

Christmas Eve at Aunt Maxine's Roadside Bar and Grill

By John Mark Day

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Christmas Eve at Aunt Maxine's 1

4m, 4f, 1 girl

Cast of Characters

Maxine	60s, the bar's owner and head cook, bartender, server, and cleaner
Sarah	20s, a waitress
Jerry	60s, a regular and a curmudgeon
Paula	50s, the sheriff
Jonathan	30s, a professor at the local community college
Scott	40s, Susan's husband, in town visiting her family
Susan	40s, spent a lot of time at the restaurant as a child
Andrew	30s, the associate pastor at the local Presbyterian church
The Girl	6

Time: Christmas Eve, evening

Place: Aunt Maxine's Roadside Grill and Bar

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Lights up on the interior of Aunt Maxine's Roadside Bar and Grill. It's a cosy restaurant somewhere in the Midwest. It's small, and old, but well cared for. Maxine wouldn't admit it, but she takes a lot of pride in the place, and her regulars feel the same way.

There's a bar with barstools, neon, everything you'd expect. It also has a large collection of snapshots of patrons, scattered throughout. There are also proper booths and tables. A door leads to the outside, and another leads to the kitchen and the back of the restaurant.

At rise, MAXINE is behind the bar, setting a plate down in front of PAULA. JERRY watches from a stool nearby. SARAH is finishing decorating a Christmas tree in the middle of the restaurant.

MAXINE

Here you go, Sheriff. Christmas Eve special. Good luck.

JERRY

Any next of kin you want us to notify before you eat that?

PAULA

You sure seemed to get it down ok.

JERRY

I swallow crap professionally, Paula. You've seen it.

SARAH

Come on now.

JERRY

It's true. Let me tell you about this couple I had in court the other day. Been married 27 years, no kids, big house out in the country. Up and decide, together, they just don't want to be married anymore. Fair enough, happens all the time. And should be a pretty simple case. Just divide everything up 50/50, handle it in mediation, I just sign off on it. And everything's going fine until it comes to their nutcracker collection.

SARAH

Nutcrackers?

JERRY

They had hundreds of 'em. Big ones, little ones. They had one that was six feet tall and shaped like Snoopy. And they can't decide who gets what. The giant house, nobody cares. But the commemorative souvenir Mickey Mouse nutcracker from the 1997 Walt Disney World Holly Jolly Christmas spectacular? One of the attorneys actually tried to propose monthly visitation. But I thought, I'm not going to be the judge who signs off on visitation for a bunch of toys. So I have them bring them into the courtroom, spread them out all over the place. They fill the room -- I've got a jury of nutcrackers silently staring at me. So I flip a coin and the wife goes first, picking the one she wants. Then he goes. They're choosing teams of nutcrackers. That's working ok too until the husband gets this big one, all done up in gold and gems. Gaudiest thing I ever saw. But the wife starts screaming about how it's hers, she brought it to the marriage, and if she doesn't get to keep it this whole deal's off. So I figure I'd see what all the fuss is about. I send the bailiff to my office. I'd gotten one of those fruit and nut baskets from the girls in the court clerk's office, and the bailiff brings me a walnut. I stick it in the mouth of the fancy gold nutcracker, pull the lever, and the damn thing falls apart in my hands. Fake gems go all over my desk. That walnut stays in one piece though. I look up, and they're both staring at me all shocked-like. Neither one of them wants it now and I realize, welp, I've solved the problem.

MAXINE

Way to go, King Solomon

JERRY

Look, you want me to divorce you at Christmas time? I will. But you're not going to like it.

MAXINE

Don't pretend you're sentimental.

JERRY

Lazy. And this is the one time of year I can get away with it.

SARAH

Christmas doesn't feel very lazy.

JERRY

Exactly. So nobody's paying attention. My bailiff's lunches get longer and longer every time she heads to Target. The assistant DA spends more time on Amazon than on cases. And the Sheriff over there is usually sugar crashing hard by mid-afternoon.

PAULA

Look, the deputy bakes and bakes. What am I supposed to do, not eat it? That would make me a terrible boss.

JERRY

So if you're actually going to make me work during the holidays, I'm going to make sure we're suffering together.

MAXINE

Making you work? How are you Bob Cratchit in this story?

JERRY

It's because I'm so naturally cheery. (Raising a glass.) To the founder of the feast!

PAULA

(who has been eating this entire time)

Well he's not wrong there, Maxine. This is amazing.

MAXINE

Thanks, darlin'. I had a feeling you'd like it.

PAULA

What kind of cheese is in those potatoes? Parmesan?

MAXINE

Pecorino Romano. The real stuff. I had to special order it.

PAULA

Well, thank you. That's a real treat.

MAXINE

Not too bad for a dive bar

PAULA

This dive bar is also the best restaurant in town.

MAXINE

Classy and trashy. Only way I know how to be.

JERRY

Maxine, why don't you pour the sheriff there a beer. On me.

PAULA

Thanks, Jerry. But I'm on duty. Nothing for me.

JERRY

Aw, come on. You're not going to make me drink alone on Christmas Eve?

MAXINE

It's your terrible personality that's making you drink alone on Christmas Eve. But, in the spirit of the holidays

MAXINE pours two shots of whiskey and hands one to JERRY. They cheers, and then shoot them down.

JERRY

Well Merry Christmas to me.

SARAH

(finished with the tree, she stands back to look at it)

There. All done.

SARAH switches on the lights on the Christmas tree, and everyone pauses a moment to look at it. It's surprisingly lovely.

SARAH

You know, I never understood in all of those Christmas movies why they waited until the last minute to put up their Christmas decorations. Everytime I see someone on a show putting their tree up on Christmas Eve I think, all that work just for one night.

PAULA

But that's what you just did.

SARAH

(indicating MAXINE)

Talk to her about that. I could barely convince her to let me put it up tonight.

MAXINE

I'm running a business here. Not a nativity scene.

SARAH

You're the one who spent all day making Christmas cookies for everybody.

JERRY

Christmas cookies? Maxine, it's almost like you care about us.

MAXINE

You haven't tasted them yet.

PAULA

The tree is lovely, Sarah. Really.

SARAH

Oh! I set this up today, too.

She crosses to the bar, where a laptop's been set up. She hits a button and Christmas music begins to play through the bar.

MAXINE

Almost like a real family Christmas

SARAH

I figure if we're here and it's Christmas Eve, it should feel like it.

JERRY

Doesn't feel too Christmasy to me. You're making it awfully hard to be miserable.

SARAH

Good. You know they say that people who decorate for Christmas are happier and live longer. We've had Christmas lights on our house since the day after Halloween.

MAXINE

How do your parents feel about that?

SARAH

Oh my dad's the one who put them up. And he only waits that long because my mom makes him. One year he put them up on October 27th. Every kid who came by on Halloween didn't know if they should say trick or treat or sing a Christmas carol.

JERRY

Must be a hell of an electric bill.

SARAH

Well, he only keeps them on for a few hours each night, just until we're about to go to bed. Except for Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve he leaves them on all night, and when we wake up in the morning for Christmas the lights are still on and everything is so cozy and warm. Even now, it's a nice way to wake up on Christmas morning.

JERRY

Or you could do like I do - sleep in and skip the whole thing.

SARAH

Is that really what you'll do tomorrow?

JERRY

Nah. I usually saddle Brutus up and we have a nice long ride. It's good and quiet on the trails on Christmas morning.

PAULA

That doesn't sound too bad.

JERRY

We like it. And Max, I could saddle up the mare too if you'd like to come join us.

PAULA

I thought you like it quiet.

MAXINE

Ok now. Besides, if I'm going to ride a beast on Christmas morning I'd prefer he comes down my chimney with presents first.

PAULA snorts in laughter.

SARAH
(horrified)

Maxine!

As the rest of them laugh, JONATHAN enters from the outside. NOTE: Every character who enters from the outside will go through the exact same ritual of stamping snow off their shoes, shivering, and unwinding themselves from coats and scarves. It's cold out there. Once JONATHAN is free from his coat, he takes a book he's brought with him and sits at a booth. SARAH goes over to him with a menu.

MAXINE
(as he unwinds)

Well hey there Jonathan. Couldn't tell it was you under all those layers.

JONATHAN

It's cold out there, folks.

MAXINE

Well then get on in here.

SARAH

Are you going to want dinner tonight, Dr. Carver?

JONATHAN

Dinner sounds great, Sarah. And please, we're not in class. Call me Jonathan.

SARAH

Ok, Jonathan. Are you doing anything for Christmas?

JONATHAN

(holds up the book)

Just this.

SARAH?

Really? Where's your family?

JONATHAN

They're--not here.

JERRY

(breaking in)

Hey Doc, why don't you come over here and join us?

PAULA

Yeah. Jerry's looking for someone to motivate him to drink more.

JERRY

(holding up his drink - cheers)

Like I need it.

He drinks, as Jonathan grabs his things and joins them at the bar.

JONATHAN

Thanks, guys. Merry Christmas.

PAULA

What are you reading?

JONATHAN slides his book down the bar
to her.

PAULA (cont'd)

The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.

JERRY

Well dang. Merry Christmas to you too I guess.

JONATHAN

Oh it's super Christmasy don't you think? Talking ravens? Ghosts at midnight? A slow descent into madness and alcoholism? It's more Dickens than Dickens. Now about that drink.

