARET

I don't think he would've done it if he'd known it meant so much to you.

PHILLIP

I told him what it meant! Didn't seem to matter that my father had already set a record.

MARGARET

I'm sure it made a difference. He was jokin' with you and got carried away. Now calm down, calm down, Phillip.

PHILLIP

Don't you run interference, Margaret. This is between Roy and me.

MARGARET

I never thought about talking to Roy myself.

PHILLIP

Well, don't. I wouldn't accept his apology anyway.

MARGARET

You can't go on throughout eternity being mad about a Bluegill.

PHILLIP

I'm not mad at the fish, Margaret. I'm mad at Roy.

MARGARET

But don't you see? You put yourself through an uproar every time you think about it and whenever you're with him.

PHILLIP

I am not forgiving him so just forget that idea.

MARGARET

It spoils all the good times you've ever had with him.

PHILLIP

You got that right.

MARGARET

It makes me sad. I couldn't treat Tina that way about anything that might go wrong between us girls. I've known Tina and you've known Roy for...thirty some years. Thirty years, Phillip. It, it makes me sad.

PHILLIP

...Sad? (*SHE nods*) Sad?

MARGARET

Yes, sad!

PHILLIP

Please don't say 'Love one another.' I don't need to hear it.

MARGARET

I won't. (*Beat*) John thirteen.

PHILLIP

Darn it, Margaret, I said not to say—

MARGARET

—I didn't! (*Beat, pointing upward with a nod*) HE did. You ought to apologize to Roy for all the turmoil you put him through.

PHILLIP

I put him—? I put him—? Are you crazy, Margaret?

MARGARET

Maybe. But you'd better let go of it before it does you in.

PHILLIP

...I wanted Jerry to see my name hanging on the wall. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but I wanted Jerry to catch a prize-winning Gill some day, and then we'd all have plaques hanging at The Green Frog.

MARGARET

...The three Murphys. That would have been nice...Forgiveness is a scary thing. I mean, to actually ask for it; that's the scary thing.

PHILLIP

Don't try to use that reverse psychology on me, Margaret. I'm not scared of talking to Roy.

MARGARET

I don't mean merely talking to him but—

PHILLIP

—Yeah, yeah, the forgiveness part. (*Beat*) Oh, I'll think about it.

MARGARET kisses him on the cheek.

PHILLIP, *Continued*

So you're going to have your Christmas celebration after all.

MARGARET

Oh, yes! Pauline got her business plans changed. We raised a good daughter.

PHILLIP

(Noticing the walker)

And what's that thing?

MARGARET

A walker. For me.

PHILLIP

It's a little early for a walker, isn't it?

MARGARET

Nobody asked me. I wouldn't mind so much if they asked me first about things. Feels like they run over me all the time. *(Realizing the 'run over' reference)* Oh, Phillip, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to say that!

PHILLIP

We can't change things, Margaret. It would've been nice to have had one more Christmas together... *(Kissing her on the cheek and starting to exit)* ...all of us.

MARGARET

Phillip?

PHILLIP

Yes?

MARGARET

I want to sell your car.

PHILLIP

I know.

MARGARET

But Pauline, Pauline doesn't...

PHILLIP

I know.

MARGARET

What should I do, Phillip?

PHILLIP

...Farther along. You'll know what to do...by and by. *(Exits)*

MARGARET

(Realizing she's alone, calling towards hallway)

Pauline? Pauline! Are you here? Pauline?

PAULINE

(Hurrying in)

Yes! Are you okay?

MARGARET

I, I wanted to know if you were still here.

PAULINE

I was making out a grocery list for you.

MARGARET

Get some cottage cheese, please.

PAULINE

Anything else?

MARGARET

No, just cottage cheese. Low fat. *(PAULINE begins exiting)* Pauline...Pauline, ...

PAULINE

(Compassionately)

Are you tired, Mom? I don't know why you're standing around. Come on. Sit down. Put your feet up. I'll get you a cup of tea.

MARGARET

You baby me so much.

PAULINE

You pretend you don't like it but, secretly....

MARGARET

Sometimes I do.

PAULINE

I'll get your tea.

MARGARET

No, no tea. You sit down, too. I, I want to talk to you. ...Pauline, the night of the accident... I don't know how to tell your father that I, I told Jerry—

PAULINE

—I know what you said to him, Mom. I was on my way out, but I heard. You said not to let Dad catch him, that he should wait until after Dad went to bed.

MARGARET

I didn't know you knew. It's been eating at me. If only I'd known he was going to a party way out on Bethel Road...

PAULINE

Things happen, Mom; you know that. Things just happen.

MARGARET

It's time I tell your Dad I went behind his back.

PAULINE

If you think so.

