

A SCATTERED, SMOTHERED & COVERED CHRISTMAS
A Waffle House Christmas Musical
written by Kaine Riggan

(It is Christmas Eve at a Waffle House just off Interstate 24 in Murfreesboro, TN, just 20 miles outside of Nashville. As the lights come up, we see one gentleman sitting in a booth drinking coffee and having a bowl of chili. A quirky little waitress names Rita enters, obviously in a good mood. She is somewhere between plain and attractive and somewhere between thirty-five and fifty-five, although it is somewhat difficult to judge where in either category she clocks in. She pours out the old coffee (regular) and starts a new pot. She picks up a second pot (decaf) and smells it and decides to keep it. Suddenly, she notices the audience for the first time.)

RITA

Well shoot fire! If I'd known all ya'll were gonna be here tonight, I'd a spent more time on this hair. (She quickly adjusts her hairdo) What do you think Harold? Is that better or should I just wear my bad hair day bonnet? (referring to her Waffle House paper hat)

(HAROLD mumbles a grouchy, unintelligible response)

Oh, chip up, Harold. It's Christmas Eve! Don't you just love Christmas Eve?

(HAROLD starts to mumble again but she talks right over his response)

Awe, there's just something about this place on Christmas Eve. It's magical... like there's something special in the air.

HAROLD

(acknowledging himself)

Sorry!

RITA

That is not exactly what I had in mind

(shouting towards the kitchen)

Bert, get in here and change this chili out.

(taking the bowl away from Harold)

I tell you what... you try to bring a little class to a place and *this* is the thanks you get. Prince Charming, here is one of my regulars. Every night, right on the shift change, just like clockwork, ain't that right Harold?

(HAROLD mumbles again as RITA crosses around him to downstage)

Ain't he a peach? He works harder than most, I'd say. He's in here near about every night... coffee black, a bowl of chili, and a grilled cheese with tomato. He'll use about a half a shaker of black pepper on that tomato, too. I don't know how he eats it. But... that's not my say so. You picked a good night to come visit. We'll be brimming with personalities all hungry for something in a few minutes. Naw, you'd think that it being, well, *Christmas* and all, everybody'd be at home doing Christmassy things, but... well, let's just say not everybody gets it. (she sits on a stool) But heck, *I'm* here. Twenty-one Christmases and counting... serving up a hot (noticing

that someone has left a full pot of coffee sitting on the counter) well, warm cuppa coffee and a smiling face. (she yells) Peggy, come see to this coffee. (she smiles again) And for some, that's just about the best Christmas present they're gonna get.

HAROLD

Hey Rita, you got my bill?

RITA

Can't you see I'm busy?

(Peggy enters in a huff carrying a big jar of pickles. LISSA is right behind her. During this next exchange, RITA gets up and fiddles behind the counter then goes into the back room.)

PEGGY

If that boy sings one more datggum country song that he's written somewhere between drunk and wasted, I swear I'll change him to a soprano.

LISSA

Oh, come on, Peggy. There's worse things than having a man sing to you every night.

PEGGY

Like what?

LISSA

Well I hear child birth is pretty bad.

PEGGY

Oh please, honey. When you've popped off as many young'uns as I have, it's no different than getting into this pickle jar. Gimme some hot water, a towel and a salad fork and POP, little berpin' baby gerkins everywhere.

LISSA

How many kids do you have?

PEGGY

Five or six. After four, you just lose count. Let's see, there's Tommy Lee, Vince Neal, Eddie Van, Joe Elliott, Steven Tyler (she pauses) and McCauley

(LISSA gives her a look)

He's the baby.

LISSA

That's so sweet. How old is he?

PEGGY

Thirty-two. (beat) Not so sweet anymore, is it?

BERT

(entering with a carton of potatoes)

Does anyone else around here think it's gross that these potatoes come from a milk carton?

PEGGY

Not when you consider where them eggs come from.

(they consider it)

You'd better be bringing up more than that though. It's gonna be busy in here tonight.

BERT

It's Christmas Eve. Nobody's gonna be in here on Christmas Eve.

(PEGGY and LISSA share a laugh)

Besides, they're calling for eight to ten inches of accumulation by morning.

LISSA

(excitedly)

Do you think it's actually gonna do it? I've never actually seen a white Christmas.

PEGGY

And you ain't going to tonight. The weather man is still a *man*. And when a man says something is going to happen, it ain't. And if claims something's eight to ten inches, you'll be lucky to get three or four.

LISSA

That's disgusting.

PEGGY

Awe. Don't go getting all goody-goody on me tonight, Lissa. I've had a double dose of redneck tonight and there's no telling what I'm liable to say.

BERT

Double dose of Redneck? What a great title for a song!

PEGGY

Oh, Lord, here we go.

LISSA

How were the Christmas Eve festivities at the Malone house?

PEGGY

Hush your mouth, I wouldn't be caught dead keeping company with a Malone.

LISSA

Sorry.

PEGGY

The boys and I went to see my folks down in Smyrna. And that sister of mine brought her new Mexican boyfriend. Now don't get me wrong, I am not, by no means, prejudiced. I think a man that can't speak English is a novel idea. And from what I gather, he's a real hard worker, which is more than I can say for that dead-beat Bobby Joe Malone I was married to. Anyway, Mama had already pumped Daddy full of eggnog before she got there with Pedro, hoping maybe he wouldn't notice that he was a Mexican. And you gotta give her kudos on that because it worked... until Pedro broke into Feliz Nadidah. Well Daddy bolted up out of his Berka-lounger and called the law while I tried to coax Pedro out in the yard, but all I could think of to say was "Hon-delay, Hon-delay, Reba" you know, like Speedy Gonzales on Buggs Bunny. Well then that sister of mine got all up in my face saying that I was trying to be all uppity now, since I'd moved to Murfreesboro. Well, luckily, Steven Tyler knew enough Spanish to coax Pedro outside before Daddy could find his pellet gun. You know, that child can't remember to zip his own zipper, but he can recall how to spout off "Get up, get out and duck Pedro" in a foreign tongue. All I can say is thank the Lord for Sesame Street. Well, the whole thing tore Mama's nerves up so bad, she took to that eggnog like a two-fisted alcoholic. I swear. Next year. I am just gonna mail everybody \$10 Walmart gift cards and be done with it.

LISSA

That is horrible.

PEGGY

Yeah, well, Merry Christmas from the fam-i-lee.

BERT

That's it!

(RITA re-enters)

PEGGY

That's what?

BERT

That's the title to my song. Peggy, you are truly inspirational.

PEGGY

Here we go...

(she heads toward the kitchen. BERT is on her heels singing. LISSA follows)

BERT

Merry Christmas from the fam-ma-lee...

PEGGY

Lord, keep me from killing this child right here on the holiest of days.

LISSA

Bert, maybe you ought to stick to traditional Christmas carols tonight?

RITA

(handing HAROLD his bill)

Well, I see you've met the third shift. Peggy's been here since they built the place. Other than five brief maternity-leaves, she's been here six days a week for thirty-four years.

HAROLD

Six maternity leaves. She just said she had six boys.

RITA

I know it. She had McCauley on her day off and was right back in here buttering toast. Five *brief* maternity leaves.

(HAROLD mumbles as he leaves)

Bye Harold.

(He mumbles until gone)

Listen to that. Just take it in for a minute. It is the last quiet moment you will see this night.

(she takes a deep breath, then touches her nose)

Record that one... I always thought it would be nice if we had a little recorder in us that would let us record all the good moments in our lives just by touching our nose. Then maybe we wouldn't get so bogged down with all the bad, you know. Just rewind and (touching her nose again) boop, watch it... feel it. Wouldn't that be nice to have? But that ain't my say so. (getting up) So I just pretend.

(We see headlights shining across the set as if a big truck is pulling in)

Well, here comes Peggy's first customer. Danny Wayne Leggett. Super-nice man. Clean-cut,

good-hearted. He drives a truck, stays gone a lot, but whether coming or going he always times it just right so that he can stop in here on third shift. He has his heart set on softening up a certain southern waitress, which shall remain nameless...

(BERT comes running out of the kitchen and ducks behind the door as a frying pan comes flying out.)

BERT

Peggy! Wait a minute, you haven't heard the hook yet.

RITA

Bless him, Lord.

(music starts)

BERT

Oh, Peggy, guess who's here?

(DANNY WAYNE enters)

Hey Danny Wayne, you're early tonight. Have a seat. I'll go get your waitress.

DANNY WAYNE

MY BABY IS A WAFFLE HOUSE WAITRESS
THE CUTEST LITTLE THING THAT YOU EVER DID SEE
SHE WORKS HARD SIX DAYS A WEEK
BUT ON SUNDAY SHE BELONGS TO THE LORD AND ME
MY WAFFLE HOUSE WAITRESS IS WAITIN' FOR ME

I DRIVE A TRUCK FROM TENNESSEE TO CALIFORNIA
I FEEL SCATTERED WHEN WE'RE APART
WHEN I COME HOME SHE SMOTHERS ME WITH LOVIN'
A HOT CUP OF COFFEE AND A WARM HEART

WHILE SHE'S WAITIN' ON TABLES I'M READY AND ABLE
TO MAKE THAT GIRL MY BRIDE
WE'LL BUY A LITTLE HOUSE OUT IN THE COUNTRY
WHERE THERE'S ROOM TO PARK THIS RIG OF MINE

I'LL BE ROLLIN' IN ON SATURDAY
JUST ABOUT THE TIME SHE'S READY TO LEAVE
I'M GONNA PUT A DIAMOND RING ON HER FINGER
MY WAFFLE HOUSE WAITRESS IS GOING TO BE
MY WAFFLE HOUSE WAITRESS ETERNALLY

Can I have some sugar please?

(He puckers up. PEGGY slides him the sugar)

PEGGY

What are you having?

DANNY WAYNE

Well, Merry Christmas to you, too.

PEGGY

Don't sass me tonight, Danny Wayne, I am too busy.

DANNY WAYNE

I can see that. (taking a sip of his coffee, then changing his approach) Come on, Peg, sit down and have a cup of coffee with me on Christmas Eve, now, I drove ninety-miles-an-hour to get here before your rush started and the least thing you could do is share a cup of coffee with me.

(PEGGY gives in by picking up his coffee, taking a sip of it, and sitting it back down forcefully)

PEGGY

Merry Christmas. What are you having?

DANNY WAYNE

Cheeseburger, hashbrowns with cheese and onions, and make sure your new cook makes those taters good and crispy.

PEGGY

(shouting very loud)

Order up! Quarter cheese plate scattered smothered, covered and *burnt!*

(talking again)

Is that all?

DANNY WAYNE

(whining)

Why do you have to be so cold to me all the time?

PEGGY

You know what, Danny Wayne? They's two things in this world that make me want to commit suicide. Country music (to BERT) and a grown man a' whining.

DANNY WAYNE

I'm sorry, Peggy. (still whining)

BERT

Why would anyone who lives this close to Nashville hate country music? You're surrounded by it everyday.

PEGGY

When's the last time you sat down and *ate* a waffle?

BERT

Good point.

PEGGY

When something's in your face all the time, it makes you not like it. (for DANNY WAYNE)

LISSA

But why do you hate whiny men? (STEVEN TYLER enters)

STEVEN TYLER

Maaaama, can I eat here? McCauley ate all the left overs again.

PEGGY

Does that answer your question? I guess so Steven Tyler, but you are not staying here all night. Do you hear me? And don't even try ordering a t-bone, I am not made of money.

STEVEN TYLER

Yes ma'am. Hey Danny Wayne, what are you doing here so early?

(STEVEN TYLER knows why Danny Wayne is here. He's just poking fun, schoolboy-like. PEGGY gets some silverware and sets them out on a napkin for him.

DANNY WAYNE

Oh, um. I can't rightly say I guess.

STEVEN TYLER

Why not? Is it a seeecret?

PEGGY

Maybe he was trying to beat this snow storm everybody is harping about.

DANNY WAYNE

Eight to ten inches is what they say?

PEGGY

Is that what they say?

DANNY WAYNE

Mmmm hmmm. We're just liable to get snowed in together, Peg. Just me and you... nothing but my arms to keep you from freezing. What do you think about that?

PEGGY

(Wielding a butter knife)

I think you'd miss your arms.

