

Lights

by
Michael Grady

LIGHTS

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LIGHTS

For Linda DeArmond Grady

LIGHTS

Lights was originally commissioned by the Purple Rose Theatre Company. *Lights* premiered at Actors Co-op in Hollywood, CA on Friday, September 19, 2003 with the following cast:

HERALD*.....Robin Knight
LEONARD TCHERNIK.....Jim Custer
WENDY TCHERNIK.....Callan White
STAN TCHERNIK.....John Senekdjian
MARK TCHERNIK.....Gary Clemmer
DEBRA TCHERNIK-PLITTMAN.....Wendy Shapero

Directed by Gary Lee Reed.
Designed by Robert Bingham.
Lighting by Bill E. Kickbush.

**NOTE: The HERALD may be played by either a man or a woman.*

TIME: The rooftop of the Tchernik home, Hamtramck, Michigan.

PLACE: Autumn-Winter, 2019

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ACT 1
SCENE 1

The stage is the roof of Wendy and Leonard Tchernik's home, in an old working-class neighborhood outside of Detroit. The roof is shingled, flat in front, then sloping upward, past two dormer windows, SL and SR. As the play progresses, an enormous Christmas lights display will take shape on this roof. But at this moment, it is as empty as every other rooftop in the middle of a chilly October night.

We hear a soft flutter of wings and the HERALD appears, walking across the roof. He is an angel, of sorts, though his hair and wings are a little unkempt. He walks to the peak of the house, drinking in the night air and letting the breeze pick at his robes. Then he sits, lighting a cigarette and looking up at the stars.

A light comes on in one dormer window. LEONARD TCHERNIK pulls the curtain aside and looks out. The Herald waves. Len comes out. He is a burly man, in his late 50's/early 60's, wearing a winter coat over pajamas. He approaches the Herald, who stands and tosses the cigarette away.

HERALD. Bon Soui. (*Len looks confused.*) Oop! English. Sorry. Hi. (*Len waves weakly.*) Leonard Tchernik, right? Goes by 'Len?' 'Tchernik' with a 'T' but don't pronounce it, right?

LEN.... God?

HERALD. No. No, sorry. (*Notices Len staring at his wings, and smooths them.*) Forgot how wings freak the locals. No, I am not God, Len. But I am here tonight as God's messenger. (*Len abruptly falls prostrate on the roof.*) Okay, what is this?

LEN. I'm prostrating myself.

HERALD. On a pitched roof?

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LEN. I'm being reverent before the Lord.

HERALD. And the Lord appreciates it, but you're going to hurt yourself. Come on, now—

LEN. (*Crying:*) I don't want to leave Wendy now! (*Herald is thrown.*) I've been real good since the bypass! I gave up smoking, managed my anger, and started eating *fruits!*

HERALD. Leonard, I'm not Death.

LEN. You're sure? I thought ... six months out of the bypass, and ... I haven't managed my anger *that* well—

HERALD. Is this an argument you really want to win? (*Len shakes his head.*) There is no Angel of Death, Len. When people die, the last thing they see is ... a car in the wrong lane, or a bunch of doctors looking confused, or a huge section of carpeting coming up fast.

LEN. I see.

HERALD. It's like a big remote. Those arteries of yours? We shut 'em down—(*Mimes a remote. Makes a croaking noise.*) You come to *us*. So, this isn't about Death. God has a message for you.

LEN. Should I kneel? Or build a temple for—? (*Herald crosses to the peak and sits.*)

HERALD. You've already prostrated yourself, you've already been afraid — and believe me, God was thrilled—

LEN. I am his devoted servant—

HERALD. And now, he'd just like you to shut up. (*He pats the space beside him for Len to come sit. He does. Herald takes a deep breath.*) Autumn. I love that smell. It's beautiful down here. What's this place called?

LEN. Hamtramck.

HERALD. And that's a ... Polish word? (*Len nods.*) Meaning ...?

LEN. "Hamtramck." (*Herald nods, digs out a cigarette, offers on to Len.*) No thank you. My heart.

HERALD. Ah. Smart man. (*Pause. Len watches the Herald smoke.*) God sent me in answer to your question, Leonard.

LEN. Which one?

HERALD. You've asked more than one?

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LEN. I'm in my late fifties. With iffy arteries. The only thing I *haven't* asked about is the Infield Fly Rule.

HERALD. Well, God has sent me to answer the most important one. Ready? (*He smoothes his robes, clears his throat. Len rises, crosses himself.*)

LEN. Let me be worthy to receive His wisdom.

HERALD. 'You never won the neighborhood Christmas lights contest because you never captured the true meaning of Christmas.' (*Herald nods solemnly. Len looks at him.*) Go now, my son, and—

LEN. What are you talking about? I never asked about lights displays.

HERALD. That's what God heard.

LEN. Well, forgive me, but how close was God listening? I toss ten good questions a week up there.

HERALD. And you never asked about Christmas light displays?

LEN. I may have said, 'God, why didn't we win?' But it was like 'God, I stubbed my toe!' Or 'God, where are my car keys?' It wasn't a serious question—

HERALD. Well, this is the only answer I have for you—

LEN. It's not even accurate. We captured the spirit of Christmas. That can't be why we lost. Twenty years of ... hanging cherubim on *Hail, Emmanuel* in that icy rain of '85?, or slammin' nails into *We Who Seek* in the middle of the night. Every year we would lose, and every year I would tell my wet, bitter children that it was worth it to glorify God.

HERALD. And God appreciates your work. Although *Glorious Nativity* in '87 was a little—

LEN. That makes a completely different statement if the baby's head stays on.

HERALD. But glorifying God was only part of the deal. You never caught the whole fish, Leonard. That's why you never won.

LEN. Then I respectfully ask God to show me what I've missed.

HERALD. That's a separate question.

LEN. Oh, please.

HERALD. No, I'll answer it. But with wisdom comes a task. Are you up to it?

LEN. You're the one in charge of my arteries.

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(Herald chuckles, takes Len's hand, turns it face up. Then he puts his own hand on top of it. Len closes his eyes and gasps.)

HERALD. This is what Christmas feels like. *(Len is kind of tripping on the feeling. Herald removes his hand. Len drops to a knee with his eyes still closed.)*

LEN. *(Awestruck.)* What does it look like?

HERALD. That's your task: Gather your lights, Leonard, and see. *(Herald exits. Len catches his breath for a moment, looks around, finds that Herald is gone. Then he exits into the SLC dormer window. We see a light go on and hear the following:)*

LEN'S VOICE. Wendy, get out here!

WENDY'S VOICE. Len, why—? Leonard, that's my leg—

LEN'S VOICE. Come on!

WENDY'S VOICE.

Come on! Walk it off. It's not so bad.

AAAGH! *(A dull thud.)* Have you gone CRAZY?

LEN'S VOICE. I'm not crazy! Come out on the roof with me!

(Len comes through the window followed by WENDY, robed and slippered, hair sculpted by sleep.)

WENDY. What are you doing?! The neighbors will see you!

LEN. A marvelous thing has happened! *(Wendy is frightened by his energy, and uneasy about her footing. She edges to the dormer window and sits.)*

This is--! Oh God, Wen. You'll thank me--a special night for both of us!

This is BIG! So big! And I don't--! How do I even--?!

WENDY. It's four o'clock in the morning. *(She wraps her robe tighter as he paces.)* Good Catholics don't do this, Len. They don't roll their wives out onto the roof like so much ... shingling.

LEN. God just spoke to me, Wen!

WENDY. God? Our God? The Father, Son and Holy Spirit? *(He nods.)*

Wouldn't *He* know that it's four o'clock in the morning?

LEN. It was God. Believe me! He called me. He knew me. He answered my questions. He told me, 'You never won the Christmas lights display because you never captured the true meaning of Christmas!' *(Pause)* I swear on my honor, this is true!

WENDY. You had the ear of God for a moment...*(Len nods.)*... and you asked about *Christmas lights*?

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LEN. It was complicated.

WENDY. Why not ask about the drapes? Do they work in the game room? Are the Lions going to make the playoffs?

LEN. Wendy, this was the only answer I got!

WENDY. You really think it was Him?

LEN. *(Nods)* It was scary, but it made a kind of awesome sense. Same feeling as the heart attack, when I was—

WENDY. Don't talk about the heart attack—

LEN. It doesn't hurt to *talk* about it, Wen—

WENDY. All you do it talk—

LEN. Because I won't live underneath it? Every day, every night: 'You're eating too fast, Len.' 'That's too spicy, Len.' 'Let Stan lift that, it's too heavy for you, Len.'