MAXINE

(handing him a drink)

At least Dickens ends with happy townspeople.

JONATHAN

Well, Poe will end with some happy students. If they read it, anyway.

MAXINE

That's for class?

JONATHAN

Intro to Gothic Literature. Thought I'd try something new next semester.

JERRY

Sounds dark and depressing.

PAULA

(to Jerry)

You should register. Might brighten up your outlook.

MAXINE

What about you, Sarah? Are you going to take Dr. Carver again next semester?

SARAH

Well, I--

PAULA

You in school?

JONATHAN

Sarah here was one of my star students last semester.

MAXINE

I knew she would be.

JONATHAN

You can always tell those who have gone out and lived life before coming to school. They're so much more mature.

JERRY

Mature. That's just another way to say old.

PAULA

Don't worry, Jerry. No matter how old you get nobody will ever think you're mature.

JERRY

I'll drink to that.

MAXINE

So what do you think, Sarah? Are you going to take it?

SARAH

I don't really think--

JONATHAN

You did so well last semester.

SARAH

Yeah, but that class wasn't realistic.

JONATHAN

Oh should I have failed you, then? Would that have been more realistic?

SARAH

It's just--The Search For a Happy Ending? We spent a whole semester reading books that have happy endings. Then we wrote stories that all had happy endings.

JONATHAN

What can I say? I was in a mood.

SARAH

But that's not realistic. Happy endings. Things end, sure. Nobody's usually happy about it.

JERRY

I know some divorce attorneys who might think differently. They end things all the way to the bank.

SARAH

See? Unhappy endings. That's more like it.

JERRY

Aren't you supposed to be the young and optimistic one? If you've given up we're all screwed.

JONATHAN

You literally just put up a Christmas tree. In a bar. Isn't Christmas Eve the most hopeful time of year?

SARAH

I did put it up. Spent a lot of time on it. Four people will see it. At least one will be too drunk to remember. And day after tomorrow I'll take it down again.

PAULA

(after a moment of silence, slides the book down to her)

Here you go. Seems like you'll fit right in with Jonathan's class.

JONATHAN

For sure. I'm looking forward to reading your essay on the gothic implications of Christmas Eve. Actually, it makes sense, right? Woman gives birth to a ghost's baby?

JERRY

Man invades your home in the middle of the night after spending the year watching your kids sleep.

MAXINE

Snowman comes to life and then agonizingly melts in front of a bunch of schoolkids.

PAULA

Plus a deep dive into the year-round forced cheeriness of the North Pole's elves. That ain't natural.

SARAH

Are you all done now?

She drops the book in front of Jonathan

MAXINE

Oh it's fine when you do it?

SARAH

It's someone else's turn to be the positive one.

There's a moment when they try to decide who that will be. Nobody wants it.

JERRY

Looks like you're out of luck there.

JONATHAN

Glad to see you you're already gearing up for class next semester. What else are you taking?

SARAH

Oh, you know. Things like that.

JONATHAN

What?

SARAH

Have you figured out what you want to eat?

JONATHAN

Oh. Um, I'll take the special.

MAXINE

(exiting to the kitchen)

Coming up, hon. Make sure he signs the release.

SCOTT and SUSAN enter and go through the de-coating ritual. SARAH crosses to them with menus.

SARAH

Hey there. You all want a booth or a table?

SUSAN

Booth, please.

SARAH leads them to a booth. As they're about to sit, SUSAN stops.

SUSAN

(cont'd, indicating the booth in the corner)

Actually, could we take this one?

SARAH

You're the only ones over here. Take all of them if you want.

SUSAN

Thanks.

SARAH

Can I get you something to drink?

JERRY

The more you drink the better the food tastes.

SARAH

Hush up.

SUSAN

I'll take an iced tea, please.

SCOTT

I'll do the same.

SARAH

You got it.

She goes to make their drinks.

SCOTT

So? Does it look like you remember?

SUSAN

Exactly, actually. Let me see if I--here. See! SEB. Susan Elizabeth Brown. My initials are still here after all this time!

SCOTT

Wow. Thirty years later and nothing's changed. How--authentic.

SUSAN

Scott.

SCOTT

Why do anything new when you can do, um, nothing, I guess?

SUSAN

Wait until you try the food.

SCOTT

I'm assuming today's special is some sort of molded jello.

SUSAN

Hey. Could you stop? This is important to me.

SCOTT

No you're right. It's Christmas. It should be retro.

SARAH brings them their drinks. SCOTT takes a drink and immediately spits it back into the cup.

SCOTT

Ugh. What was that?

SARAH

Iced tea.

SCOTT

It's so bitter.

JERRY

Fits right in.

SUSAN

Welcome to the midwest. We don't do sweet tea here.

SCOTT

But it's Christmas Eve!

SARAH brings him a box of sweeteners.

SARAH

Maybe these will help.

SCOTT

(pulling out packets)

Hmm. Calories. Cancer. Do they still make this one? I guess just water. Bottled. Do you have bottled water?

SARAH

Yes we have bottled water.

SCOTT

And no ice. Or glass. Just the bottle.

SARAH

Of course. Do you know what you'd like to eat?

SUSAN

I'll take the special.

SCOTT

Just a hamburger, please. No bun. Or cheese. And do you have just, like, steamed veggies instead of fries? Just steamed, no butter? And no salt. On any of it. Maybe a squeeze of lemon? Or you could just bring out a lemon and I'll do it myself.

SARAH

I think we can do that.

She goes to put their order in.

SUSAN

I do appreciate you being here.

SCOTT

There's no place I'd rather be. Ok maybe not no place.

ANDREW enters and unwinterfies. Once it's revealed who he is...

JERRY

Rev! Peace be with you!

ANDREW

And also with you, your honor.

MAXINE enters with a plate of food that she delivers to JONATHAN.

MAXINE

Glad you're here, Andrew. You're just in time to do last rights.

ANDREW
(following her over)

Oh yeah? What's the special tonight?

JERRY/PAULA/MAXINE

Salmonella!

They laugh. SCOTT chokes on the drink he's just taken. MAXINE exits back to the kitchen. ANDREW realizes that he's headed right for JONATHAN and there's an awkward moment when he tries to decide whether or not to sit next to him. Finally, he sits.

JONATHAN
(also awkward)

Hi.

ANDREW

Hello.

JONATHAN

How was the service?

ANDREW

Oh, you know. Christmas Eve family service. Little kids dressed like sheep and parents elbowing each other out of the way to take pictures.

PAULA

I thought Christmas Eve service was all candlelight and hymns.

ANDREW

That's the 11:00. I'll go back for that in a bit.

PAULA

Needed a break, did ya?

ANDREW

Grabbed my Bible, threw the Santa suit in my car and got out of there as soon as I could.

PAULA

Santa in church?

ANDREW

Santa, a live donkey, it even snowed in the sanctuary. It's a whole thing.

JERRY

Let me buy you a drink. Sounds like you could use it.

ANDREW

I don't know, I'm supposed to be back...(checks his watch). Eh. I've got time.

SARAH comes behind the bar to make his
drink.

JONATHAN

Merry Christmas, Andrew.

ANDREW

Merry Christmas, Jonathan. Christmas Eve at Aunt Maxine's, eh?

JONATHAN

Yeah. You know. It's just

ANDREW

Yeah.

JONATHAN

Are you going to see your family?

ANDREW

Tomorrow. By the time I get out of service tonight it'll be pretty late. So just a quiet Christmas morning here and then a drive over the river and through the woods.

SARAH
(bringing the drink)

You two should spend Christmas morning together.

JERRY
Yeah! After spending Christmas Eve night together.

SARAH
That's not what I meant.

ANDREW
I mean, it's/

JONATHAN
We're not/

JERRY
Oh lord. Just kiss him already.

PAULA
Stop it.

JERRY
What? They're two grown-ass men over there acting like it's the first middle school dance.

PAULA
Oh, you're one to talk.

JERRY
I'm fine, thank you.

PAULA
Uh-huh.

The kitchen door swings open and MAXINE enters, bringing food to Scott and Susan. PAULA continues her assault on JERRY, giving the head nod to indicate it's Maxine she's talking about.

MAXINE

(dropping off food for SCOTT and SUSAN)

Here you go. One self-flagellation burger. And one special. (Noticing who it is.) Well hot damn! Little Susan Brown! It's been a minute.

SUSAN

Hi, Maxine. I can't believe you remember me.

MAXINE

Are you kidding me? (To the rest of the bar.) This little girl would come and sit in this booth with her mother every Saturday lunch while her dad did Cub Scout duty with - if I remember right - four brothers? And if you ever tried calling her Susie, she'd wrinkle up her face and say, so slowly, that's--not--my--name. I always just figured a place like this ought to have a little girl named Susie in it.

JERRY

Maxine, you know this is no place for children.

MAXINE

Ignore him. So what are you doing here?

SUSAN

It's Christmas. We came back for Christmas.

MAXINE

We? (Noticing Scott) We.

SUSAN

This is my husband, Scott.

SCOTT

(standing up, he shakes her hand)

It's nice to meet you. Susan has been telling me how important this place was to her.

MAXINE

Do you see this? Look at those manners. You hooligans better pay attention and learn something.

JERRY

Bah humbug.