STEVEN TYLER

Mama, Danny Wayne's got a seeecret he's been waiting to share with you.

PEGGY

What are you having Steven Tyler?

STEVEN TYLER

Eggs?

PEGGY

Uh huh. How many?

STEVEN TYLER

Four?

(she gives him a look)

Two. With hashbrowns, cheese, ham, tomatoes, peppers and chili.

PEGGY

Mmm hmm. How do you want your eggs?

STEVEN TYLER

Runny. And can I have a waffle too?

PEGGY

You're pushing it.

STEVEN TYLER

I love you, Mama.

PEGGY

Don't call me that here. Not here. It's unprofessional and it lacks class. (she screams, now) Order up! Two over light, scattered, covered, chunked, chopped, topped & diced. Waffle on the side! (everybody look at her) What?

(phone rings)

LISSA

I'll get it. (she does) Waffle House, this is Lissa. No, it's not Melissa, it's Lissa. No, not Lisa, Lissa. It's like Melissa without the me or Lisa without the E. Thank yoooouu. My Mama named me. She was creative like that – she went to Woodstock. She was on the cover of TIME and everything. Uh huh, isn't that cool? She was naked except for the moccasins and the mud. I know, I asked her to tell me all about it, you know, it being all historical and stuff but she said she can't remember much of it. But she's old like that. She's like fifty so she probably just forgot.

PEGGY

Lissa.

LISSA

Huh? Oh, I'm sorry, I gotta go. Bye. (she hangs up the phone)

PEGGY

Who was on the phone?

LISSA

I don't know. I didn't ask. Danny Wayne, tell us this secret of yours.

DANNY WAYNE

Well, it's not much of a secret if you want to know the truth.

PEGGY

We don't. It is way too early in my shift to be hearing any of that trashy trucker talk. Forget about it Lissa.

LISSA

Alright. It's probably for the best, anyway. I ain't good at keeping secrets. I get SO nervous when I know more than people think I know.

PEGGY

Awe well, lucky for you that don't happen often.

LISSA

I know. (she doesn't get it. The phone rings) I'll get it!

PEGGY

(beating her to the phone)

No, I'll get it. It's probably that to-go order you just hung up on. Waffle House. Yes, Eddie Van, what is it? I'm working, what are you doing? Well... good? (long pause) Son, do you mind telling me why you called or do I need to get Miss Cleo on the line? No you can *not*, I am not feeding the whole family down here tonight. Find something in the cabinet. (to the side) I swear.

DANNY WAYNE

I got a great gumbo recipe if he wants it.

PEGGY

Danny Wayne, mind your own business. I can take full-care of my own children.

STEVEN TYLER

Mama, this ketchup bottle is empty.

PEGGY

Well don't just sit there, Danny Wayne, get up and help that child. (EDDIE VAN is back now)
What? Yes we do, listen honey. There's every bit of three boxes of macaroni hanging on the tree.
Boil and stir. (she almost hangs up) Take it off the fishing line first. Nylon is toxic. (she hangs
up) I tell you what, I don't care what that doctor says, I breast-fed that child just a tad too long.

(SUMMER enters)

LISSA

Hello, welcome to Waffle House. Sit wherever you like.

SUMMER

Thank you. (she sits at the counter, PEGGY goes to her with coffee) Thank you so much ma'am.
Is that regular?

PEGGY

Yeah. Did you want decaf?

SUMMER

No, I need the caffeine. I've still got some driving to do.

PEGGY

Where you headed?

SUMMER

(proudly) Nashville.

PEGGY

You're gonna need more than caffeine.

STEVEN TYLER

(overhearing) Mama?

SUMMER

Awe! Is that your son?

PEGGY

Nope. You need cream?

SUMMER

No thank you.

PEGGY

Menu's beside you. D'you know what you're having?

SUMMER

Not yet, I'm sorry. It sure is pretty out there. Looks like ya'll had some snow.

PEGGY

We had a dusting last night. Just enough to empty all the bread shelves at Krogers.

SUMMER

The radio station said there's more on the way.

PEGGY

And I'll believe it when I see it.

SUMMER

I hope it holds of. I've got a gig tomorrow. I'm singing at the Bluebird Café.

BERT

You're a songwriter too?

SUMMER

Well, I try. I'm a singer, mostly. But they say you have to write your own to get a record deal anymore.

BERT

I heard that too. I'm Phillip.

PEGGY

We call him Bert.

SUMMER

Nice to meet you Phillip. I'm Summer Shey. But why do they call you Bert, if your name's Phi...

PEGGY

We go through so many cooks at this place, we just call 'em all Bert. Heck, by the time you learn their real name, somebody's already ticked 'em off and made 'em quit.

BERT

Quick everybody! Three guesses as to who that somebody is.

LISSA

Awe, I'm no good at games. Do I get a hint?

BERT

I've got a demo in my truck. You could listen to it between here and Nashville if you'd like.

SUMMER

That would be nice.

BERT

Cool. (he darts outside to get it).

PEGGY

(yelling out) No, don't worry about the eggs on the fire, I'll get 'em. I swear, that boy. How long do you think this one will last, Lissa?

LISSA

One question at a time please. I'm thinking.

(PUNCH enters)

PUNCH

Your cook just about mowed me over, Peggy. What did you do to tick this one off?

PEGGY

What is this, Poke at Peggy Day? I feel like a datgum pinata.

PUNCH

(to STEVEN TYLER) See there, boy? Because of that fella your crazy Aunt is dating, your own Mama speaks es-pan-ola now.

RITA

I kind of feel like I ought to warn you about this one. This is ol' Punch Cardwell. He lives right down the street in that big white house with all the land. The one you passed on the way in here that makes you think Mammy and Scarlette are gonna be running out of the front door looking for Ashley Wilkes... that's the one. He's old school, old money and old testament. And if he

starts singing about a White Christmas, you can bet it ain't no snow he's dreaming of.

(another woman enters and goes to RITA's table. Meanwhile, BERT comes back in and gives SUMMER the cd)

Well, look what we have here! Martha Prtitchard, this makes four times in two weeks you've been in here to see me. I guess that makes you one of my regulars now.

MARTHA

I guess so.

RITA

I'm surprised to see you in here so soon, I figured that last job you were doing would have kept you busy for weeks.

MARTHA

Like my husband used to say, ain't no cobwebs growing under Martha's butt.

RITA

How poetic.

MARTHA

I don't have much time to chat, Rita. You know what I want, don't you?

RITA

Yes ma'am, coming right up.

PUNCH

Since you brought up the pinata, Peggy, I hear where that sister of yours has taken to living with a Mexican.

STEVEN TYLER

Actually, Mr. Cardwell, he's from Puerto Rico. He seems like a real nice fella.

PUNCH

(sarcastically) Oh, yeeaaaahhh. They're all real nice. Nice enough to take your job down at the factory, weren't they?

PEGGY

Listen here, Punch! We aren't going to have any of that negative talk in here tonight. You hear me? No negative talk. Everybody with any sense knows that Steven Tyler lost that job on his own on account of his no-count, trash-mouthed, frizzy-headed girlfriend keeping him out all hours of the night so he couldn't get his lazy, good-for-nothing butt out of bed in the morning.

LISSA

I love it when a woman defends her family.

PEGGY

Well, you have to. What kind of Mama would I be if I sat around and let somebody mistreat my children. (she slaps STEVEN TYLER on the back of the head) Don't put so much food in your mouth, boy, you'll choke yourself. (he's choking from the slap) See there. What'd I tell you? I swear.

BERT

Order up! (now, to SUMMER) Ma'am the quality on that demo isn't the best, but just pay attention to the words.

SUMMER

I can't wait to hear it.

BERT

Really? Cause I could sing a little bit for you while I'm not busy.

PEGGY

Order in!

BERT

You got another one?

PEGGY

No, but I'll make up one just to keep you from singing another twangy song.

BERT

Now, just because you don't like that kind of music doesn't mean that everybody shares your opinion. This nice young lady, here, says she wants to hear one of my songs and it is one of my songs that she is going to hear! In fact, I.. (he stops when he realizes she stopped)

PEGGY

I don't want to hear it! Now it just so happens that we hired ourselves a cook in here, not a dancin' monkey. If I have anything to do with it, there Ain't gonna be no... (she freezes when she sees RICHARD has entered)

(there is a brief, uncomfortable silence)

PEGGY

(overly enthusiastic and nice) Well, what a Merry Christmas it is! Richard Watson, get over here and hug my neck. I tell you what, if you are not a sight for sore eyes. I don't know how it is humanly possible, but you have just gotten better-looking since I saw you last. When was that?

RICHARD

It was at the funeral.

PEGGY

I'm sorry. Me and my big mouth. Sometimes I don't know when to shut it.

(Her regulars start to agree)

Shut it!

RICHARD

It's ok, really. I knew it would be uncomfortable coming in here again, but I couldn't help thinking that it might make me feel closer to her... with Christmas and all.

PEGGY

Well, this coffee ought to fix you right up. I just made a fresh pot. I must have known you were coming. Can I get you something to eat? It's on the house?

RICHARD

No, thank you, Peggy. I'll just sit here with my coffee for while, if that's ok. (music starts)

PEGGY

(still syrupy) Well, okeydokey. (trying to see what he's looking at outside) You just sit here as long as your little heart desires.

RICHARD

I see you still have her tree?

PEGGY

Oh, that thang? Yeah, well. It kindly reminds us of her. She always insisted on putting it up. She was decorating it that night that... She stuck that one little old partridge in there and we just can't

stand the thought of changing it. If you need anything, just holler, ok?

RICHARD

OH CHRISTMAS TREE STANDING INCOMPLETE
WITH YOUR BRITTLE BRANCHES BROKEN IN DEFEAT
WHERE DID ALL YOUR GLITTER GO? OH CHRISTMAS TREE

WITH YOUR ANGEL GONE AND YOUR EMPTY ARMS
AND ONE STRAND OF TINSEL BARELY HANGING ON
SOMEONE LOVED YOU NOT SO LONG AGO – OH CHRISTMAS TREE

DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU WERE LIGHTING UP THE ROOM
WHY DID IT HAVE TO END SO SOON?

OH CHRISTMAS TREE YOU'RE SO MUCH LIKE ME
I NO LONGER AM WHERE I LONG TO BE
AND I CAN'T LET HER MEMORY GO – OH CHRISTMAS TREE

RITA

I suppose everybody has a little empty place inside of them that silently aches at Christmas time. A childhood memory, a loved one lost, a love never found, or just the cold nudge of unrealized dreams tapping at your window. It's funny how such a joyous occasion can be so hopelessly lonely at times. Richard here lost his wife a year ago tonight. A tragedy somehow worsened by its timeliness. Left him with two new grandchildren, too. You gotta wonder why things like that happen to good people. The girls, here, went to the service. Peggy said she'd never seen a man love a woman so much. I guess you *can* kind of see it in his eyes. (she smiles) Even sorrow has a bit of beauty in it when there's love involved. (she breathes and touches her nose) Record that one...

RICHARD

CAUSE I REMEMBER WHEN SHE WAS LIGHTING UP THE ROOM
WHY DID IT HAVE TO END SO SOON?
WITH MY ANGEL GONE AND THESE EMPTY ARMS
HARD TO FIND A REASON JUST TO CARRY ON
ISN'T JANUARY COLD, OH CHRISTMAS TREE?
OH CHRITMAS TREE

RITA

(handing Martha her to-go order and ticket) There you go, sweetheart. I told you I wouldn't keep you waiting.

MARTHA

(looking at the bill) Is that all?

RITA

Yep, that's all this time. I'll go east on you since it's Christmas.

MARTHA

You're an absolute doll. (leaving the money on the table)

RITA

So I'll see you soon?

MARTHA

We'll see.

PEGGY

(back to SUMMER) Well, did you decide?

SUMMER

I didn't even look. What kind of teas do you have?

PEGGY

Lipton.

SUMMER

OK. Could I just get a salad and a bowl of soup? What's your soup of the day?

PEGGY

(A brief giggle-gasp, then with a bad British accent imitation) Well madame, our soup of the day is lightly browned beef in a tomato puree with just a smidge of Cajun spices and a brown bean of the Pinto region. (back to normal) We call it chili for short.

SUMMER

I like chili. It's my son's favorite. And could I get a diet coke, too?

