

LIFE ON THE MOON

BY

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SEMI-FINALIST IN SOUTHWEST THEATRE PRODUCTIONS' 2020 NEW
PLAY WITH A MALE LEAD COMPETITION

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PLACE:

The stage is the interior of the Rawleys' living room and kitchen. The kitchen contains a dining table with four chairs and a whiteboard on the wall. At the top of the whiteboard, the words 'VACATION SCHEDULE,' along with the date, are written. Below are several numbered events with a time beside them. The days and listed items change with the passage of time. The items that stay the same each day are '7:40am: Get Dressed, 7:50am: Brush Teeth, 8:00am: Breakfast, 8:30am: Meds, 12:30pm: Lunch, 6:15pm: Dinner, 8:30pm: Meds, 8:45pm: Bath, 10:00pm: Bedtime.'

The living room includes an undecorated Christmas tree and a TV with a VCR. Against the wall is a mantelpiece or bookshelf lined with photographs of the Rawley children. There seems a very conscious effort to distribute evenly the number of photos each kid appears within. Placed most prominently are Spencer's military headshot and a candid shot of Piper laughing.

TIME:

December 2013. Although it doesn't necessarily need to be this exact or even communicated to the audience, the days of the week might not align with their dates if it's changed (e.g. if this takes place in a different year, December 21st might not occur on a Saturday).

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

SPENCER, a twenty-year-old male soldier in the U.S. army.

PIPER, his eighteen-year-old sister with autism. She always wears at least one article of blue clothing, a watch, and a "Wander Responder" tracking bracelet. She also always keeps her hair tied and/or clipped back from her face.

HELEN, their mother and an engineer in her mid-fifties.

BRUCE, their father and Piper's full-time caregiver in his mid-fifties.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

All of the movies and books quoted within the script are in the public domain. Production companies should note, however, that while the film script of *It's a Wonderful Life* is a public domain work, the music is under copyright.

The gin rummy instructional video was made up by me, although there are an array of similar videos available on YouTube that can be used for sound design.

Regarding casting, I have no racial preferences. My preference is to find actors dedicated to and excited about this play, regardless of their ethnicities and/or if they look like blood relatives.

PRODUCTION HISTORY:

Life on the Moon received its professional debut at the Detroit Repertory Theatre from November 18th through December 18th, 2022. The production was directed by Leah Smith. The cast was as follows:

Spencer.....Dan Johnson
Piper.....Kelly Eubank
Helen.....Aimee K. Bryant
Bruce.....Peter Knox

Set design by Harry Wetzel; stage management by Jabriel Milner; costume design by Sandra Landfair Glover; lighting design by Dan Morency; music design by Damian Bullis;

sound design by Burr Huntington; fight choreography by Jen Pan and Joe Wright.

Life on the Moon also received development through workshops and a weeklong production run from the Gallatin Theatre Troupe at New York University (2014-2015) and a weeklong production run at Southeastern Louisiana University (2018).

DEDICATION:

For Myla Churchill, my former playwriting mentor. I never would have had the courage to tell this story without you.

ACT I

SCENE 1

(AT RISE: The top of the whiteboard reads, 'SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21ST.' The list of numbered events includes: '5:15pm: Spencer Comes Home' and '7:00pm: Wrap Christmas Presents.')

(PIPER sits in the middle of an elaborate play scheme in the living room. Toys are scattered over the floor and furniture, but in a deliberate manner.)

(SPENCER enters in a winter coat.)

SPENCER

Hey, Piper.

(Piper does not look up as she continues arranging toys.)

PIPER

Spencer will come home at 5:15 on the first day of your Christmas break from home school.

SPENCER

Yeah, I know – I'm home a little earlier than scheduled.

PIPER

Twelve minutes early.

SPENCER

Yeah. Well, hey, I saved you a peanut packet from the airline.

(He holds it out. Piper does not look up. Spencer returns the packet to his pocket.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

That's okay. It'll keep, if you want it later. I've got to unpack now, but I'll see you at dinner.

PIPER

Dinner's at 6:15 p.m., seventy-two minutes away.

SPENCER

I haven't been gone that long. I still know all our routines. But thanks for the reminder.

(He half-turns but then stops and looks back at Piper. Piper continues arranging her toys.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

Can I have a hug?

(Piper tenses her body. Spencer edges into the room, careful not to bump into any toys, and embraces the stiff Piper.)

PIPER

All done.

SPENCER

Yeah. Okay. See you in seventy-two minutes.