WENDY. *(Rising)* I'm going in.

LEN. Wendy, I promised I'd do something! And I'm gonna need your help! *(He motions her to sit. She does, reluctantly.)* See, I was pretty peeved with His answer. We had our moments with those displays.

WENDY. *Drummer Boy Christmas* was...

LEN. *Drummer Boy Christmas* in '89. *Santa Cleared for Takeoff* back in '86. *Two Happy Wise Men* in '91.

WENDY. Three *Happy Wise Men*.

LEN. God didn't see the one Mark hit with the car. We must have put a million lights into the sky over the years. And we got ... moments. Little bits. But God showed me how Christmas *feels* tonight, Wen – and He told me to build it with my lights. *(Wendy stands and moans, ominously.)* Maybe you see where I'm going, then—

WENDY. I'm trying to find a way to say 'no' with my entire soul, here. I'm—HA! How do I say 'No!' from the balls of my feet, Len? From the shifting, molten core of this earth?! Because I SO don't want this to happen! *(Len makes to speak.)* I will NOT go back to splinters, and glue gun burns, and building angels in an icy wind, shouting at each other across the ghosts of people departed! No! Unh-huh! Nein! Nyet! *(Brief pause.)*

LEN. So, reluctance?

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WENDY. This wasn't God! God didn't bring you back from death so you could lock up your heart and roll off the roof onto my Ford Taurus! (*Len makes to speak.*) Leonard, do you *want* to go back? Do you miss wolfing down Thanksgiving Dinner to run out and finish the display? Then losing to the MacVicars or the Palladinos every year? Haven't you enjoyed the past few Christmases? We have a perfectly serviceable Madonna and Child. Stan puts it up. Stan turns it on. The Tchernik name is upheld, everyone has a Merry Christmas, and we have a life.

LEN. It looks weak.

WENDY. Not to us.

LEN. 'Cause we're in FLORIDA!

WENDY. All the more reason! (*Len crosses away, sits.*) Len, it's been four years since we even *tried*! D'ye remember the last time? We placed thirteenth! Thirteenth on a block of twenty-four houses – and three of those families were Muslim. You said, 'If we ever place in the teens, or if it ever isn't fun, we'll stop.' Well, we did, and it wasn't, and we stopped. (*Brief pause*)

LEN & WENDY. But God...

WENDY. Does God have a design? It's October already. Everyone else has figures cut and supplies bought by now. Those umpteen shepherds and carolers and cherubim we have down in the basement? They all came from carefully thought-out plans.

LEN...I'm sure God has a plan. (*Rising, pacing.*) Okay, what is Christmas, then? What is Christmas?

WENDY. You're going to cook up a plan, right here on the roof, in the middle of the night? (*He ignores her. She chuckles and sits.*) You look just like a little boy right now.

LEN. Who says we're old, Wendy? Who?

WENDY. My back and every working timepiece on the planet.

LEN. Do you ever think that it isn't cholesterol or arthritis or time that makes us old, but the belief that we are old that makes us old?

WENDY. No. I like being old. I'm wise enough to love my husband, cherish my health and pick my battles. I can see, now, that capturing Christmas in a rooftop lights display is something young people do until they realize it can't be done. (*Pause. Len is caving. Gently:*) A lot of

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people want to hear God, Len. Some even have dreams about it. But God would not ask the impossible.

LEN. It is impossible. Isn't it? *(She smiles. He helps her up as they head back inside.)* I mean, we tried for twenty years.

WENDY. With plans. And high hopes. And lots more people. *(He holds the window open for her.)* There's always something that you miss. You celebrate Jesus, you're missing Santa. Angels aren't fun. Elves aren't holy. *(She is halfway in.)* The problem with Christmas is not that it's one thing. It's *everything*. *(Len, thunderstruck, freezes at the window.)* Len. LEN?

(Suddenly, Len bounds around the roof, bursting with energy, framing parts of the roof between his fingers. Wendy watches from the window.)

LEN. All those figures in the basement – why are they there? Why did we save them all these years?

WENDY. They're all we have left of some people.

LEN. We kept them for THIS display! All of them—the two surviving Wise Men and the warped Drummer Boy; the Christmas Fairy with the cat puke on it; the reindeer Mark made which could also be a cow, and every elf that Stan didn't shatter when his MRI came back! And ALL of them are going up here!

WENDY. It won't make any sense!

LEN. Yes it will – because Christmas is *everything*! Christmas is everything, Wendy! God wants us to put it all together! It's the birth of our savior! It's the joy of giving! It's a solemn event, celebrated with the excitement of a child!

WENDY. And that's what I should tell people when you die of an embolism building it?

LEN. I'll write it down so you won't forget. *(She is up and done. Len catches her at the window.)* Wen? WEN?! *(He grabs her in a bearhug and holds her as she cries.)* I won't die, okay? I promise you that. Okay? Have I ever broken a promise?

WENDY. You can't promise that. *(He rocks her gently as she cries.)* I've lost too many people, Len!

LEN. Sssh. Sssh....

WENDY. My parents. Your parents—

LEN. You were really sorry to see my mother go.

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WENDY. We made a nice peace after her larynx was removed.

LEN. But you won't keep me by making me walk on eggshells, Wen. If I can't ever get excited, can't follow my heart... I don't know who you'd have here. But it wouldn't be me. *(Pause)*

WENDY. So Christmas is about bringing everything together? *(He holds her, and nods.)* Let's do it, then. *(He spins her around, stares at her. She nods.)* Let's go. We'll skip Florida. I'll inventory the basement, hose down the roof, pull out the figures. I'll make hot chocolate and tiny sandwiches, break out the glue gun, and say 'watch your step' a thousand times over.

LEN. This ... is a miracle! *(He picks her up and hugs her.)* God has possessed my wife and made her cooperate!

WENDY. *(Laughing)* Len—LEN! *(They tumble onto the dormer, laughing.)* I have a condition.

LEN. What is it? Doesn't matter—whatever! Sex on demand! Complete custody of the remote!

WENDY. I want a full crew, Len. *(Pause)*

LEN. That's *easy!*

WENDY. A *full* crew.

LEN. How easy is that? Stan's a stone's throw away. It's a quick drive to pull Mark out of college. He'll miss a few days, but—

WENDY. You're not listening, Len. A full crew. Five. *(Silence.)*

LEN. Tommy Jeffers, from work, was always asking—

WENDY. My husband and my love: You know what I'm talking about.

LEN. Wendy ... I—No, I can't give you that. It would ... ruin the very purpose—

WENDY. Then there is no display. *(She rises.)*

LEN. You can't just cancel God's project!

WENDY. Who's drawing up the guest list? God or you?

LEN. *(Angry)* This is to glorify Christ Jesus! It has to be built with reverent hands, or—! It would be an abomination to open our doors to...

WENDY. She has a name. *(Silence. She stands.)* How reverent are our hands, really? When we open them to Christmas on the roof, but lock our doors to the world downstairs? *(No response.)* If Christmas is everything, it's everyone, too! *(She leaves by the window. He is alone a moment.)*

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LEN... do you have a phone number? (*Wendy sticks her head back out the window.*) You can make a call. You can ... extend an invitation.

WENDY. I can do that.

LEN. You can *ask*. I won't have you beg.

WENDY. (*Excited.*) Oh, Len! (*He looks at her. She nods. Quietly.*)... I'll do that, then. I'll do that tomorrow.

LEN. She won't come. And when she doesn't come, I don't want you saying—

WENDY. (*Coming back out on the roof.*) If I can ask – and honestly invite – I'm in for the rest. No matter what. (*She hugs him, laughs and sniffles.*)

LEN. Don't cry. The neighbors'll think I'm beating you up here.

WENDY. Come inside now, eh? (*He nods. She crawls in. He pauses at the window, looking skyward.*)

LEN. God? My wife ... has amended your command. I'm sorry. If You were married, You would understand. (*He exits. Blackout.*)

SCENE 2

Several weeks later. The roof is dotted with power tools and boxes. A huge pile of lumber appears over the peak, and it is dropped suddenly on the roof. Behind it is STAN TCHERNIK, Len and Wendy's 25-year-old son, in checkered flannel. He noisily arranges the tools, lumber and odds and ends. He pauses, bending to pick up a loose nail, then moves smoothly into a lineman's three-point stance. He is still for a moment, then explodes out of the stance into an imaginary run-block. He walks back to his original position, mumbling to himself and shaking his left knee as he does so. He sets again, preparing to fly off the block, until MARK appears, 19, thinner and unhappily awake. Stan quickly returns to the lumber.