PEGGY

ORDER IN! Chili! Make it soupy! How old's your son?

SUMMER

He's three. My daughter's five. (getting their picture)

PEGGY

Aweee. A little girl. That must be nice.

(DANNY WAYNE and STEVEN TYLER have just thumped a paper football at each other.

DANNY WAYNE & STEVEN TYLER

Score!

PEGGY

That must be real nice. Would you look at that little dress? Where is she?

SUMMER

They're both at homes with my folks. I couldn't really bring them to the Bluebird.

PEGGY

Well, sweetie. It's Christmas.

SUMMER

Yes, but the chance to perform in Nashville, and especially at the Bluebird? You understand. I couldn't imagine missing that.

PEGGY
(handing her the photo back) And I couldn't imagine missing *that*. (PEGGY walks away)

DANNY WAYNE
Can I talk to you for a minute, Peggy?

PEGGY
I'm listening. (she doesn't stop working)

DANNY WAYNE
No, I mean can you take a minute to sit down and talk to me?

PEGGY
Oh sure. I'll just sit down and relax, take a load off. I'm sure everybody can just help themselves to the buffet. I am busy Danny Wayne!

DANNY WAYNE
Well, it's only going to get busier in here. So please? I came early for a reason.

PEGGY
Alright, worry-wart. (she plops down across from him) And, pray-tell, what reason was that?

DANNY WAYNE
(he is caught off-guard by her cooperation) Oh.... Um...

PEGGY
Oh, for crying out loud.

DANNY WAYNE
Truth is, I didn't have to work tonight. I was off.

PEGGY
You're off every night, if you ask me...

DANNY WAYNE
I made my haul to San Diego and my next trip wasn't until the 28th in in San Francisco, so instead of staying in a hotel over Christmas, I decide to drive back and spend it here.

PEGGY
(dismissively) That's lovely.

DANNY WAYNE
in Tennessee.

PEGGY
That's delightful.

DANNY WAYNE
With you. (putting his hands on hers)

PEGGY
That's deranged. (throwing his hands back at him)

DANNY WAYNE
(whining) Come on, Peggy! (music starts)

PEGGY
Did you just think you were going to sit here all night getting on *my* nerves?

DANNY WAYNE
No, I also wanted to take to breakfast in the morning.

PEGGY

Why in the world would you... what were you thinking?

DANNY WAYNE

CALL IT INTUITION THAT DROVE ME HERE TONIGHT
GUESS I KNEW THAT I'D SEE YOU, NOW I KNOW THE TIME IS RIGHT

I CAN TELL JUST WHAT YOU'RE THINKING
CAUSE YOUR EYES ARE QUICK TO READ
TONIGHT'S ON YOU, COCK-A-DOODLE DOO
BUT BREAKFAST'S ON ME

PEGGY

Well, if that ain't the stupidest thing that I've ever....

DANNY WAYNE

SHARING OUR AFFECTIONS SOMEWHERE IN THE NIGHT
ONE ON ONE WE'LL HAVE SOME FUN AND WORK UP AN APPETITE
WE'LL COOK UP SOME GOOD LOVIN' FROM OUR BRAND NEW RECIPE
TONIGHT'S ON YOU, COCK-A-DOODLE DOO
BUT BREAKFAST'S ON ME

PEGGY

Yeah, you're gonna be wearin' it!

DANNY WAYNE

SUNNY SIDE UPS, REALLY BIG CUPS OF COFFEE IN OUR HANDS
ME AND YOU IN A BOOTH FOR TWO WE CAN MAKE SOME OTHER PLANS
IT'S PLAIN TO SEE WE BOTH AGREE TO SNEAKING OFF ALONE
YOU AND ME GO WILLINGLY, WE DON'T NEED A CHAPERONE.

YOU'VE ATTRACTED MY ATTENTION I CAN TELL YOU UNDERSTAND
IT'S A TWIST OF FATE, LET'S CELEBRATE JUST TAKE ME BY THE HAND
WITH YOUR KISS AS MY PERMISSION, IT'S SO VERY PLAIN TO SEE
TONIGHT'S ON YOU, COCK-A-DOODLE DOO
BUT BREAKFAST'S ON ME

(DANNY WAYNE country-scats while PEGGY gets a glass of water to cool him off)

PEGGY

Of all the good for nothing, psychedelic tricks I have ever seen, driving an eighteen-wheeler half way across the world to eat some eggs is the looniest of them all. I swear, if there is a loony-tune to be had, I would find him, for sure. Do the words stalker mean anything to you? Grabbing on me at work and such nonsense, he's cock-a-doodle lucky I don't knock him half-way back to... (she throws water in his face)

DANNY WAYNE

YOU'VE ATTRACTED MY ATTENTION I CAN TELL YOU UNDERSTAND
IT'S A TWIST OF FATE, LET'S CELEBRATE JUST TAKE ME BY THE HAND
WITH YOUR KISS AS MY PERMISSION, IT'S SO VERY PLAIN TO SEE
TONIGHT'S ON YOU, COCK-A-DOODLE DOO

BUT BREAKFAST'S ON ME
TONIGHT'S ON YOU, COCK-A-DOODLE DOO
BUT BREAKFAST'S ON ME

(ANNA enters while STEVEN TYLER helps DANNY WAYNE back to his table.
ANNA sits in RITA's booth. RITA doesn't recognize this customer.)

RITA

Well, good evening to you, ma'am. Can I get you some coffee?

ANNA

Yes, thank you.

DANNY WAYNE

Well, what do you say, Peg?

PEGGY

Danny Wayne, when I get out of here, I am tired and there are six grown men's-worth-of dishes waiting on me at home in the sink.

STEVEN TYLER

I already did 'em, Mama. (PEGGY is not sure she heard that right)

PEGGY

Well, Eddie Van's cooking macaroni from scratch, so heaven knows what kind of mess he'll make with that.

STEVEN TYLER

I'll clean it up, too.

PEGGY

Boy, are you feeling alright? (she checks his forehead for temperature) What have I told you about not wearing a coat?

STEVEN TYLER

Tomorrow's your day off, Mam... (she pulls his ear) I mean, Miss Peggy. And it's Christmas. I'll take care of everything so you can hang out with Danny Wayne.

PEGGY

What is this, Pick-a-Pappa for Peggy Day? I do not need, nor do I want a man calling on me. I live with six of them.

LISSA

Maybe you should count your blessings. That's a lot of love.

PEGGY

That's a lot of lazy. And love don't pay the bills. And if God is handing out blessings wearing flannel and a mullet, I'll pass.

DANNY WAYNE

Say what you want to, but I think God had to have something to do with driving me in here eight years ago. I've been behind that wheel since I was nineteen years old. Never really had a family to speak of, no one to drive home to. But that night I met you, I don't know how to explain it, but it was like a guardian angel held up an exit sign that said "Home". And all of a sudden, when I pulled out of here, I knew where I was going. I had something to look forward to... home. Heck,

I've heard so many stories about Steven Tyler, Tommy Lee, Vince Neal, Eddie Van, Joe Elliott and McCauley, I feel like I was there watching them grow up. Like the time you (to STEVEN TYLER) sold McCauley to that Italian couple on Ebay.

STEVEN TYLER

Yeah, Mom got pretty mad.

PEGGY

I still say that child should have brought a better price.

DANNY WAYNE

Anyway, I don't know a whole lot about much of anything. But I know how I feel when I take that exit off I-24 and pull into here. And I know how I feel when I see you. And that's about as close to a blessing as I've ever known.

PEGGY

(after a beat) Have you been listening to them Cracker Barrel books on tape again? Guardian angels holding up signs and such. I wish they'd show me one. (she goes over to the window) Hey! You! If you want me to go to breakfast with this crazy man in the morning, show me a SIGN!

LISSA

(after a beat) Oh my gosh, it's snowing!

PEGGY

(still waiting) Any sign. Just... any sign at all. See there, I told you it was nonsense. I'm just gonna to go to the kitchen for a minute and... slam my face in the freezer. (she exits)

RITA

(back to ANNA) So, do you know how this whole thing works, or do I need to explain it to you?

ANNA

No, I'm a regular. Just not at your place. I usually go to the one out by the airport.

RITA

Oh, ok then. Well, welcome. So you already have a...

(ANNA pulls out a Waffle House ticket and lays it on the table. RITA is confused by it.)

Are you going to be eating with me tonight or are you in a hurry like the rest of them?

ANNA

I'll probably be a little while. Just the coffee is fine though.

(she continues to look towards the window like she is waiting for someone)

RITA

Well, I'm Rita if you need anything.

ANNA

I know who you are, Rita. You're part of the reason I'm here. (seeing something outside) There's my girl. I'll be right back. (she runs out)

(RITA appears confused. She takes a deep breath, then addresses the audience.)

RITA

OK, now I don't get it. Do you? You don't? Wait a minute... see when I saw all of you here tonight, I thought you got it. So, if you don't get it, I wonder why ya'll...(thinking) Well, that ain't my say so. Let me explain my... situation. Well, about a year ago, I was in here doing my job, as usual, and I got this headache. Well, I didn't think much of it, really. Until I was laying on

the floor. I remember looking up and seeing Lissa and Peggy and Bert... well, the Bert-four-Berts-ago. Well when I stood up, they were still standing there looking down at... well, me. I didn't really know what to do so I just sat there and watched as Peggy called my husband and the ambulance and blah, blah, blah the restaurant cleared out and so on and here I was... here I *am*. Now, do go get your panties in a wad, everything you've been taught about "what comes next" is true. But let's face it, some of us... A LOT of us have done some things that we're not so proud of. And our consciences – our souls will not let us move on to that next level until the good and the bad deeds are in balance. Just like those old scales, you know, good deeds on one side bad deeds on the other. Well, all of my regulars are in the same boat as me, except my job is to assign them the good deeds they have to do. I just make one up, write it down (on her Waffle House check pad) and hand it to them and off they go. None of them... none of us know how many good deeds we have left to do. So we just keep doing.

ANNA

(re-entering with SUMMER) OK, I thought I'd lost her for a minute.

RITA

Wait. She's your assignment?

ANNA

One of them. Isn't she pretty? I used to think that if I had been that pretty, I wouldn't be sad about anything. (laughing at herself). I didn't get it. And neither does she.

SHE'LL TURN THIRTY-FOUR THIS WEEKEND
SHE'LL GO OUT WITH HER GIRLFRIENDS
THEY'LL DRINK SOME MARGARITAS, CUT UP AND CARRY ON
THERE'LL BE GUYS AND THERE'LL BE COMES ONS
SHE'LL PROBABLY GET HIT ON
BUT SHE THINKS ALL THE GOOD ONES ARE GONE

SHE'S GOT FRIENDS DOWN AT THE OFFICE
AND SHE CAN'T HELP BUT NOTICE
THAT WHEN THE DAY IS OVER HOW THEY ALL HURRY HOME
EVERY DAY THERE'S GUYS SHE WORKS WITH
AND EVEN SOME SHE FLIRTS WITH
BUT SHE THINKS ALL THE GOOD ONES ARE GONE

AND HER MAMA CALLED THIS MORNING
SAID I'M WORRIED ABOUT MY BABY
I WISH YOU HAD A FAMILY OF YOUR OWN
SHE SAID MOM IT'S NOT THAT EASY
YOU MAKE IT SOUND SO SIMPLE
BUT YOU CAN'T TAKE THE FIRST MAN THAT COMES ALONG

ONCE SHE HAD SOMEONE THAT LOVED HER
BACK WHEN SHE WAS YOUNGER

NOW SHE WONDERS IF SHE HEALD OUT A LITTLE BIT TOO LONG
BACK THEN THERE WERE SO MANY, BUT NOW THERE JUST AREN'T ANY
IT SEEMS LIKE ALL THE GOOD ONES ARE GONE

AND HER MAMA CALLED THIS MORNING
SAID I'M WORRIED ABOUT MY BABY
I WISH YOU HAD A FAMILY OF YOUR OWN
SHE SAID MOM IT'S NOT THAT EASY
YOU MAKE IT SOUND SO SIMPLE
BUT YOU CAN'T TAKE THE FIRST MAN THAT COMES ALONG

SHE'LL TURN THIRTY-FOUR THIS WEEKEND
SHE'LL GO OUT WITH HER GIRLFRIENDS
THEY'LL DRINK SOME MARGARITAS, CUT UP AND CARRY ON

(music for the next song starts underneath)

RITA

So, your job is to find her a good one?