MARGARET

You're a good daughter, Pauline. And even though your intentions are good, you'll never master making the Murphy fruitcake.

PAULINE

I still have time to learn. This is only my second year to try.

MARGARET

My dear, last year we had Third Street fruitcake, too.

PAULINE

(Playfully)

Oh-oh! I'm in trouble! ...Here's the newspaper; can I get you some tea?

MARGARET

What's wrong with coffee? Why's everyone trying to push green tea on me like China's going to collapse if I don't drink green tea!

PAULINE

Don't get cantankerous on me, or I'll call Sandra.

MARGARET

Scoot-scoot! Go on, scoot-scoot! I need some time alone. I've got to figure out how to tell your father that I let Jerry have my key.

PAULINE

You worry me. If you weren't my own mother, I'd have to tell people you talk to ghosts.

MARGARET

Yeah-yeah. It's easier to say I'm crazy. ...I have a lot on my mind...My relationship with your Dad isn't over, you know.

PAULINE

You aren't losing sleep over telling Dad about the key, are you?

MARGARET

Sometimes, sometimes Phillip is so understanding...but sometimes, well, you know how he can be. If I tell him, what if he gets mad—goes away from me—forever! But what if I don't tell him? Oh, Pauline, I have a feeling he knows I'm keeping something from him! We never had secrets from each other—ever! And he might be hanging around here waiting for me to tell him, and then leave when I do—oh, I don't know what to do! What would you do?

PAULINE

I don't know, Mom. I wish I could help, but it's your decision. *(Exits)*

MARGARET

(Dialing)

Sandra? Sandra, I'd like to ask a favor. I know it will make it harder for you to clean in here, but would you please bring Phillip's rocker back into the living room. ...Yes, when you have the time. We...need another chair...for David to use Christmas Eve. All right. Thank you, dear.

ACT II Scene Two

AT RISE: *Christmas Eve. ROY is standing at the edge of the stage fishing; PHILLIP is standing behind him.*

PHILLIP

Told you I'd never let you forget it. Now if you'd just admit that you took my fish, I could go ahead and forgive you. But I can't forgive you until you admit that you did it!

ROY

Are you crazy? I'm not admitting anything!

PHILLIP

I told Margaret—

ROY

A-ha! She put you up to it; that's the only reason why you'd open your big ol' mouth about something you're so sensitive about!

PHILLIP

Sensitive? Why would I be sen-si-tive about a low-down dirty trick like—

ROY

—Doesn't matter, Phillip; the plaque's not even on the wall at the Green Frog any more. It 'mysteriously' disappeared.

PHILLIP

I know that! You see, you don't really get what this is about. It's about more than a plaque, you dim-wit! It's about—

ROY

—I figured it out: the difference between what you said I owed you and what I know I owe you! It's nine cents. Now I'm prepared to split the difference with you, and that's my last offer. *(Taking out wallet but doesn't pay him)* That makes it nineteen dollars and forty-seven cents, and my debt to you is cancelled—with you coming out one cent ahead of the deal!

PHILLIP

Are you crazy? I'm not taking your money! It's not even about the money!

ROY

Then why have you been talking about it all these years!

PHILLIP

(Grabbing ROY'S bucket and dumping contents over stage into water)

There! Go fish.

LIGHT CHANGE. Fade to SFX: MUSIC: "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" and OUT. OUTSIDE. DAVID and PAULINE are looking out at the snow.

RADIO VOICE

"...We can expect a light blanket of snow tonight, a perfect white Christmas, so button up those overcoats!"

DAVID

It's as pretty as an old-fashioned Christmas card, isn't it?

PAULINE

Just beautiful. I can almost hear sleigh bells. I'm so glad it worked out I can be here instead of there.

DAVID

Pauline, ...Pauline, do you think...uh, don't you think since you were promoted you could always be here for Christmas? I mean, it's a pretty special time, and you are the lead sales. You should be able to take some time off at Christmas. *(Beat)* Pauline?

PAULINE

If the world were perfect, but it isn't; so if I have to go, I have to go.

DAVID

You know your mother gets awfully lonely on holidays when you're not—

PAULINE

—Don't lecture me, David; don't, please don't spoil the moment.

DAVID

(A touch of sarcasm)

No, I don't want to spoil the moment.

PAULINE

You'll come in? Mom would be disappointed if you don't. *(Beat)* And I would, too. ...David? What's wrong.

DAVID

I was thinking is all. Let's go in.

PAULINE

I think something is wrong. We went from 'beautiful snow' to 'icy chill.'

DAVID

I'd want you home every Christmas. I needed a different answer.

PAULINE

I wanted to give you a different answer. You've always worked eight to five so I'm sure it's hard for you to understand that—

DAVID

—Yeah, sure, sure, got it. *(Starts to go in with her; hesitates)* Oh, ah, ...you go on in. I've got to...ah...you go on in.