MARK. At first, I thought it was a thunderstorm, you know? One of those seven a.m. thunderstorms...

STAN. (*With a board*) Comin' through...

MARK... *That's* what's making the light fixtures rattle, I thought. Frightened Jesus right off the wall. Rode his cross down behind the air-hockey table. (*Stan ignores him.*) But then I saw the painted cow hoisted

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past my window, and I said, “Please, God, let it be a plywood rodeo. Because I can’t do another Christmas display.”

STAN. I started early.

MARK. Really? (*Wendy appears, carrying a box.*)

WENDY. Mark? ‘morning, honey! (*Kisses him on the cheek.*) There’s coffee downstairs.

MARK. Thank God. (*Exits through the window.*)

WENDY. (*Whispering to Stan.*) Remember what I said—

STAN. (*Working right through this:*) Oh, God—the whisper.

WENDY. I really need your help with him. It’s going to be tense enough with Debra coming. I don’t want Mark to feel overlooked. (*Stan snorts.*) He’s in a very vulnerable place.

STAN. And this matters to me how? (*Brief pause.*)

WENDY. I don’t want you throwing him off the house again. Understand?

STAN. I threw him off one time. Once. And it’s like no one trusts me anymore.

WENDY. It was barbaric.

STAN. (*Pointing.*) Forget that I got him clear over to a very soft oleander bush—which is another achievement no one notices.

WENDY. We’re all very proud of your achievements, Stan. Your room is chock full of football trophies!

STAN. Kept stubbing my toe on little gold linemen trying to get to the bathroom—

WENDY. Well, who knew you’d come back and live here? If Bonnie wants those trophies—

STAN. I promise not to throw Mark off the roof, okay? He’s too big to get serious air under him now, anyway.

WENDY. Good. Because he’s got enough problems as it--

STAN. No. Stop. You’re not going to take me aside and tell me someone’s pathetic story. Save that for the holidays.

WENDY. I don’t do that. Why would I do that?

STAN. I don’t know. But every time I’m home, there you are: ‘Tales from the Dark Side.’

WENDY. You make me sound so manipulative. I just wanted to share some concerns about your little brother.

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STAN. Why? He's here. He's healthy enough to annoy me. Unless he's got like a ... sucking chest wound... (*Gestures, 'I don't care,' goes back to work.*)

WENDY. Fine. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you. You won't hear a single word about Mark's problems from me. (*Pause.*) Even though that word is 'drugs!' (*Stan buries his head in his hands.*) The whole drug thing, Stan. The whole drug scene. Skeptical? So was every family that ever wound up on a news magazine. Mark was never the Popular Football Player. He never fit in like you. And now, he's in a strange environment, poised on the edge of the drug counter-culture.

STAN. How high is this roof?

WENDY. I'm not asking for much. Just be nice to him. Show me the Stan I saw the day you married Bonnie.

STAN. You want me drunk and horny?

WENDY. The day of the State Championship, then.

STAN. You want me drunk and on steroids?

WENDY. You didn't take steroids. Stanley? Did you take steroids in school?

STAN. I was 17 years-old and the size of a school bus. You don't get there on a sack lunch and three glasses of Ovaltine.

WENDY. (*As Mark returns.*) D'ye ever think that maybe God blew your knee out because He didn't like the path you were on?

STAN. No. He decided fridges were going dangerously unserviced in the Royal Oak area, and someone had to live that dream.

MARK. (*Looking at a random pile of beams.*) I like it. Let's call it "Lumber Camp Christmas" and go back to bed.

WENDY. Your father will be out in a couple of minutes for a design conference.

STAN. Good. 'Cause I got a couple of questions. Like, "Where's the design?"

MARK. Or why are we doing this at all?

WENDY. Your father will explain.

MARK. But if *you* tell us, we won't have to sit through a rambling, defensive speech. (*She looks at both of them.*)

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WENDY. Your father got a vision from God, telling him to build this display so we could capture the true meaning of Christmas. *(Pause.)*

MARK. If Dad was insane, you'd *tell* us, right? Because I don't think he'd bring it up.

STAN. Ya know, I don't care why we're in this, as long as we're in it to win. That means we start early, hit it hard, and kick some butt. I'm not trippin' over trophies so I can kiss the ass of that Ziggy display and the other eleven that placed in front of us last time. That was painful for me, and for anyone with any sense of pride. So this year, those people are going to feel our pain. *(Pause.)*

MARK. Can we sing carols now?

WENDY. I'll go get your father. Mark, help me with the window. *(He follows her as Stan returns to work. The whisper:)* Remember what I told you. Be very gentle. He needs you. *(She exits. He crosses to Stan, watching him move beams.)*

STAN. These beams line up with those little plugged holes in the roof. See where they match? I need you to sit on the wood so I can drive those carriage bolts through and set the base.

MARK. You need my special powers of gravity. *(He sits on the beams, at Stan's direction, during the following.)*

STAN. So did Mom get a chance to talk to you yet?

MARK. Yeah. Apparently, we're both on the verge of suicide, but can save each other by being perky.

STAN. Well, who told her he was, 'poised on the edge of the drug counter-culture'?

MARK. She *said* that?

STAN. *You* said that—she just repeated it. And, for your information, no one on the edge of the drug counter-culture ever says 'poised.'

MARK. I smoked grass in the dorm once. I said it as a joke. *(Pause. Stan works.)* Does that mean you're not "reliving your childhood since Bonnie threw you out after a fight over soccer"?

STAN. *(Chuckling.)* I made up the part about soccer.

MARK. But you and Bonnie did fight.

STAN. Why does she do that?

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MARK. Mom? She thinks: if I feel sorry for you, and you feel sorry for me, and we're both scared of Dad ... we'll all have a much better time.

STAN. So every holiday we eat turkey, watch television, and then you cry.

MARK. I don't always cry.

STAN. Boo hoo hoo. *(As Len and Wendy return:)*

MARK. Don't even start that.

STAN. Boo hoo hoo.

MARK. I don't even—

STAN. Boo hoo hoo.

MARK. How do I even
reason w—?

STAN. Boo hoo hoo.

MARK. This is so —
MOM?!

STAN. Boo hoo hoo hoo hoo
hoo hoo.

(They go at each other. Len intervenes, raising a hand:)

LEN. HEY! IF YOU THINK YOU'RE TOO OLD TO RIDE THE SMACK-YOUR-ASS EXPRESS, YOU CAN THINK AGAIN! ANY TAKERS? *(Mark and Stan part quietly and take seats.)* I lost my first thought, now. YOU HAPPY? I had stuff to SAY!

WENDY. *(Prompting him.)* We're glad they're here—

LEN. *(Still shouting.)* WE'RE GLAD YOU'RE HERE! *(He nods to Wendy, claps his hands, clears his throat.)* Boys, the last few Christmases—been good. Eh, Wendy? We're down in Florida, the mailman brings the presents. Pope says mass on cable and we never felt closer to God. But we'd spend the whole time playing, 'remember when?' Remember the last nativity we did, when Stan bolted the donkey head onto the Drummer Boy and tried to tell us he wasn't drunk? Or that time Mark took a girl up here and cut his hand on a bulb and she walked off the roof looking for the medicine cabinet?

MARK. We agreed at the emergency room that never happened.

LEN. What I'm saying in ... that's Christmas to us. So why did we never succeed?

MARK. *(Thoughtfully.)* Maybe because Christmas is a feeling that goes deeper than lights or glitter or painted signs. *(Pause. What a silly thing to say.)*

LEN. No! That's not it.

STAN. Everything's feelings with you!

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LEN. We never won because we never gave it quite enough. That's why we have to try at least once more, while we still can. Because if we do – and I have this on good authority – wonders will come of it!

STAN. Do we have a plan?

LEN. 'Do we have a plan?' We have the Plan of Plans!

STAN. Is it on the Blueprint of Blueprints? Because I have to know where the Lumber of Lumber goes.

LEN. You wanna know what it looks like? Everything. The Noah's Ark of Christmas displays. Everything we've ever done, up and lit for God and everybody! We got an attic full of Magi, reindeer, elves and angels — if it isn't warped, we're using it! 'Cause that's what God gives us! 'Christmas is Everything.'

STAN. That—that makes no sense. I ... what is the theme?

LEN. I just said: "Christmas is Everything."

STAN. Yeah, but ... how big do I set the base?

LEN. Set it for all of Christmas! Sound crazy? It *is* crazy! But we'll get it done, we'll win and more, besides!