ANNA

You catch on quick. But that's not the only reason I'm here. I actually came here to see you, too,
Miss Rita. (searching herself for another ticket)

RITA

Me?

ANNA

Do you know Sissy, who works at the one by the airport?

RITA

Sissy? Oh my goodness, yes, I haven't seen her in years.

ANNA

You sure haven't. She's been dead at least seven. But... like you, she's...

ANNA

RITA

Still there.

Still here, yes, I'm aware.

ANNA

(finding it) Ah, here we are. Now, listen. Sissy sent this to you and said to tell you not to get mad
at her, ok? (holding up the Waffle House ticket)

RITA

She sent me an assignment? Is that allowed?

ANNA

Now if I was an expert on what was and wasn't allowed, would I still be here?

RITA

Well, I don't want to do anything wrong on purpose.

ANNA

Then take the ticket... (she does, and reads)

And do what it says. (RITA stares at the ticket then looks at RICHARD as he begins to sing)

RICHARD

LIKE A FIREPLACE WITHOUT A CRACKLIN' FIRE
OR AN EMPTY CHURCH WITHOUT THAT MIDNIGHT CHOIR
A GLASS OF WINE WITH NO ONE TO RAISE IT TO
IT'S NOT CHRISTMAS WITHOUT YOU

SUMMER

LIKE NAKED TREES WITHOUT THEIR COAT OF SNOW
AND PRESENTS ALL WRAPPED UP WITHOUT A BOW
LIKE MISTLETOE WITHOUT A KISS OR TWO
IT'S NOT CHRISTMAS WITHOUT YOU

BOTH

WHEN I SEE THAT LITTLE ANGEL ON THE TOP
OF MY CHRISTMAS TREE
I JUST PRAY THAT SHE IS WATCHING OVER YOU
AND WATCHING OVER ME

RITA

OK, so this isn't fair. I had one thing in my life that I was sure of and that's that my husband loved me. (looking at RICHARD) He still does. (looking up, a bit angry) SO why would you want me to mess that up? (showing the check to the audience) I'm supposed to find *him* a good one. A good what? A good wife? A good mother for our children, our grandchildren? THEY ALREADY HAD ONE! (balling up the ticket) How could this be right? I don't see how it could be. But that ain't my say so, is it?

LIKE A CANDY CANE THAT'S MISSING ALL ITS STRIPES
OR A SNOWMAN WHO HAS LOST HIS CORNCOB PIPE
BEING MERRY IS THE HARDEST THING TO DO
IT'S NOT CHRISTMAS WITHOUT YOU

RITA, RICHARD & SUMMER

BEING MERRY IS THE HARDEST THING TO DO
IT'S NOT CHRISTMAS WITHOUT YOU

LISSA

(taking PUNCH's order)

Well, Mr. Cardwell, what looks good to ya?

PUNCH

Oh, a couple of things. I think I'm in the mood for a cheeseburger tonight.

LISSA

Bun or Texas toast?

PUNCH

Buns are fine. Cheese and onions on the hashbrowns, please?

LISSA

Order In! Patty melt plate on bun, scattered, smothered and covered. Extra pickles on the side.

PUNCH

Oh, I don't really like pickles.

LISSA

Those are for me. Bert doesn't like if we get things off his line, so when I get hungry, I just throw in a little something for me and eat it off the customer's plate.

PUNCH

I see. So, Miss I'm not Lisa, Lissa, how are things at the community college?

LISSA

Great! I'm taking my test again next Friday. Mr. Jenkins said that since it's Christmas, and all, he just didn't have the heart to charge me for this one.

PEGGY

This just might be your lucky number, Lissa.

LISSA

I know. Tenth time the charm, right? Once I get this test behind me, I can finally get out of this place and move on with my medical career.

PUNCH

Medical career? Come on, now?

LISSA

I will have you to know that a Licensed Massage Therapist is (like she has memorized it) trained and certified in naturopathic and homo-pathic medicine and could very easily take the next career step into the field of chiropractic reflexology.

PEGGY

Well put, Lissa.

LISSA

Thank you. That's number two on the test. It's fill in the blank, which is so much harder than multiple guess. But I think I'm ready for this one, thanks to Steven Tyler.

STEVEN TYLER

Oh, for crying out loud, Lissa.

PEGGY

Steven Tyler? What's he got to do with it?

STEVEN TYLER

You can't keep a secret for nothing.

LISSA

I'm sorry. Did I say Steven Tyler? I meant Steven *Taylor*. He's my teacher.

PEGGY

Hade Jenkins is your teacher. Quit trying to lie and spit it out.

LISSA

Oooh kaayye. Well, you know when I told you that I broke my fingers by slamming in the door of my Ford Escort? Well, I wasn't completely truthful about that.

PEGGY

Go on.

LISSA

See, I was having trouble with my multiple guess questions, so Steven Tyler being the sweet gentleman that he is, told me that the best way to get it right when you aren't sure about one is to mark your fingers A,B, C & D and slam 'em down real hard on your desk and whichever one hurts the worst is the right answer.

PEGGY

Is that so?

LISSA

Yeah. Problem is, I wasn't really sure which one was hurting the worse, so I just kept slamming and slamming and Mr. Jenkins kept looking and looking at me so I told him there was fruit flies flying around my desk. But, you know, after I got used to it, I really think it was working.

PEGGY

Is that so?

LISSA

Yeah. Until I broke one of my fingers... then I just kept answering C for everything cause that one was hurting pretty bad.

PEGGY

Is that so? (to Steven Tyler semi-privately) Why in the world are you messing with that girl, like that? That test is important.

STEVE TYLER

It costs her \$400 every time she takes it and most of the material has to be memorized.

PEGGY

(to LISSA) Sweetie, give that other hand a shot next time.

ANNA

Rita, you haven't forgotten about me, have you?

RITA

No, I haven't. It's just that this whole thing has thrown me for a loop. I had it all down. Night after night, a handful of my regulars come in here looking for their next assignment. I give it to them, and they head off hoping that this will be the one that does it – the one that settles the score. And I have to be honest with you, I kind of hope that each one might be my deal-breaker, too.

ANNA

You and me, both. Just be glad that you get to stay in one place for your assignments. Sissy has me chasing people half-way across the country.

RITA

I suppose so. (She pines while looking at RICHARD)

ANNA

You miss him, don't you?

RITA

(coming out of a daze) What? Oh, look at me. I'm so silly. I guess I just didn't realize he'd be missing me so much. He looks so sad. And I can't figure out whether that makes me sad or

happy. Is that bad?

(ANNA smiles and looks away)

Richard and I had this special kind of love. I knew he loved me and he knew I loved him, but we didn't go around saying it all the time. He's a quiet man, but has the best heart this side of heaven. I never really missed hearing it, though. Every now and then, he would kiss his finger and kind of hold it up and wave it at me, which was quite honestly better than any "I love you" that I ever heard.

ANNA

That's really sweet.

RITA

He has this smile that just gets you. It's not even a teeth smile, it's a nose smile.

ANNA

A nose smile?

RITA

(laughing) Yeah, you know, most people smile from their cheeks and all their teeth show? Well, not Richard, no ma'am. He just crinkles up his nose real tight which lifts his top lip and looks kind of like a smile and kind of like somebody cut one and he got a whiff of it.

(they both laugh)

I take back what I said. It does make me sad to see him like this. Yeah, I miss him. And I miss that smile.

SUMMER

(to RICHARD) Hey, is this your magazine?

RICHARD

(almost startled) Me? No, it probably belongs to one of the girls.

PEGGY

It's mine. You can look at it if you want to.

RICHARD

The girls hear everything that's said in this place. I tell my wife all the time that we should market her ears to the CIA.

SUMMER

Oh, really? Which one's your wife?

(awkward silence)

PEGGY

She past away last year. She used to work here with us.

SUMMER

I'm sorry. It's just that you said it like.

RICHARD

I said it like what?

SUMMER

Like she was still here.

RICHARD

Did I?

PEGGY

Well, who could blame you? We like to believe she's still here, too. Serving up waffles in her bad hair day bonnet. That's what she called her Waffle House hat.

(WILLIE enters)

Well, hello there, Willie. Merry Christmas.

(WILLIE walks carefully over to the bar and sits down. *He should not be played over the top drunk*)

PUNCH

Oh look, Aunt Bea, Otis is back.

PEGGY

Oh, hush up, Punch. (to WILLIE again) I just bet you could use some coffee. Bert, burn me a cheese sandwich, if you will.

LISSA

Extra pickles on the side, please.

PEGGY

Quit piggy-backing my orders. You eat like a line-backer.

PUNCH

Did you drive here tonight, Willie?

PEGGY

Hush up, Punch.

PUNCH

Maybe I ought to call Sheriff Breedlove.

PEGGY

Now listen here. I've got a few things of my own I could tell the Sheriff that may or may not include a certain Tennessee politician with a few secrets of his own to keep. So go ahead and pick up the phone cowboy. But let me ask you? Do you feel lucky?

PUNCH

Danny Wayne?

PEGGY

Well, do ya,, Punch?

PUNCH

You want to call off your girl over here?

PEGGY

Go ahead, Danny Wayne. Make my day!

PUNCH

I gotta tell you folks. Between us being knee-deep in snow and keeping company with the likes of Willie Wainwright, I don't think this night could possibly get any worse.

(NETTA comes parading in)

NETTA

Shoo-eee. That now is coming down out there.

PUNCH

I stand corrected.

(NETTA sits at the booth with ANNA, who, of course, she doesn't see.)

Salt trucks can't keep up on that interstate. Folks are crazy to try to keep driving.

LISSA

Hello, and welcome. My name is Lissa. I'll be taking care of you.

NETTA

Hello there, Lisa. I'm Netta Jackson.

LISSA

Actually it's Lissa. It's like Melissa without the me or Lisa without the E.

NETTA

OK. That's pretty.

LISSA

Thank you. My mama was creative like that. She went to Woodstock.

NETTA

'Nuf said. Say no more, child.

LISSA

Oh, OK. (she leaves the table)

SUMMER

Are the roads getting that bad?

NETTA

You better believe it. In another twenty minutes the only cars on the road will be the ones in the ditch.

SUMMER

Were you headed East or West?

NETTA

Driving from Chattanooga to Memphis to see my Mama.

(LISSA arrives back at the table with a hand-written sign that reads "CAN I TAKE YOUR ORDER?")

What a waste of a perfectly good white girl. (now speaking as if she's hard of hearing) I'll have four eggs over easy. Two for me and two for my baby.

(All the women react verbally to the news of a baby on the way.)

PEGGY

A boy or a girl?

NETTA

A boy.

PEGGY

(not interested anymore) Oh.

NETTA

Well, I don't know, for sure. But I just know it's a boy.

SUMMER

Boys are easier.

PEGGY

Thank what? Passing a kidney stone the size of a volkswagon?

SUMMER

My little girl caused me problems from day one. My boy was a piece of cake. I'd give anything

to have another one.

PEGGY

(pulling STEVEN TYLER up) Well, have I got a deal for you? This one may be an older model, but trust me, it's got low mileage, stays parked most of the time and stays full of gas. Do I hear an opening bid?

NETTA

Where are your babies?

PEGGY

Do I hear a thousand?

SUMMER

They're at home with my parents in Georgia.

PEGGY

A hundred?

NETTA

So you're trying to get home to see them, right?

PEGGY

Ten?

SUMMER

Actually, no. I have a singing gig in Nashville tomorrow. If I get a record deal, they'll be provided for, right?

PEGGY

Alright, fine. (emptying her apron) I've got thirty-five dollars and a gold watch, you can have it if you'll take him. But that's my final offer.

NETTA

Girl, Christmas morning with your children is a gift from upstairs. And here you are trying to reason with yourself... trying to trying to convince yourself that you're doing the right thing. Well girl, you ain't. (music starts) These are the types of decisions you are going to regret later in life. And even later, if you know what I mean. Let Miss Netta tell you something.