MAXINE

Sit down, sit down. (He does.) It's been so long.

SUSAN

Yeah, we usually spend Christmas with Scott's family.

SCOTT

My family has a cabin in the woods up north. My grandmother sort of requires that we all be there for Christmas.

MAXINE

Sounds cozy.

SUSAN

"Cabin" is a bit of an understatement.

SCOTT

Susan said it was important we be here this Christmas, so we received special dispensation to miss this year.

JERRY

What's so special about this Christmas?

SUSAN

Oh nothing.

MAXINE

Hey mind your own business old man. Don't worry about him. I'm just glad to see you again.

SUSAN

Yeah, we've come up to visit. We just haven't managed to make it in here until now. Things were getting a little chaotic at my mom's place.

SCOTT

There are twelve grandchildren all under the age of eight.

SUSAN

So I granted a momentary reprieve.

MAXINE

How is your mom doing? It's been a minute.

SUSAN

Tired.

MAXINE

Yeah.

SCOTT

Twelve grandchildren.

SUSAN

(that's not why)

Well

MAXINE

Ok. You know what, I think I still, hold on. (She goes over to the wall of snapshots thumbtacked to the bar.) I think I've got, let me just, no, yup here it is.

She pulls a photo off the wall and brings it back to the booth to show to SUSAN and SCOTT.

SUSAN

Oh my goodness.

SCOTT

Is that you?

SUSAN

As a little girl.

SCOTT
(to Maxine)

And this is you!

MAXINE

Not as a little girl.

SCOTT

And you're - you're wearing that same outfit.

MAXINE

Bad style is forever.

SUSAN

I'm what, eight years old here? (She flips the photo over.) Look - Christmas Eve at Aunt Maxine's.

SCOTT

Wait, so Maxine is actually your aunt?

SUSAN

Maxine is everybody's aunt.

MAXINE

Well, I'm old enough anyway.

SUSAN

No, I mean it. Maxine's the one you go to when you need to talk to someone who's not your parents.

SARAH

That's how I got here.

ANDREW

Same.

JERRY

Yup.

MAXINE

Now you hush up Jerry you're older than me.

JERRY

Yeah but you're smarter.

JONATHAN

She's family.

MAXINE

Ok everybody that's enough. Sarah, get everyone a round of drinks. That ought to shut you all up.

There's a cheer from the group, and SARAH moves behind the bar and starts opening beers.

SCOTT

Ok, so I'm starting to get it. This place is quaint.

PAULA

Oh lord. Don't say quaint.

SCOTT

What? It's quaint. That's a good thing.

PAULA

Quaint is what fancy people say when there's one too many taxidermied heads on the wall of the cabin they rented at the lake.

ANDREW

Quaint is when you realize you're going to have to share a room in the airstream with your three cousins.

JONATHAN

Quaint is when you swipe right and end up matching with your step-brother's baby mama. For the third time.

SARAH

Eww.

JONATHAN

Was that too far? Sorry I never know with this game.

SARAH

Little bit.

SCOTT

Did that happen to you?

ANDREW

Yeah, did it?

JONATHAN

No. Come on.

JERRY

Look, son, we can see that you're all fancy and classy and showered, but just because we're not doesn't mean we're not.

SCOTT

I'm not fancy.

JERRY

Your man-Uggs say different.

SCOTT
(to Susan)

Help me out here.

SUSAN

Well you did Amazon Prime a case of cashew milk to my mom's house for your morning cappuccino. Oh, and a cappuccino maker.

SCOTT

Sorry I wasn't expecting to go to your mother's house and there not be a cappuccino maker. You drank one too.

MAXINE

Susan! You're fancy now?

SUSAN

No! I-- (to Scott) Don't you put that on me!

MAXINE

Well. Just as long as you're not too fancy for my food now.

SUSAN

Never!

MAXINE

So, fancy boy, what's Christmas like at your grandmother's?

SCOTT

Oh, you know, it's just, Christmas.

SUSAN

The "cabin" is an inn in Vermont. They rent the whole place out every Christmas. For two weeks. Five star dining, 15,000 thread-count bedding, a butler. It's like the movie *White Christmas* if you just skip past all the sad parts.

SCOTT

It's not.

SUSAN

There's literally pictures of Rosemary Clooney performing there.

SCOTT

She was an old friend of the family.

MAXINE

Can you introduce me to George? I'd make him an old friend of my family.

SARAH

Maxine!

SUSAN

Anyway, it's great.

SCOTT

And mandatory. That's why we've never made it up here for Christmas.

MAXINE

Why would you, when you could be there?

SCOTT

No, this is, it's

PAULA

Don't say it!

SCOTT

Nice.

SUSAN

Chaotic.

SCOTT

That too.

PAULA

Embrace the chaos. When the chaos stops - that's when the real trouble happens.

SCOTT

Not always.

PAULA

Always. We used to have this super chaotic family in town. Real sweet but real loud. Dogs barking, motorcycles all up and down the street, music all the time. We were out there a bunch for noise complaints. And then one week, nothing. No dogs, no bikes, real quiet. So we went out there just to check, and you know what they were?

JONATHAN

Don't say dead.

PAULA

Dead. The whole bunch of them. Dogs and all. Gas leak.

SARAH

Come on, Sheriff.

PAULA

Dogs and all. The Reverend here had to do the funeral.

ANDREW

Dogs and all.

SARAH

Oh no.

JERRY

Merry Christmas!

PAULA

Any family that's not chaotic -- especially at Christmas -- there's something wrong. That's all I'm saying.

JONATHAN

That's why we're all here tonight, yeah?

ANDREW

Seems pretty chaotic here.

JONATHAN

Chaos is better than silence.

ANDREW

Have you talked to your family?

JONATHAN

Nah.

ANDREW

Do you want to?

JONATHAN

You know what? I really don't.

ANDREW

Ok.

JONATHAN

It's not like it was ever that great anyway.

ANDREW

We don't have to talk about it here.

JONATHAN

Might as well.

MAXINE

(trying to be a distraction)

Ok, everybody else. Let's, uh, let's talk over here.

Everyone at the bar moves to the booths and pretends to be distracted doing something else.

JONATHAN

I actually saw my grandmother in October. I told her not to tell anybody I was coming and we had a really nice dinner.

ANDREW

Yeah?

JONATHAN

Well it was super awkward. But the food was good.

JERRY

Hey at least that means you're probably still in the will!

MAXINE

Hush!

SARAH

That's so sad you don't get to see your family at Christmas. Are they just too far away?

JONATHAN

Philosophically, I guess.

ANDREW

But hey we're here. I'm here.

JONATHAN

Yeah. Hey I'm not some tragic Christmas figure. Everybody come sit back down. (They do.) Truth is, I've had some great Christmases and some terrible Christmases. Just like everybody else.

PAULA

I've been on duty every Christmas since I was 19. You figure out how to make it work.

MAXINE

Remember that year we did the candy cane eating contest for kids? I spent Christmas cleaning up peppermint puke.

JERRY

When I was a kid my great aunt Bethany's cat burned down our Christmas tree and then my mom's cousin in law kidnapped my dad's boss when he didn't send him a Christmas bonus.

PAULA

That's the plot of Christmas Vacation.

JERRY

Based on a true story.

JONATHAN

Now this is true. This is realistic. Every Christmas movie is super dark when you think about it.

SARAH

No.

JONATHAN

Elf? There's a whole storyline about Zoey Deschanel being poor and having to shower at work. Then she's eating ramen noodles by herself on Christmas Eve. Plus she's blonde, which is a bummer. The movie A Christmas Story is about poverty and capitalism. Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street? Alcoholism and dementia.

SARAH

Stop.

ANDREW

No, I've got to agree. From the beginning, Christmas is terrifying.

MAXINE

Oh, yeah. Donkeys and the manger and all. Real terrifying.

ANDREW

You should hear the Revelation version. (Blank stares.) Nobody knows this one? Hold on.

ANDREW opens his Bible, and then walks to the center of the bar.

ANDREW

Lights, please. (A pause.) Lights! (MAXINE flips a switch, and ANDREW is illuminated by a single spot.) "A great sign appeared in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman, who was about to give birth so that it may devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter...then the dragon was enraged at the woman, and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring." That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

PAULA

That's in there?

ANDREW

Chapter twelve.

MAXINE flips the lights back on.

JONATHAN

So, yeah. I don't figure there's too much perfect family Christmas going around.

JERRY

Unless you're the heir of an old-timey railroad magnate.

Everyone turns and looks at Scott.

SCOTT

(after a pause, sheepishly)

Real estate.

The room erupts with laughter.

ANDREW

In the ministry the whole month of December is like one big marathon. Christmas is exhausting.

JONATHAN

But you at least get to go home to your family tomorrow.

ANDREW

You're right. You win. Your life is more depressing.

JONATHAN

That's not what I meant.

ANDREW

You sure? Because it sure seems like you're not happy unless you're wallowing in self pity.

JERRY

Well this took a turn.

MAXINE

Hey everybody let's go back over here again.

Everyone moves again.

JONATHAN

You want to/

ANDREW

Yeah, let's do this. I tried. You know? I tried. And here you sit, alone in a bar on Christmas Eve, feeling your feelings.

JONATHAN

Oh because it's so pathetic to be in a bar on Christmas Eve? (He pauses, looking to the group for backup. They're working hard to ignore him.) Come on. Nobody?