PIPER

Seventy-one minutes.

SPENCER

Right. Seventy-one. Silly Spencer.

PIPER

Silly Spencer.

(Spencer stands and picks his way back through the play scheme, but accidentally knocks over one of the toys. Piper still does not look up, but she immediately snaps at him.)

PIPER (cont'd)

(mimicking George
Bailey)

What is it you want, Mary?

SPENCER

It's okay – you're okay – see? It looks just like it did before.

PIPER

(getting louder)

What do you want? You want the moon?

SPENCER

(with practiced calm)

Lower your voice, everything's fine –

PIPER

(flapping hands)

Just say the word and I'll throw a lasso around it and pull it down.

SPENCER

Hey, Piper – let's tell a story.

(Piper stops yelling, but her hands keep flapping. The crisis has not yet hit, but they are teetering on the edge. Both Piper and Spencer are aware of this, and neither of them desire to hit breaking point.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

Once upon a time, Spencer came home from the army for Christmas and wanted to say hello to Piper. But Spencer is a silly guy and he knocked over one of Piper's toys. He didn't mean to, but accidents just happen sometimes – like when Alice made the Queen of Hearts angry, right? Remember how the Queen's face got red and she started yelling? She was angry like you are now. But Alice didn't mean to upset the queen, just like Spencer didn't mean to upset Piper – and everything worked out fine in the end. So then Spencer fixed the toy and Piper was all better. The end?

(Piper is flapping less now. She continues to recite It's a Wonderful Life, but more quietly.)

PIPER

Hey. That's a pretty good idea. I'll give you the moon, Mary.

(Spencer stands. The strain only shows upon his face now, after the crisis is averted.)

SPENCER

Yeah. I'd like that, Piper. I'd like it if you gave me the moon. Gravity just weighs us both down. I'll see you in seventy-nine – five – whatever minutes.

PIPER

Sixty-eight.

SCENE 2

(The family is in the kitchen. HELEN finishes cooking dinner. BRUCE makes Piper's dinner of bacon and vegetable chips. Spencer and Piper set the table.)

(As Helen and Spencer chat, twice or thrice, Piper slams down a glass or plate and then glances at Bruce, eager for an adverse reaction. Bruce, to Piper's disappointment, pretends not to notice, anticipating that to scold her will only make her increase the behavior.)

HELEN

But you don't have to notice the allusions to Walt Whitman, *Scarface*, *Rain Man*, or anything else –

SPENCER

Of course you don't have to, but doesn't knowing them make you respect Vince Gilligan all the more?

HELEN

If I were making a list of things that I most respect, allusions would come long after characters, cinematography –

SPENCER

It all contributes to *Breaking Bad* as a whole. It wouldn't be what it is if you removed any of those things.

HELEN

I would enjoy it just as much without the highbrow references.

SPENCER

Since when is *Scarface* highbrow?

HELEN

The particular sources don't matter – it's the whole concept of allusions that's highbrow.

SPENCER

I think you're just mad that you never get these 'highbrow' allusions until I explain them to you.

HELEN

(elbows him)

And I think your head has inflated since I last saw you.

(Once the table is set, Piper goes to the living room. She arranges her toys across the room as she eats. Spencer, Bruce, and Helen sit down at the dining table. The one vacant chair should be noticeable.)

(As he eats, Spencer folds his napkin horizontally, then vertically, repeating these motions until he is left with nothing but a tiny square. He then unfolds the napkin and begins the whole process again.)

(Up until she asks for pretzels, Piper's dialogue overlaps with the conversation that Helen, Bruce, and Spencer have. Whether these conversations are staggered or simultaneous, it should be evident that Piper does not wait for pauses in her family's conversation, and vice versa.)

PIPER

(announcer voice)

Hi, I'm Jim, and today I'm going to teach you all about gin rummy.

SPENCER

It's good to be back home. I've missed these family dinners.

BRUCE

There's no need to make fun, Spencer.

PIPER

So, you want to know all the tips, tools, and techniques needed to play a mean game of gin rummy?

SPENCER

I was being sincere –

BRUCE

Because I would hope you could appreciate the progress she's made in even being in the same vicinity as us during dinner.

PIPER

Well, look no further, chumps – or should I say, future champs! – because with my help, you'll soon be playing like a pro!

SPENCER

I do, Dad. It's like when I'd go over to a friend's house and the family'd sit down together . . . Well, I'd get a little jealous I didn't have that.

PIPER

Let's start with the basics.