WHEN I WAS JUST A LITTLE GIRL, MY GRANDMA WAS WELL-KNOWN
SHE'D GO AROUND TO CHURCHES AND SHE'D TAKE ME ALONG
BEFORE THE PREACHER STARTED AND IN BETWEEN THE SONGS
SHE'D RISE UP TESTIFYING IN A VOICE LOUD AND STRONG

SHE'D RAISE HER HAND TO HEAVEN AND PRAISE HIS HOLY NAME
SHE'D THANK HIM FOR BEING THERE IN HER JOY AND PAIN
THEN SHE'D TAKE A LOOK AROUND HER
AT THE HEADS HUNG DOWN IN SHAME
TELL 'EM YOU BETTER GET RIGHT WITH JESUS
AND GET ON BOARD THAT TRAIN

BETTER GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO
THE LORD IS COMIN' YOU'RE GONNA REAP JUST WHAT YOU SOW

IT SAYS IN THE GOOD BOOK, HE WASHED YOUR SINS WHITE AS SNOW
TIME TO GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO

ALL

BETTER GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO
THE LORD IS COMIN' YOU'RE GONNA REAP JUST WHAT YOU SOW
IT SAYS IN THE GOOD BOOK, HE WASHED YOUR SINS WHITE AS SNOW
TIME TO GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO

(ad lib dialogue while NETTA is trying to teach SUMMER how to sing with soul)

NETTA

THERE'S AN ORDER TO GOD'S BUSINESS
HEED HIS WORDS LEST YOU STRAY
THAT'S WHAT MY GRANDMA'D BE TELLING YOU
IF SHE WAS STANDING HERE TODAY
YOU'VE UP AND LEFT YOUR CHILDREN |
WITHOUT THEIR MOTHER ON CHRISTMAS DAY
GIRL, THERE'S A JUDGEMENT DAY A' COMIN'
AND WE'RE ALL GONNA HAVE TO PAY

ALL

BETTER GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO
THE LORD IS COMIN' YOU'RE GONNA REAP JUST WHAT YOU SOW
IT SAYS IN THE GOOD BOOK, HE WASHED YOUR SINS WHITE AS SNOW
TIME TO GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO

BETTER GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO
THE LORD IS COMIN' YOU'RE GONNA REAP JUST WHAT YOU SOW
IT SAYS IN THE GOOD BOOK, HE WASHED YOUR SINS WHITE AS SNOW
TIME TO GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY

NETTA

READY

SUMMER

READY

NETTA

READY TO

ALL

GO - PACKED UP PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO!

(At the end of the song, everybody is upbeat and continuing their conversations as
the lights dim and a special comes up on WILLIE)

WILLIE

YOU'VE HEARD A MULTITUDE OF PRAYERS ON MY BEHALF
AND I PRAY ONE MORE IS NOT TOO MUCH TO ASK
I'VE TRIED TO FIGHT THIS BATTLE BY MYSELF

BUT IT'S A WAR THAT I CAN'T WIN WITHOUT YOUR HELP

TONNIGHT I'M AS LOW AS ANY MAN CAN GO
I'M DOWN AND I CAN'T FALL MUCH FARTHER
ONCE UPON A TIME YOU TURNED THE WATER INTO WINE
NOW ON MY KNEES I'M TURNING TO YOU FATHER
COULD YOU HELP ME TURN THE WINE BACK INTO WATER

RITA

Willie Wainwright has been the object of many of the assignments I've sent out of this place. He's had more guardian angels than Oprah's Book Club. He deserves it, though. He's got a wife at home that loves him. I see her drive by here sometimes at two, three o'clock in the morning. She doesn't come in, she's just making sure he's safe. He used to be a preacher. Yeah, you heard me right. Good ole Punch Cardwell was one of his head deacons. That's why Punch is so hard on him. He shouts at him, "For the drunkards shall come to poverty and rags... Proverbs 23:21. Of course, Punch always leaves out the part of that verse that talks about the gluttons. It hurts my heart to see people use a book so full of love as a weapon to cause so much pain. (beat) And I don't mean just Punch. See, about five Christmases ago, Willie's only son David dropped a bomb on the family over turkey and cranberry sauce. They haven't spoken since. Willie claims his son died that day. Truth is, Willie did.

WILLIE

SO MANY TIMES I'VE HURT THE ONES I LOVE
I PUSHED THEM TO THE EDGE OF GIVING UP
THEY'VE STOOD BY ME BUT HOW LONG CAN THEY STAND
IF I DON'T PUT THIS BOTTLE IN YOUR HAND

TONIGHT I'M AS LOW AS ANY MAN CAN GO
I'M DOWN AND I CAN'T FALL MUCH FARTHER
AND ONCE UPON A TIME YOU TURNED THE WATER INTO WINE
NOW ON MY KNEES I'M TURNING TO YOU FATHER
COULD YOU HELP ME TURN THE WINE BACK INTO WATER

I SHOOK MY FIST AT HEAVEN FOR THE HELL THAT I'VE BEEN THROUGH
NOW I'M BEGGING FOR FORGIVENESS AND A MIRACLE FROM YOU
CAUSE TONIGHT I'M AS LOW AS ANY MAN CAN GO

I'm down and I can't fall much farther. (consider speaking this one, if it works.)

AND ONCE UPON A TIME YOU TURNED THE WATER INTO WINE
NOW ON MY KNEES I'M TURNING TO YOU FATHER
COULD YOU HELP ME TURN THE WINE BACK INTO WATER
COULD YOU HELP ME TURN THE WINE BACK INTO WATER

(WILLIE returns to the bar as the lights come back up in the restaurant. Everyone except PUNCH is laughing at a story that NETTA is telling. LISSA is eating peanut butter out of the jar.)

LISSA

Did she really say that to him?

NETTA

Yes ma'am. And to answer your question, yes. Even after all that, I'm so glad to be having this baby. I do love children, but my child is gonna behave. I can't stand a bunch of screaming young'uns. I plan to use my Mama's method for making a child behave. Manual intimidation.

PEGGY

Well, that never worked for me.

LISSA

You know what never worked for me?

PEGGY

Hooked On Phonics?

(LISSA considers it, then licks some more peanut butter.)

BERT

(to LISSA) Hey, do me a favor and run to the back and get me a loaf of Texas toast, a pack of cheese and a box of grits.

LISSA

A loaf of bread, a pack of cheese and a box of grits... A loaf of bread, a pack of cheese and a box of grits... (she exits)

(BERT is writing)

PEGGY

Wait for it. Wait for it?

LISSA

Hey Bert, what was that again? (he tears off the note from the pad and hands the list to her.) Thank you. How'd you know? (she exits again)

RITA

It never ceases to amaze me what we will do around here to amuse ourselves. That one was always my...

PEGGY

(to RICHARD) That one was always Rita's favorite.

RICHARD

She told me about that one. I can't believe she still falls for it.

BERT

Falls for it?

PEGGY

As if she could help it.

NETTA

The way she sits here gnawing on pickles and peanut butter all the time, you'd think *she* was the one carrying a baby.

| | |
|--|--------------|
| | BERT |
| That's brilliant! We could play with that one all night. Netta, is that right? I love you! | |
| (PUNCH chokes on his coffee) | |
| | NETTA |
| I'm not following, here. | |
| | BERT |
| We could make Lissa believe that she's pregnant. | |
| | NETTA |
| Do what? | |
| | BERT |
| She's fallen for taller tales than that. | |
| | PUNCH |
| Alright, who's in? I got thirty on twenty minutes. | |
| | DANNY WAYNE |
| I got forty on a half hour. | |
| | SUMMER |
| What are ya'll betting on? | |
| | BERT |
| On how long it will take her to figure out that it's not true. | |
| | STEVEN TYLER |
| I got twenty-five on two days. | |
| | PEGGY |
| Steven Tyler, you haven't got any money to be betting boy. What's the matter with you? | |
| (she slaps her cash down on the table) | |
| Here, double down and let it ride. Two days it is! | |
| (everyone celebrates) | |
| You know, I don't think she's been with a man since Clinton was in office. | |
| | RITA |
| Amateurs! Midnight! | |
| | PEGGY |
| All in? | |
| | RICHARD |
| Ten big ones on midnight! For Rita. | |
| | PEGGY |
| For Rita! | |
| | ALL |
| For Rita! | |
| | RITA |
| Record that one. | |
| | LISSA |
| (entering again) | |
| Here you go, Bert. | |

BERT
Thank you for that... oh my goodness! Are you ok? You look a little pale.

LISSA
I'm fine.

PEGGY
You do look a little pale sweetheart. Maybe you ought to sit down.

LISSA
Well, I do feel a little empty-headed.

PEGGY
That's certainly understandable.
(they sit her down in a chair and put her feet up in another chair)

BERT
How's that? Do your feet hurt?

LISSA
Well...

PEGGY
Those ankles look a little swole to me.

LISSA
Really? I...

STEVEN TYLER
Can I get you anything? Water? Aspirin? Pickles?

PUNCH
Hot towels! Hot towels! (they give him a look) It works in the movies.

NETTA
Here, baby. Have some Saltines. That always helps me. I've been having those same symptoms every since I found out I was having this baby.

LISSA
Really?

NETTA
Yes ma'am. Ankles all swole. Face all pale.

PUNCH
How could you tell?
(NETTA slow burns to PUNCH. She takes a Saltine out of LISSA's hand and offers him one.)

NETTA
Cracker?
(PUNCH goes and sits down)
I'll tell you the truth, now that I'm having this baby, all I feel like doing most of the time is sitting around eating dill pickles.

LISSA
Dill pickles?

NETTA
And peanut butter.

LISSA
Peanut butter?

PEGGY
She is good! (referring to NETTA's skills)
(LISSA is staring blankly out towards the audience)

LISSA
(plainly after a few beats) Oh!
(totally getting it now after a few more beats) Oooooohhhhh!
(the phone rings. Everyone leaves LISSA alone center stage to work it out.)

PEGGY
I got my hands full Lissa, would you get that?
(LISSA slides off the chair like a pregnant woman and walks leaning backward with her hands on her back. She drags her feet.)

LISSA
(exhausted) Waffle House, this is Lissa. (moody, now) It is not Lisa, alright? It's Li-i-issa. Like listen! (she slams the phone against the wall then brings it calmly back to her ear sweetly again) What can I get you darling? That'll be fine? (she hangs up)

BERT
Who was that?

LISSA
Best Western next door calling to say they are sending a small group over here. They're full-up already.

PEGGY
Bert, better help me get some chairs. (they exit to the back)

SUMMER
Looks like the radio station was right. It's still coming down out there.

STEVEN TYLER
What are you gonna do?

SUMMER
About what?

STEVEN TYLER
If you can't make it into town to play that gig tomorrow?

SUMMER
I've come this far. I'll make it to town somehow.

STEVEN TYLER
It must be nice to have a dream.

SUMMER
Everybody has dreams.

STEVEN TYLER

Not everybody.

PEGGY

(entering with Bert with chairs)

How many people did that dude say he was sending over?

LISSA

He didn't say.

(While PEGGY and BERT set out chairs, BERT looks out the window like he just saw a ghost. He drops his chairs.)

Holy Christmas!

PUNCH

Holy Moses!

PEGGY

Holy shit!

(the children enter like a heard of elephants, screaming and chasing each other. After a few moments, NETTA has had enough.)

NETTA

Quiet!

(everyone freezes to attention. As she sings out, the kids return to mayhem.)

TIME TO GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO

THE LORD IS COMING – YOU'RE GONNA REAP JUST WHAT YOU SOW

IT SAYS IN THE GOOD BOOK, WASH YOUR SINS WHITE AS SNOW

BETTER GET PACKED UP, PRAYED UP AND READY TO GO!

END OF ACT 1

ACT II

(Lights up as the children are reaping havoc all over the restaurant. It is utter chaos. BERT is cooking as fast as he can. LISSA & PEGGY are cutting grilled cheese sandwiches into little triangles as fast as he can throw them off the grill. STEVEN TYLER is blowing up helium balloons for them. They all have chocolate milk cartons. A few kids have wrapped PUNCH in toilet paper in a chair. There are two kids fighting over an overfilled helium balloon center stage.)

PEGGY

Listen up! Listen Up! Hello?

(Unable to get their attention, PEGGY pops the children's balloon with a fork from her apron on the button of the opening music. Everyone freezes)

Thank you. Now, please tell me. Who among us thought it was a good idea to give these young'uns chocolate milk?

STEVEN TYLER

(his lungs are full of helium)

I did, Mama. They were thirsty.

