

Excerpt from Scene One  
of  
Light Through the Cellar Door

By

Barbara Hume

January 15, 2024

*This script is copyright protected and may not be reproduced, distributed, or disseminated without the prior written permission of the author.*

Copyright (c)

### CAST OF CHARACTERS

- AGNES: Mother of MAURA, in her mid 60's. Recently widowed, born in Ireland, but raised in Missouri since age 5.
- MAURA: Daughter of AGNES, in her early 40's. Lawyer for Women's Clinic in St. Louis for the past ten years. She separated from her husband about six months ago.
- PHOEBE: Daughter of MAURA & NICK, age fifteen struggling with her parents separation.
- NICK: Husband to MAURA, in his mid/late 40's currently working as a freelance mechanical engineer.

### Setting

The scene takes place in the backyard of the Ditworth residence in St. Louis county in the state of Missouri. The rural home is surrounded by a large field, with a backyard facing the western horizon on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River.

### Time

The time is March in the year 1989 just prior to the US Supreme Court ruling in July 1989 which upheld a Missouri law that imposed restrictions on the use of state funds for facilities and employees performing or assisting in abortions or reproductive counseling. The state continues to chip away at Roe v. Wade, de-funding Women's Clinics across the state reducing the number of clinics dramatically.

A ONE ACT IN THREE SCENES

*SETTING:* We are looking at the following sets: 1) down right, an old bench underneath a large Oak tree, 2) stage left, a raked mound with a cellar door on top of the mound. The interior stairs lead down to a small cellar not seen by the audience; inside are gardening tools and canned jars of vegetables. Set on a shelf is an icon of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, surrounded by candles and rosaries.

3) Angled up right is the exterior of AGNES' back porch with a back door, a rocking chair, benches, knitting and/or baskets and an assortment of gardening tools.

*AT RISE:* AGNES is entering from the back porch with a large ceramic container holding her husband's ashes. She is wearing her husband's hat, sweater & overalls. She crosses DR to the Oak tree, kneels then places the urn on the ground next to the small flower bed below the tree. She proceeds to weed and mulch the small flower bed while humming a familiar Irish melody. There is a bronze plaque on the tree with the words:

*In memory of Harry Ditworth  
Born 1919 - Died 1988  
Age - 69 years old*

SCENE ONEFRIDAY - MID-MORNING

AGNES

Harry, can you believe it's been almost a year since you left us! The three of us are celebrating your life tonight by fixing your favorite brisket with colcannon. (continues to weed/mulch then grabs her stomach). I've been feeling that pain all over again ... losing Lily makes me fear losing Maura! Your daughter's been struggling so and I don't seem to be able to help her;...I'm concerned about her Harry...

(AGNES stands back looking at the bed of flowers, stroking the bark of the tree, then leans in and embraces the tree.)

AGNES

This old oak tree was just a sapling when we planted it together. Now look at the canopy! Oh Harry, I can feel your presence.

(AGNES sneaks some of his ashes out of the urn and mixes a handful into the soil below the Oak tree.)

AGNES

You will never be a ghost to me!

(AGNES stands and bends over in pain for a brief moment, then she is startled by MAURA's abrupt entrance through the porch door. MAURA is carrying a pile of papers.)

(Preoccupied with her work, MAURA crosses to sit on the cellar door to continue to work on her court case for the Women's Clinic.)

MAURA

Mom, I think the brisket is burning! I turned down the heat and added some more broth.

AGNES

Thank you, dear! (a troubled aside) oh my goodness... (to MAURA)... 'forgetting is remembering! Right?

MAURA

You always say that but exactly how does that work?

(AGNES picks up the laundry basket pre-set on the porch and starts taking the laundry off the clothes line left of the porch.)

AGNES

When you forget...

MAURA

I can't afford to forget! The clinic would close if I dropped the ball. The state is doing all it can to shut us down.

AGNES

Why would they shut down the women's clinic? They have to have a good reason to do that - right?

MAURA

A good reason according to the State is providing birth control or counseling for complicated pregnancies.

(AGNES stops taking down the laundry for a moment)

AGNES

...what do you mean by 'complicated'?

