

A very professional but visibly irritated and tense ACCOMPANIST takes their place at a keyboard, piano or organ. After a moment or two of preparation and possibly a sigh, they begin to play a rousing tune. The introduction seems to be building up to a performer's entrance, but after a few musical attempts and flourishes, ACCOMPANIST simply stops, looks even more irritated, smiles apologetically to the audience, then goes back stage. A strange noise from back stage, and ACCOMPANIST returns quickly, sits down and plays the rousing music again. After a brief instrumental introduction, SINGER makes a bold entrance. She is anywhere between 40 and...Vera Charles. She has a twinkle in her eye and it wouldn't be bad if she has a round little belly that shakes when she laughs like a bowl full of jelly. She sings with great cheer and wears a Santa cap.

SINGER

On the longest night of the year
On the shortest day in December
Who's making sure this Christmas
Is a day you'll always remember?

When the naughty little elves are fighting
Or oversleeping in their tiny beds
Who gently gets them back to work
With a smack to their pointy-eared heads?

Mrs. Christmas
Mrs. Christmas
She's the girl who gets it done
Mrs. Christmas

Mrs. Christmas
Without her there's no holiday fun!

When Donner's little hooves are frozen
And Comet's antlers must be thawed
Who sets little Rudolph's nose aglow
With her electric reindeer prod?

Mrs. Christmas
Mrs. Christmas
She sends off that famous sled
Mrs. Christmas
Mrs. Christmas
Or the reindeer don't get fed

When Santa's had so much eggnogg
That he can't find his way to your house
Who kicks him to the floor and grabs the reins
But his obedient and loving spouse?
Loving spouse!

Mrs. Christmas
Mrs. Christmas
A late nativity would be a crime
Mrs. Christmas
Mrs. Christmas
She makes happiness happen on time!

At the conclusion of the song,
SINGER takes a bow or curtsy
whether there is applause or not.

SINGER

Good evening everyone and welcome. I'm [real name of SINGER]
and I hope you're all in the holiday spirit. You may not be
familiar with the carol I just sang, *Mrs. Christmas*. Me,
either. I never heard of it before I stumbled upon it here:

She shows an old, overstuffed
scrapbook with a "crafty" cover
that says *Christmas Keepsakes*.

SINGER

My mother collected everything that ended up in this scrapbook over many decades, and it's full of holiday memories, cards, recipes, craft ideas, and carols. Mom loves Christmas, and her favorite Yule tradition is carols. In fact, she gave me "Carol" as my middle name: [real first name] Carol [real last name]. I suppose it could be been worse; she could have named me Tannenbaum, Spritz or Krunkake.

In the little farm community of Kandota Township where I grew up, my mother was actually called Mrs. Christmas. Everyone knew of her devotion to the holiday. It was very...public. She found it hard to communicate important messages privately, and nothing--*nothing*--was more important to her than Christmas. Which meant she was regarded as a "character"--not a compliment in rural Minnesota--and a great embarrassment to her teenage daughter.

(Calling into audience)

Isn't that right, Mother?

(To audience)

Don't worry, tonight is all good fun. I'm not going to regale you with tales of childhood abuse and only talk about myself. I mean, a little--I *am* a performer--but tonight is about my mother, Mrs. Christmas, a kind of tribute to her, actually. And music is the best way to communicate emotion--

(furtive glance at

ACCOMPANIST)

For some people, the only way. Oh, by the way, I'm doing a number of performances this season, but tonight is especially special. This is the traditional date for Mom to make her first batch of *Glugg*, a Norwegian mulled wine. It was an evening I always dreaded. But:

She pulls out a Thermos and cup and pours herself a drink, to the horror of ACCOMPANIST.

SINGER

In honor of Mother, I made my own batch.

(drinks entire cup)

To help me through the night.

(pause to register the strength of the *Glugg*)

Actually, I suppose I *should* tell you a little bit about myself for those who don't already know me.

I might even reveal a side of me you didn't know! For instance, I wasn't always so outgoing. Mother once described me as "shy, painfully shy, bordering on mental illness." But when I discovered audiences, I was hooked. Several years ago I started doing synopsisized solo performances of Broadway musicals, both classic and obscure, everything from *Showboat* to *Plain and Fancy*, which is kind of an Amish *Fiddler on the Roof* written ten years earlier by the same playwright--?

(inquiring of the audience)

--Anyone? No? Joseph Stein. But tonight isn't about Broadway or about me. It's about my mother. And Christmas carols.

She opens the scrapbook.

SINGER

I didn't know about this scrapbook until we moved Mom off the family farm into the Sarepta Home. Our house was always neat as a pin when I was a kid. But what I didn't know was Mother had lots of secret hiding places, not for anything naughty, just large accumulations of...stuff: never-worn blouses, extra socks, and a ton of crafts, many related to Christmas. The most precious being this:

She shows off the scrapbook:
Christmas cards, photographs, sheet
music.

SINGER

It's almost a holiday diary, musical memorabilia. Never fear, I'm not going to sing them all! But folk songs--which is what many carols are--or become, even if they first appeared on the silver screen like *White Christmas*--which didn't actually debut in the movie *White Christmas* but on the radio and then in which musical--?

She gives the audience an
opportunity to respond. If they
respond correctly she says:

SINGER

I knew you were going to be a good audience!

Or if they don't:

SINGER

Holiday Inn. Must be a lot of straight people in the audience.

There are so many fascinating folk tales about the origin of specific Christmas carols, some of them even true. The most famous is that *Silent Night* was composed for the pastor to play on the guitar on Christmas Eve 1818 in Oberndorf bei Salzburg when the church organ was frozen. That's not exactly accurate: the organ was broken or rusty or something, not frozen, and the composition wasn't on the fly.

Finds a carol in the book.