(the kids all laugh. PEGGY pops STEVEN TYLER's balloon to freeze the children again.)

PEGGY

Children and chocolate milk do not mix.

(LISSA has brought a bus tub downstage center and started to collect milk cartons in it.)

Alright! Now everyone who has chocolate milk, please pour it out.

(one child pours his milk on the floor. LISSA quickly brings a rag and cleans it up.)

Pour it IN the bus tub, thank you very much. Lissa, is this one some kin to you?

Now, let's play a game!

(the kids celebrate)

Oh, it's a fun game! It's called let's see who can keep their lips zipped the longest! We will line up in a straight line... Good. Now let's check our zippers.

(all the boys and STEVEN TYLER check their pants zippers)

Not *that* zipper although that can sometimes be a life-long struggle...

(referring to STEVEN TYLER)

Let's check our lip zippers. Steven Tyler, I am sorry, but you have to be under the age of twenty-six to play. Here's how it works. Put your right hand on the left side of your mouth... the right hand... your other right hand. The left side of your mouth... left side. And on the count of three, we are going to ZIP IT UP! Are we ready?

A FEW CHILDREN

Yees.

PEGGY

Children, are we ready?

ALL CHILDREN

Yeeeeeeesssss! (then the chatter continues until they zip)

One, two, THREE!
(the children all zip quiet and still)
Very nice!

PEGGY

OLDEST CHILD

This is a stupid game.

PEGGY

We have a faulty zipper, do I have to get my trusty staple gun out? (she clicks the staple gun)
(the children are terrified)
Now, sit where you are and we will have grilled cheese sandwiches for everyone!

CHILDREN

Yeeaaahhh!

PEGGY

Keep it zipped! (staple gun click)

CHILDREN

Mmmmmmmmm! (sounds like yeaahh, but with mouths closed)

PEGGY

This game has a shelf-life of about two minutes, hurry up with those sandwiches, Bert.

BERT

I'm hurrying, Peggy.

PEGGY

Excuse me, sister!
(SISTER JANE turns around)

SISTER JANE

Yes, my child?

PEGGY

What are your plans for these blessed little brat...

STEVEN TYLER

Mama!

PEGGY

Little angels.

SISTER JANE

Well the only hotel on this exit is full and the roads are too bad to try and keep moving.

PEGGY

So?

SISTER JANE

So, I've taken it to the father.

PEGGY

Good, is he on his way to get 'em?

STEVEN TYLER

Ma!

PEGGY

Oh, you mean THEE father? (she crosses herself) Oh, I'm sorry.

(PEGGY looks upward, then, after a beat...)
What did he say?

SISTER JANE

She is not afraid of the snow for her household for he shall appoint for her cities of refuge.

PEGGY

Oh, I see. I see. Did he say which city because I think Smyrna has some vacancies.

STEVEN TYLER

Order up!

PEGGY

Thank the Lord!

LISSA

(to RICHARD and SUMMER) Do you mind helping me pass these sandwiches out.

PEGGY

Can we have a staff meeting at Danny Wayne's table please?

(BERT, LISSA and PEGGY meet at DANNY WAYNE's table)

OK, so what's the plan? I can't fend 'em off all night, I only have a few staples left.

BERT

Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

PEGGY

Yes, but I don't think we have any rope, either.

BERT

Santa Clause!

LISSA

Where?

BERT

We need a Santa to keep the children occupied. They'll never misbehave in front of Kris Kringle, himself.

PEGGY

Where in the world do you expect us to find a random Santy Clause in the middle of a snow storm on Christmas Eve?

SISTER JANE

Excuse me, pardon me. I have a Santa costume in my bag. We were on our way to do a program for midnight mass in Nashville. The orphans were going to perform.

SUMMER

Awe. They were going to do a show?

SISTER JANE

Yes ma'am.

SUMMER

And now they're not going to get to do it? That breaks my heart.

RICHARD

Well, why not? Why can't they do their song for us?

SISTER JANE

You people are too kind. Children? Would you like to do your song for these people?

CHILDREN

Yeeaaaah!

SISTER JANE

Alright, places then.

(The kids get into place for the number and put the angel costume on the soloist.)

PEGGY

Listen Sister, when this little orphan Annie skit is over, we're still going to need us a babysitting Santy Clause. Let's see this costume you got there.

(she displays a very large pair of Santa pants.)

Great day in the morning!

PUNCH

Shooo-eeee! (laughing) Who in the world you gonna find to fill them pants?

(ALL slow burn to PUNCH as his laughter fades)

Oh hell naw!

PEGGY

Shut up, Punch. Get over here and *earn* my vote.

PUNCH

They are not going to fit me.

PEGGY

Don't worry. I got my staple gun.

(PEGGY clicks it. CHILDREN and PUNCH jump to attention. PEGGY & PUNCH exit to the kitchen as the music starts. SISTER JANE pulls a boom box out of her bag for the kids' music to start.)

SOLO CHILD

I WAS WALKING HOME FROM SCHOOL ON A COLD WINTER'S DAY
TOOK A SHORT CUT THROUGH THE WOODS AND I LOST MY WAY
IT WAS GETTING LATE AND I WAS SCARED AND ALONE
THEN A KIND OLD MAN TOOK MY HAND AND LED ME HOME
NO ONE ELSE COULD SEE HIM, BUT HE WAS STANDING THERE
BUT I KNEW IN MY HEART, HE WAS THE ANSWER TO MY PRAYERS

OH I BELIEVE THERE ARE ANGELS AMONG US
SENT DOWN TO US FROM SOMEWHERE UP ABOVE
THEY COME TO YOU AND ME IN OUR DARKEST HOURS
TO SHOW US HOW TO LIVE
TO TEACH US HOW TO GIVE
TO GUIDE US WITH THE LIGHT OF LOVE

SISTER JANE

WHEN LIFE DEALT TROUBLED TIMES AND HAD ME DOWN ON MY KNEES
THERE'S ALWAYS BEEN SOMEONE THERE TO
COME ALONG AND COMFORT ME

A KIND WORD FROM A STRANGER TO LEND A HELPING HAND
A PHONE CALL FROM A FRIEND JUST TO SAY I UNDERSTAND
AIN'T IT KIND OF FUNNY AT THE DARK END OF THE ROAD
SOMEONE LIGHTS THE WAY WITH JUST A SINGLE RAY OF HOPE

CHILDREN

OH I BELIEVE THERE ARE ANGLES AMONG US
SENT DOWN TO US FROM SOMEWHERE UP ABOVE
THEY COME TO YOU AND ME IN OUR DARKEST HOUR
TO SHOW US HOW TO LIVE, TO TEACH US HOW TO GIVE
TO GUIDE US WITH A LIGHT OF LOVE

SISTER JANE

THEY WEAR SO MANY FACES
SHOW UP IN THE STRANGEST PLACES
GRACE US WITH THEIR MERCY IN OUR TIME OF NEED

ALL

OH, I BELIEVE THERE ARE ANGELS AMONG US
SENT DOWN TO US FROM SOMEWHERE UP ABOVE
THEY COME TO YOU AND ME IN OUR DARKEST HOUR
TO SHOW US HOW TO LIVE, TO TEACH US HOW TO GIVE
TO GUIDE US WITH A LIGHT OF LOVE

SOLO CHILD

TO GUIDE US WITH THE LIGHT OF LOVE

(Everyone applauds their performance and makes over them quite a bit. During the end of the song, LISSA'S mother STELLA and grandmother DRUCILLA have entered and sat down at PUNCH's booth)

DRUCILLA

You didn't tell me this was a dinner theatre.

STELLA

It's not a dinner theatre, mother, it's the Waffle House.

DRUCILLA

Call it what you will, but the little Catholic kids playing the Von Trapp family sounded pretty darn good to me.

LISSA

Hello Mama. Grandma, I'll be right over.

DRUCILLA

Hello sweetie. We'll catch up with you after the show. I don't want to miss Edelweiss.

STELLA

We came as soon as you called. What was so urgent?

Well, I'm glad you made it.

Barely made it.

Oh, mother, we were fine. But if we didn't live so close and that four wheeler hadn't been gassed up...

She drives like Evil Knievel.

You know how she is. She insists on wearing a seat belt. It took me twenty minutes in the freezing snow to bunji her ear end to the back of that thang.

Click-it or Ticket. It's the law.

(to LISSA who has finally waddled over to their table) So, what's up?

Maybe you should sit down.

OK, we will.

Aren't we sitting?

Yes Mother. It's just best not to confuse her.

Thank God. For a minute there, I thought my osteoporosis had taken a turn for the worse.

I'll get you some milk in a minute. Grandma. Something miraculous has happened. There's gonna be another baby in the family.

I'm pregnant?

Mother!

I hope it's a boy this time.

Please stop.

Well she said it was miraculous.

It's me! I'm gonna have a baby.

What's so miraculous about that? Girls your age have babies all the time.

Who's the Daddy?
STELLA
There isn't one.
LISSA
Now we're back to miraculous.
DRUCILLA
What do you mean no Daddy? Who have you been seeing?
STELLA
Nobody. I work, I go to school, I go home, I go to sleep. I work, I go to school, I go home, I go to sleep.
LISSA
A girl on Maury Povich had this same problem. Have you been washing your sheets at the fluff and fold?
DRUCILLA
No ma'am. I have my own washer.
LISSA
I see. (she snaps her fingers) Montel Williams! Do you recall blacking out at a tattoo parlor in the past eight weeks?
DRUCILLA
I really don't know how it happened.
LISSA
If I drew you a picture, do you think it would jar any memories?
STELLA
(LISSA hands her a pen and pad and she starts to sketch as PUNCH enters)
PUNCH
Ho. Ho. Ho. Merry Christmas!
CHILDREN
Santa! (they swarm him, knocking him back into the kitchen, where they follow with great excitement)
PEGGY
Listen, sister, we can't keep these young'uns here all night. What are we gonna do?
SUMMER
The hotels are full. Where will they sleep?
BERT
Peggy, are you thinking what I'm thinking?
PEGGY
(having walked over to the phone) I'm one step ahead of you. (disguising her voice poorly)
Yes, is this Best Western? There is bomb in your building! Must evacuate right away.
STEVEN TYLER
Hang up the phone, Mama. (she keeps the phone away from him and puts it back up to her ear.)
What? Peggy who? Never heard of her. (she hangs up the phone)
I hate caller ID. (she decides to take the phone off the hook.)

RICHARD

Who do we know that has a house big enough to house all these children for the night?

(Everyone slow burns to PUNCH)

PUNCH

Awe hell naw! (pleading) You know my heart's no good. I can't take all that screaming and hollering.

SISTER JANE

You do whatever you feel is the right thing to do, Mr. Cardwell. I am sure those children and our Father will understand your decision.

PUNCH

(fighting reason) You know, that Catholic guilt stuff ain't supposed to work on us Baptists.

(they keep looking at him)

Oh, for crying out loud. Call Edna and tell her to get some blankets down.

SISTER JANE

Blessed are the generous of hear for they shall be called Sons of God!

PUNCH

Save it, Sister!

PEGGY

Well, Punch, that's better than what you are usually called the son of.

(PUNCH take a flask from his briefcase and takes a swig.)

SISTER JANE

Mr. Cardwell, I am surprised at you!

PUNCH

It calms my nerves. Don't knock it 'til you try it. It's just a little concoction my Aunt Hazel brings to the fellowship dinner every year. Here. Don't be shy.

(SISTER JANE smells it, takes a big swig and the music starts as it hits.)