(MAURA continues shuffling through her papers while AGNES takes the laundry off the line.)

MAURA

You know, women who are too young to be moms, been raped, are destitute or can't afford another child...or...have medical complications.

(AGNES stops abruptly, then  
continues to take down the laundry)

AGNES

I see....(showing concern)...what I was trying to say was that sometimes when you forget or make an honest mistake, your memory of that incident sticks with you so much that you do things differently the next time.

(AGNES looks at MAURA working intently)

Dear do you remember our little Lily?

(MAURA stops to look up at AGNES)

MAURA

I was two years old when Lily died. I only remember her from what you told me about her. (pauses) I understand what you mean about forgetting...as long as you don't burn the brisket. Phoebe should be here soon.

(MAURA works diligently with her  
papers while AGNES continues taking  
down the laundry)

AGNES

How's she goin' to get here? Her dad?

MAURA

No, she's taking the bus.

AGNES

Why doesn't her dad pick her up?

(MAURA is preoccupied with her  
papers)

MAURA

I already made arrangements with Phoebe. It's our time today and tomorrow - just us girls.

AGNES

Now why is it a bother for a father to give his daughter a ride home from school?

MAURA

I already made the arrangements with Phoebe to take the bus, so let it go!

(AGNES moves towards MAURA on the cellar door, sits and begins to fold the laundry.)

AGNES

I know you two have been having some struggles these past few months-

MAURA

It's complicated. I need to get this petition finished before Phoebe gets here.

AGNES

If you need some time alone with Nick...I would enjoy spending more time with Phoebe-

(MAURA throws her papers into her briefcase)

MAURA

No, mom! I got this, OK?

AGNES

OK, (pause) I just don't understand why you don't want some time alone with Nick?

(MAURA finishes gathering her papers)

MAURA

I can't deal with Nick and my deadline for the hearing next week.



AGNES

What do you mean dearest? I can help you with Phoebe so you can have some time with him. Why-

MAURA

Nick's been insisting we get back together and I'm not ready for that!

(AGNES pauses to gaze at MAURA)

AGNES

I understand...but...has he ever tried to-

(MAURA cuts off AGNES abruptly)

MAURA

No, Mom! I can deal with Nick.

(Silence between them. AGNES continues to fold laundry while looking at MAURA working,)

AGNES

(pause) You fancied sittin' on this cellar door when you were a youngster.

(MAURA ignores AGNES as she busies herself with her papers. AGNES pauses to look at MAURA intently)

AGNES

There's no harm in taking a break once in a while. (pauses) Still like your work with the women's clinic? (pauses) Well, you look uneasy...Str-e-ssed out!

MAURA

I'm fine ... just need to finish this petition. Plus I have to get some paperwork ready for Nick.

AGNES

Given your stress level these past two days, you look like a nursing mother who's been up all night caring for her baby. Sleep deprived!

MAURA

The deadline for this court case next week is looming over my head!

AGNES

Why not take a break and sip some of my valerian root tea?  
Could help you get through this mountain of paper!

MAURA

I can't. I'm fighting an appeal deadline.

AGNES

What do you mean?

(MAURA becomes more stressed  
looking through her papers, looking  
for different forms/articles, etc.)

MAURA

I'm writing a petition to challenge a state law threatening  
to cut off the clinic's funding.

AGNES

I thought your clinic was state funded?

MAURA

It was...But remember the Hyde Amendment? We can't take  
anyone on Medicaid. But it doesn't stop there.

AGNES

What do you mean? Are the courts shutting your doors?

MAURA

Not quite. They're tying the hands of our medical staff.

AGNES

If a woman can't rely on the doctors, then she just has to  
rely on herself!

MAURA

I really can't talk about it right now...it's complicated  
and women's lives are at risk. If I don't win this appeal  
case next week-

AGNES

Maura...(no response from MAURA) How can I help you?

(AGNES pauses to look at MAURA; MAURA continues to work  
ignoring AGNES.)

AGNES

How about that cup of tea?

(AGNES goes to the kitchen to get tea. MAURA looks at her papers, holds a brief and wanders over to the oak tree reading. She stops sees the urn with her dad's ashes. She holds the urn for a moment, then places it down quickly.)