PAULINE

I want you to be here tonight, David; you know that.

DAVID

...I know. *(Exits)*

LIGHT change. SANDRA has brought the rocker back. MARGARET is rehearing her talk to PHILLIP, pretending he is in his rocker.

MARGARET

(To Chair)

You know how much I respect you, Phillip. You know how much I trust your decisions. And it's time, time for me to tell you something. *(To self)* I don't know if I can do it. It's too hard to say the words. *(Tries again, to chair)* It's about Jerry. You see, he'd already asked me if he could use the car before you told him he couldn't. And I told him...that because it was his twenty-first— *(To self)* I just can't do it. I, I can't do it!

SANDRA

(Entering with tray of cookies)

Mrs. M? What's wrong? Are you okay? What's wrong!

MARGARET

I'm, I'm okay. I'm fine, Sandra.

SANDRA

Are you sure? Now don't you snap at me, but do I see a tear crawlin' down your cheek? What could be so upsetting that would cause—

MARGARET

—She didn't even ask me about the remodeling! And you didn't tell me that she had those men coming! Zip-zip! It's done! I've never seen anything like it in my life! Zip-zip! And now I don't have a bathtub to soak in! What am I going to do without a bathtub to soak in!

(PAULINE appears in the doorway)

SANDRA

I told Pauline you'd take it this way! I told her she'd better talk to you first so your blood pressure wouldn't go sky high!

MARGARET

Why is she changing everything around, Sandra? I'm not helpless. I don't have any problem doing for myself. Just because I drop something or make one wrong entry in a checkbook and ask her to help me find it doesn't mean—

PAULINE

(Entering)

—Because I worry about you, Mom. Because I care. Because I know you wouldn't be happy anywhere else, and this means you can walk into the shower and you won't have to get up and down, climb in and out, slip and fall. It can be real—

MARGARET

—Am I that unreasonable? You didn't talk it over with me. What about my feelings?

PAULINE

I know you'll miss your tub bath, but you'll enjoy the new shower after you get used to it. It's just that— Any change is—oh, do we have to fuss about this now on Christmas eve!

MARGARET

...It is Christmas. And we don't have to talk about it later, Pauline. The subject is closed if you understand that we talk about any future changes you have in mind before you make them. I'm taking control of my life as of this minute!

SANDRA

I think she means it.

PAULINE

I know she means it. I promise, Mom. I promise, promise, promise. (Beat) So. I guess Dad's rocker stays in this room?

MARGARET

Yes.

PAULINE

That'll be nice. Dad can sit and chat with you all the time now. —That was said in a loving way. Don't get upset again.

MARGARET

(Choking up)

Oh, I'm all right, for heaven's sake!

PAULINE

I'm sorry I went ahead without talking to you about—

MARGARET

—It's not that. I still haven't been able to tell your father I ...went behind his back and—

PAULINE

—Don't work yourself up about that now. Christmas, remember?

MARGARET

But I know it's something I have to do. It's an old, old wound, and it's eating at me.

PAULINE

(Beat)

I need to tell you something, too.

MARGARET

Wh—?

PAULINE

That night... Jerry asked me to go with him. Said he'd only turn twenty-one once and that it was going to be some party. I should have gone. I could have driven him home. I wouldn't have let him go down Bethel Road—too winding, dangerous. I would have insisted that he put his seat belt on. It wouldn't have happened if I'd been with him. I know it wouldn't have happened.

SANDRA

Oh, no.

PAULINE

But...I had other plans, and I didn't want to; I was selfish and I should have—. Family should always come first. I'm so sorry, Mom. I'm so sorry.

MARGARET

Wh? You've felt bad all this time, too? Oh, Pauline...It's all right. You can't blame yourself forever. Let it go. It was good for you to tell me; now let it go...I think I need a little quiet time alone if you don't mind.

SANDRA

I'll put some tea on.

MARGARET

Stop pushing that tea at me, Sandra! Make it coffee! Strong and black!

SANDRA

(Exiting)

Okay!

MARGARET

Where's my writing tablet? I need my writing tablet.

PAULINE

I'll get it. *(Getting pen and paper tablet)* Anything else?

MARGARET

No, thank you, dear. Except...

PAULINE

Yes?

MARGARET

I love you very much.

PAULINE

I love you too, Mom. *(Exits)*

MARGARET

(Writing)

Dear Phillip...You know how much I respect... *(Continues writing)* ...I know it seems unforgivable, especially for a man of your temperament...No, I'd better not put that in. *(Crossing it out)* ...but I'm asking you from the bottom of my heart: can you ever forgive me? ...You see, after you told Jerry he couldn't...