WENDY. But it isn't just about winning. It's *who* wins. Who comes together. This'll be our first time back with Debra in a—

LEN. (*Sarcastically.*) Who? (*Wendy shoots him a withering look. Stan and Mark exchange glances.*)

WENDY. Just ... cherish each other and the time, alright? It'll be really irritating, but you'll be glad you did later.

LEN. (*Clapping his hands.*) Alright, alright! Those figures downstairs aren't getting up here by themselves! Let's go, let's go! (*The boys exit through the dormer. Len tries to follow. Doesn't make it.*)

WENDY. You are going to ruin God's vision unless you think about how you're going to receive Debra! D'ye hear me?

LEN. She won't come, anyway.

WENDY. She told me she would try.

LEN. (*Sorting wood.*) What is that? What is 'try?' You do or you don't.

WENDY. Have you thought about what you're going to do if she—?

LEN. I will be who I am, okay?! May-Maybe I'll put a face on for the boys ... but I'm not being disrespected again! Not in my home!

LIGHTS

WENDY. Now I wish she wasn't coming. (*Off his look:*) I know! I know! But it was a good idea back in October. There was still time for a miracle. (*She approaches him. Gently:*) I can't wave her off now, Len. And we can't ... have a replay of the night she left. That would kill you.

LEN. I'm stronger than you think.

WENDY. Then *I* would kill you.

LEN. THIS PERSON—

WENDY. Your daughter—

LEN. I *had* a daughter. Taught her about love, and family and God – and she told me I was a joke. D'ye remember? Laughed at the workings of my soul, then grabbed her purse because Plittman was waiting in the car.

WENDY. Isn't it time we let go of that? She divorced Plittman three years ago.

LEN. My daughter is dead. You have someone coming over. We don't know who she is.

WENDY. Maybe she's sorry.

LEN. Has she gone to confession? Or even to church? Every Christmas, every birthday, Father's Day, Mother's Day she has a chance to ... do *something*. Does she? She's sorry? Has she ever said so? In seven years, she ever said the words? Please tell me if she has. (*No response. He gestures around him.*) This is all how she wants it: *we're* fighting, and she has no responsibility. She books a flight—maybe *this* flight. 'I'm coming.' 'I can't come.' 'I'll try.' I'm not going to wait on tinder hooks, 'til she decides to show up at our door.

WENDY. Me neither. (*Grabs her purse and keys.*) That's why I'm going to the airport.

LEN. When are you going to have the backbone to stand up for your faith? (*She turns to look at him.*) She broke with God. Blasphemed the sacraments—

WENDY. (*Evenly:*) Go back to the part where I'm not good to my faith. (*Pause.*)

LEN. I ... I'm just alone on this. Again! I don't understand why I'm alone on this.

WENDY. I know what she did. And what it means. I've taken communion with you thirty-two years. But I've got to see her eyes, Len. Very

LIGHTS

transparent eyes, d'ye remember? She could never hide the cigarettes she snuck in there. Or the curfews she broke. Before she ever said Plittman was more than her teacher, I saw that, too. If she's bad, I'll see it. But the only thing I know right now is an empty airport terminal says volumes.

LEN. At some point, you'll have to decide where your loyalties are.

WENDY. I have. They're everywhere.

LEN. This is a woman who cast us aside.

WENDY. She also built the nativity figures I find you staring at. She's every pause in holiday conversation. All the photo albums we never look at together. And she's the squirmy little thing in the nursery that made you cry for the first time in your life. *(Len turns back to the display.)* Come with me. It would mean so much. *(He gestures to the work in front of him.)* You know, when the prodigal son came back, his father saw him "when he was still a long way off." You know what that means?

LEN. The prodigal son was sorry.

WENDY. It means the father was *looking* for him. *(Stan steps onto the roof, between them.)*

STAN. Boy, you can work all morning with gloves on, but take 'em off for a second, and you get splinters. I just wish... *(He notices them staring at each other.)*

WENDY. Do what you want, Len. I prefer to be kind. *(She exits.)*

STAN. Uh, anything wrong?

LEN. *(Looking directly at him:)* What would be wrong? *(Mark returns. Len claps his hands.)* Okay, okay! Look at this! I got a chill in the air, power tools, colored lights and my sons hauling up the wood. Feels a little like Christmas, doesn't it?

MARK. Oh, yeah! *(Len gives them a 'thumbs-up,' and exits. To Stan:)* We're in Hell, aren't we?

STAN. Oh, yeah. *(We hear a car start. Mark watches Wendy leave.)* He might just *be* insane. That would just make my day.

MARK. What are we going to do?

STAN. Not only does this thing *not* exist, but it's different every time you ask him. "Is it a Santa thing?" "Oh, yeah." "Is it a Jesus thing?" "Oh, yeah."

LIGHTS

MARK. I mean, what are we going to do about what's about to happen? They haven't talked about her, or hashed it out, or *anything*—

STAN. “Is it a Cowboy, Pirate and Walrus thing?” “Oh, yeah.” I need specs and plans. How many carriage bolts do you need for “all of Christmas?”

MARK. Stan, I'm a little dubious about what's going on, here.

STAN. What do you mean? (*Mark looks at him.*)

MARK. Debra, whom Dad won't even *mention*, is on her way here from the airport! Do you remember Dad before Deb left? These are people who shouldn't even be in the same county, and we're putting them on a high roof, surrounding them with sharp tools, and asking them to celebrate Christmas, when one of them is a Jew.

STAN. No, what is “dubious?”

MARK. Dubious! Uh, doubtful! A bad idea—

STAN. Then just *say* it's a bad idea! Use little words. There isn't anything anyone'll do up here that needs a big word! (*Returns to work.*)

MARK. You're going to say something, right? To Dad? You're going to stand in, if this gets ugly.

STAN. She may not show.

MARK. But if she does—

STAN. (*Pauses work.*) Dad was right about one thing. We should have won this contest a couple of times, at least. It's weird how we never won. Like a curse. If Deb comes back, I think she'll work with us. And if she does, and we win ... that'll say something to Dad.

MARK. ...that's the lamest plan I ever heard. (*Stan returns to work.*) If people would just sit down and discuss—

STAN. Oh, yeah, let's *talk* about our problems! It'll be like we're doing something—

MARK. Sometimes talking *is* doing something.

STAN. Sometimes it's just talk! Mark, you're going to find that world isn't waiting for you to come wrap fancy words around it. (*Stan grabs the nearest figure and begins wiping it off. Mark takes a position by the pile, handing Stan the figures one by one, as Stan brushes them off, pries off loose nails, etc.*)

MARK. Why did Bonnie throw you out?

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STAN. You're talking. I have a hammer. How smart is that?

MARK. We can talk, Stan. Brothers talk. You can't spend your life avoiding important stuff.

STAN. Dad does.

MARK. Dad doesn't avoid the important stuff. He just handles it badly. He shoves all the important stuff to the end of his sentences, and ... never gets there. *(Clapping his hands. As Len:)* "Hey! Listen! If you're driving on an icy road, and you start to skid—always remember to..." *(He mimes a steering maneuver. Stan grins.)* "... off the brake, and then..." *(Another gesture.)* "—slowly, slowly ... to the side of the road."

STAN. You never got his football talks. "Hey! Stan! Listen! If the..." *(Gestures.)* "If it pops right out in front of you. Remember just to get down on top of it. Don't try pick it up and run."

MARK. I thought that was his "sex talk." *(Pause.)*

STAN... that would explain why he was sweating so much. *(They laugh.)*

MARK. If you told me about Bonnie, maybe I could help. *(Stan returns to work.)*

STAN. 'Cause you know so much about marriage, right?

MARK. You're my brother and I lo—

STAN. Ho! Ho! HO! DON'T SAY IT!

MARK. Why are you so hung up?

STAN. Why do you always have to talk about stuff and cry?

MARK. That's what brothers do.

STAN. That's what *Italians* do, Mark. *(Mark laughs.)* What?

MARK. Oh, my God. I finally found your Kryptonite. You can't say "I love you."

STAN. Okay, you're pissing me off.

MARK. You can't say "I love you," you can't *hear* "I love you." *(Stan squirms a little. Mark laughs.)* Oh man, if I'd only known this when I was in seventh grade!

STAN. I promised Mom I wouldn't toss you off the roof.

MARK. You're not going to toss me off the roof, because you *luuuuuuve* me! And I *luuuuuve* you! *(He laughs. Stan approaches him. Mark evades.)* And you can't pound a person for saying "I love you." That would be like pounding Gandhi.

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STAN. I would pound Gandhi.