(AGNES returns with the cup of tea as MAURA crosses back to the cellar door, reviewing her petition. AGNES hands MAURA the cup of tea.)

AGNES

If your job is providing women's health needs, it seems you need a dose of your own medicine once in a while.

(AGNES continues folding her daughter's laundry while MAURA takes the cup of tea offered by her mother.)

AGNES

If I carried the stress you carry, I think I'd lose more of my precious memory. Why, my mother used to tell me "sleeping is the best medicine" AND knowing when to quit!

(MAURA interrupts AGNES abruptly)

MAURA

Mom, please. . . I really don't have time to listen to more of your mother's so-called "wisdom" . . .

(AGNES looks at MAURA with concern, shrugs her shoulders then holds up a pair of MAURA's panties with astonishment)

AGNES

Will you look at this? (snapping the panty) What is this for? A blindfold for sleepin'?

MAURA

It's called a thong. . .

AGNES

For your foot?

MAURA

No, just a woman's panty ... no other purpose.

(AGNES holds up the thong with amazement)

AGNES

A panty? Looks uncomfortable ... (an aside) and a bit indecent.

(MAURA grabs the thong from AGNES and puts it in her bag.)

MAURA

It's underwear!

AGNES

Far be it from me to comment on ladies lingerie. I've never stopped wearing my whittie-tighties, all cotton for all day comfort! Sometimes I found myself wearing your dad's underwear - and he sometimes put mine on without realizing it!

MAURA

Listening to you talk about you and dad sharing underwear while I'm under a courtroom deadline is more than distracting...it's...it's disturbing!

AGNES

OK, no more talk of whittie tighties or "thongs"!

(AGNES pauses to look at her daughter on the cellar door.)

AGNES

You always did like this spot. I used to sit here with your dad while you were playing with your imaginary friend. (pause) Your dad would always ask you, "How's Bree doin' today? And you'd say "Bree's upset she can't go to the carnival" or if you fell and skinned your knee, he'd pick you up and say-

(MAURA completes AGNES' story)

MAURA

"Did Bree push you again?"

(Both AGNES and MAURA chuckle reminiscing. Then MAURA sighs over the amount of work in front of her.)

MAURA

Remember when it was just you and me on nights when dad was leading the union rep meetings at the plant?

AGNES

He took pride in managing those union meetings. (pause) I so cherished the times when just the two of us were together.

MAURA

Even after an entire year without dad, my most vivid memory of him was arguing about my going to law school... (pause) Do you ever have regrets about dad?

AGNES

What do you mean?

MAURA

You know, about things you said to each other.

AGNES

Um...(hesitates a bit)...we talk everyday.

(MAURA appears less distracted)

MAURA

Really? What do you talk about?

AGNES

...I have a chat with him each morning by the Oak Tree.

(MAURA listens intently now)

MAURA

And does he answer?

(MAURA continues to look at AGNES. AGNES refrains from answering MAURA's question and continues to fold clothes.)

MAURA

As a kid, I remember dad working at McDonnell Douglas, coming home late...you waiting on him tirelessly. (pause) After I was married, when I got the job at the clinic, he never showed any interest in my work.

AGNES

Don't think he didn't care...he just didn't understand all the in's and out's of women's health needs-

MAURA

The only question he would ask me when I came over with Phoebe was "How's your daughter managing without you?"

AGNES

Maura, you must know that your father only wanted the best for his grand daughter.

MAURA

And what about me? And my work? Did he have any idea or interest in knowing what I was trying to do at the clinic?

AGNES

He never could understand a woman wanting to work outside the home.

MAURA

I remember asking him what he thought about a woman's choice over her reproductive rights.

AGNES

What did he say to you?

MAURA

"Your mother never really had a choice."

(Silence between MAURA & AGNES.  
Then AGNES looks intently at  
MAURA.)

AGNES

I know life hurts sometimes, my love. But a child can relieve a sorry set of woes...think of Phoebe.

(PHOEBE enters abruptly from SL  
carrying a school backpack, wearing  
earphones listening to her music.)