SINGER

This is an interesting one. In 1849 Edmund Sears, a Unitarian minister in Massachusetts, composed *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* as a plea for peace in the wake of the Mexican American War and various revolutions in Europe. I imagine you're all familiar with the first couple of verses, but do you know this one which is often censored?

Turns to the ACCOMPANIST.

SINGER

Dolce, per favore! [sweetly, please]

The ACCOMPANIST plays a brief introduction, then:

SINGER

(sings)

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing

SINGER

(speaking)

Isn't that lovely?

(turns some pages)

Some carols, especially the oldest, most traditional ones,
don't exactly make sense--

(sings)

I saw three ships come sailing in

(ACCOMPANIST gamely catches
up)

On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day

I saw three ships come sailing in

On Christmas Day in the morning

(speaks)

What do ships have to do with Christmas?

(to ACCOMPANIST)

Piu dolce, pianissimo. [sweeter, very softly]

ACCOMPANIST looks annoyed and plays
softly.

SINGER

(sings)

Oh they sailed into Bethlehem

On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day

They sailed into Bethlehem

On Christmas Day in the morning

(speaks)

Bethlehem is not a port. In fact, the nearest body of water
is the Dead Sea, twenty miles away. Never mind, it's English.
Derbyshire, 17th century. Moving on:

(to ACCOMPANIST)

Presto, per favore. [very fast, please]

(sings)

Bring a torch, Jeannette, Isabella--

(speaks)

Who's Jeannette? Who's Isabella? They're not in the Bible--
they're French, also 17th century. There was a lot of
craziness going on in the 1600s in Europe, at least
lyrically. Are these pyromaniacs supposed to be angels,
shepherdesses, cows?

As she turns pages.

SINGER

I'm sort of hoping our exploration of carols will remind us
why people like my mother love Christmas. When you're a kid,
it's all about the presents, and then as a parent it's about
your kids' presents. A lot of anxiety either way. At least
for me, but I've always been cynical about the holidays.

Mother said I just don't have the Yuletide spirit. So don't expect me to recite *Luke Chapter Two* like Linus and tell you the true meaning of Christmas. It's not so much theology as music, emotions, memories, don't you think? So maybe what we're doing tonight is trying to recapture that joy, that innocence...I never had. Or maybe it's to expiate my sinful cynicism about the holiday...

(stops herself)

Never mind! Let's just have fun!

(to ACCOMPANIST)

Musica, per piacere. [music, please]

ACCOMPANIST looks confused, then irritated, then plays a few bars of a familiar tune from an animated holiday Christmas special. SINGER rolls her eyes.

SINGER

Sometimes solo shows need a little improvisation, but not everyone's comfortable with that.

(to ACCOMPANIST)

Si ferme, per favore! [stop, please!]

(ACCOMPANIST stops playing)

I've found a lot of people are uncomfortable with solo performance in general: your friend who says "how do you memorize all those words?!" after you've succinctly and amusingly explicated *Wildcat*, starring Lucille Ball in 1960 and introducing which hit song--?

If the audience guesses correctly:

SINGER

Excellent! You do have the musical gene!

If the audience doesn't:

SINGER

I guess you just don't have the musical gene.

ACCOMPANIST helpfully plays a few bars of *Hey, Look Me Over*.

SINGER

Hey, Look Me Over, which was later recorded by Louis Armstrong, Rosemary Clooney and Mel Torme. Bobby Short?

Judy Garland? No, no gene.

In any case, Mother, thank you for this--

(re: scrapbook)

Here's an excellent example of an arcane carol. I was completely unfamiliar. It's from medieval Sweden, kind of an Annunciation dialogue.

(to ACCOMPANIST)

Non troppo lento. [not too slow]

(sings)

Where is my babe? did Mary cry
I surely feel his birth is nigh
My heart is full of worry
He comes from God, said Gabriel
Among poor mortal men to dwell
Do not ask him to hurry

Where is my boy? did Mary call
Not yet a man, what could befall
Him in Jerusalem?
I'm in the temple, said the lad
Among the priests, do not be mad
For we are sharing wisdom

Where is my son? did Mary wail
On Golgotha with cross and nail
Ahhhh!
His arms are spread in wide embrace,
For all of the human race

SINGER dons a homemade Christmas
shawl.

SINGER

Mother started Christmas preparations in July, making gifts and costumes like this shawl, baking and freezing holiday treats. On the hottest August day her kitchen would be ablaze, the oven pregnant with a fruitcake or a batch of gingersnaps, peppermint candy melting on the stove. She tried to draft me to help, but I'm not very good in the kitchen. "Never mind," she said, "I'm happy to do it myself."

Mother didn't fit in on the farm, or anywhere really, but she tried very hard. Too hard, from my teen introvert perspective.

In December, she'd bring Christmas cookies for my whole school, and she'd wave to me wildly from across the playground. I'd stare at the ground, praying to be swallowed by a sinkhole, but I knew she wouldn't stop until I waved back:

SINGER plasters both arms to her
sides then moves one at the wrist
in a tiny wave.

SINGER

We don't always appreciate our parents until we're parents ourselves, and when I remember some of Mother's homemade gifts I am amazed at her craftiness. When I was five I became obsessed with dinosaurs, so Mom secretly bought up every plastic dino she could find then spent months in the basement building tiny dioramas for the prehistoric creatures. Papier mâché rocks, mountains of cloth over chicken wire stiffened with flour paste, moss trees from model train kits, even a basin filled with real water as a lake for the plesiosaurs and ichthyosaurs. On Christmas morning this landscape of microclimates was arrayed under the tree, every diplodocus and trachodon grazing unknowingly as t-rexes and allosauruses lurked behind plastic palm trees. My five-year-old heart nearly exploded with joy when I saw her mini Jurassic Park, and I played with great childish concentration for almost twenty minutes. After that initial excitement wore off, I think I made the triceratops fight an ankylosaur every once in a while or drowned a dimetrodon in the lake. The chicken wire mountains didn't have a lot of flat, stable surfaces, so the stegosaurus wouldn't stand right or fell off. After a few weeks the dino dioramas went back to the basement and eventually into the trash slough--

ACCOMPANIST underscores with a few
bars of the Jurassic Park theme.