SPENCER

It's nice having that in the army, too. Sitting down to meals at the same time as everyone else.

HELEN

Speaking of which – when do we get to hear about life at Fort Carson?

PIPER

The object of gin rummy is to collect a hand where most or all of your cards can be melded into sets or runs, and the point value of the remaining cards in your hand is low.

(Spencer is cheerfully evasive.)

SPENCER

What do you want to know?

HELEN

Whatever you want to tell us! You've been gone for six months.

SPENCER

Well, yeah, but it's not like we haven't talked.

PIPER

Now, you're probably sitting there thinking, 'What are all these runs and sets that this Jim guy is talking about?'

SPENCER

I've kept you pretty informed.

BRUCE

There's only so much you can tell us during a weekly call. I'm sure there were some things you skipped over.

PIPER

A run consists of three or more cards of the same suit in consecutive order, such as this here three, four, and five of spades.

SPENCER

Sure, but there isn't much to say about army living. Life there is all about routines, not having a bunch of outrageous stories to tell your loving parents!

PIPER

And a set is three or four cards of the same rank, such as the four queens or three sixes that I have displayed here.

HELEN

We'll give you time to think. But by tomorrow morning, you should have a whole bunch of stories ready to go.

SPENCER

Yikes – sounds like homework.

PIPER

A card can only belong to either a run or a set.

BRUCE

Well, since you won't talk about yourself, how are Marcus and Terrence doing? Have you guys stayed in touch?

SPENCER

Yeah, we Skype now and then. They're good – just finished their winter semesters –

PIPER

(normal voice)

Do you want some pretzels?

(Helen begins to rise from her chair.)

BRUCE

No, sit down. She can do this herself.

(Helen sits. Spencer begins to systematically rip his napkin into strips, tearing along his previous fold marks.)

BRUCE (cont'd)

Piper, if you would like something, you can come in here nicely and ask.

(Piper marches into the kitchen.)

BRUCE (cont'd)

Yes, Piper?

PIPER

Do you want some pretzels?

BRUCE

No, I do not want some pretzels.

(Piper fiddles with her tracking bracelet.)

PIPER
Do I want some pretzels?

BRUCE
Do you?

PIPER
Yes.

BRUCE
Great! Then I'll go get you some. Thank you for asking so nicely. Could you bring me your bowl?

PIPER
(tensely)
No.

BRUCE
(chuckles)
Alright – we won't push it tonight.

(Bruce fills a bowl with gluten-free pretzels.)

SPENCER
(to Helen)
So – did you make it through *Dexter* yet?

HELEN
No. I made it through season four before needing a break.

SPENCER
Aw, c'mon, Mom – how could you stop there?

HELEN
That season finale was too emotional for me.

SPENCER
But all those emotions should propel you to find out what happens next – not abandon the show.

HELEN
I'm not abandoning it. I just need time to recover –

BRUCE
(to Piper)
Here you go.

(Piper grasps the bowl but Bruce does not let go.)

PIPER
 (deliberately testing
 him)

Thank you, Peter Pan!

(Spencer chokes back a laugh. Bruce waits patiently. Piper, disappointed at the lack of reaction, relents.)

PIPER (cont'd)

Thank you, Dad.

BRUCE

You're quite welcome.

(Piper goes back to the living room. Bruce sits back down at the table.)

(Piper's dialogue about gin rummy overlaps with the rest of the family's conversation.)

PIPER

Now that we've discussed the rules of gin rummy, let's move on to some fierce, fun, and fresh strategies.

SPENCER

So we've gone back to Peter Pan, huh? Man – I haven't been called Pan or Hook since she was seven or eight. What happened to calling everyone the Queen of Hearts?

HELEN

Oh, we left her behind around four months ago. Suddenly she preferred a chapter of *Peter and Wendy* at bedtime instead.

PIPER

Our basic strategy is to form melds, and to get rid of high, unmelded cards.

HELEN

Bruce . . . Bruce, there was no need to snap.

BRUCE

Snap? I didn't snap – I was perfectly patient with her.

HELEN

I meant at me, Bruce.

(Spencer begins to rip the napkin strips into tiny squares.)

PIPER
(more loudly)

There are thirty-two possible melds of three of a kind, and forty-four possible three-card melds of the same suit.

BRUCE
I didn't mean to snap – but Piper's got to learn how to do things for herself, and she can't do that if she's being coddled all the time.

PIPER
So your odds are far better if you try for a three-card meld of the same suit rather than a three-card meld of the same number.