MARK. But you'd never hurt me. Because you *luuuuuve* me! *(Stan chases him as Len returns, dragging figures out of the dormer window. He spots the chase and moves, figures in hand, to intervene.)*

LEN. Hey! Hey! Break it up! *(The chase continues until Len gets between them, shoving a Virgin Mary figure at Stan like garlic at a vampire.)* THE VIRGIN MARY SAYS, 'BREAK IT UP!' *(Stan pauses.)* This isn't 'Simon Says.' She'll send you straight to Hell, Stan. *(Mark makes to speak. Len, without looking:)* And you – stop talking!

MARK. I was only saying—

LEN. Hey! Doesn't matter! Sometimes with you, it's the *number* of words! *(Holds up the Virgin Mary figure.)* How 'bout this, huh? Buried under half a reindeer and a full chimney set, and it still glows like it was painted yesterday.

MARK. Debra always lacquered the ones she did. It put us behind schedule, but they were worth the wait.

LEN. *(Putting it down.)* You got the beams bolted down? Let's finish that up.

STAN. It's twelve feet. You want that big a base?

LEN. Six for the nativity. The rest to anchor Santa.

STAN. We're going to have Santa *and* a nativity?

LEN. We're going to have Santa *at* the nativity.

STAN. And the caption is ...?

MARK. *You're Early!* *(Both glance at Mark, who resumes picking up stuff.)*

STAN. Uh, you know I never question you on design...

LEN. And you'd better not start now.

STAN. *(Carefully:)* I'm not. Because I know... you wouldn't screw around with our time, and your time, and ... you wouldn't do it unless this was real important. *(Len stops. Looks at Stan.)* Jus' sayin'...

LEN. This is a good design! It's a ... a collage! Mark, you see what I'm goin' for!

MARK. Oh, yeah. I think, right now, it just *looks* like you're pullin' ideas out of your butt.

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LEN. You see? Fewer words, less trouble. (*DEBRA TCHERNIK-PLITTMAN enters quietly through the opposite window. She is 28, dressed kind of careerish—stylish jacket and a skirt. She carries her shoes in one hand. She looks extremely capable, but at this moment also looks extremely nervous. The men, focused on the beams, do not see her. She takes a step toward Mark, but stops as Len addresses Stan:)* Don't even try to second-guess me on design, okay? (*Mark clears debris as Len and Stan drive in the bolts to anchor the base. Debra, still unseen, backs off a few steps.)*

Been designing these things – for you kids! Since back when you were all spuds. And I did that alone! (*Debra hesitates, taking a post by the dormer as they work.)* Course, it wasn't much back then. Life-sized Santa on the lawn. Sometimes he'd wave. Sometimes he'd give off smoke.

MARK. You would march all three of us out on the lawn for the unveiling.

STAN. Those were the best ones. When we were real little.

LEN. Nah, they were horrible. (*They look at him. He chuckles.)* I have Polaroids. You remember 'em fantastic 'cause you were little.

STAN. “Hi, Santa!” (*Len begins to chuckle.)*

MARK. Oh, shut up.

STAN. “Hi, Santa! Hi, Santa!
Hi, Santa!”

STAN. (*To Mark, as Len laughs*) You wouldn't stop doin' it!

MARK. He wouldn't stop waving!

STAN. He was a *machine!* (*They laugh. Debra smiles, sits on the dormer.)*

MARK. I was five, okay?

LEN. Your mother wouldn't let me go out and tell him. (*As Wendy:)* “He waits all year for this. You're not going to tell him Santa's a rotisserie motor!” (*They laugh. It ebbs. They resume work.)*

MARK. ... my shoulder hurt 'til Easter. (*More laughing. Debra laughs, a little.)*

LEN. I still don't remember how we got you to stop.

STAN. “Come inside, Mark! The dishwasher wants to talk to you!” (*They laugh. Debra stands, makes to speak.)*

MARK. No. Debra said, “Mark, Santa's waving to the other children, and the angels, too. It wouldn't be right if you didn't share him.” (*Pause. Debra watches Len's face darken. Work resumes in silence.)*

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LEN. You know, Christmas may be in all the things we put together here. But there is one very important point to it. It celebrates Jesus as the Christ and the Messiah. And certain people reject that.

MARK. Bad people?

LEN. I never said they were bad. Some of them – it's not for me to say! But they turn their backs on Jesus Christ. And because they do, they consign themselves to Hell.

STAN. I'm tellin' you right now: We don't have room for that on the display. *(Mark and Len look at him. Debra looks back to the window, weighing the possibility of escape.)*

LEN. Hey, listen. There will be times – a few in each life – when you have to... declare who you are. Say “this is right and this is wrong.” And it may be very hard to make that call. But you have to be— *(A doorbell. Len, Stan and Mark exchange uneasy glances. They suddenly stand. Debra dives for cover on the other side of the dormer.)*

MARK. Mom said she would catch her at the airport. *(Stan crawls to the edge, looks over. Motions that he can't see. Doorbell again.)*

LEN *(Calling:)* HANG ON A SECOND! *(Takes a deep breath and strides to the window.)* Well, whoever it is, I'm going to ... see. Who. It is. *(He exits, followed quickly by Stan and Mark. Debra tries to flag Mark down as he crawls inside.)*

DEBRA. Pssst! Mark! MARK! *(He doesn't hear her and closes the window behind him. DEBRA approaches the window slowly, makes sure they are gone, and tries to open the window. It won't move. She tries again, frantically, then kicks it. She tries the other window. No luck. She climbs to the apex to look for back routes. None. She peers off the sides. The height bothers her.)* This is officially not going well, now. *(She prays.)* Okay God, I'm here at home. And it's just like the dream, except the house isn't burning and the Pope isn't shouting from a helicopter. But I blew my entrance. And I'm up here without an escape route. *(She takes a few deep breaths and tries the window again as she talks to herself.)* “Hello, Dad. I got Mom's invitation and thought I'd ... *free climb* up and see how it's going...” *(She gives up and tries the other window.)* “Hello, Dad. Maybe you didn't know Reform Jews can levitate, but...” *(Nothing doing. She paces around, picks up the Virgin Mary figure and admires it for a*

LIGHTS

moment.) Nice to see you. *(She brushes it off.)* Could you get me out of here? For old times' sake?

LEN'S VOICE. *(Offstage, approaching:)* They knock on your door, ask about Jesus, then don't stick around for your answer! *(Debra sets the figure down, hiding as the men return.)*

STAN. Dad, you were on your third sacrament before he even got his little pamphlet out.

LEN. Why am I getting so much attitude from you?

STAN. I just—I'm not...I have to wonder, Dad, if you've thought this through. *(Len glares at him.)* You got your Santa, your heavy piece, way up on the corner—

LEN. Counter-weighted with the Elf and Shepherd down here. Does that solve your problem?

STAN. Yeah, but you got a Shepherd next to an Elf, now. *(Len gestures 'so what?')* A SHEPHERD next to an ELF, Dad! SHEPHERD – ELF!

MARK. What would they talk about?

LEN. *(Tightly:)* This is a good plan. I just ... I'm not explaining it right!

STAN. It's just hard to put together what you can't explain! *(Pause.)* It's still alright, you know, to ... call off the display.

LEN. No, it's not alright! This is important—not just for me, but for you, too! Why can't you just trust me? I know you think I'm crazy to ... and I know ... that ... I was better prepared before. But ... would I have moved mountains to get you here? I made deals... *(The sound of a car pulling up registers on all of them. Mark and Stan struggle not to look.)*... because this is important...

MARK. That's Mom. *(Len gestures. Mark and Stan walk to the edge.)*

LEN. Just trust me, okay? You don't always have a plan. Sometimes you just gotta trust. *(Sound of a single car door slam.)*

WENDY'S VOICE. I'm alone. *(From her perch, Debra watches a perceptible slump fall across the men.)*

MARK. No one was at the airport?

WENDY'S VOICE. She didn't make her way here, then?

MARK. You checked the gate? And baggage claim? And the curb?

WENDY'S VOICE. *(Irritated.)* What do you think, Mark?

LIGHTS

LEN. Come on up, Wen. We got work to do. *(Stan and Mark move back to the center of the roof.)*

MARK. She could have taken a later flight—

LEN. *(Clapping his hands:)* Okay! Okay! Uh, I want to...get the figures in groups, so we can, uh, we can have a sense of size... *(Mark resumes sorting figures. Len loses his train of thought.)*

STAN. Groups, Dad—

LEN. Yeah! Groups: Dickens characters, Santa stuff over here, and the Nativity, then we have different ... fronts, you know? “Christmas is this,” “Christmas is that...” *(Mark drops his figures, as Wendy enters through the window.)*

MARK. *(Crying:)* Why don’t we just admit that Christmas is about love?