ANDREW

You say you're not some tragic figure but the truth is you don't know anything else to be.

JONATHAN

What is this? What's happening here?

ANDREW

I don't know. I've been putting the time in for a year now. Since last Christmas Eve. And where are we? Another year older. Not any merrier.

JONATHAN

Where is this coming from?

ANDREW

It's Christmas Eve, and I'm in a bar, and I'm tired, and I have to go back to work soon. And I want to be with my family but I'm here and now I feel guilty that I even have a family to want to be with. And last Christmas I really thought by this one it'll be different.

SARAH

What happened last Christmas?

PAULA

Sarah, that's none of our business.

ANDREW

No, he's dragged all of you into this, so let's go ahead. Last Christmas Eve I finally worked up all of my courage and I asked the good professor here on a date. I had to work that evening of course, so we went to lunch. Here. We went ice skating and drank hot chocolate and it was completely cliché and it was completely perfect. And then on Christmas I drove to my sister's house and I was Uncle Andrew and I thought, next year Jonathan will be here with me and that will be all I've ever wanted.

SCOTT

What happened?

SUSAN

You're in this now?

SCOTT

I want to know what happened!

ANDREW

Nothing. Literally nothing. I asked him out again and he said yes. And then he postponed, then he postponed again. Then I decided I'd wait for him to ask, and he never did. I'd see him here all the time but he never did. It's not like we broke up because we were never dating. It's not like he ghosted me because here we are. A year later and, just, here.

JONATHAN

I didn't mean to. It just got away from me. And then I felt awkward.

ANDREW

No. What you felt was self pity. You'd rather feel self-pity than be with me.

JONATHAN

That's not true.

ANDREW

So tomorrow I'm going to go back and be with my sister and her family, and I'm going to be Uncle Andrew and I love being Uncle Andrew, but also I'm going to spend the whole time being really grateful and really lonely.

JONATHAN

I know.

ANDREW

And you could be there with me. But you're going to choose loneliness. For both of us.

JONATHAN

You're not being very pastoral right now.

ANDREW

Oh you want a Bible verse? "And the Lord said stop whining about it and get off your ass and do something." First Andrew 12:24.

JONATHAN

Never learned that one in Sunday School.

ANDREW

It's from the advanced version.

JONATHAN

Look, it's not that I/

ANDREW

Sure. I know. You do you. Here, let me move over here so I'm not infringing on your holiday exile.

ANDREW gathers up his things and moves away to a booth, having to move through the group as he does. They all settle back to their seats. There's a long, awkward pause.

JERRY
(to PAULA)

So it was a gas leak, huh?

PAULA

Carbon monoxide. We found one of those detectors but the battery had been pulled out.

JERRY

Oh.

That didn't help. There's another awkward pause.

SARAH
(remembering)

Oh! Cookies!

She runs to the kitchen.

MAXINE

Oh thank god.

SCOTT
(trying to help, to PAULA)

So, Sheriff, is it usually quiet around here on Christmas Eve?

PAULA

Usually. Nothing like Thanksgiving.

SCOTT

What happens on Thanksgiving?

PAULA

Exploding frying turkeys. Gruesome touch football accidents. Family gunfights over the last piece of pumpkin pie.

SCOTT

No, that doesn't happen. Does it?

PAULA

Oh yeah. And when I cuff the first shooter he's mad because it means he'll miss Black Friday at Walmart. He was planning to get a cheap tv for the brother he was shooting at.

MAXINE

Don't tell me your family has never resorted to a little gunplay to settle an argument.

SCOTT

Oh we don't argue.

MAXINE

Oh that's right. Fancy boy family.

SCOTT

Oh no we should argue. We just don't argue.

SUSAN

Nobody does passive aggressive like Scott's family.

SCOTT

One time my brother forgot to call my mother for her birthday. So she forgot to put him in the next draft of the will.

PAULA

Sounds like I'd prefer the guns.

SUSAN

You'd be right to.

SCOTT

Do you work every holiday?

PAULA

Sure do.

SCOTT

Don't you want to celebrate?

PAULA

That's why I'm here now.

SCOTT

But this is (he takes a look around) maybe not too bad, actually.

JERRY

Haven't had a gunfight at Maxine's in a while.

PAULA

And I was elected to take care of the people of the town. Me being on duty during holidays means they can celebrate without worrying. That means something.

SCOTT

I'm beginning to see that.

SARAH enters with a platter of cookies and begins handing them out. There's a moment when everyone is eating and all is at peace.

SARAH

See? There we go. Cookies make it better.

JERRY

Even Maxine's.

PAULA

Especially Maxine's. What's in these?

MAXINE

Ah well that one's a secret family recipe. I'm not telling.

SUSAN

Like passed down from your grandmother?

MAXINE

Actually no, I developed the recipe over time with my nieces and nephews. When they were kids they'd come here the first day of their Christmas break and we'd spend all day long making cookies and hot chocolate while their parents were Christmas shopping. That was always my Christmas.

SARAH

Did they make these?

MAXINE

No, they haven't been back to town in a while. Their families moved away after our parents died and so they don't come here for Christmas.

SARAH

Why don't you go see them?

MAXINE

I could. I've thought about it. But if I close the restaurant for Christmas where would you extras from the bar in It's A Wonderful Life go?

PAULA

You don't have to keep this place open for us. You should be with family on Christmas.

MAXINE

I always figured I was. Not you, Jerry.

JERRY

None taken.

SCOTT

So that's where the name Aunt Maxine's came from? The actual Aunt Maxine herself?

MAXINE

Pretty much. When I started waitressing here it was called Mama's.

SCOTT

Who was Mama?

MAXINE

Stanley Mousekowitz. When Stan retired I bought the place and changed it to a more accurate name.

SCOTT

You never settled down and had kids?

MAXINE

I bought a restaurant. Felt like the same thing.

SCOTT

Is there a Mr. Aunt Maxine?

SUSAN

Scott, enough.

MAXINE

It's ok, hon. You can't be the nosiest old lady in town without some of it coming back around. And no, there's no Mr. Aunt Maxine.

SCOTT

Why not?

PAULA

Yeah, Jerry, why not?

MAXINE

Like I said, I bought a restaurant. Haven't met a guy yet who can compete with her.

JERRY

Oh, no?

MAXINE

Well if I have he sure hasn't done anything about it.

Everyone turns to look at JERRY. MAXINE is enjoying watching him squirm.

JERRY

(finally)

No batteries in the carbon monoxide detector, you say?

MAXINE

That's what I thought.

SARAH

(taking the tray back to JERRY)

Have another cookie, your honor. Should help soothe the burn.

JERRY

I don't need any sass from you, young lady. But I will take the cookie.

SCOTT's phone rings.

SCOTT

It's grandmother. Are you good?

SUSAN

You'd better answer. I can't imagine what would happen if you missed her Christmas Eve call.

SCOTT exits, answering his phone on the way.

JONATHAN

Sarah, you should see if you can get Maxine to make up a batch of these for the first day of class next semester.

MAXINE

That's not a bad idea. Give you all some brain food. And some energy to survive Dr. Carver's lecture.

JONATHAN

Hey now. It's not that bad. Not the first day at least.

MAXINE

Sarah, you never said if you've decided on what you want to study. That school's got a pretty good culinary program. You could come back and teach me a thing or two.

JERRY

Feel free to try those recipes out on me.

MAXINE

Sorry, professor, the judge ate my homework!

SARAH

Well, I don't think/

MAXINE

Sorry, hon, of course not. You study what you want to study, now.

What are you in school for?
SUSAN

Well, nothing.
SARAH

What does that mean?
JERRY

I mean I'm done.
SARAH

But you just started.
JONATHAN

I dropped out.
SARAH

I knew it.
JERRY

What?
MAXINE

What?
JONATHAN

Why?
MAXINE

Why?
JONATHAN

How? (Everyone looks at him.) Sorry I just wanted to play too.
JERRY

Move.
MAXINE

Everyone except Maxine, Jonathan, and Sarah goes to the opposite side of the stage.

JONATHAN

What happened? You were doing so well.

SARAH

No, I wasn't. I hated it.

JONATHAN

Didn't seem that way to me.

SARAH

Ok, your class was good. But everything else was dumb.

MAXINE

But you worked so hard.

SARAH

Yup. I guess I was the dumb one.

JONATHAN

Sarah.

SARAH

I went because I told you I'd try it, and I tried it, and now I'm done with it. I don't need it.

MAXINE

So what are you going to do?

SARAH

What I'm doing now.

MAXINE

You're going to live with your parents and you're going to be a waitress here? Forever?

SARAH

Eventually I'll move out. If I'm not paying for school I can save up a lot faster.

MAXINE

But, just, here? That's it?

SARAH

It's what you did.

MAXINE

Yes, which is why you're not.

SARAH

You just said how much this place meant to you.

MAXINE

To me.

SARAH

You're going to need someone to take it over when you retire.

MAXINE

Not happening. I'm going to die in the walk-in cooler.

JERRY starts to make a comment about this
until PAULA elbows him in the ribs.

SARAH

Maybe I don't need to have it figured out then. I'll just see what happens.

MAXINE

That's your plan? See what happens? Sarah, we're talking about your life. Not your weekend.