PUNCH

AT THE CHRISTMAS POTLUCK DINNER AT THE HOLY ROLLER HALL
THEY DON'T ALLOW NO DRINKIN' OF ANY ALC-I-HOL
SO MY AUNT HAZEL MAKES A JUICE WITHOUT THE USE OF LIQUOR
AND EVERY YEAR IT SEEMS TO DISAPPEAR A LITTLE QUICKER

IT'S HAZEL'S HOMEMADE HALLELUJAH PUNCH
GUARANTEED TO SPREAD SOME CHRISTMAS CHEER
FILL THE CUP AND DRINK IT UP, IT SOESN'T TAKE TO MUCH
OF HAZEL'S HOMEMEADE HALLELUJAH PUNCH

(Everyone lines up across the front of the stage with a little red solo cup. As they pour and pass the flask, DRUCILLA keeps getting out of line after her swig and stepping in further down the line for another)

WHEN EVERYONE'S DONE EATING AND THEY'VE HAD A GLASS OR TWO

THE STRANGEST THINGS START HAPPENING
JUST LIKE THEY ALWAYS DO
THE SPIRIT OF THE SEASON FLOWS
THROUGHOUT THE CONGREGATION
THERE MUST BE MAGIC IN THAT BOWL
TO CAUSE SUCH A SENSATION

ALL

IT'S HAZEL'S HOMEMADE HALLELUJAH PUNCH
GUARANTEED TO SPREAD SOME CHRISTMAS CHEER
FILL THE CUP AND DRINK IT UP, IT SOESN'T TAKE TO MUCH
OF HAZEL'S HOMEMEADE HALLELUJAH PUNCH

PUNCH

SHE SWEARS THERE'S NOTHING IN IT BUT
THE JUICE SOME FRUITS AND BERRIES
SOME RAISINS, DATES, A FEW YEAST CAKES
AND MARICHINO CHERRIES
SHE FILLS UP TWO FIVE GALLON JUGS
AND SEALS THEM EVERY SPRING
AND WHEN SHE OPENS 'EM UP FOR CHRISTMAS
THE CHOIR BEGINS TO SING

HALLELUJAH, HALLELUJAH
HALLELUJAH, HALLELUJAH PUNCH

(The CHILDREN march out of the kitchen and out of the door to their bus)

AUNT HAZEL MAKES – HALLELUJAH, HALLELUJAH
AN AMAZING PUNCH – HALLELUJAH , HALLELUJAH
YOU'LL HURL YOUR LUNCH – HALLELUJAH, HALLELUJAH
IF YOU DRINK TOO MUCH – HALLELUJAH, HALLELUJAH
AND EVERY SIP TASTES BETTER AND BETTER
AND BETTER AND BETTER – HALLELUJAH, HALLELUJAH

IT'S HAZEL'S HOMEMADE HALLELUJAH PUNCH
GUARANTEED TO SPREAD SOME CHRISTMAS CHEER
FILL THE CUP AND DRINK IT UP, IT SOESN'T TAKE TO MUCH
OF HAZEL'S HOMEMEADE HALLELUJAH PUNCH
HAZEL'S HOMEMADE HALLELUJAH PUNCH

(SISTER JANE exits on the button)

DRUCILLA

(drunk, now) I don't remember that song in The Sound of Music. This must be a double feature.

STELLA

It's a review, Mama.

DRUCILLA

A review? I want my money back.

PUNCH

I better try and beat them to the house. Edna can't handle them by herself.

PEGGY

BERT & LISSA

Thank you, Punch! Bye!

Merry Christmas, Mr. Cardwell!

-----possible cut to p.46 if no TANA MILLER is cast -----

(TANA MILLER enters as PUNCH exits. They kind of recognize each other)

PUNCH

Hello, young lady. Merry Christmas!

TANA

Hello. Merry Christmas to you, too.

LISSA

Sit wherever you like.

TANA

Thank you.

LISSA

Pardon the mess, we just had a heard of children through here.

TANA

I saw that. Where are they going in this snow?

LISSA

They're going to Punch Cardwell's house.

TANA

As in State Representative Punch Cardwell?

LISSA

Yes, that's the one. Do you know him?

TANA

I've been to a party or two out at his house back some years ago when he was still in local government. He still comes to the Opry every now and then.

SUMMER

I knew it. I knew it! (crossing to her table) I'm sorry, I thought it was you and I just have to say something. I can't believe this. Are you Tana Miller?

TANA

To everyone except ex-husbands and the IRS, I am.

SUMMER

I'm Summer Shea. I'm from Georgia. I love your music. I'm singing at the Bluebird tomorrow. Will you be playing there?

TANA

I haven't been to that place since I divorced the owner.

SUMMER

I'm sorry. I didn't remember he was married to you.

TANA

He didn't either. That's why I divorced him. Where in Georgia?

SUMMER

You've never heard of it. It's called Vesta.

TANA

Vesta? Not only have I heard of it, I've played there. It's only twenty-five, thirty miles from my hometown.

SUMMER

You're from Georgia?

TANA

South Carolina, right next door. Cross the line on 72? Calhoun Falls. My old stomping grounds. Are you out here from Vesta by yourself?

SUMMER

Yes ma'am. I'm not married.

TANA & PEGGY

Congratulations!

SUMMER

My Dad used to travel with me to gigs, but he stays home and looks after my kids.

TANA

You've got kids? I never had kids. Couldn't find a man I could trust to stick around and raise them. (she might have struck a chord with SUMMER) Oh, sorry. Well Vesta is a nice place to raise a family.

SUMMER

I'm glad you think so. I want to pack up and leave there so bad. There's nothing there. I'd rather be living here and playing the Opry every week like you.

TANA

(she laughs) Careful what you wish for.

SUMMER

What?

TANA

Have you ever spent Christmas alone, honey? I mean really alone?

(she hasn't)

Then you won't understand. You might tomorrow. Sweetie, happiness isn't about a place, or a job. It's from in here. I love the Opry and the people and all, but as I look back on it, I think the happiest I ever was – was right there in Calhoun Falls. And I left it there. Even now that Mama, Daddy and... well, they've all passed on, I still head back there to spend Christmas. Somehow it

just wouldn't feel like Christmas without being there.

LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW, I CAN SEE THE TOPS OF BUILDINGS
SO MUCH TALLER THAN YOU'D EVER SEE BACK HOME
DRIVING THROUGH THE POURING RAIN

THE CITY LIGHTS ALL LOOK THE SAME
AND ALL IT MEANS IS ONE MORE NIGHT ALONE
IT'S NOT SO BAD IN SUMMER, BUT DECEMBER MAKES ME WONDER
HOW A COUNTRY GIRL COULD FEEL SO OUT OF PLACE
TRAFFIC LIGHTS AND FOREIGN CARS
PLASTIC SMILES IN CROWDED BARS
I'D TRADE IT ALL FOR ONE FAMILIAR PLACE

BUT WHEN THE RAIN TURNS TO SNOW
AND ALL THE CITY STOPS ARE FILLED
WITH JOY AND MISTLETOE
THAT'S WHEN I'LL BE ON MY WAY
WHEN THE RAIN TURNS TO SNOW
I'LL BE HOME ON CHRISTMAS DAY

STARING AT THE CEILING IN MY ROOM I GET THE FEELING
THAT THERE'S NOTHING IN THIS TOWN THAT'S WORTH MY TIME
EVERY NIGHT UP HERE I DREAM
OF COUNTRY ROADS AND MOUNTAIN STREAMS
BUT MOST OF ALL THE ONE I LEFT BEHIND

BUT WHEN THE RAIN TURNS TO SNOW
AND ALL THE CITY STOPS ARE FILLED
WITH JOY AND MISTLETOE
THAT'S WHEN I'LL BE ON MY WAY
WHEN THE RAIN TURNS TO SNOW
I'LL BE HOME ON CHRISTMAS DAY

WHEN THE RAIN TURNS TO SNOW
I'LL BE HOME ON CHRISTMAS DAY

(SUMMER and TANA continue to talk at the booth)

----- Cut -----

(BERT comes out from the kitchen with a small boy who has been left behind. His face is covered in chocolate)

BERT

We have a stowaway! 86 chocolate pie, by the way.

PEGGY

Oh my Lord! I can't believe this. I thought we were rid of you. Why didn't you march out to the bus like everybody else?

BOY

I was eating the chocolate pie.

PEGGY

Is that right? Well, how do I know you're telling me the truth?

(he shrugs)

Well let me get you cleaned up.

(she crosses behind the counter to get a clean rag, but WILLIE beats her to it with his handkerchief)

As soon as I find a clean rag, we are going to figure out how to get you over to Punch's house with everybody else. What about you, Lissa? Maybe you could drive him over there.

LISSA

In my condition?

PEGGY

Your condition? (realizing) Oh yeah. Bert, where's the hand soap? (BERT points) Well, somebody's gonna take him home. He's liable to start whining here in a minute and my nerves can't take it. Now, come here and let's see to this face of your...

(all clean – she looks at the BOY, he smiles. She looks at WILLIE, he smiles)

OK... well.

(WILLIE'S son DAVID walks in followed by MARTHA)

DAVID

Dad. Look, I know you don't want to talk to me, and that's ok. I guess. But Dad, Mom is really worried about you being out in this snow. I've never seen her this worried, and you know how she worries.

(WILLIE gets up and crosses to the far side of the stage away from DAVID, not looking at him. SUMMER crosses to the little boy and mothers him)

I want you to know that things are going great for me in New York. The magazine wants to make me Associate Editor and, if they do, I'll be able to buy a house... not in the city, but close. I wanted Mom to tell you, but she said... well, you know what she said. Listen, I really want Mom to come to New York and see where I work, and if I buy this house, I want her to see it. But she won't come without you, Dad, you know that. I know you can't talk to me anymore and all, but will you *think* about coming? I'll pay for everything. (pause) Geez, this place brings back so many memories. Every Sunday morning as far back as I can remember, we'd sit right there and Mama would read the sales papers and you would be putting the finishing touches on your sermon. It used to look so much bigger in here. And I'd get into the chocolate pie while ya'll weren't looking and get it all over my face and Mama would get so mad at me for making a mess and you for buying me the pie. Her ears would get so red I thought smoke was going to blow out like they did on the cartoons. But you'd just take your handkerchief and clean me up and buy it again for me the next week. "Try and keep it between your mouth and Israel this time, boy." (pause) Listen, Dad, I can call a cab if you don't want to ride in the car with me. But please... just come home. This snow's not letting up. I brought you a coat.

(DAVID offers the coat. WILLIE walks over slowly and gets the coat and turns away from DAVID. DAVID starts to leave but is stopped in his tracks by RITA, who he feels but doesn't see. WILLIE walks over to DAVID and puts his hand on his shoulder. When DAVID turns around, WILLIE hugs him. After a beat, DAVID hugs his father back. During this next scene, PEGGY pours WILLIE some coffee and let's DAVID use the phone to call his Mom.)

RITA

Record that one. Good job, Martha.

MARTHA

Thank you, darling. It wasn't easy. Men are stubborn.

ANNA

People are stubborn.

RITA

They just don't get it.

RITA, ANNA & MARTHA

Yet.

RITA

(to MARTHA) You ready for another one?

MARTHA

Child, please. Let me at least catch my breath.

RITA

No, I think maybe you should see this one home. Make it a two-for-one.

MARTHA

I knew you'd say that. That coffee better be strong in the morning.

RITA

It always is.

SUMMER

TINY FEET STILL IN PAJAMAS RACING DOWN THE STAIRS
HURRYING TO SEE IF SANTA LEFT SOMETHING FOR THEM DOWN THERE
THE GLASS OF MILK THEY LEFT IS EMPTY
THE COOKIE'S MISSING JUST ONE BITE
AND THEY SWEAR THEY HEARD SOMEBODY
WALKING ON THE ROOF LAST NIGHT
ISN'T IT WONDERFUL, IF ONLY FOR JUST ONE DAY
ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE THE HOPE IN A CHILD'S FACE
TUCKED IN ON CHRISTMAS EVE
THAT'S ALL THE PROOF I NEED TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTMAS

(she watches as DAVID & WILLIE exit)

FAMILY COMES FROM FAR AND NEAR
DIFFERENCES ARE LEFT BEHIND
SOMETHING 'BOUT THIS TIME OF YEAR
BRINGS OUT THE BEST IN YOU AND I

PEOPLE FIND THE TIME FOR CHURCH
VOICES JOIN AS ONE IN SONG
GOOD WILL TO MEN AND PEACE ON EARTH

AND EVERYBODY SINGS ALONG
ISN'T IT WONDERFUL, IF ONLY FOR JUST ONE DAY
ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE THE HOPE IN A CHILD'S FACE

(PUNCH is back for the BOY who sees Santa and runs to him. They exit)

THE HOPE THAT'S INSIDE OF ME
THAT'S ALL THE PROOF I NEED TO BELIEVE
THAT'S ALL THE PROOF I NEED
AND I STILL BELIEVE IN CHRISTMAS

ANNA

(over the music tail) I think she finally gets it.

RITA

Mmmm. 'Bout time. You want some more coffee?