SINGER

All right, all right! So I'm a little off track! I feel like I'm about to get the hook at the Academy Awards.

(glares at ACCOMPANIST until
they stop playing)

Oh. Ohhh! My apologies, [real first name of ACCOMPANIST], I meant to introduce you but completely forgot! Everyone, this is my wonderful and talented accompanist, [full real name of ACCOMPANIST].

Would you like to say a few words to the audience?

(ACCOMPANIST shakes head)

Nothing at all? I'm so sorry! I was supposed to introduce [first name] at the top of the show. Not only an extraordinary musician but also a secret composer--[first name], would you like to tell us a little about your work?

(ACCOMPANIST just looks at keyboard)

Never mind, never mind! Sometimes accompanists are shy.

(ACCOMPANIST glares)

Painfully shy.

(mouths to audience
"bordering on mental
illness")

I'm mortified I forgot!

(mouths to audience "not
really")

All right, back to our carols, back to Mrs. Christmas.

(pages through scrapbook)

This next one is from Elizabethan England and couldn't be more esoteric in its symbolism.

ACCOMPANIST plays an introduction that is very long. Once or twice SINGER appears about to sing, but ACCOMPANIST extends the introduction just a little further. When SINGER is sufficiently annoyed by false starts, the introduction ends and SINGER sings.

SINGER

Peck, peck, peck!
The chicks do hatch
The pelican babes are born
Peep, peep, peep
The chicks do beg
Upon a Christmas morn

Peck, peck, peck
The mother's breast
She pricks a crimson vein
Drip, drip, drip
The blood drops down
A red, sustaining rain

Sip, sip, sip
 The chicks all sup
 Upon their mother's gore
 Drop by drop
 The mother dies
 To save the chicks she bore

Prick, prick, prick
 The crown of thorns
 Upon our Savior's head
 Drip, drip, drip
 His life flowed out
 As for our lives he bled

SINGER

(speaks)

Festive, isn't it? The pelican as Christian imagery goes all the way back to second century Alexandria, was referenced by Thomas Aquinas and by Dante in the *Divine Comedy* and shows up to this day in--

(she produces a pelican
 Christmas ornament from a
 box)

--Christmas ornaments, like this one made by my mother when I was about seven. Perhaps this gruesome little bauble explains some of my ambivalence about the holiday.

(reaching back into the box)

Mother collected ornaments, some very old--

(shows an antique ornament)

--She said this one belonged to her mother, who died on Christmas Day, very young. Store-bought can be elegant, but home-made seemed to her more sincere. As Mrs. Christmas, Mother embraced every holiday craft fad, including:

(she produces examples)

Decoupage, Swedish straw ornaments, needlepoint, macrame, soft boxes, quilled snowflakes, circle weaving, and--speaking of gruesome--apple head dolls.

(showing the doll, which is
 male)

You peel a large apple, carve a face with a paring knife then dip it in lemon juice and salt. You let the apple sit out for days or even weeks, until it naturally dehydrates and shrinks into a wizened old face.

Apparently invented by the Seneca Indians and adopted by settlers in Appalachia. No two heads are alike because every apple dries differently. As a child I was scared of them, and Mom thought it would be a good idea for me to make one so I wouldn't be afraid. She said it could be my Christmas present to her that year. Here's how that turned out:

SINGER produces a larger apple head doll with a hideous, lopsided head showing remnants of green and black mold. The mold has even spread to the doll's dress.

SINGER

I screamed when Mom took it out of the attic where we left it to dry. I refused to even touch it. Mother said "Never mind, I'll finish it." I still have nightmares that the apple head granny comes into my room at night and kisses me with her green, moldy lips.

ACCOMPANIST checks their phone.

It's hard to believe Mother saved all these crazy crafts, but when we cleaned out her hoard--and that is the appropriate word, given the shocking volume of junk--every single one inspired a memory:

(handling each item)

Decoupage sheet music from my first piano recital. A *julbukk* Mom made after Aunt Elsie visited Sweden. A macrame plant-hanger from my two weeks in Junior Achievement. The winter it was so cold we weren't allowed outside for three days and Mom distracted us making quilled snowflakes. Mother kept some earrings in this soft box for a couple of years in order to prove it was useful. When we cleaned out her house, we found each craft carefully labeled with the year and the name of the crafter, mostly Mom, of course. Sometimes there was commentary: "[real name of SINGER] won second place at 4H for this circle weaving" or "Didn't look like the photos" or once simply "Never mind."

Most of these creations were presents, crafted in secret by Mom and then revealed under the tree on Christmas morning. Everybody in the family got a tole painting, a Swedish wood curl, a decoupage of something they made during the year.

It became a tradition, one I dreaded, because we got these crafty gifts instead of real dolls from Mattel or Tonka Trucks or cool board games from Milton Bradley like a normal Christmas.

SINGER sees the ACCOMPANIST looking at the phone, and she stops speaking until the ACCOMPANIST notices and puts away the phone.

Mother went through a period when she explored the Christmas traditions of other lands. Who could forget the year we pretended to be German and played hide the pickle in the Christmas tree?

ACCOMPANIST underscores with German music.

Apparently the pickle was supposed to be an ornament, but we used a real dill cucumber from our garden. It wasn't hard to find if you had a sense of smell.

ACCOMPANIST plays Greek music.
SINGER dons a weird head-dress.

One season Mom dressed as *Kallekantzaroi*, evil goblins in Greece that run amok during the twelve days of Christmas.

ACCOMPANIST plays scary cat music.

Even scarier was the Icelandic Yule Cat that devours children who don't get their gifts of new clothes by Christmas Eve. One of her favorite traditions from overseas was from Asia.