HELEN
Are you suggesting I don't know how to act around my daughter?

BRUCE
No – I'm saying that, if she's ever going to have a successful future, we both have to start –

HELEN
So you're suggesting I don't want what's best for her?

BRUCE
Would you stop putting words in my mouth?

(Piper is still arranging her toys and eating pretzels, but her body begins to rock.)

PIPER
(tone of command)
Mom and Dad are happy!

BRUCE
We're not immortal, Helen. I'd like to take care of her forever too, but I've recognized that's impossible –

HELEN
Right – and meanwhile, I live in a dreamworld to hide from the shock of my own mortality –

PIPER
Do you want Mom and Dad to be happy?

BRUCE
We'd intended to have her finances, her job, her ability to care for herself all set by the time she turned eighteen –

HELEN
It isn't for a lack of trying that we don't –

BRUCE

– because she can't set it up herself, and doesn't that scare you? – to know if we don't do this, no one will?

PIPER

(louder)

Excuse me, please, I'm sorry, the yelling is all done now!

HELEN

And we are doing it – this isn't a single-parent household, and I have as much of a right as you to raise our daughter –

BRUCE

You aren't with Piper twenty-four-seven the way I am, which means you persistently misunderstand –

(Piper hurls one of her toys across the room. Bruce and Helen fall silent.)

PIPER

IT'S TIME FOR MOM AND DAD TO BE HAPPY!

HELEN

Yes, Piper – we're happy. Mom and Dad sometimes raise their voices when they're tired. But we're happy. We're fine.

(Piper resumes her play. Bruce stands and clears the table. When he reaches Helen's place, she touches his elbow. Bruce sighs and wraps his free arm around her shoulders, and she presses her face into his chest. They have such arguments too often to find verbal apologies useful.)

(Spencer goes into the living room, his napkin scraps held loosely in his fist. Helen and Bruce clear the table and go off-stage.)

SPENCER

You okay, Piper?

PIPER

Yes.

SPENCER

Good. I still have the airline peanuts, if you want them. Or do you not like peanuts anymore, either? Did peanuts go the way of Alice in Wonderland?

PIPER

We mentioned before that the opponent has the option to lay off some of his deadwood cards on the other player's melds.

SPENCER

Are you saying that airline peanuts are like deadwood cards? – that I should get rid of them?

PIPER

But if the knocker is presented a gin hand, the opponent is not allowed to lay off cards.

SPENCER

What am I talking about? I'm the one who makes too much meaning out of everything. Silly Spencer.

PIPER

Silly Spencer.

(Spencer's eyes catch upon the family photographs. As Piper monologues, he moves towards the mantel and picks up his army photo.)

PIPER (cont'd)

You might be surprised to learn that, despite all these rules, there are possible game play variations. These variations should be decided on amicably before the game –

(Spencer slams the photo facedown upon the mantel.)

PIPER (cont'd)

UH OH!

SPENCER

No. Leave it. That's where it belongs.

(Even as he speaks, Piper bolts up and rights the photo.)

PIPER

All better.

(She turns to Spencer as though for confirmation, but her eyes stay on his photograph.)

PIPER (cont'd)

(mimicking Spencer)

Good job, Piper: You fixed Spencer's military photo!

SPENCER

Sure. Good job.

PIPER

(command)

Spencer is happy.

SPENCER

Yeah. I'm happy.

(Piper hovers, unconvinced.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

I'm fine, Piper, don't worry.

(He reaches out as though to touch her shoulder, but Piper returns to her spot upon the floor before he can reach her.)

(Bruce enters.)

BRUCE

Ready to wrap some presents, Piper?

PIPER

You will wrap presents at seven p.m., nine minutes away.

BRUCE

You're right: that is what your schedule says. But if we start earlier, then we can finish earlier, too.

PIPER

(after considering
this)

What do we need?

BRUCE

Excellent question. Let's look at your picture chart.

(Bruce shows her the picture chart on his cellphone. Piper looks, then exits. Spencer takes the phone and scrolls through the steps.)

SPENCER

There's no step for cutting the wrapping paper – shouldn't that come first?

BRUCE

I cut it up beforehand. Using scissors is another skill we're working on, but I don't want to overwhelm her with too many challenges at once.

Fair enough.

SPENCER

(Piper returns with a box, roll of tape, and sheet of wrapping paper pre-cut to fit the box.)

BRUCE

Nice job getting those things by yourself.

PIPER
(reading off phone)

Step one: place box on paper.

(Piper only performs each step after she has announced it.)