MARGARET continues writing, then folds the paper and sets the writing things aside. She closes her eyes and speaks.

MARGARET, *Continued*

"Time is but a stream...time is but a stream."

*PHILLIP appears standing next to his photo.
MARGARATE opens her eyes with a jolt.*

MARGARET, *Continued*

Phillip? Is that you?

PHILLIP

Your senses are so sharp, Margaret! I can't pull anything over on you.

MARGARET

Of course not.

PHILLIP

I came to look at you while you were sleeping.

MARGARET

Yes, I know you watch over me. (*Beat*)...I have something for you.

PHILLIP

A Christmas present?

MARGARET

I'm afraid not. It's...a confession.

PHILLIP

Confession?

MARGARET

I need to ask your forgiveness.

PHILLIP

What on earth are you talking about?

MARGARET

Just read this.

PHILLIP reads. When he finishes, he looks up at her.

MARGARET, *Continued*

I know God's forgiven me a long time ago, but I need to ask you... Can you? Can you forgive me?

PHILLIP

Why, Margaret, I always knew. I knew you had given the key to Jerry when I saw it wasn't on the peg. He wouldn't have taken it without permission from one of us. I know our son.

MARGARET

You didn't say anything all these years? You never blamed me?

PHILLIP

We don't have all the answers. It's not your fault. Farther along...remember? Farther along. Don't let it trouble you anymore. It's all right with me if you sell the Corvette. I don't think I ever would have restored it anyway. Now dry those tears up, Margaret, my dear; it's Christmas!

MARGARET

Christmas Eve!

PHILLIP

Almost time for everyone to gather around for your stories. (*She nods*) I'll be right behind you...And by the way, you look beautiful tonight.

LIGHT change. PAULINE and DAVID are in entryway.

DAVID

I thought about how you didn't want to go to California, and I thought about how the world isn't perfect. I thought about how strong and determined you are to take care of things at work and at home.

PAULINE

Where are you going with this, David?

DAVID

Come here. (*She does*) I thought about how miserable I'd be if you were in California, and I was here without you.

PAULINE

Yes?

DAVID

And I wondered...if you'd be miserable, too.

PAULINE

You know I would be.

DAVID

And I wondered if you had any idea at all about how much I've loved you...ever since eighth grade.

PAULINE

No, how much?

DAVID

(Opening a box with a ring in it)

This much. Will you marry me?

PAULINE

What do you think? I love you, too.

THEY kiss.

SANDRA

(Appearing with coffee on a tray)

Excuse me, you love birds. When you two gonna admit you love each other and get married?

PAULINE

(To DAVID)

How about in a few days?

DAVID

New Year's Eve would be a nice, easy anniversary date to remember.

PAULINE

Perfect.

SANDRA

(To DAVID)

Did she just propose to you?

DAVID

Looks that way.

SANDRA

I guess I had to lean on her to get her to do it. *(Entering into room)* Hey, Mrs. M! You're finally gonna be a mother-in-law. Pauline's gettin' married. New Year's Eve. I arranged it!

MARGARET

That girl. Pauline! Bring your young man in here. What's this about getting married.

PAULINE and DAVID enter.

PAULINE

A.S.A.P., Mom! May I present my 'young man' to you. Mother, this is David; David, this is my mother.

MARGARET

(Beat)

You can call me 'Mom!'

DAVID

(Taking her hand)

Mom.

MARGARET

This is just, just a perfect Christmas. Now you're really in the family, David. Wait until I tell Phillip.

PHILLIP

I'm here, Margaret.

MARGARET

Oh, that's right. He's here all the time, David. I don't have to tell him anything. But you have to decide sooner or later: either I'm crazy or he's really here with me.

SANDRA

Cookies and coffee, everyone! I'll pour; grab a cup!

*ROY appears at door while SANDRA pours;
THEY ad lib. PAULINE gets candles.*

ROY

(Entering, crossing to PHILLIP)

I'm going to say it straight out, Phillip. I'm sorry.

PHILLIP

You're sorry for?

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes

Continue to Next Page for Set/Props List

ESSENTIAL SET PIECES

Decorated Christmas tree
An electric “lift” chair
Rocking chair
Small throw rug

PROPS

PAULINE:	Laundry basket Pen and paper Calendar with yellow circles Red designer travel bag Wrapping paper and gift box
MARGARET:	Key on chain Rubber worm Afghan
PHILLIP:	Large cardboard box, Lift Chair size Fishing rod Fishing bucket Fishing hat Fishing award plaque
SANDRA:	Plate of cookies Christmas wreaths Bible Walker Tray with tea pot and cups Ribbon for walker
ROY:	Fishing poll Fishing bucket identical to Phillip’s Smaller fish for bucket Large plastic fish
DAVID:	Fruit cake Engagement ring and box