ANNA

Yeah, why not. (music ends)

DANNY WAYNE

I know it, Steven Tyler, but how am I supposed to tell her if she won't agree to go to breakfast with me?

STEVEN TYLER

You just tell her now.

DANNY WAYNE

But I don't know what to say.

STEVEN TYLER

Listen, if there's one thing I've learned about women, it's not what you say, it's *how* you say it.

DANNY WAYNE

How do you mean, how?

STEVEN TYLER

Well, she's already told you she hates whiny men.

DANNY WAYNE

(whining) Yeeeeaaaah, I know.

STEVEN TYLER

So, DON'T whine. You got to be *firm* with her. Tell her like it is. You're the man and she's the woman and that's how it's gonna be.

DANNY WAYNE

Firm. I'm the man and she's the woman. (standing up and yelling) Peggy, get over here!

PEGGY

Don't you raise your voice at me, Danny Wayne, I'll squash you like a cockroach.

(he sits back down)

STEVEN TYLER

Go on! Firm.

(DANNY WAYNE stands back up on the first chord of the song)

DANNY WAYNE

SILVER BELLS ARE RINGING

PEGGY

Welcome back to HeeHaw.

DANNY WAYNE

CAROLERS ARE SINGING

DRUCILLA

I hear 'em.

DANNY WAYNE

SNOWFLAKES DRIFTING THROUGH THE AIR

PEGGY

Please tell me he's not coming over here.

DANNY WAYNE

EVERYBODY'S SHOPPING, GOT NO TIME FOR STOPPING

IT LOOKS LIKE CHRISTMAS IS HERE

PEGGY

What do you want, Danny Wayne?

DANNY WAYNE

SO TELL ME HOW DO I WRAP MY HEART UP FOR CHRISTMAS

I WANT TO GIVE IT TO YOU

PEGGY

Have you tried UPS?

DANNY WAYNE

PRETTY BOWS AND RIBBONS DON'T FIT THE GIFT I'M GIVING

YOU'RE LOVING ARMS WILL HAVE TO DO

PEGGY

Let me go, you crazy fool.

DANNY WAYNE

AT FIRST I THOUGHT OF GIVING YOU A PRETTY DIAMOND RING

I WORE MYSELF OUT SHOPPING FOR A MILLION OTHER THINGS

PEGGY

How about diamond earplugs?

DANNY WAYNE

I FINALLY DECIDED ON SOMETHING YOU CAN'T BUY

PEGGY

Means it's cheap.

DANNY WAYNE

BUT HOW WILL I DISGUISE IT SO YOU WIL BE SURPRISED

HOW DO I WRAP MY HEART UP FOR CHRISTMAS

I WANT TO GIVE IT TO YOU

PRETTY BOWS AND RIBBONS DON'T FIT THE GIFT I'M GIVING
YOUR LOVING ARMS WILL HAVE TO DO

PEGGY

Now listen to me, I have told you and told you that I ain't lookin' for a whiny man. Don't want one don't need one.

DANNY WAYNE

But you don't understand, Peggy.

PEGGY

I understand plenty.

DANNY WAYNE

No, you don't, now just sit down and listen.

(she does)

A GIFT OF LOVE WAS GIVEN TO THE WORLD SO LONG AGO
LYING IN A MANGER, HE WAS WRAPPED IN SWADDLING CLOTHES
AND EVERY YEAR WE CELEBRATE AND THANK THE LORD ABOVE
AND GIVE TO ONE ANOTHER OUR LITTOLE GIFTS OF LOVE
HOW DO I WRAP MY HEART UP FOR CHRISTMAS
I WANT TO GIVE IT TO YOU
PRETTY BOWS AND RIBBONS DON'T FIT THE GIFT I'M GIVING
YOUR LOVING ARMS WILL HAVE TO DO

PEGGY

Are you finished?

DANNY WAYNE

(nervously) Well actually, I... uh...

(during PEGGY'S next line, she gets up and walks away as STEVEN TYLER stands up to get DANNY WAYNE's attention, making muscle man gestures. RICHARD gets up and goes to the bathroom)

PEGGY

Good, because I've got too much to do around this place as it is to be messing around with you and your silly school-boy courting games. I...

DANNY WAYNE

(yelling and manly) No, I am not finished yet, woman, so are you going to sit down and zip it or do I have to chase that nun down and get that staple gun back?

(PEGGY looks at him, then looks around the room to see if they heard him yelling at her. She walks over and sits down in the chair he has provided. He continues, firmly, but not yelling anymore.)

Now, I have been driving that truck in to see you for eight years and for eight years I have wanted to tell you that I love you and for eight years you haven't stopped long enough to ask me how my day went, and I am sick of it. Do you hear me? Sick of it. Now, I am going to sit here at this booth and watch the snow fall until 6:30 when you clock out and go home and change your clothes and meet me for breakfast at 7:45 at Denny's. At which time, I will put this ring in front of you and ask you to marry me and you will say yes because you love me too, and your days of

being too blame stubborn to admit it are over. Is this clear?

PEGGY

Crystal.

DANNY WAYNE

Now is there anything you would like to say?

(PEGGY pulls him to her and plants a humongous kiss on him.)

PEGGY

How was your day?

DANNY WAYNE

Good.

PEGGY

Good.

(she walks away and goes back to work)

ANNA

So, where'd yours go?

RITA

Huh? Oh, he's in the bathroom.

ANNA

You know what we gotta do, right?

(RICHARD comes out of the bathroom)

RITA

Huh? Oh, yes, but how do I know she's the one? She so much younger, and what if...

(ANNA throws SUMMER's coat in the floor in front of RICHARD)

Oh, look at that. No turning back now I guess.

RICHARD

(having picked it up)

You dropped your coat.

SUMMER

I did? Oh, thank you.

RICHARD

No problem.

(realizing that RICHARD is about to return to his seat, ANNA throws SUMMER's hat in the floor next. RICHARD picks it up)

And your hat, too?

SUMMER

Yes, well. Thank you, two times.

RICHARD

No problem, two times.

(as he starts to leave, RITA knocks over SUMMER's water glass. RICHARD comes around to sit across from her to wipe up the water)

ANNA

Nice one.

RITA

Well, he's shy.

SUMMER

I can't believe I'm so clumsy. You know, you don't have to do this.

RICHARD

I know. But I want to, if it's ok with you.

SUMMER

OK? Sure it's ok. Totally ok.

RICHARD

Oh look, your hat.

SUMMER

There went my favorite bad hair day bonnet.

(RICHARD stops cold as the music starts)

What is it?

RICHARD

Nothing.

(RICHARD continues to assist, but almost as if he keeps hearing something that interrupts him for brief moments. Once they get straightened out, they continue to chat.)

RITA

OH CHRISTMAS TREE STANDING INCOMPLETE
WITH YOUR BRITTLE BRANCHES BROKEN IN DEFEAT
WHERE DID ALL YOUR GLITTER GO – OH CHRISTMAS TREE

WITH YOUR ANGEL GONE AND YOUR EMPTY ARMS
AND ONE STRAND OF TINSEL BARELY HANGING ON
SOMEONE LOVED YOU NOT SO LONG AGO – OH CHRISTMAS TREE

DO YOU REMEMEBR WHEN

RICHARD

I REMEMBER WHEN

BOTH

YOU WERE LIGHTING UP THE ROOM
WHY DID IT HAVE TO END SO SOON?

RITA

I suppose everybody has a little empty place inside of them that silently aches at Christmas time. A loved one lost (RICHARD) a love never found (VICKIE) or just the cold nudge of unrealized dreams tapping at your window (HERSELF). Richard needs somebody like her to make him smile again... with his nose. And she's been waiting her entire life for a man like him. I hope she's good to him.

CAUSE I REMEMBER WHEN

RICHARD

I REMEMBER WHEN

BOTH

HE (SHE) WAS LIGHTING UP THE ROOM
WHY DID IT HAVE TO END SO SOON

RICHARD

WITH MY ANGEL GONE

RITA

AND YOUR EMPTY ARMS, TIME TO FIND A REASON

RICHARD

JUST TO CARRY ON – IT'S NEVER EASY LETTING GO

RITA

WITHOUT A CHANCE TO LET HIM KNOW

(They see each other.)

BOTH

WHAT HE (SHE) MEANS TO ME – OH CHRISTMAS TREE

(A special light comes up down center. RITA steps into it and smiles
as if a warm shower has just poured over her.)

RITA

Well, as it turns out, all is square with the house. I wish I could tell you what comes next, but I don't know yet.

LISSA

(she is with DRUCILLA & STELLA looking at the sketch they made)

Ooohhh! Well, if that's the only way, then I am definitely not pregnant anymore.

PEGGY

Midnight! Who got the pot?

(RICHARD & RITA did)

DRUCILLA

Good. Well, bunji me up, Stella. I've still got time to catch Matlock on TBS. What a hunk!

RITA

You know, I never did figure out why you nice people were chosen to come visit me, tonight of all nights. I thought, at first, that you all get it. But I'm not quite sure that all of you do. Most of us don't really until... well, UNTIL. Maybe Richard wasn't my final assignment. Maybe you were. Either way, I hope you learned a little something from old Rita this Christmas Eve night. Oh, I bet you're wondering who's gonna take my place handing out the assignments to these good people...

(PUNCH CARDWELL comes bouncing out of the kitchen in a Waffle House uniform and hat. He is not happy.)

PUNCH

Oh, hell naw! I told ya'll my heart couldn't take all those young'uns.

ANNA

Bout time you got here. Fix Mama some more coffee, baby.

(PUNCH mumbles unintelligibly)

RITA

I think he might just be here a while. I want you all to be so good to each other. And if you see Richard, or my children or that sweet little grandbaby, please tell them that I... (she chokes up) tell them Mama Rita loves them, ok? I really hope they get it... But that ain't my say so.

(RICHARD steps into what was her light as she moves toward the exit in dim light.

RICHARD has his winnings from the bet. He holds it up as if to say, "This is for you"

Then, as RITA watches, he kisses his finger and holds it up toward the light and bends it in a wave, just as she described earlier. Then he smiles... with his nose, of course.)

RITA

Record that one.

(As the music starts, they both turn at the same time. She exits. He sits back down at the table with SUMMER. The special light fades and we continue to see the busy life of the restaurant. Then spotlight on SUMMER)

SUMMER

I'M THE BABY IN THE MANGER

I'M THE SONGS THE CHILDREN SING

I'M THE KINDNESS DONE TO STRANGERS

I'M FOR WHO THE CHURCH BELLS RING

TANA

I'M THE ANGEL RIGHT BESIDE YOU

SOFTLY WHISPERING IN YOUR EAR

LOOK FOR MIRACLES TO HAPPEN

MORE THAN ONLY ONCE A YEAR

TOGETHER

AND ALL I WANT IS SILENT NIGHTS

WHERE ALL IS CALM AND ALL IS RIGHT

AND PEACE ON EARTH GOOD WILL TO MEN

WILL LAST FOREVER WITHOUT END

ALL

I AM LOVE WITHOUT MEASURE

I'M A WEALTH OF MEMORIES TREASURED

I AM COUNTLESS FAMILIES HOLDING HANDS

BOWING HEADS TO PRAY

SUMMER

I AM CHRISTMAS DAY

SUMMER & TANA

I AM CHRISTMAS DAY

ANNA

I'M THE BRIGHTEST STAR IN HEAVEN
ALL CREATIONS GUIDING LIGHT
I'M THE REASON ANGRY BROTHERS
CALL THE TRUCE AND CEASE TO FIGHT

ANNA, SUMMER & TANA

AND ALL I WANT IS SILENT NIGHTS
WHERE ALL IS CALM AND ALL IS RIGHT
AND PEACE ON EARTH GOOD WILL TO MEN
WILL LAST FOREVER WITHOUT END

ALL

WITHOUT END

I AM LOVE WITHOUT MEASURE
I'M A WEALTH OF MEMORIES TREASURED
I AM COUNTLESS FAMILIES HOLDING HANDS
BOWING HEADS TO PRAY
I AM CHRISTMAS DAY – I AM CHRISTMAS DAY

RITA

I AM CHRISTMAS DAY

ALL

I AM CHRISTMAS DAY

END OF PLAY

As the audience leaves, “Merry Christmas from the Family” should be played.