ACCOMPANIST plays Japanese music.

Mother learned that Christmas is very popular in Japan because of the gift-giving, but the origins and images of this Christian holiday aren't deeply understood there. As serious as Mother was about Christmas, her devilish sense of humor inspired her to reproduce this image she heard was displayed in a Tokyo department store window:

SINGER produces a Santa Claus
nailed to a cross.

SINGER

This was one we couldn't show off to the neighbors. In fact,
Mother later denied making it.

SINGER puts Santa Claus and the
Greek head-dress away.

SINGER

I mentioned all the baking and freezing Mom did in
preparation for Christmas, and one South African tradition
actually has a carol about it. Perhaps when you were little,
you left cookies and milk out for Santa. In South Africa,
those are called *soetkoekies*, or in English, sweet cookies.

(shows recipe in scrapbook)

A very simple recipe: flour, baking soda, cream of tartar,
cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, cloves, brown sugar, almonds,
butter, eggs and red wine. Apparently *soetkoekies* are
irresistible, as described in this cautionary South African
carol.

ACCOMPANIST plays a fast
introduction, but SINGER
interrupts.

SINGER

Piu lento, per favore! [slower, please!]

ACCOMPANIST plays aggressively
slowly. SINGER glares, and the
ACCOMPANIST picks up the tempo.
SINGER sings.

SINGER

Granny made the best sweet cookies
They're for Santa Claus, she said
As she laid them out with a glass of milk
When Danny headed up to bed
And then the cookies said:

Eat me! Eat me!
I'm such a tasty treat!

Eat me! Eat me!
Delicious and so sweet!

As she sings, SINGER passes out
sugar cookies to people in the
front row.

Danny heard the calling cookies
The scent drifted up the stair
He tried to resist stealing Santa's treat
He decided to say a prayer
But the cookies did declare:

Eat me! Eat me!
With milk I'm awfully good!
Eat me! Eat me!
You know you really should!

Much to SINGER'S annoyance,
ACCOMPANIST varies the tempo
unexpectedly a number of times,
forcing SINGER to rush to catch up
or sing very slowly.

Danny gobbled up the cookies
And the milk he drank it all
He told himself Granny wouldn't know
Then his belly began to bawl
He could hear the cookies call:

You ate me! You ate me!
You've stolen Santa's gift!
You ate me! You ate me!
Your punishment will be swift!

SINGER acts out the last part of
the carol using the apple head
dolls as puppets. It's a little
scary.

Granny woke Christmas morning

To no presents under the tree
 Did someone steal Santa's cookies?
 Danny said it wasn't me
 But the cookies shouted with glee:

He ate me! He ate me!
 Young Danny is a thief!
 He ate me! He ate me!
 He's bad beyond belief!

Granny heard the crying cookies
 And killed Danny with one blow
 She chopped him up in pieces
 Then kneaded him into the dough

ACCOMPANIST holds the note and
 harmonizes on it for a while,
 forcing SINGER to hold it
 uncomfortably long.

SINGER
 (speaks)

Piu veloce! [faster]

SINGER

Now Danny's ghost sings low:

ACCOMPANIST plays very quickly,
 forcing SINGER wrap up the song
 very fast.

Beat me! Beat me!
 I stole a Christmas treat!
 Eat me! Eat me!
 Because now I'm very sweet!

SINGER
 (sinister)

Enjoy the *soetkoekies*. I'm sorry I didn't have enough for
 everyone. These people paid extra.

We always put cookies and milk out for Santa--it was a huge
 big deal and the tradition had to be done just right.

Three spritz cookies slightly overlapping on the plate, and the glass of milk three quarters full. Of course, after Mother discovered this charming carol, I was never tempted to sneak a cookie again. She disavowed Danny and Granny when I brought them up to her years later, refused to remember them at all, even tried to deny the carol when I found it in her scrapbook.

SINGER produces a red skirt and puts it on.

Thanksgiving was always very tense at our house, because Mom didn't allow herself to start celebrating Christmas until the last turkey bones were turned into soup (consequently everything about Thanksgiving was haphazard and rushed). On the day after, she woke up early, and if there was snow--there was always snow for Thanksgiving in those days--if there was snow, she'd harness Prince and Maisey to her sleigh. Yes, my mother--Mrs. Christmas--had a sleigh. A red one, with green trim and holly pattern seats she upholstered herself.

Then she'd deck herself out in this shawl, cap and skirt, fill a big canvas bag with all the candy, hard cookies, and other small treats she'd been preparing for months, and giddy-up herself into town.

SINGER produces a canvas bag.

All my friends--yes, I actually had friends, despite my notorious parentage--all my friends and their siblings knew to be ready for the arrival of Mrs. Christmas. She'd slide through the slush shouting "Merry Christmas! *God Jul! Fröliche Weinachten!*" Eventually she expanded her greetings to include "*Joyeux Noel!*" and "*Feliz Navidad!*" All the while throwing candy to the kids. It was mortifying. Once she tricked me into dressing as an elf and riding with her. By the end of that ride I learned to throw the candy really hard so my friends' parents complained and I wasn't invited to elf ever again. "Never mind," she said, "I'll go by myself."

Of course, on her sleigh ride she'd also sing carols in her penetrating soprano, especially ones with reindeer themes like *Rudolph* or sledding lyrics, like *Jingle Bells*.

Here's one not quite as familiar--I think of it as a mash-up of *The Twelve Days of Christmas* and *Sleigh Ride*, with all its sound effects. Be ready for a wild audience participation ride--it's interactive.

ACCOMPANIST plays a lively introduction, then SINGER sings.

SINGER

As we drive the team into town
The snow falls silently down

The lonely dog [barks] when we go by
As we drive the team into town
And the snow falls silently down

The winter wind [whistles] high in the sky
The lonely dog--

SINGER and ACCOMPANIST stop until the AUDIENCE barks, then resume.