STAN. Oh, now he’s cryin’—

LEN. Oh, God.

WENDY. *(Hugging him.)* It’s okay, honey.

MARK. It’s about my love for you, Mom. And you, Dad. And your love for me. *(Len wearily pats him on the back. Mark looks at Stan.)*

STAN. Don’t come over here, cowboy. *(Mark advances on him.)*

Remember what I told you? What did I say?

MARK. Stan, I love you, too. *(Stan charges Mark, who bolts amidst the shouting. Stan chases him in and out of sight lines, all around the roof. Debra moves a couple times to maintain cover.)*

WENDY. Stan? Stan, STOP IT! *(Stan catches Mark in a headlock and drags him toward the edge.)*

LEN. STANLEY! You can’t just throw your brother off the roof! He’s not a kid anymore!

WENDY. He just said that he loves you, Stannie.

STAN. To embarrass me.

WENDY. Say it back to him if you want. You can embarrass him, too.

STAN. I have trouble.

LEN. We all have trouble with him. But when he’s quiet like this, you can see he means well.

STAN. The phrase. I have ... trouble with the phrase.

WENDY. Is this what Bonnie tells you? *(Stan nods.)* Well, there are ways of saying it without saying it. Aren’t there, Mark? *(Mark nods. Stan looks at him. Debra rises and steps forward during the following.)*

LIGHTS

STAN. It's not normal to...

WENDY. Love someone?

STAN. ...and want to kill them at the same time.

LEN. It is if they're family.

DEBRA. Hello. *(All turn to Debra, who is suddenly struck for words. Pause.)*

LEN. Debra. *(Pause.)* Debra Tchernik.

DEBRA. Yeah, I—

LEN. Debra Tchernik-Plittman.

DEBRA....right again. Listen. Um, I'm on my way to... *(She laughs nervously. Len approaches her slowly.)* I was just in town. So, I got your invitation and I'm ... just poking my head in. I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable, so... *(He hugs her. It isn't a vigorous hug, but kind of a careful, gravitational pull. Everyone is surprised and silent. Len lets her go and takes a few steps back.)*

LEN.... you look well.

DEBRA. You look really old. *(Wendy gasps)* God, I said that out loud, didn't I?

LEN. I *am* old. It's okay. I heard it before. Wen?

WENDY. You're old. *(He gestures, "See?" Debra laughs nervously.)*

LEN. Wanna know *why* I'm old?

DEBRA. I know about the bypass. I called Mom, then. But we all thought—

LEN. *(With an edge:)* That's not what makes a man old. That's a ... symptom. Like grey hair. You want to know *why* I look so old? Why your mother looks so old? *(Pounds his chest.)* Old starts from here! **INSIDE!** You know? What could age a man like me from the inside? *(He turns. His hand falls on the Virgin Mary figurine, which catches his attention for the moment.)*

DEBRA. *(Tartly:)* I suppose you'll tell me. *(Len turns to her. A moment of indecision. Then he points to the boys.)*

LEN....these dumb bastards have no clue about designing Christmas displays! *(A brief, surprised pause.)*

STAN. That is true. I'm clueless.

MARK. We just don't know.

LIGHTS

LEN. They don't—they don't... They don't— (*Stalled, gesturing.*)

MARK. Appreciate.

LEN. APPRECIATE!—thank you!—they wouldn't appreciate a reverent Christmas display if it came down with a host of angels and bit 'em on the ass! (*Pause.*)

DEBRA. I come back after seven years and you want to talk about a Christmas design?

STAN. 'Cause it's a really stupid design—

LEN. It is *not!*

STAN. He wants to put Santa at the nativity scene—

DEBRA. (*Chuckles.*) Well, that *is* stupid— (*Len turns to her. Behind him, they all gesture, NO!*) ... unless it's not. I mean, if you were doing it as part of a collage, or—

MARK. A
collage!

STAN.
Christmas
collage!

WENDY: Oh,
sure!

LEN. I *said* "collage." (*Looking around:*) Didn't I say "collage?"

DEBRA. If you wanted a ... mosaic of different Christmas moments: spiritual, secular, family traditions, I could... (*Len nods as Debra walks around the base.*) I mean, it would be tough to do, but if you're trying to sum up the Christmas experience...

LEN. Yes, because Christmas is everything! (*Behind Len, all signal her to agree.*) Jesus, and Santa Claus, and families and-and stories and toys, see?

DEBRA. And you put 'em all together in a single image—

LEN. That's right! You have to put 'em together! And they glow with one light! (*Pause.*)

WENDY. Len, she's got to stay or you'll never get this across.

STAN. When *she* talks? I get it.

DEBRA. Wait, wait wait! We're just going to pretend that—?

MARK STAN & WENDY. Yes!

WENDY. You have to help us, Debra. The plan *is* a little sketchy. But if you stay... things will become clear. Will you help us? (*Debra stares at them all a moment, stammering.*) Good! She said, "yes." Help me make up her room, Len. (*Wendy exits through the window. Len follows, but pauses for something to say.*) **LEN!** (*Len exits. Debra turns to Stan and Mark.*)

LIGHTS

DEBRA. What's really going on here?

MARK. Stan loves me. *(Mark bolts. Stan chases him. Debra sits next to the Virgin Mary, watching as the boys disappear on the far side of the roof.)*

MARK'S VOICE. *(Offstage:)* Stan? No! Stan—quit it! Stan—?
AAIIIIIEE-EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

DEBRA. *(To the Virgin Mary.)* And they wonder why I became a Jew.
(Blackout.)

SCENE 3

Late afternoon, two days later. All the Tcherniks are gathered on the roof. Boards are now up, in a grid pattern. They are beginning to attach figures to the display. A few nativity figures hold the low center, with Dickens characters on one end and Santa and elves on the other. Stan, visible only from the neck up, adjusts a wise man while Len and Debra gauge figure placement. Wendy and Mark sort lights.

LEN. Little more ... little more—

MARK. So the red bands are on a five-second pattern?

WENDY. Reds are five, blues are seven, yellows are nine.

DEBRA. Do we want it back-and-forth—one, two, three—or outside-in, from Santa's workshop into the nativity?

LEN. I want it to kind of zig-zag from the Dickens—

STAN. Left or right, Dad?

LEN. One second, Stan—from the Dickens across to the workshop, and down—

DEBRA. An off-and-on blink or a timed hold?

STAN. Dad?

LEN. A timed hold. It builds, see—

WENDY. Leonard, that's going to pull a lot of juice and we'll be running it for a month.

STAN. Holding a Wise Man with two broken fingers here.

WENDY. I don't want to hear a lot of whining come January's electric—

LIGHTS

STAN. TELL ME TO DRILL
THE GOD—

LEN. HEY! DON'T
BLASPHEME!

STAN. I'M NOT BLASPHEMING! I JUST WANT TO SCREW THE
WISE MAN!

LEN. *(As Stan drills:)* I don't want us losing sight of the prize, here. This isn't the sophomore Homecoming float we're putting up. This is a *Christmas* display. *(Mark rolls his eyes. Wendy looks at Debra, who sighs.)* It demands the respect and honor due the Son of God. So, piety and reverence in all we do here.

STAN. HA! Let's see you twitch with three zip screws in you, you sorry-ass Wise Man bastard. *(He looks up to see them all staring at him.)*

LEN. I'm talkin' to *everybody* here.

DEBRA. Noooo, I don't think you are.

WENDY. You weren't reverent in '93 with *Santa's Sack o' Fun*.

STAN. *(To Debra:)* One gift from Santa's sack was the top of Dad's index finger.

MARK. But once we shoveled the bloody snow away, we took a respectable fifth.

STAN. No such thing as a 'respectable fifth.'

LEN. Why are you talking? Don't we have a ban on Mark talking?

WENDY. He's right, Mark. No walking near the edge. No love for Stan. No talk about anything. *(Mark makes to speak. Stan emerges from behind the display, limping and heavily bandaged.)* That's what we agreed. I have a patio set that won't see Spring because of you two.

MARK. I was defending myself.

WENDY. No. You knew your brother was in a bad place and you got him blind-angry and ran him off the roof like a lemming.

STAN. The detail lights in most of these guys will work with some new bulbs.

LEN. I don't want to go heavy on the details. I want silhouettes.

DEBRA. If you're looking to impress the judges in the Channel 3 van, they'll have to follow the vignettes back and forth. *(Walking around it.)* You talked about one light at the center, right?

LEN. The one light, which is Jesus.

LIGHTS

DEBRA. I'm talking wattage, Dad. If you had that light, then the other lights on sequence to radiate out toward the surrounding stuff.