BRUCE

That's right. Great start.

PIPER

Step two: fold one side of paper up and tape.

(Piper struggles with this step.)

BRUCE

Remember the hand placement we talked about? Use one hand to hold the wrapping paper against the box, and the other to get the tape.

(With great concentration, Piper follows Bruce's advice.)

(Helen enters the living room.)

(The following exchange between Helen and Spencer overlaps with the dialogue between Bruce and Piper.)

HELEN

How about a match of gin rummy?

SPENCER

I thought we usually played after Piper's meds - ?

PIPER

Meds are at 8:30, ninety-five minutes away.

HELEN

Yes, you're right, Piper.

BRUCE

Nice job! I know that was a real challenge for you, and I appreciate how calm you stayed.

PIPER

Step three: turn box one hundred and eighty degrees.

HELEN

(to Spencer)

Her new med regimen makes her more tired than the old one. So I have a window of free time now to spend with you.

PIPER

Step four: fold other side of paper up and tape.

HELEN

But I know travel days can be tiring, so I'd understand if you didn't feel up to -

SPENCER

Of course I want to play. I wouldn't be a part of the Rawley family if I didn't love routines, now would I?

(Helen and Spencer retrieve a deck of cards and set up the game at the kitchen table.)

(While they play gin rummy, Spencer realizes that he's still clutching the napkin scraps in his fist. He glances around at his family to see if they have noticed. They haven't.)

BRUCE

I like how you are using both hands at the same time to do different tasks. I know that isn't easy for you.

HELEN

Now, I feel that it's only fair to warn you: I've gotten very good at this game since you were last here.

SPENCER

You've been practicing without me? How could you do such a thing?

PIPER

Step five: press sides of wrapping paper down against edge of box.

HELEN

Was there ever a rule that I couldn't do such a thing?

SPENCER

In the Rawley rulebook, yes.

PIPER
(mimicking Bruce)

GENTLY, Piper.

BRUCE
(laughs)

That's right – gently. We don't want to tear the wrapping paper the way we did last time.

HELEN
You could've been practicing gin rummy too instead of rotting your brain with TV all the time.

PIPER
Step six: fold one side of paper into triangle shape.

SPENCER
Excuse me: I actually tend to be pretty busy with, you know, protecting our country.

HELEN
Excuses, excuses.

PIPER
Step seven: press triangle shape flat against box and tape.

(Spencer thrusts the napkin scraps on the ground. No one notices.)

HELEN
Don't be such a premature sore loser.

SPENCER
Oh, don't worry: I still plan, like always, to wipe our gin rummy floor with you.

BRUCE
You're doing super. Just six more steps to go – and then we can wrap another present!

SCENE 3

(The whiteboard reads, 'SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22ND.' The list of numbered items includes: '2:45pm: Decorate Christmas Tree.')

(Piper and Spencer sit in the living room watching A Farewell to Arms. As the movie plays, Piper and Spencer quote the dialogue. Piper's tempo and pitch are closely matched to Lieutenant Henry's; Spencer also has good tempo, though his female voice is very unnatural and high-pitched. He is having fun.)

SPENCER

Oh, darling . . . I'm going to die. Don't let me die.

(Imitating the film, Spencer clasps one of Piper's hands inside his own, but Piper jerks away, so Spencer instead clasps his own hands.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

Take me in your arms, hold me tight. Don't let me go.

PIPER

Cat!

SPENCER

It's dark out there alone. I don't want to leave you anymore. I've been alone so much.

PIPER

You can't die. You're too brave to die. You're a fine girl. A brave girl.

(During Piper's line, Bruce enters carrying a large box of Christmas decorations. Spencer helps him set the box down.)

SPENCER

I forgot how much Christmas junk we have.

BRUCE

Actually, there's a whole 'nother box of junk on the way.

(Bruce exits. Piper rewinds the VHS player.)

She still speaks in Lieutenant Henry's voice, but more sharply.)

PIPER

You can't die. You're too brave to die. You're a fine girl. A brave girl.

SPENCER

Oh, sorry -

(He returns to his seat.)

SPENCER (cont'd)
(mimicking Catherine)

Yes - I am a brave girl.

PIPER

Whatever happens, you'll not be afraid.

SPENCER

I'll not be afraid.

PIPER

We've never been apart. Really. Not since we met.

SPENCER

Not since we met.

PIPER

We never can be.

SPENCER

Never parted.

PIPER

In life and in death. Say it, Cat!

SPENCER

In life and in death, we'll never be parted.