SINGER

[barks] when we go by
As we drive the team into town
And the snow falls silently down

For each sound effect, SINGER makes the sound the first time it appears, then gestures to the audience to help her with subsequent incidents of each sound.

The driver [clucks] his tongue once or twice
The winter wind [whistles] high in the sky
The lonely dog [barks] when we go by
As we drive the team into town
And the snow falls silently down

The hooves [clop, clop] upon the ice
The driver [clucks] his tongue once or twice
The winter wind [whistles] high in the sky
The lonely dog [barks] when we go by
As we drive the team into town
And the snow falls silently down

The horses [blow] as we climb the ridge
 Their hooves [clop, clop] upon the ice
 The driver [clucks] his tongue once or twice
 The winter wind [whistles] high in the sky
 The lonely dog [barks] when we go by
 As we drive the team into town
 And the snow falls silently down

The sleigh runners [scrape] when we cross the bridge
 The horses [blow] as we climb the ridge
 Their hooves [clop, clop] upon the ice
 The driver [clucks] his tongue once or twice
 The winter wind [whistles] high in the sky
 The lonely dog [barks] when we pass by
 As we drive the team into town
 And the snow falls silently down

The carolers [laaa] a Christmas song
 The sleigh runners [scrape] when we cross the bridge
 The horses [blow] as we climb the ridge
 Their hooves [clop, clop] upon the ice

SINGER

The--

SINGER suddenly stops singing, and
 the ACCOMPANIST plays for only a
 bar or two more before stopping.

SINGER

Oh, my! What's next?

ACCOMPANIST stares coldly, not
 helping SINGER. If the AUDIENCE
 calls out "driver" or makes the
 clucking sound, SINGER thanks them
 and resumes the song. If not:

SINGER

I always slip up after the ice! The...the...driver!

SINGER gestures and ACCOMPANIST
 resumes playing.

SINGER

The hooves [clop, clop] upon the ice
 The driver [clucks] his tongue once or twice
 The winter wind [whistles] high in the sky
 The lonely dog [barks] when we pass by
 As we drive the team into town
 And the snow falls silently down

The whip goes [crack] as we race along
 The carolers [laaa] a Christmas song
 The sleigh runners [scrape] when we cross the bridge
 The horses [blow] as we climb the ridge
 Their hooves [clop, clop] upon the ice
 The driver [clucks] his tongue once or twice
 The winter wind [whistles] high in the sky
 The lonely dog [barks] when we pass by
 As we drive the team into town
 And the snow falls silently down

SINGER

Whew! That little brain teaser was written in 1952, during an especially goofy holiday decade that also produced *Santa Baby*, *Rockin' Round the Christmas Tree* and *Happy Birthday, Jesus*. But the silent snow is such a lovely image, especially after all that joyous cacophony.

SINGER takes off the cap, shawl and skirt and returns them to the box.
 SINGER pulls a choir robe out of the box and starts putting it on.

SINGER

One very cold winter, Mother sang so many carols in the sleigh that she not only lost her voice for three days, she also lost her sense of taste and her sense of smell, permanently. So she could never fully enjoy her crispy *krumkake* or fruitcake overloaded with candied citron, which made me feel kind of sad. Even worse, although her speaking voice came back, she lost her high notes and never sang soprano again. I think that was when she started saving carols so she wouldn't forget.

SINGER has trouble with the robe and gets it wrapped around her head, but keeps talking as she struggles. ACCOMPANIST does not help.

SINGER

Mother's preparations for Christmas--the summer baking, the sleigh ride candy distribution, the secret craft gifts--were all a prelude to her most glorious night of the year, Christmas Eve. For me, the dread and anxiety ratched up with every extra holiday choir rehearsal--by the way, choir was how I overcame my shyness.

SINGER is very entangled in the robe. It's worrisome. But not to the stone-faced ACCOMPANIST.

SINGER

Mother forced me to join the choir at Kandota Lutheran, and it turned out I had both a voice and an ear. Very quickly I was made assistant choir director and sometimes even conducted when Miss Speich was out sick. I studied music and acting in college and, well, here I am. I love singing, but most of all I love the audience--or at church, the congregation. Mom liked attention, and it seems that's a gene I inherited. She figured out what would flip that switch to convert the introvert. And I figured out--perhaps unconsciously--music was a way make her proud of me.

On her own, or perhaps with volunteer help from the AUDIENCE, SINGER frees her head and gets the choir robe on properly.

SINGER

I realize I'm speaking about Mother in both past and present tense. In many ways it feels like she's still here, watching, listening, singing in my head with the voice she lost on that cold sleigh ride.

(to the heavens)

Aren't you, Mother?

(to AUDIENCE)

But she passed away long ago, and I'll tell you about that in a little bit.

But first, the most embarrassing event of my entire life. It gets a little technical here--I'll have to explain the floorplan of Kandota Lutheran.

SINGER may walk the room in order to show what she's talking about. ACCOMPANIST takes advantage of SINGER'S distraction to consult their phone.

SINGER

The organ console was in a sort of pit at the end of the center aisle, right in front of the chancel where the altar was. On either side of the organ were the two halves of the choir pews, facing each other across the chancel. There was a passage on either side of the organ console that the choir used during the processional hymn to get to our pews. We'd split up, with half the sopranos, altos, tenors and basses going to either side, then climbing into their elevated pews, the sopranos on floor level, the altos on the next level, then tenors, with the basses at the top. Still with me?

At Christmastime on the congregation side of the choir pews they added two enormous candelabras with electric candles. The whole church loved those candelabras, the result of a legendary fund drive in the late 1950s.