LEN. Or—OR! They could – what did you say? 'Radiate?' – radiate *in*, toward the center, toward the Christ child. Because that's the payoff, right? *(Debra grabs a tape measure. Mark and Wendy fuss with strands.)*

WENDY. Len, those paneling strips we store the light strands on? Are they in the basement? Could you get them? Or these are going to knot up. *(Len nods, exits. They all work for a moment.)* Okay, who's ready to kill him? *(All raise their hands. To Debra:)* I'm sorry. It's hard to believe, but he actually thinks he's being subtle.

DEBRA. I'll take cover if he ever gets blunt.

STAN. Would it be such a big deal to covert? For like, a week? You could go right back—you don't have to buy Christmas presents, and it would be a lot easier on me.

WENDY. Can't you see he's trying?

DEBRA. Not exactly basking in acceptance, Ma.

STAN. But there are positive signs.

DEBRA. Like?

STAN. *(Shrugs)* You're still alive.

DEBRA. When you come this far, you hope for better.

WENDY. Then tell him what you want from him. *(Pause.)* Tell him why you came here. Such a beautiful story, it might help him understand—

DEBRA. I think, I should just...suddenly get an urgent call tonight and leave, graciously, while I'm still ahead.

WENDY. The best we can hope for is a gracious goodbye?

STAN. It isn't a fair fight, Ma. We're trapped on the roof, the radio's broken and he keeps bringing up Bible characters. Criminy, *I've* been converted twice.

WENDY. What do you think we should do?

STAN.... let Mark talk. It's irritating, but it'll distract him. *(Mark mimes agreement.)*

DEBRA. If he can't accept me, what's the point?

WENDY. You're gone seven years, and back three days. Is it asking too much to give this a little time? His religion taught him that you ... are the enemy.

LIGHTS

DEBRA. It's your religion, too.

WENDY. Well, I didn't ... we don't all ... I can't be religious right now—I'm too busy trying to be nice.

DEBRA. (*Gently:*) Look me in the eye and tell me he will ever take me back—

WENDY. All I know is
you're too proud to even *ask*
him!

DEBRA. And respect my
beliefs.

DEBRA. You and I both know he will keep beating me with Jesus unless I go. (*Wendy crosses away. Debra follows her, picking up her personal effects as she prepares to leave.*) At least the door is open, Mom. We're cordial now. I can leave and come back—

WENDY. But you never will. You're both just civil enough to say, 'It's okay. We've made our peace.' And because of that, you never *really* will.

DEBRA. Oh, you know the future?

WENDY. (*Nodding toward the street.*) How many of these families still gather here for the holidays? D'ye know? One. Maybe two. This street used to be thick with kids this time of year. None of 'em return now. And why not? Ugly fights like we had? No. They just drift. People get less comfortable with their own families, and God forbid we're not always comfortable. Families don't die from angry words anymore. They fade away in schedule books and far-off promises and silence.

DEBRA. It's called 'growing up,' Mom. (*Wendy shakes her head.*)

WENDY. You can grow up and bring people along. But you have to be willing to take the time. (*Debra pauses by the window as Len sticks his head out.*)

LEN. Hey, guess what I found—you headin' in? (*Debra glances at Wendy.*)

DEBRA. No, I'm just... (*She gestures weakly, then returns to work.*)

LEN. Good, 'cause I want to show you something. (*He reappears with a life-sized Jesus figure on one arm, and a life-sized Moses on the other.*)

STAN. You know, every dirty dream I ever had ends just this way.

LEN. From *The Prophets Fulfilled*, in '88. It had Jesus and Moses just like this, see? With Moses in back, who the Jews worship—

DEBRA. (*Covering her eyes.*) We don't—

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LEN. And Jesus, who is the fulfillment of Moses' Law, extending from Moses. Moses—Jesus—Moses—Jesus. Because *that's* the path to God. *(They all stare at Len. Brief pause.)*

WENDY. Mark? You can talk now.

DEBRA. Dad, why don't you just sprinkle holy water on a brick and hit me with it 'til I'm dead?

LEN. What's that supposed to mean?

MARK. *(Stepping in.)* I think the path to God is like that song you used to sing to us. *(Sings:)*

*Oh, you take the high road,
And I'll take the low road,
And I be in Scotland a'fore ya
For me and my true love
Will never meet again*

On the bonny bonny banks of Loch Lomond.

(Pause. Len is perplexed. Stan gives Wendy a thumbs-up. Wendy rises.)

WENDY. Lunch in half an hour. *(She exits. Stan & Debra measure during the following.)*

LEN. I sang to you about locked banks?

MARK. *(Nods)* When we were kids. It was one of my fondest memories.

LEN. Your Polish father. Sang you Scottish song. About banks.

MARK. Okay, maybe it was the TV. But my point is: There are *two* roads to Scotland! *(He pauses to let that sink in. It doesn't.)* The high road and the low road.

LEN. *(Looking around.)* He's allowed to talk now?

MARK. It's life! Don't you see? "Scotland" is the meaning of life. And there is more than one "Road"—one path, one creed—to get there!

LEN. I got off where Scotland is the meaning of life.

MARK. Not literally—

STAN. Lemme tellya 'bout Scotsmen: They wear skirts like women; they play football without helmets; And their music? I'm sorry, but someone's torturing an animal there.

MARK. The point isn't Scotland, Dad. It's that there's more than one way to live your life.

LEN. The High Road and the Low Road? *(Mark nods.)* Heaven and Hell.

LIGHTS

MARK. No! Both roads get you to Scotland!

LEN. We agreed that Scotland wasn't all that much.

MARK. The 'Low Road' is just another road through life. No better or worse than the 'High Road.'

LEN. Then where is Hell?

MARK. What if there is no Hell?

LEN. There *is*, state college, because twelve years of expensive parochial school *taught* you there is.

MARK. I'm just saying, "What if?"

LEN. Then where is Hitler? I'm asking: Where is Hitler? Where is Stalin? Where is Pontius Pilate?

STAN. I'm telling you right now: there's no room for 'em on the display.

DEBRA. I think Mark's talking about diversity of belief. (*Brief pause.*)

LEN. Oh. Well. That makes more sense. (*He returns to work. They exchange glances.*)

MARK. You think so?

LEN. Yeah. I mean, that's popular opinion now, isn't it? "Whatever you believe is fine." I see what you're saying now. (*He measures a bare spot.*) It's crap. But at least I know what you're saying.

DEBRA. Why is it crap?

LEN. (*Shrugs.*) Because it's touchy-feely New Age crap, that's why.

DEBRA. Well, I'm glad you thought it out.

LEN. (*To Mark:*) And you'd better think again, Kilt Boy. 'Cause, come the Day of Judgment, God's going to bestow His righteous mercy upon the faithful, and drop the hammer on all the rest. (*Wendy returns.*)

DEBRA. So any belief system that isn't *your* belief system is damned, right?

LEN. That's the short version, yeah. I didn't make the rules, but I—

DEBRA. Live by them without reflection or question. Even if they condemn other people. Even if they splinter families. Have you ever put a little thought into the fact that your religion—?

LEN. I don't have to put *thought* into my religion! I have to put *faith* into my religion!

WENDY. (*Calling:*) LUNCH!

LEN. You said half an hour.

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WENDY. Time flies. Now, I have some ... boiling water and bread slices down there, and they're not going to eat themselves! *(They exchange glances.)* Well? *(Debra sighs heavily and exits through the window. Stan and Mark follow. Len turns away, paces.)* Len, come down and eat.

LEN. In a bit. *(She leaves him and he wanders a bit, picking up the Virgin Mary figure and studying it while he sits.)* I'm sorry. I'm so stupid, God. You give me a simple plan, and... *(Debra returns, unseen by Len, who sighs.)* Why give me this chance? Just so I can watch the wheels fall off?

DEBRA. Talking to God?

LEN. That's funny to you?

DEBRA. Not if you're getting answers. *(Pause.)* To me, talking to God is like looking into the sun. You can go blind trying to see directly, but ... little pieces appear on the periphery once you give up and head for home. *(Pause.)*

LEN. Pain in the ass, is what it is. *(They laugh.)*

DEBRA. You know, we have enough carpentry and dysfunction up here to keep us from talking for a good long time.

LEN. Isn't that the plan?

DEBRA. I would like to be welcome here regardless of what subject comes up.

LEN. That's an awful longshot.

DEBRA. So is improvising a Christmas display because God said so. We Tcherniks put our money on longshots. *(He rises heavily, returning to the figure during the following.)*

LEN. *(Wearily:)* You are not my daughter anymore. You gave that up when you forfeited your faith to ... I can wish you well, pray for you—I do—but it wouldn't be honest to pretend that ... this ... is more than...