(Spencer dramatically pretends to die while Piper hits the rewind button and begins to watch the entire film backwards. The whir of the outdated VCR is audible.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

Right. No tragic deaths for us - just the prelude.

(Bruce returns carrying another box.)

BRUCE

Well, it's a nicer version of the story, the way Piper views it.

SPENCER

Not really. It's obvious that Catherine's on her death bed. And even if she did have a miraculous recovery, who's to say the love between her and Henry would've lasted?

BRUCE

My son, the eternal optimist.

SPENCER

Hey, pessimists live longer and happier lives – they're not constantly disappointed.

BRUCE

That's a bleak outlook.

SPENCER

I'd rather call it realistic.

(Spencer begins hanging ornaments on the tree.)

BRUCE

Piper? You want to help us decorate the Christmas tree?

PIPER

No, Mr. Smee.

(Bruce clears his throat.)

PIPER (cont'd)

No, Dad.

BRUCE

That's okay. Thanks for addressing me so politely. Spencer, why are you putting the ornaments on first?

SPENCER

Oh.

BRUCE

The lights go on before everything else, remember?

SPENCER

Yeah – just spaced out . . . But does it really matter? Everything's going on the tree eventually.

BRUCE

There's no need to get defensive. I'm just trying to help.

SPENCER
Yeah, Dad, so am I.

(Spencer takes the ornaments off the tree. Spencer and Bruce proceed to decorate the tree with lights and ornaments as they talk.)

SPENCER (cont'd)
So, how about those lights shaped like Mickey Mouse heads? Where'd they go?

BRUCE
Those old things? But half of them have shorted out.

SPENCER
It's a sentimental thing. We've had those lights since I was – what? – six or seven?

(Piper, who has not appeared to be listening to this exchange, chimes in.)

PIPER
Target on Maple Street, November 1999, priced at \$25.99.

SPENCER
Right. So I was about six.

BRUCE
So my pessimistic son is also a romantic?

SPENCER
I guess so.

BRUCE
Seems a little contradictory to ridicule happy endings while getting sentimental over broken objects.

SPENCER
All I was trying to say about *Farewell to Arms* is that, even if you cut it off early, that doesn't mean the characters' lives just stop. It doesn't mean their ever-after, against all odds, can still be a happy one.

BRUCE
But wouldn't it be nice to believe that it could be?

SPENCER
Letting yourself believe that only makes the realization that it couldn't be all the worse.

BRUCE
Okay – but cherishing broken Christmas lights . . .?

SPENCER

Is completely different. I can be nostalgic about the past without being unrealistic about the future.

BRUCE

I threw out the Mickey lights last year, Spencer.

SPENCER

Oh – that's fine.

BRUCE

I'm sorry. I didn't realize how much they meant to you.

SPENCER

Don't worry about it. They're just lights.

BRUCE

I could run by Target this afternoon and see what's left in their Christmas section –

SPENCER

Pretty sure they discontinued the Mickey lights.

PIPER

In 2005.

BRUCE

Then I'll look at what's being offered on eBay –

SPENCER

Seriously, don't sweat it. We have other lights.

BRUCE

Okay. If you're sure.

SPENCER

Yeah. I am.

BRUCE

So – just the blue lights or should we add some red?

PIPER

Blue.

SPENCER

Of course, blue. That was a pretty silly question, Dad.

BRUCE

Oh, well. That's my job in this house – to ask silly questions.

SPENCER

And Piper's to correct us all.

BRUCE
So - speaking of silly questions -

SPENCER
(laughs)
Uh oh.

BRUCE
When are you going back to Fort Carson?

SPENCER
Oh - not sure . . .

BRUCE
When you get a chance, can you look that up? We need to plan if me or your mom'll take you to the airport -

SPENCER
Yeah - well, I haven't bought my ticket but when I do -

BRUCE
I thought you'd told us you were going to buy a ticket months ago.

SPENCER
Yeah, it slipped my mind, but I'll do it when we're done -

BRUCE
When are you to report back?

SPENCER
Sometime next month.

BRUCE
Aren't you given exactly thirty days leave a year?

SPENCER
I am. I just don't remember right now how many days I've got left.

BRUCE
Airline prices are going to skyrocket any day now if they haven't already -

SPENCER
I know - I didn't mean to wait until this late, but . . .

BRUCE
Well - you don't have to look so remorseful. It's not the end of the world.

SPENCER
Thanks for confirming that - I wasn't sure.