The Christmas Eve service at Kandota Lutheran was the highlight of the church year, not just for Mrs. Christmas, but for everyone. I had persuaded Miss Speich to hire a string quartet, two violinists, a viola and a cello were arrayed around the console so Miss Speich--who played the organ as well as directed the choir--could conduct them. I was quite proud my idea had been accepted, and my mother was proud of me. She was for the first time paying almost as much attention to me as to Christmas. We were all ready for the best service ever--

SINGER sees ACCOMPANIST on their phone and stops. After a moment, ACCOMPANIST notices, but keeps texting.

SINGER

Did I mention [first name of ACCOMPANIST] is a composer? Very talented.

Rarely compensated and living in your parents' basement but very, very talented. In fact, along with all of Mother's carols from her scrapbook--

(starts gesturing with
scrapbook)

--I will be singing one of [first name of ACCOMPANIST]'s songs, a brand new Christmas carol. Very modern and slightly-abstract--but beautiful.

ACCOMPANIST finally puts down the phone and sits with folded arms.

SINGER

Including this--non-traditional--carol in the program required significant--negotiation--

As SINGER gestures with the scrapbook, a sheet falls out onto the floor. Without a pause, SINGER picks up the sheet, glancing at it as she starts to stuff it back into the scrapbook.

SINGER

--But I am delighted to provide a public forum for a young composer--

(pauses to look more closely
at the sheet)

--Whose work--

(pause)

--I admire--

SINGER stops talking and just reads the sheet. After a moment, she looks up.

SINGER

Well. This is very odd. Perhaps Mother is not merely watching and listening but also--

(holds out the sheet)

I have never seen this carol before in my life.

(reads from sheet)

The Dreaming Babe. Text by Birgitte K. Boye (1742 to 1824) translated by Carl Doving (1867 to 1937) with a tune by Johann Crüger (1598 to 1662). A carol that seems to have taken almost three hundred years to write.

SINGER goes to ACCOMPANIST and
places the sheet on the music rack.

SINGER

Apparently this is a song that must be sung.

ACCOMPANIST just stares at SINGER,
arms folded.

SINGER

An improvisation.

(ACCOMPANIST stares)

Yes, sight reading. I can stand here and we can read it
together.

(ACCOMPANIST stares)

Not instead of your piece--we'll do that, too--just *first*.
It's a very straightforward arrangement. In C, even, not a
single pesky sharp or flat.

ACCOMPANIST picks up phone and
starts texting. After a moment,
SINGER snatches the music and walks
away from the piano.

SINGER

Fortunately, the melody looks strong enough to hold up
without harmony.

(hopeful pause)

No accompaniment whatsoever.

(pause)

Never mind. I'm happy to do it myself.

(pause)

A capella.

(sings)

A baby dreams in Bethlehem
Of all his life will be
He came to Earth not to condemn
But to set the sinners free
To build a world for gentle lives
Where love's the only law
Where honesty and trust survives
And kindness without flaw

ACCOMPANIST stops texting.

A mother dreams in Bethlehem

About her infant boy
 And how the Holy Ghost came down
 To fill her life with joy
 But from her dream the mother wakes
 To her baby's gentle cry
 She kisses him to sleep again
 And hums a lullaby

ACCOMPANIST puts down the phone,
 possibly moved by the song.

Tonight we dream of Bethlehem
 And of the promise made
 When God upon this Earth did dwell
 So wise and unafraid
 To cleanse our hearts and save the world
 All evil to subdue
 This Christmas Eve we pray the dream
 Will at last come true

SINGER

Beautiful. Thank you, Mother. I wish we could have sung
 that together when you were still with us. I wonder how you
 found such an obscure little carol...

Sorry for the detour. I was telling you about the worst
 Christmas Eve ever. After a charming medley of carols, Miss
 Speich paused dramatically with her fingers above the keys,
 then plunged into her florid introduction to *O Come, All Ye
 Faithful*.

ACCOMPANIST plays an introduction
 that is florid but not too loud.

I had also persuaded her to let us sing the first verse in
 Latin, an extremely risky proposition for a Lutheran church
 in those days, borderline Papist. Miss Speich had rejected
 my suggestion of Gregorian chant--

(sings)

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.

(speaks)

Yes, it sounds Catholic, but it means "Where charity and love
 abide, God is there." It got to be sort of a thing--Mother
 had to intervene--and the Latin stanza of *Adeste Fidelis* was
 their version of a compromise.

ACCOMPANIST plays the last few bars
of the introduction more loudly,
then SINGER sings.

SINGER

*Adeste fidelis
Laeti triumphantes*

SINGER silences ACCOMPANIST with a
gesture and resumes her story,
walking through it.

SINGER

I was singing alto, so I was in the second wave of the
procession after the sopranos, and I could see the faces of
the congregation glowing back at us. Mother, the last of the
altos, was behind me in line, but I knew she was in rapture,
transported by the glory of it all.

SINGER sings as ACCOMPANIST plays.
They've obviously spent a lot of
time rehearsing this part.

SINGER

Venite, venite in Bethlehem!

SINGER processes as she speaks.

SINGER

Suddenly I saw the most awful thing. When the sopranos
reached the chancel, they found their usual path blocked by
the string quartet--they couldn't get around the organ to the
choir pews. But they didn't lose their heads, God bless
them, and the first two ladies on either side realized that
by turning sideways--

(demonstrates)

--They could slip through a tiny gap in their pew because it
was on the ground level.

(sings and demonstrates a
couple more times)

*Natum videte,
Regem angelorum*

SINGER

From midway down the aisle I watched in horror as the
sopranos--

(demonstrates)

--Ooched their way into the choir loft, with Mrs. Stone, our supreme soprano, awkwardly but without hesitation claiming her assigned spot at the end of the pew. I could see the altos, tenors and basses would not have that option since our pews were stacked on higher levels. Thinking quickly, I interrupted my singing to warn the altos next to and behind me:

(sings)

Venite, adoremus!

(shouts)

Go to the right! Pass it back!

(sings)

Venite, adoremus!

(shouts)

Go the left! Pass it back!