SARAH

Look. I'm not one of those people things get better for. This is the best I can hope for.

JONATHAN

Sarah. That's not true.

SARAH

It's ok. I understand that. This is who I am.

MAXINE

What if you get hurt and can't work? What if I fire you?

SARAH

You're not going to fire me.

MAXINE

I'm thinking about it.

JONATHAN

Max--

MAXINE

What if you decide you want to start a family?

SARAH

What does that have to do with it?

MAXINE

You think you're going to run this place and have a family?

SARAH

Just because you couldn't doesn't mean that I can't.

JERRY

Ok, now.

MAXINE

(To Jerry) You've done enough. (To Sarah) Listen here, little one. I know the easy path seems great right now. But we all reach a point where we look back and think, what if? And if you don't have a good answer to that question, it's gonna lead you to some places you don't want to go.

SARAH

It's not the easy path. It's the only path.

MAXINE

Is it? What if?

JONATHAN

Ok. Thank you, Buddha, for that. Sarah there are options, and we can talk about it later. But it's Christmas Eve, and we're family, and family means ignoring problems for the holidays. So everybody come sit back down, let's resume our evening.

The group moves back to their seats.
SCOTT enters.

SUSAN

How was your grandmother?

SCOTT

Surprising. Unless her passive aggressiveness has reached a whole new level, she seemed ok? She said to tell you Merry Christmas without any hint of sarcasm. It's very unlike her.

SUSAN

Well it is Christmas Eve.

SCOTT

I still can't believe she let us miss it.

SUSAN

Well

SCOTT

They were just about to start the carol singalong.

JERRY

Oh, well, us too.

PAULA

You singing Christmas carols is a whole nother level of problems.

SCOTT

Why not? I do love Christmas carols.

PAULA

Let me guess - family singalongs gathered around the piano?

JERRY

Everyone in fair isle sweaters and perfect harmony?

ANDREW

Adele flown in to lead the singing?

SCOTT

No. (Susan gives him a look). Ok. John Legend that one time.

MAXINE

Good lord. What are you, the villain in a Hallmark Christmas movie?

SUSAN

Oh I like that. Where's the strapping hometown hottie to teach me the true meaning of Christmas?

SCOTT

Stop it.

SARAH

Ooh, tell me about him.

ANDREW

Oh I've got this. His name is Jameson Winters, and he's a Christmas tree farmer.

MAXINE

Innkeeper.

PAULA

Uber driver slash dog walker slash independent baker. But deep down he's an aspiring photographer.

SUSAN

Of course.

SARAH

You meet when he rescues your cat who got stuck in a Christmas tree.

ANDREW

When you accidentally fell into his arms while ice skating.

SCOTT

When you decide to buy his historic family home to turn into condos. (Everyone looks at him.) I can play too.

PAULA

And he teaches you the true meaning of Christmas thanks to a magic snowglobe that reenacts your childhood.

MAXINE

He covers every tree in town in purple Christmas lights because purple are what your dad would always put up.

JERRY

He brings you here for dinner and the food poisoning is so bad that when you're in the medically-induced coma you have a whole vision about what your life would be like with him.

MAXINE

Ok well that's a little too on the nose.

SCOTT

And what happens to me?

JONATHAN

You marry your assistant. She's blonde.

PAULA

Nobody knows.

JERRY

Alcoholism.

SCOTT

Ok, well, that was fun.

SUSAN

I thought it was nice.

There's a burst of static out of the walkie-talkie clipped to PAULA's shoulder. She listens for a moment, then:

PAULA

(in the radio) Ten-four. I'm on my way. (To the group.) Sorry folks I've got to head out. Duty calls.

MAXINE

What's going on?

PAULA

They're not sure. An accident or something. Max, I'll swing by later if it's not too late when I finish up.

MAXINE

I'll keep something warm for you.

PAULA puts her coat on and exits.

JERRY

Well that killed the mood.

SARAH

I hope everyone's ok.

MAXINE

(to Scott)

You know that nobody here actually thinks you're the villain in a Hallmark Christmas movie, right?

SCOTT

I don't know. Maybe I am. I just have certain expectations for what Christmas should be like.

MAXINE

Well at least you're one of the good villains. The one we feel a little bad about sending out into the cold.

SCOTT

There's that at least. You know, if we were at my family's right now, we'd be having an actual Hallmark Christmas.

SUSAN

I know.

SCOTT

I mean, anything you want. Snow, dogs curled up by the fire, gingerbread houses made by a pastry chef.

SUSAN

I know.

SCOTT

It's literally the perfect Christmas, and if that's what you want, why are we here?

JERRY

Hey now.

SCOTT

Do you all want to know what was happening right when we came here?

SUSAN

Scott, don't.

SCOTT

One three year old was screaming because she got the red candy cane and she wanted the green one. Susan's older brother is drunk, already, and made me sit in his lap and tell him what I wanted for Christmas. And her younger brother brought his dog who, seeing all the chaos, ran right into the middle of the living room and peed on the Christmas tree.

SUSAN

I know.

SCOTT

I just don't get it. You say you want a perfect Christmas but you brought us to chaos.

MAXINE

Chaos is what Christmas is all about.

JONATHAN

Everybody says they want family on Christmas, but everybody hates their family at Christmas.

ANDREW

How would you know? Sorry. You know what? No I'm not.

MAXINE

Boys.

JONATHAN

No. He's right. Hey, everybody. My name's Jonathan and I'm alone at Christmas. When I was 21 years old I told my parents I was gay. On Christmas Eve, actually. My dad said I could choose to be gay or I could choose to be his son. When I told him I didn't choose to be either, he said he thought it would be best if I went back to school early. And that was the last time I was home.

SARAH

At least when you're not with your family you don't have to worry about them telling you want to do all the time.

MAXINE

Oh we're back to being family now?

SARAH

That's what you've always called us. If it's changed then fine.

JONATHAN

This is all the response I get?

ANDREW

Everybody's figured out your tragic backstory.

SARAH

Sorry we didn't pay enough attention to your big reveal.

MAXINE

Looks like we've all got things of our own to hash out.

JERRY

Ladies, I don't think that you want to be doing that.

MAXINE

Hey you stay out of this old man.

SARAH

Yeah what do you know about family anyway?

MAXINE

That doesn't concern you.

SARAH

Oh now you don't want my help?

MAXINE

It's not enough for you to sit in judgement every day at work. You had to do it on Christmas Eve, too.

ANDREW

Oh no need to blame Jerry. This has all been ready to come out.

JONATHAN

Yeah I suppose Christmas is the time to say everything you don't have the guts to say the rest of the year.

JERRY

That's what the eggnog's for.

SCOTT

(to Susan)

You should have a cup, then. Maybe you'll finally tell me what's going on.

SUSAN

There's nothing going on.

SCOTT

We've never missed Christmas at the lodge. So clearly something happened to change that.

SUSAN

Scott, this isn't/

SCOTT

Look, if you don't tell me what it is, I can't fix it. Did Grandmother say something?

SUSAN

No. Of course not.

SCOTT

Then what is it?

JERRY

Yeah, what is it?

MAXINE

Jerry, they don't need your help.

JERRY

Actually, I think they do. It's Christmas Eve and it's time for miracles. I can't do anything about this (indicating Andrew and Jonathan) and I can't do anything about this (Maxine and Sarah) but I'm a family court judge, and there's a problem with this family. That's something I can do something about.

MAXINE

Just because you can doesn't mean you should.

SCOTT

I'm in.

SUSAN

Scott.

SCOTT

If this is what it takes for you to tell me what's wrong with my family, then let's do this.

JERRY

Nah, it's not your family.

SCOTT

What?

JERRY

It's not your family that's the problem. Everything she's said about your family Christmas has been a joke. One with some endearment. That's not where the pain is coming from.

MAXINE

Jerry, you need to stop.

JERRY

And earlier, Maxine you found that picture of Susan and her family so fast. You've been looking at it recently. You've got hundreds of pictures up. Why that one? Why now? There's something going on with Susan's family, Max, and you know what it is.

MAXINE

It doesn't matter what I know.

JERRY

And you do know, don't you? You know everything that goes on in this town.

MAXINE

It doesn't matter.

JERRY

Now what would you know and how would you know it?

MAXINE

Alright, folks. We're shutting down. Everybody go home. (to Jerry) Or back under your bridge.

SUSAN

No, ok, stop. I'll talk.

SCOTT

I'm sorry, Susan. This has gone too far. You don't have to.

SUSAN

I was going to tell you tomorrow night anyway. But you can't tell anyone else.

They look at the rest of the group, who get up to move to the other side of the restaurant.

SUSAN

(cont'd)

No, stay everybody. Just don't say anything.

The group mumbles their assents and assurances. MAXINE shooting a death look to JERRY

SUSAN

(cont'd)

My mom's cancer is back. And it's worse this time.

SCOTT

Oh. Oh no.

SUSAN

This is probably her last Christmas.

JERRY

Damn.

SUSAN

My brothers know, of course, but we haven't told the kids, and we haven't told the spouses. My mom wanted totally normal and that's what we're getting.

SCOTT

Susan.

SUSAN

Your grandmother knows, actually. I called and told her when my mom asked for us to be here. That's how we got released to come. She was completely understanding. So this is our last Christmas here.

SCOTT

We should go back.