BRUCE

You can check flight prices when we're done decorating.

SPENCER

Yeah, and I'll get my ticket earlier next time. I just haven't been thinking straight lately. The past few months have been stressful.

BRUCE

But you must find ways to relieve stress even while on duty.

SPENCER

Oh, of course.

(Spencer launches into the following story with relish, as though he has anticipated its telling for years.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

All right, so first: let's set the scene. On my floor, we've all got roommates, but we still share showers with everyone else, right? And my roommate would always leave his shampoo in the showers, even though anything left there would be stolen. "It's a communal space, sure, but there's no communal belongings, and people gotta learn their lesson!"

(Piper begins to rock. Neither Bruce or Spencer notice.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

My roommate had no idea how to teach that lesson, though. So I suggested, "How about you pop some Nair in your shampoo bottle so we can catch the culprit?" Innocent 'til proven guilty, right?

(The pace of Piper's rocking increases.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

So, we went down to the commissary for shampoo and Nair, mixed 'em together, then put the rigged shampoo in the gang showers. Next day, this guy on our floor, Mike – real preppy guy with this thick crop of blonde hair – comes into the mess hall with all of his hair gone – including his eyebrows! Bald as a newborn – worse! – as a stick cartoon character!

(Spencer and Bruce both break out laughing harder than the story calls for.)

SPENCER (cont'd)
(choking on laughter)

And I said, "Mike, are you trying to start a new trend?" And Frank was all, "Wow, that new Suave shampoo sure does the trick!" Mike tried to laugh it off, but he was pretty humiliated, and so Frank was vindicated –

BRUCE

Wait – is Frank your roommate now? I thought you were rooming with Brody?

(Spencer is still laughing, but something in his face instantly disengages from the conversation. Piper begins to rock so severely that her head smacks the floor.)

SPENCER

No. Frank's my roommate now.

BRUCE

Oh. Well, great story. Reminds me of my years in a frat. We were a bunch of idiots – but we were still brothers.

SPENCER

Right.

(Piper screams, drawing the attention to her. Bruce rushes over to crouch beside her. Spencer and Bruce behave with practiced calm to conceal their anxiety throughout the meltdown, although Spencer at first can only watch with dawning awareness.)

BRUCE

Piper – Piper, tell me what you want. I'm here. I'm listening to you.

(He puts his hands on her shoulders but she slaps him away.)

BRUCE (cont'd)

I know you are unhappy, Piper. You need to tell me why so that I can make it better.

(Piper launches across the room towards Spencer. Bruce places himself between Spencer and Piper.)

PIPER

WHATEVER HAPPENS, YOU'LL NOT BE AFRAID, SPENCER!

(Piper tries to get around Bruce to Spencer, but Bruce blocks her. She hits Bruce repeatedly.)

SPENCER

Dad, it's okay –

BRUCE

I see you're upset. You're shaking and you're yelling. I know that you're angry.

PIPER

WE'VE NEVER BEEN APART. REALLY. NOT SINCE WE MET, SPENCER.

SPENCER

Dad – stop – it's me she wants to talk to –

BRUCE

Are you upset that I was not paying attention to you? I am sorry about that, and I am paying attention now –

PIPER

WE NEVER CAN BE, SPENCER!

(Piper head-butts Bruce. He stumbles backwards, knocks into Spencer, and Spencer hits the tree. The tree topples.)

(Spencer steps around his father and faces Piper in a defensive stance as she continues to flail. Bruce watches closely. Piper is crying.)

PIPER (cont'd)

In life and in death. Say it, Spencer.

SPENCER

In life and in death, we'll never be parted. What is it that you want, Piper?

PIPER

You want – you want – you want more VHS tapes!

SPENCER

Sure, I can go get different ones from your room –

PIPER

You *don't* want more VHS tapes!

SPENCER

That's fine. You don't have to have more.

PIPER

You want your toy horses!

SPENCER

Great, I'll go grab -

PIPER

NO! IS IT TIME FOR A SNACK?

SPENCER

If you're hungry, then I can get you some pretzels -

PIPER

NO THANK YOU, CAPTAIN HOOK.

(She kicks Spencer in the shins. Bruce jumps forward but Spencer gestures for him to stay back.)

SPENCER

I'm sorry, Piper. I know how hard it is for you to not be able to say what you really mean.

(He puts out his hands. Piper latches onto them and squeezes hard. Spencer grimaces but does not pull away. Slowly Piper stops crying.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

Hey . . . it looks like you finished watching *Farewell to Arms* on rewind - so how about we watch the end of the film again? Your end, I mean.