(speaks)

My emergency instructions worked, and each pair of altos disappeared down the hallways next to the chancel, then reappeared through doors on either side of the altar so they could get to their pews behind the sopranos. Everyone got the message.

Except my mother.

ACCOMPANIST continues playing
under, softly.

Mrs. Christmas, distracted by holiday ecstasy as she strode in her elegant choir robe toward the chancel, turned neither left nor right. She reached the organ, saw her way blocked, and decided to ooch into the soprano pew. Unfortunately, the soprano at the end was Mrs. Stone, who lived up to her name and refused to budge. The prominent seat at the congregation side of the pew was hers, had been for thirty years, and she was not about to give it up on this most blessed of all nights to a confused and out-of-order alto. Three times Mother tried to push her way into the pew, but Mrs. Stone actually gripped the railing to block her.

Mother was in a panic. The English verses were almost through, and the carol was about to revert to Latin for the final stanza. She could be stranded out in front of God and everybody! All by herself!

Then she saw the candelabrum.

Without thinking, she grabbed one of the horizontal supports and hoisted herself up. Then another. Hand over hand she climbed--in her choir robe and in full view of the entire congregation--up the wooden candelabrum which had never been designed to support the weight of an adult woman. Thank God the lights were electric and not real candles!

I was the first of the altos to enter the chancel and witnessed the worst sight an easily embarrassed teenager could imagine: my mother, perched high upon the candelabrum, singing away as if everything was normal while she hauled herself higher and higher:

(sings)

Venite, adoramus--

(speaks)

Finally, Mother climbed high enough for her weight to overwhelm the flimsy wooden candelabrum. With a grotesque crack, the wood splintered and Mom plummeted into the choir loft. Right into the alto pew. Exactly where she wanted to be. She got up and brushed herself off as the rest of the altos, tenors and basses filed in, kicking fragments of candelabrum aside while we finished singing like nothing was wrong:

(sings)

Dominum!

ACCOMPANIST stops playing.

SINGER

If I could have wished myself into Hell at that very moment, I would have gone gladly. My attempt at Christmas spirit evaporated, but as assistant choir director I was responsible for everyone else, so I soldiered on, pretending nothing had happened. So did the entire congregation. But for the rest of the service, if there was a reference in a scripture reading or the sermon to "the light coming down from above," a titter made its way around the sanctuary.

After the service, everyone in our family was quick to tease Mom or reassure her that no one had noticed, but I couldn't gin up the wherewithal to do either. In fact, I couldn't speak to Mother at all. For three weeks. Of course I was furious that she embarrassed the whole family, but mostly because Christmas was more important to her than us, than anything going on outside of Kandota Township.

She was living in the past, comforting herself with tradition, looking backward and inward instead of doing anything to fix the terrible problems of our world. She never voted, never read the newspaper because she was too busy making--decoupage and--and--applehead dolls!--I worked myself up into an angsty teen frenzy! Was that a sin? Is that why I hate Christmas? It was the grimmest holiday season we ever knew. Well, the grimmest up till then. I'm going to go a little off script here--

SINGER looks at ACCOMPANIST, who is glaring daggers.

SINGER

Well, maybe not. I do have something unscripted to tell you, but I also promised to sing [actor playing ACCOMPANIST's real name]'s new modernist carol. Is it all right if we do that now?

(ACCOMPANIST shrugs)

Of course it is. In fact, my little departure from prepared text will make even more sense after the carol.

SINGER gestures and ACCOMPANIST plays. The music is abstract, and the introduction may go on a while before SINGER actually sings. SINGER tolerates this, unmoving.

SINGER

Twelve twenty-one

(glissando up)

Seven sixteen

(glissando down)

Sixteen thirty-two

Nine fifteen eighteen

SINGER remains frozen for the next stanza as well.

SINGER

Twelve twenty-two

(glissando up)

Seven seventeen

(glissando down)

Sixteen thirty-two

Nine fifteen twenty-two

SINGER starts to move abstractly.

SINGER

Twelve twenty-three

(glissando up)

Seven seventeen

(glissando down)

Sixteen thirty-three

Nine fifteen twenty-nine

SINGER'S movements get a little bolder, still abstract.

SINGER

Twelve twenty-four

(glissando up)

Seven eighteen

(glissando down)

Sixteen thirty-three

Nine fifteen forty

SINGER'S movements become disturbing to ACCOMPANIST, who retaliates, perhaps with a surprise change to a higher key.

SINGER

Twelve twenty-five

(glissando up)

Seven eighteen

(glissando down)

Sixteen thirty-four

Nine fifteen fifty-five

More aggression between SINGER and ACCOMPANIST. A key change up every time from now until the end. Getting dangerously close to the top of SINGER'S vocal range. SINGER and ACCOMPANIST stay outwardly professional but are gunning for each other.

SINGER

Twelve twenty-six

(glissando up)

Seven eighteen

(glissando down)

Sixteen thirty-five

Nine sixteen fifteen

This is war.

SINGER

Twelve twenty-seven

(glissando up)

Seven nineteen

(glissando down)

Sixteen thirty-five

Nine sixteen thirty-eight

In the last stanza, ACCOMPANIST clearly wins, with SINGER'S voice cracking or some other flaw revealed. SINGER cannot let it be.

SINGER

Does anyone have the remotest idea of what that carol means? Anyone?

If anyone in audience knows the answer, SINGER acknowledges it but with great exasperation, then proceeds:

SINGER

Its title is *The Seven Days of Solstice*. Get it? Were you doing the math? You can't believe how hard that was to memorize with nothing but numbers.

(to ACCOMPANIST)

Would you like to explain it? No? Then I'll read the composer's own description:

(reads from a piece of paper)

The Seven Days of Solstice is among my most optimistic works, charting both musically and lyrically the incremental but inevitable number of minutes and seconds of daylight following the longest night of the year on December 21. The cyclical nature is echoed in the sequel, *The Seven Days of Solstice II*, which begins June 21, the longest day of the year, and moves from light to dark.