SUSAN

No. My mom's in bed right now anyway. I thought here would be better. (To Maxine) I mean, if you're still staying open.

MAXINE

Of course.

SUSAN

Everybody please let's just go back to Christmas Eve. Maybe we need to, I don't know, figure out what kind of elf Sarah would be.

SARAH

Baking, obviously.

SCOTT

Maxine, how about a round of drinks. That does the trick, right? A round of drinks. On me.

MAXINE

Drinks, of course. But they're on the house.

SARAH

(moving behind the bar)

I got em.

MAXINE

(to JERRY)

Well looks like you got what you wanted. Everybody miserable on Christmas Eve.

JERRY

I didn't want everybody miserable. But at least the truth is out.

MAXINE

She was going to tell him tomorrow. But you had to do it your way. You had to commandeer Christmas Eve.

ANDREW
(to JONATHAN)

Well I guess this is something you won't have to worry about.

JONATHAN

What?

ANDREW

At least you'll never have to be there for somebody while they're dealing with the death of a family member.

JONATHAN

You think that/

MAXINE

See? You did this too.

JERRY

That has nothing to do with me.

MAXINE

None of this does! And yet you're still in the middle of all of it.

SARAH
(bringing drinks around)

It's not all his fault.

MAXINE

And don't think I've forgotten about you.

SARAH

Great. Let's have it.

MAXINE

Nah. This one we're going to ignore for now. Let's let it fester.

SARAH

Oh good.

MAXINE

A toast, everybody. Here's to making each other miserable on Christmas Eve. I guess we're a real family after all.

Everyone drinks, silently. After a moment
THE GIRL enters. She wears only a
bathrobe over pajamas and one slipper. She
clutches a stuffed animal. She makes her
way to the bar, past Maxine, and sits down.

SARAH

Sorry, sweetie. You can't sit there. You have to sit in a booth with your parents.

THE GIRL doesn't move. ANDREW looks
outside.

ANDREW

There's nobody there. She's alone.

BLACKOUT

End of Act I

Act II

Five minutes later

SARAH is entering with a plate of cookies and a glass of milk, which she sets in front of the girl. MAXINE is on the phone. SUSAN has taken a seat next to THE GIRL. The guys are all essentially in their same positions.

SARAH

Here you go, darlin. Milk and cookies always help. (To Jonathan) Has she said anything yet?

JONATHAN

Nothing.

SUSAN

It's ok, sweetheart. You're safe now. We just want to help. (There's a long pause.) Can you tell me your name?

Nothing.

MAXINE

(Hanging up the phone)

The deputy's at the accident scene now, so Paula's on her way here.

SCOTT

I'm assuming this isn't a normal occurrence, children wandering off the street like that.

JERRY

Neither normal nor desirable.

SCOTT

And nobody recognizes her?

General consensus that no, they do not.

SCOTT

Should we, I don't know, put her picture online? Like on Facebook or something?

JERRY

Feel like I'd advise against that.

SUSAN

She's not somebody's puppy who got out of their yard.

SCOTT

She's somebody's kid, though. That's a start at helping them find her.

JONATHAN has made his way over to
ANDREW

JONATHAN

Maybe you should try talking to her?

ANDREW

She's going to talk to some grown man she doesn't know?

JONATHAN

You're a pastor. You're supposed to have divine powers of getting people to talk.

ANDREW

Sorry, I left my magic stole at the church.

SARAH

I think he's right. You should try.

ANDREW moves to the girl, clearly
uncomfortable.

ANDREW

Hey there, little girl. Uh, my name's Reverend Andrew. What's yours? (Long pause, then in desperation.) Uh, you want a cookie?

JERRY

Good lord. You're even worse at this than I'd be. Hey little girl, do you know who I am? I'm a judge, that's who. That means you have to tell me your name or I can put you in jail. Do you want to spend the night in jail?

THE GIRL starts crying, collapsing into
SUSAN

MAXINE

That's your best approach? Jail? I mean sure you're hopeless but this is hopeless.

JERRY

It works all the other times.

ANDREW

At least I feel better about my own approach now.

SUSAN

It's ok, sweetie. The mean judge was just kidding. You're not going anywhere.

JONATHAN

(to Andrew)

Try again. You've got this.

ANDREW

(Deep breath) Hi. Can I tell you about our church tonight? I think you would have enjoyed it. We had donkeys, and it snowed inside. Do you like to play in the snow? Oh, and Santa even stopped by. (The girl perks up at this.) Oh! You know Santa? I know Santa. Actually, I know Santa. (He gets up and heads for the door.)

JONATHAN

Where are you going? You were doing so well.

ANDREW

I have an idea. Sarah, can you take over? (He's out the door.)

SARAH

Hi, sweetie. My name's Sarah. Do you want to tell me your name? (Nothing.) You know what, that's not fair, is it? There's a whole room full of grownups here asking you questions, and nobody's telling you who they are. So how about I walk you around and everyone can tell you who they are, and maybe then you can tell us about yourself? Does that sound ok?

SARAH holds her out to the GIRL. There's a pause, then she takes it.

SARAH

Ok.

MAXINE

Good idea, Sarah.

SARAH

Let's start here then. This is Aunt Maxine.

MAXINE

Hey, darlin. I'm Maxine. Everybody calls me Aunt Maxine. You can call me that too. This here's my restaurant. Have you been in here before? (Pause) I don't think you have. But I can make you anything you want. Chicken strips, or a hamburger, or maybe a grilled cheese? I can make something for you. It's Christmas Eve. You should eat. Would you like that? I'm going to make you something. I'll be right back. (She exits into the kitchen.)

JERRY

Boy bringing a little kid in sure does get everyone to leave fast. I'm going to have to remember that for my birthday party.

JONATHAN

Don't worry, Jerry. I don't think anybody's going to be coming to your birthday party.

SARAH

And this is Mr. Jerry. I promise he's a nice man. Well, he's not a mean man anyway. Well, he's not going to throw you in jail.

JERRY

I'm sorry about that, little girl. I don't really throw people in jail. All that often. Actually sometimes my job is to find little ones like you find families. I'm the judge who gets to make their adoptions official. It's my favorite part of the job, making families. Usually there's a whole bunch of people there and they're crying--the good kind of crying--and we take pictures. For a lonely old guy I figure I'm in a whole lot of family photo albums.

SARAH

And this is Scott and Susan. They're married. And, um, sorry I don't know a whole lot else about you.

SUSAN

Oh no that's ok. I grew up here. My mom used to bring me to Aunt Maxine's all the time when I was a little girl like you. It's a nice place and the people are nice. And Aunt Maxine makes a great grilled cheese. Wait till you try it. And this is my husband, Scott.

SCOTT

Hi. I'm not from here. But I like it here. The people are nice. They care about you. About how you're doing. And they want to help each other out. Let's say you had some really bad news, or something, or something you were scared to tell somebody? Well the people here, they're like family. They are family. So you need to tell them because you need to tell these things to family, because family will help you out. They'll be there for you. Support you. But only if they know what's going on.

SUSAN

Subtle.

SCOTT

Sorry. Really. Still processing.

SARAH

This is Jonathan. He's a teacher. He was my teacher, actually. Best one I ever had.

JONATHAN

Sarah.

SARAH

I mean, it's true. We read great books.

JONATHAN

(to the girl)

I love to read. Do you like to read? I love stories. There are great Christmas stories. I just, well I can't think of any right now. Does anybody know a good Christmas story? Sarah?

SARAH

Um, ok. Oh! When I was a little girl, about your age. I wanted a puppy for Christmas so badly. All year long I told everybody that all I wanted for Christmas was a puppy. It's all I talked about. Then Christmas morning came, and I was so excited the night before I couldn't sleep. Finally it was morning and I ran downstairs and there it was! A puppy! He had a bow and everything. And right as I ran to pick him up my big brother pushed me out of the way and grabbed the puppy. And the puppy bit him right on the nose! It was awesome. He had to have stitches and everything. His whole life that puppy hated my brother. But he loved me. He was the best.

MAXINE comes back with a plate of grilled cheese.

MAXINE

Here you go. Aunt Maxine's grilled cheese.

SARAH

Come over here and let's have a seat so you can eat it.

THEY sit in one of the booths. The GIRL hungrily eats.

SARAH

Good. That's good, right?

MAXINE

Even I can't screw up grilled cheese.

SARAH

Maxine! She'll have a good Christmas story. I'm sure. Max? We're telling Christmas stories.

MAXINE

What kind of Christmas stories?

SARAH

I don't know. Tell us about when you were a little girl.

MAXINE

Back when we rode dinosaurs to school?

SARAH

Be serious.

MAXINE

Oh ok. Well, when I was in middle school I decided I'd be the one who made Christmas dinner for everybody. My mom was what I like to call a functional cook. Food got on the table. We were fed. But we weren't always happy about it. So I thought, well, this will be my Christmas present to the family. Well, it was a great plan until my sister announced she was bringing her boyfriend home for Christmas dinner. It was his first time meeting everybody, it was my first time cooking for everybody, everyone was nervous.

JERRY

Oh so she thought she would kill him instead of break up with him. Smart.

SARAH

Keep going.