DEBRA. *(Rising:)* Well, thanks for being honest. Sure beats you shoving the Bible down my throat all day. Do you want me to go? Because I'll go.

LEN. Do what you like.

DEBRA. *(Dark laugh.)* I would like to be someone's daughter again. *(Len brushes his hands off and heads for the window.)*

LEN. Then what you have to do is not a mystery.

DEBRA. So you can just *not* love me unless the church says it's okay? *(He stops.)* I'm an outsider. I'm disowned.

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LEN. Yes. Every day, with great effort and a very heavy heart, you are disowned. *(She chuckles.)*

DEBRA. You know, I thought you might try to ... *re-convert* me? One of the million scenarios I imagined was you overwhelming me with acceptance and forgiveness, and I would... *(Shakes her head.)* Another one – you’ll get a laugh out of this! – was that we would actually *talk about our faith*. I would bring my beliefs, and you would bring yours and we would sort them out, without anger, and maybe catch a few glimpses of God along the way. *(She laughs.)* So, what a relief, huh? That you’re every bit as intolerant as I remember. That the best you can do is throw fifth-grade catechism at me. I’m not Jewish because I forgot Catholicism was there. And if you’re trying to pull me back, Len, you’re falling way short. My faith comes from someplace deeper than parochial school flashcards and guilt. I still don’t have a clue where yours comes from.

LEN. When you were four, you almost drowned at the YMCA. You *did* drown, you ... were blue, and your eyes were open and glassy and... *(Sighs heavily.)* Water rolled out the sides of your mouth. The lifeguard, he... *(He mimes a ‘chest press.’)* It was my fault. Young dad. First time at a Family Swim. And I looked away for a second. As a parent, you got a wide margin of error on some things, and on others... My first reaction was to get angry with God. “You bring her *back* to me!” As if *God* had looked away. But the lifeguard kept goin’... I remember him pinchin’ your nose for mouth-to-mouth and me bargaining—*so fast*—I promised to be true to my faith, and when I swore upon the Virgin Mary that ‘I will find a way, every year, to praise God to the skies,’ something *caught*. You started coughing *just then*. And you rolled over, and saw me, and your eyes filled with tears. *(Pause.)* And you puked all over my lap. *(They laugh.)* Yellowy-brown puke. The lifeguard was disgusted. But I’ve been fond of the color ever since. *(Pause.)* That’s where my faith comes from. *(STAN enters, frantically.)*

STAN. I NEED TO TALK TO SOMEONE!

LEN. What’s wrong?

STAN. Uh, I had a fight with Bonnie and we separated! *(Pause.)*

DEBRA. And you just found this out?

STAN. Just hit me. Just now.

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DEBRA. *(To Len:)* You wanted him to play football.

STAN. Bonnie... wants kids, and I'm-I'm not ready for that. It's not something I really like to talk about? So that's why I had to bring it to you.

LEN. Who are you talkin' to?

STAN. Either one. Doesn't matter. I could talk to you, and you could go downstairs. Or I could talk to *you*, and ... Mom's got lunch downstairs. There's all that bread. And I think she's found ... like, meat.

DEBRA. Maybe both of us could help you.

LEN. Yeah, let me get that window— *(As he heads to the window, Stan pulls Debra aside.)*

STAN. *(A whisper:)* What the hell are you doing? We're all downstairs watching water boil and you *wander back up here?* *(He glances over at Len, struggling with the window.)* I can't break this up with banter, you know. Mark banter. All I got is problems.

DEBRA. So this isn't a real problem?

STAN. It is, but this is my only problem. I'm very well-adjusted. After this, you're on your own.

LEN. *(Clapping his hands:)* So, you don't want to have kids. And Bonnie does. *(Stan nods. Brief pause.)*

STAN. So, you see my point?

LEN & DEBRA. No.

STAN. Bonnie's got this biological clock, which ... I can't hit the snooze alarm anymore. Me, I could just make do with another dog.

LEN. Stan, you have three dogs already.

STAN. Yeah, but like a *smart* dog this time. Like a Cocker.

DEBRA. So you just barter back-and-forth, across the evolutionary scale?

STAN. Yeah, but I'm not buying a monkey. That gets old, you know? I mean, they're cute, and you can dress 'em up, but ... in the end, all you got is a hairy kid in diapers who'll never go to college.

LEN. Stan, you're going to have a child eventually. *(Off Debra's look.)* What? He's healthy, Catholic and his wife lives in the county.

DEBRA. If he doesn't want one—

STAN. See, that's the thing. Bonnie says I *do* want one. She says ... 'cause I'm good with other people's babies, and spend all of mass making faces at 'em. And we've had arguments about baby names, and which parts of our

LIGHTS

faces a baby should have. *(To Len:)* This is where a monkey really comes up short.

LEN. It's a shame you don't want to be a father, Stan. Because you'd be a great one. Great fathers start as great sons. *(To Debra:)* Twenty-five years. He came out colicky and hasn't been a lick of trouble since. Never cry. You would never cry. You could hang him upside-down in his crib, leave the room. Come back ten minutes later, he's wavin'. *(Len waves upside down.)*

DEBRA. Makes me wonder a little about you, though.

STAN. There's more to parenting than hangin' upside-down, though.

LEN. And you aren't up for that? Three years varsity letterman—

STAN. Oh, here we go—

LEN. Smallest on the
offensive line by 20 pounds,
and toughest by far!

STAN. Like football answers
everything that could go
wrong.

LEN. Is it so wrong to be proud? With all the things you've done? You think I bring it up too much, but if you brought it up a little more—

STAN. *(To Debra:)* Everything becomes football.

DEBRA. *(To Stan:)* Listen to him. He's right. *(Len gestures: "See?")* Somewhere along the line you forgot yourself. You stopped becoming the person who went and did ... and started becoming a person things happen to. If you care that much, this is *not* something you're going to fail at.

LEN. And it's not something you should let yourself miss. Being a parent, Stan: It makes your heart. It breaks your heart. *(Wendy and Mark reappear during the following.)* The ride exhausts you. But on my deathbed, if I have a regret? It's that I can't go to the front of the line and do it all again.

STAN. *(To All:)* Okay, my problem is solved. Dad and Deb solved my problem.

DEBRA. Well, I'm sure there's more to it than—

STAN. No. That's it. Problem solved.

MARK. Are you going to go impregnate Bonnie now? *(Groans from everybody.)* I didn't mean *right* now. *(Heightened expressions of disgust.)* So we can't mention sex, either?

LEN. In front of Jesus and Santa?

LIGHTS

MARK. And what was goin' on beneath Santa in *your* room last night?
(*Loud expressions of disgust.*) We share a wall!

LEN. I was moving boxes around in the closet!

STAN. D'ye see why I throw him?

LEN. (*To Stan:*) Hey! That's not a good thing, even if it is understandable!

WENDY. If anyone is interested, lunch is really, really ready. (*Stan, Len & Mark head to the window. Len turns back, grabs Debra, as Wendy watches.*)

LEN. Uh, thanks for the help with...

DEBRA. You're welcome. I ... you're welcome. (*Len nods, exits. Debra walks to the edge of the roof as Wendy waits. Softly, to herself:*)

"Baruch atah Adonai elohanynu melech—"

WENDY. You coming in? (*Debra turns, startled.*) I'm sorry! I didn't—was that ... Hebrew?

DEBRA. "*Baruch atah Adonai elohanynu Melech ha'olam shehech-eyanu vekimanu vehigiyanu lazman haze. Amen.*" (*Wendy blinks. Debra takes her hands.*) "Praised are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us to this season of joy. Amen." It's a blessing you say when you come home and your father doesn't toss you off the roof. (*Wendy smiles, kisses her on the cheek.*)

WENDY. Lunch when you're ready. (*She heads for the window. Bumps into Len coming out.*)

LEN. She still out here?

WENDY. Can it wait? She's ... takin' a moment, okay?

LEN. She told you she wants back in the family? (*Wendy nods. Len steals a kiss from her.*)

WENDY. Thank you. I hope that means more boxes in the closet tonight.

LEN. This is God at work. Don't you see, Wen? The angel. The contest. You insisting on her. It was all meant to happen to bring Debra back to the church!

STAN'S VOICE. (*From inside:*) HEY! ARE WE EATING OR NOT?
(*Len gives Wendy another peck on the cheek and departs. Wendy turns and watches Debra pray, as the lights fall. End of Act 1.*)

LIGHTS

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