(stops reading)

Imagine a group of carolers bringing *that* to your porch on a frosty evening or worse yet to a nursing home!

Speaking of nursing homes, the Sarepta Home took very good care of Mother in the year she was there. The whole family was grateful.

(glances at ACCOMPANIST)

This is my improvisation.

Remember Mom's exacting tradition of the three homemade spritz cookies and the glass of milk three quarters full? The Christmas Eve Mom climbed the candelabrum, there were only two cookies. Ginger snaps. Store bought. I figured the incident at church distracted her, made her forget the details of her tradition. I let it go. I wasn't even speaking to her.

Over the next several months, I gradually warmed back up to Mother, but something had changed forever. Permanent embarrassment? Asserting my adolescent independence? Was I just sick of living with my parents? Or was she changing, too? She started forgetting more traditions.

Toward the end of July, we realized Mom hadn't done her usual holiday baking and freezing. When I pointed this out to her, asked if she wanted help, she looked surprised for a moment, then said "Never mind, I'll do it myself."

By the end of August she still hadn't started baking. She did try a new craft--Norwegian rosemaling--but I noticed when she tried to paint the fine lines her hand twitched and it took forever to do even a single flower. "There's plenty of time," she told me, "Christmas is months away."

I watched her more closely after that and saw more twitches and spasms but never said anything. None of us did.

That September, once school started, I was practicing on the piano--our family's great extravagance that Mother had insisted on years before--I was learning an alto aria from Bach's Christmas Oratorio--in German--when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Nothing's more irritating than being touched when you're trying to learn a new piece, especially when you're playing and singing at the same time. My reflex was to shrug the hand away, but I felt something desperate in the grip.

I stopped playing and turned to see Mother smiling at me. She gestured as if to say "keep playing," so I did. But I could feel her full weight in her hand. She was using me to steady herself, to hold herself up. But she never said a word. I finished the song and drove her into town to see the doctor.

Mother resisted, of course, but I could see something was wrong even if she wouldn't admit it. Our small-town doctor couldn't figure it out right away, but after many tests, he gave us the news. Huntington's Disease, which sometimes progresses rapidly. It's genetic.

Mom nodded, smiled, and said, "Mother had...never mind." That was the last time she spoke.

When Christmas came there were no crafts. The sleigh sat silent in the shed. We spent the week between holidays moving Mom into the Sarepta Home.

That's when I found her scrapbook and all the carefully labeled crafts squirreled away in the house. All of the things Mother didn't want to forget gathered in the months since she climbed the candelabrum. A very personal legacy. This was one of the boxes--

(pulls a small box from the larger one, reads small label)

It's dated from when I was eight years old. The label says: "My Greatest Gift."

(pulls out the moldy applehead doll)

Mom never saw another Christmas. Never sang another carol. The next autumn she slipped quickly away from us into another world as the days got darker and darker.

She often said "there's plenty of time," but...

(pauses--perhaps unnervingly long--to contemplate the doll)

Sorry! I never promised you the true meaning of Christmas, but I was sort of hoping we might find it accidentally. I apologize for getting a little too personal. Never mind, sorry.

(pause)

But what I wouldn't give to see Mom climb that candelabrum one more time.

SINGER gestures for the ACCOMPANIST to play, but the ACCOMPANIST isn't ready, has become wrapped up in the "improvised" story.

SINGER

Musica, per piacere. [music, please]. One last carol for Mother.

ACCOMPANIST takes a moment, then plays an introduction before SINGER sings.

SINGER

In a stable rude and chill
Mary watched as time stood still
With calm maternity
In her arms she bore the world
And held her breath till time unfurled
Into eternity

In the star-strewn sky above
Darkness duels with light
The dark is death,
The light is love
And saves us from the night
Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.

In a manger rough and cold
Despite the frankincense and gold

SINGER stops, forgetting the next line. ACCOMPANIST plays a few more bars stops, repeats, a musical encouragement.

SINGER

Oh, how funny! I--

ACCOMPANIST plays the line again.

SINGER

I can do it. I can do it myself.

(gathers herself, sings a
capella until ACCOMPANIST
joins in)

In a manger rough and cold

SINGER stops again, signals
ACCOMPANIST, who stops instantly.

SINGER

(speaks)

I'm sorry--I can't--

ACCOMPANIST, unbidden, plays the
line again, but SINGER leans
against the piano and does not
sing.

SINGER

[real name of ACCOMPANIST]--

ACCOMPANIST stops playing, and for
the first time, stands and speaks.

ACCOMPANIST

Mother--

(SINGER gestures impatiently)

Mom--

ACCOMPANIST goes to SINGER and
gently leads her to the piano
bench. ACCOMPANIST sits with
SINGER standing behind.
ACCOMPANIST plays and sings.

ACCOMPANIST

In a manger rough and cold
Despite the frankincense and gold

SINGER joins in the singing,
tentatively at first, slowly
recovering from the episode of
confusion.

ACCOMPANIST AND SINGER

(softly)

The baby Jesus cried
The musk of myrrh did fill the room
Reminding him of mortal doom
That cannot be denied

From that cold sky a gentle dove
Folds warmth within its wings
The cold is fear
The warmth is love
To each of us it brings
Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.

Together ACCOMPANIST and SINGER
gain strength in their duet. They
may even harmonize.

ACCOMPANIST AND SINGER

In a palace roared a king
That death the little child must sting
For the sin of being born
So Herod sent his soldiers out
With sword and knife and angry shout
Upon that Christmas morn

SINGER puts her hand on the
shoulder of ACCOMPANIST, supporting
herself through the vigorous final
chorus.

ACCOMPANIST AND SINGER

We hear today the shouting of
Coarse men and coarser kings
The roar is hate
But silence love
God's son sweet silence sings
Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.
Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.

End of Play