MAXINE

Anyway, I did it all. Ham, macaroni and cheese, rolls. Chocolate cake with peppermint icing for dessert. And not only did nobody die, after dinner the boyfriend got down and proposed to my sister. Now he says he was already planning it but I know that it was my food that pushed him over the edge.

JERRY

He wouldn't be the last.

MAXINE

I'm going to take that one as a compliment. Anyway, that was when I realized it. Food is a way that love shows up in the world. And I've been cooking ever since.

ANDREW enters again with a bag over his shoulder.

ANDREW

Any luck?

SARAH

Do you want to tell us your name? (Silence) Still nothing.

ANDREW

I have an idea, but Judge, I'm going to need your help. Max, you too.

The three of them confer in whispers.
JERRY is adamantly opposed.

JONATHAN

How about Scott? I bet you've got a great Christmas story.

SCOTT

I don't know.

SARAH

Yeah! I want to hear about Christmas at the inn.

SCOTT

You're all going to think this is ridiculous.

SUSAN

No more than they already do, I'm sure.

SCOTT

Well, ok. One year we got actually snowed in at the inn. There was a huge blizzard, and they shut down the roads. None of the staff could get there. UPS couldn't make it with all the presents we'd ordered. It was like being in *The Shining*. So Christmas comes, and it's time for Christmas dinner, but of course none of us know how to do anything. My whole family's just standing in the kitchen, staring at each other. I mean we're just about to have ice cream for dinner when there's this crazy noise from outside. We run out, and there's this helicopter landing on the lawn of the inn, like Santa and his reindeer. And then this man gets out - it was Bobby Flay! My grandfather's assistant had called him in, arranged the helicopter, everything. He even picked up the Christmas presents on the way! So we had steak and enchiladas and all sorts of amazing food that year. We tried to get him to bring Bobby back next year, but he said that was a one time Christmas miracle.

JONATHAN
(after a long silence)

Come on, man.

JERRY breaks away from their
conversation.

I'm not doing that.

JERRY

Come on, Jerry.

MAXINE

Nope. Once you do it once, you're stuck doing it every year.

JERRY

We won't tell anybody.

ANDREW

You're going to tell everybody.

JERRY

We're going to take pictures.

MAXINE

No.

JERRY

PAULA enters

Hey Maxine where (she sees the girl). You found her.

PAULA

Well she found us.

MAXINE

Do you know who this is?

ANDREW

PAULA

There's a wreck up on the highway. The couple in the front was unconscious and on their way to the hospital. (She holds up the GIRL's other shoe.) We found this next to the car and have been trying to figure out who it belongs to.

JONATHAN

Well hey there, Cinderella.

SARAH

Hey, they found your shoe. (She takes the shoe from Paula and tries to put it on the GIRL, but the GIRL refuses.) Ok, ok. That's fine.

PAULA

She came here?

MAXINE

She just wandered in.

PAULA

What has she said?

SARAH

Nothing. She won't talk to anyone.

PAULA

Ok. (To the girl.) Hey, little one. Do you want to come with me? I can take you to your parents.

THE GIRL shakes her head no and buries her head in SARAH's shoulder.

SARAH

She's freaked out.

JERRY

Can't you just pick her up and carry her or something?

PAULA

I can. I'm not going to.

MAXINE

That's a terrible idea.

JERRY

It's an effective idea.

SARAH

I don't think she's going to go with anybody.

ANDREW

I know somebody who could get her to go. (He and MAXINE look at JERRY, who squirms again for a moment).

JERRY

Fine. Dammit.

ANDREW

In front of the kid?

JERRY

Sorry.

MAXINE

Right this way, your honor.

(She leads JERRY and ANDREW back to the kitchen.)

SARAH

It's ok, sweetie. They're going to take care of everything.

JONATHAN

Do you think the parents are going to be ok?

PAULA

I do. They were unconscious but intact.

SUSAN

Poor thing. This must be terrifying.

PAULA

At least she found her way to someplace safe.

SCOTT

I think she's not the only one.

SUSAN

Hon.

SCOTT

I mean it. I'm sorry about your mother. I'm sorry I/

SUSAN

You didn't know.

SCOTT

Anyway, I'm glad we're here.

SUSAN

Me too. Actually, I've got a Christmas story. The first time my mom got sick I was in college. She told me the day after Christmas. Nothing ever really changes, does it? I was so upset and so scared, and I just had to get out. I ended up here right as Maxine was turning out the lights. I mean I crashed through the door right before she locked it. And she made me a grilled cheese. They really are the best. And she sat up with me for what felt like hours. And I knew that somehow, whatever was about to happen, we were going to make it.

SCOTT

We're going to make it this time, too.

SUSAN

I think we will. Hey, what about you, Professor? I'm sure you have some positive Christmas story you can tell.

JONATHAN

Fair enough. There are benefits to spending Christmas on your own. You save a bunch of money on presents. It's quiet, and it's peaceful. And travelling on Christmas? That's the best. There

were a lot of years where I'd just pick a place to go on Christmas. It's cheaper if you travel on Christmas day, and everyone's a lot less stressed than they were the day before. One year I even flew to Hawaii. They played Mele Kalikimaka the whole time and I wore this red and green Hawaiian shirt. And the best part was showing up to work with a tan when everyone else was fat and exhausted. I don't mind inspiring jealousy every now and then.

SARAH

But you don't travel on Christmas anymore?

JONATHAN

I don't. I guess I figured it was better to be here.

SCOTT

Somebody here worth staying home for?

JONATHAN

Yeah. Actually, yeah.

The kitchen door swings open, and
MAXINE enters

MAXINE

Hey, everybody, look who's here!

She indicates the door, but nothing happens.

MAXINE

Look who's here!

Nothing. MAXINE moves back to the door
and yells into the kitchen.

MAXINE

Get your ass out here, fat man.

JERRY enters, wearing the Santa suit.
ANDREW follows him in.

Say it.
ANDREW

Ho. Ho. Ho.
JERRY

Santa!
SARAH

Well look at that.
JONATHAN

Looking good.
PAULA

Keep it up and it's coal for all of you.
JERRY

Are you the real Santa?
THE GIRL

There's a stunned moment, then

What do you think?
JERRY

No.
THE GIRL

Smart girl.
JONATHAN

Hush.
MAXINE

Why not?
JERRY

THE GIRL

The real Santa's busy. He's delivering toys.

SARAH

Yeah. It's Christmas Eve.

JERRY

Maybe I just stopped by to see my friends.

THE GIRL

Where's the bag of toys?

JERRY

In the sleigh.

THE GIRL

Where are your reindeer?

JERRY

Circling the block.

MAXINE

It's tough to park a sleigh downtown.

THE GIRL

You're not the real Santa.

JERRY

No. I'm sorry.

SARAH

He's one of Santa's helpers. Like at the mall.

THE GIRL

What's a mall?

MAXINE

Oh lord.

THE GIRL

Do you know where my mom and dad are?

JERRY

No. But the Sheriff here does.

PAULA

You were in a car accident. They got hurt and we took them to the hospital. But they're going to be ok. I can take you to them.

JERRY

Would that be ok? Can the Sheriff take you to the hospital to see your parents?

After a moment, the GIRL nods and takes Paula's hand.

MAXINE

Oh thank God.

JERRY

Wait!

He gets the GIRL's shoe, bends down and puts it on her foot.

JERRY

There you go. Don't want to forget that.

PAULA

(leading THE GIRL out)

Thank you, everyone. Merry Christmas.

THE GIRL

Merry Christmas, Santa!

JERRY

Merry Christmas.

They're out.

SCOTT

Wow.

MAXINE
(to JERRY)

Well done, old man.

JERRY

Thanks. Now delete those photos I know you took.

MAXINE

You know I'm not going to do that.

ANDREW

The Judge's heart grew three sizes that day!

JERRY

What the hell? You're right. Who wants to sit on my lap and tell me what they want for Christmas?

MAXINE

Nobody wants to do that, you dirty old man.

SARAH

Why not? Santa's here, and it's Christmas Eve. (She sits.) I want, let's see. I want a new car. And a pony. And for Dr. Carver not to be disappointed in me.

JERRY

I don't know about that last one.

JONATHAN

I'm not disappointed.

MAXINE

I am.

SARAH

Yeah. I didn't even bother asking for that.

ANDREW

Let me try. (He sits.) I want a first edition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, tickets to Britney's Vegas residency. Oh and I'll take a car, too.

JERRY

The boy's got some range.

JONATHAN

That's all you want?

ANDREW

That's it.

SCOTT

Ok. My turn. (He sits on Santa's lap.) I want a chaotic family Christmas.

SUSAN

Scott.

JERRY

That I can do.

MAXINE

Clearly.

JERRY

Alright, Maxine. Your turn.

MAXINE

I knew this was some elaborate plan to get me to sit on your lap.

SARAH

Go ahead, Maxine.

MAXINE

Fine. (She sits.) I want someone to clean out the grease traps, since you're giving out cars I'll take one of those. And I want my own show on Food Network.

JERRY

You got it. We'll call it My Adventures in Food Poisoning. It'll be a hit.

MAXINE

One more. I want a certain judge to man up.

JERRY

We're going to blow right past subtext, huh?

MAXINE

I'm sitting on your lap, Santa. It's a little late for subtext.

SARAH

One more. Jonathan, you go.

MAXINE

(Getting up, indicates Jerry's lap.) Come on, professor. What do you want for Christmas?

JONATHAN

(Sitting.) A second chance.

JERRY

I don't think I can give you that.

ANDREW

I might be able to.

JERRY

Not sitting on my lap, you won't.

JONATHAN

(Gets up. To ANDREW)

This was some good thinking. Santa and all.

ANDREW

Well I figure what's the good of hauling a Santa suit around town if you're not going to put it to use?

JONATHAN

You're incredible, you know that?

ANDREW

Stop.

JONATHAN

Nah. It's Christmas Eve, and I've been an idiot, but I'm thankful to have you in my life.

ANDREW

Well, thank you.

JONATHAN

And maybe self-pity's the only thing I've known how to feel. But I guess I can try for something else.

ANDREW

I could be in for that.

There's a pause. It looks like one of them will make a move, but then nothing happens.

JERRY

Ok. That's it. (He crosses over to Andrew.) Hey. This is Jonathan. He's cute, right? I mean, even I can see that. And I don't even go for that sort of thing. But I'd imagine that if I did go for that sort of thing he's the sort of thing I'd go for.

JONATHAN

What is happening right now?

JERRY

And sure he's a bit of a fixer-upper. Kind of a jerk to those he cares about. Pushes folks away and all that. But the fact is I've known him for a long time now, and this is the closest he's gotten to letting anybody in, and I figure that's worth a lot. Am I wrong?

JONATHAN

No.

JERRY

I rarely am. And this, this is Andrew. He's not so bad looking himself, and of course I'm partial to a man in a robe, and, and this is the important part, he's for some reason into you. And you will, I cannot reiterate this enough, never find anyone better. So?

JONATHAN

Um, yes?

JERRY
(to Andrew)

You?

ANDREW

Yes?

JERRY

Good. Now kiss.

JONATHAN

What? No/

ANDREW

Not here.

JERRY

Sorry. That's a direct order from Santa Claus. On Christmas Eve. Kiss.

They shrug, and roll their eyes, but then they kiss. The entire bar bursts out into applause.

MAXINE

Hallelujah.

ANDREW

Merry Christmas.

JONATHAN

Did we just get married?

JERRY

Do you want to? We could do that now too.

JONATHAN

One step at a time.

MAXINE

So you're solving problems now?

JERRY

I create them, I solve them. It's the holidays.

SARAH

Well then what's next?

JERRY

You are. Come here.

SARAH

What?

JERRY

Tell me why you're not in school this semester.

SARAH

I didn't like it.

JERRY

No, that's not it.

SARAH

I wasn't good at it.

JERRY

We're going to try one more time. And remember, young lady, that I spot BS professionally.

SARAH

Oh, well in that case they had to shut the school down this semester. They discovered a portal to hell in the basement and it's just going to take a long time to get that cleaned up.

MAXINE

A gas leak was slowly turning the students into zombies.

JERRY

Ok, folks. We're not piling on. Not this time.

ANDREW

Just one more? Can I?

JERRY

Don't think I can stop you.

ANDREW

Aliens.

JERRY

That's what you've got?

ANDREW

That's what I've got. Aliens.

JONATHAN

Worth it.

JERRY

We're all done. (SCOTT starts to speak up.) That wasn't a question. So what's really going on?

SARAH

I was almost bad at it. Barely hanging on in some of those classes. And they're just going to get harder. And what if I actually can't do it? What if I'm actually not smart enough? And I'm going to have to come back here and tell everybody that I failed, and they're going to feel sorry for me. But if I quit then everyone's just mad at me. I can handle mad.

JERRY

Oh. Well that makes sense then.

SARAH

Really?

JERRY

No. Listen up, little girl. You've got skills. Real skills. You're smart, and you're kind, and you're one of the two hardest working women I know. And you're scared. Yeah I get that. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let you let scared win.

JONATHAN

Look, I meant it when I said you were one of the best students in class last semester. Do you want to know why?

SARAH

I always figured it was because I knew how you liked your whiskey.

JONATHAN

That's close, actually. It is because of Maxine's, but not because of the drinks. It's because I would sit here and I'd watch you, with a textbook and a notebook over in the corner. And any spare moment you got you'd be studying.

MAXINE

You were doing your homework on the job?

SARAH

I'm sorry, I/

MAXINE

Keep it up. This way I don't have to cut your hours.

JONATHAN

You work so hard, Sarah. Harder than anybody else in that class. That's what makes you one of the best.

SARAH

But what happens when it gets harder?

JONATHAN

You get tougher.

MAXINE

You've done it before.

JERRY

I know it seems like fear leads to safety, but it doesn't. The only place fear leads is to regret. And regret is the worst place to be.

Everyone looks at him.

JERRY

What, everyone gets to be wise here except for me?

JONATHAN

Look, let's just worry about this next semester, ok? You take this one, you make it through, and then we worry about the next one. One at a time.

JERRY

Santa commands it.

SARAH

It's a good thing Christmas only comes once a year. That schtick is gonna get old fast.

JERRY

Making full use of it as long as I can.

SARAH

Ok.

MAXINE

Ok?

SARAH

Ok.

MAXINE sets the laptop down in front of SARAH.

MAXINE

Here. Go ahead and register.

SARAH
(to JONATHAN)

Can you help me pick out some classes?

JONATHAN

Of course. I know a pretty good English class you should take.

ANDREW

I hear the professor's cute, too.

SARAH

Thanks.

JONATHAN and SARAH huddle, selecting
classes.

MAXINE
(to JERRY, indicating SCOTT and SUSAN)

Want to go for three, Saint Nick?

JERRY

Gotta use that Christmas magic while it lasts.

MAXINE and JERRY go to SCOTT and
SUSAN

MAXINE

I'm sorry about your mother. And I'm sorry for what's to come. That's going to be hard on all of us. But no matter what, we're here for you.

SUSAN

Thanks, Maxine.

MAXINE nudges JERRY

JERRY

And I'm sorry I got in the middle of it. That's not my place.

MAXINE

Well I've never heard you admit that before.

JERRY

Well it's usually not not my place.

SUSAN

(to SCOTT)

It was killing me not telling you, you know.

SCOTT

I know. I'm sorry I kept pushing.

SUSAN

I guess I figured you push because you care.

MAXINE

I push because I care. I need to embroider that and hang it over the bar.

SUSAN

I'm sorry we're missing the perfect family Christmas.

SCOTT

I am too. But only because of why we're missing it.

SUSAN

I'm pretty scared about what's going to happen next.

SCOTT

Yeah. I get that. But we'll figure it out together.

SUSAN

Together.

SCOTT

Let's go home. To your mom's.

SUSAN

To the chaos?

SCOTT

To the chaos. Besides, it's gotta be calmer than this crew anyway.

SUSAN

Yeah. Let's go home.

THEY get up and start to put their coats on and dress for outside. Most everyone else waves and says goodbye. MAXINE comes and gives SUSAN a hug goodbye.

MAXINE

I mean it. Anything you need. When the time comes, don't worry about food. We'll send it along.

JERRY

Come on, Maxine. Haven't they been through enough?

SUSAN

Thank you everyone. Thank you.

SCOTT

And Merry Christmas!

THEY're out. A moment falls over the restaurant.

MAXINE

Well, Santa, any more Christmas miracles up your sleeve?

JERRY

Maybe just one. But that's for later.

MAXINE

Big talk from a man who only works one night a year.

ANDREW

Welp, that's my cue. Gotta get back for the late service.

JONATHAN

Maybe I could come too?

ANDREW

I'd like that. And maybe lunch with my family tomorrow? If you want. No pressure.

JONATHAN

Let's see how it goes with Jesus tonight and then we can see about your family tomorrow.

ANDREW

Fair enough.

THEY prepare to leave.

JONATHAN

Goodnight everybody.

SARAH

Goodnight! See you in class.

JONATHAN

See you there.

MAXINE

Merry Christmas!

ANDREW

Merry Christmas, Maxine. Merry Christmas, your honor. And thank you both.

They're out.

MAXINE
(to SARAH)

Why don't you head on home now too. I'll close up.

SARAH

Are you sure?

MAXINE

Go on. Your dad's probably got the house all lit up. You want to be there for that.

SARAH

I do. Thanks, Max.

SARAH puts her coat on and starts to unplug the Christmas tree.

MAXINE

Leave that on for a bit. Still a couple more hours until Christmas.

SARAH comes around and wraps MAXINE in a big hug.

SARAH

Merry Christmas, Aunt Maxine.

MAXINE

Merry Christmas, darlin'.

SARAH heads for the door. But at the last moment, she turns back to the laptop and picks out a song to play. A classic Christmas song by one of the crooners begins to play through the bar. She turns the light out, leaving MAXINE and JERRY illuminated by the Christmas tree. SARAH exits.

MAXINE

Well.

JERRY

You're a small miracle, you know that Maxine?

MAXINE

Nobody's called me a small anything in a long time.

JERRY

You're right. You're a big wonder. That's what you are.

MAXINE

And you're an old fool.

JERRY

Have been for a long time. Long enough that I'm wondering if it's time to try something other than regret.

MAXINE

You know, nobody asked what you want for Christmas.

JERRY

How about a dance?

MAXINE

How about it.

JERRY takes MAXINE in his arms, and they begin to dance to the music. The lights slowly dim, and then BLACKOUT.

THE END