PIPER

Yes.

BRUCE

I'll set it up.

(Bruce fast-forwards the film to the start of the scene. Piper returns to the TV. Within seconds, she seems fine.)

(Bruce crosses back to Spencer. Both are weary. Even if accustomed to such episodes, they do not recover as fast as Piper.)

SPENCER

You okay?

Of course. BRUCE

Are you sure? SPENCER

I wouldn't say that I was if I wasn't. BRUCE

I'm just making sure - SPENCER

I know. I'm sorry. Are you okay? BRUCE

Always. SPENCER

(Silence. Bruce raises his arms. Spencer thinks for a moment that Bruce is going to embrace him, but Bruce is only righting the Christmas tree. Spencer helps him. If any ornaments or lights have fallen out of place, they should also fix these.)

So - who's ready to hang up the stockings? SPENCER (cont'd)

SCENE 4

(The whiteboard reads, 'MONDAY, DECEMBER 23RD.')

(Spencer and Helen are in the kitchen baking Christmas desserts. Their conversation remains fairly light-hearted until the subject of the future starts to surface.)

SPENCER

But you're missing the point — all the *Mission Impossible* movies are supposed to be similar. They have a formula, and it's a good one, so there's no reason to change it.

HELEN

I'm tired of all these movies with explosions. And I'm tired of Tom Cruise, for that matter.

SPENCER

Well, again — he's hit on a formula that works, so why change it?

HELEN

I didn't say he should change it. But I shouldn't have to suffer through all of Cruise's explosion-films —

SPENCER

I think you mean action films.

HELEN

— just because of this 'successful formula.'

SPENCER

There's a reason he's won several Golden Globes.

HELEN

I know. You'll be proud to know I did finally rewatch *Rain Man*.

SPENCER

It's about time! That's a fantastic film.

HELEN

It is — but incredibly hard to watch.

SPENCER

I know. I get this awful anxiety every time I watch it — will they get off the road in time for *Jeopardy*? Can they find any green jello in the middle of nowhere? And let's not even talk about the airport scene . . .

HELEN

And the film was different than I remembered. Or . . .

SPENCER

It looks different now than before you had Piper?

HELEN

I knew it would. Just not in what ways.

SPENCER

Right. I'm sure. But I'm glad you gave it another watch.

HELEN

And I'm glad that I never have to watch it again.

SPENCER

Hey, what happened to never say never?

HELEN

Did I ever say that?

SPENCER

I don't know – seems like the kind of thing a mom would say. Or at least your Classic Movie Mother.

HELEN

Oh, excellent – my own son has reduced me to a cliché.

SPENCER

Sorry. So – apart from criticizing Tom Cruise – what've you been doing the past six months?

HELEN

Oh, the usual – constantly changing from my engineer-hat to my mother-hat and back again – but you know all my routines.

SPENCER

I'm sure you've got something to tell me about.

HELEN

Well, if you really want to hear about the problematic subsonic flow speed of one of our new commercial aircrafts –

SPENCER

Uhm – I'll pass, thanks.

HELEN

That's what I thought.

SPENCER

I mean, I'm glad you're enthusiastic, but you sound like you're speaking another language when you talk about that stuff.

HELEN

I am enthusiastic about 'that stuff.' Which is fortunate, given that I'm never going to be able to retire.

SPENCER

Let's give 'never say never' a try.

HELEN

Piper's still going to need us for a while, so I have to stay employed.

SPENCER

I'm sorry.

HELEN

Don't be. I'm not upset about it. I wouldn't know what to do without my job.

SPENCER

How about take some time to yourself for once?

HELEN

People lose so much of their purpose when they leave their jobs – mortality rates are much higher among seniors who've retired than those who continue to work, you know –

SPENCER

Don't recite abstract things like that –

HELEN

How are statistics abstract?

SPENCER

– both you and Dad, you've got so much on your plates – I ought to be here, doing more –

HELEN

Stop. Stop right there. We've talked about this, Spencer.

SPENCER

Except we haven't, because every time I bring this up, it becomes this diversion about choices and –

HELEN

Your father and I have already had our youths and our freedoms – we want you to have the same.

SPENCER

And I appreciate that, but we need to be able to talk about this now before you're – gone, or can't communicate –

HELEN

We want you to make your decisions without any thought for us, like any other twenty-year-old.

SPENCER

I do make my own choices – but I also have to always consider how my choices affect me and Piper's future –

HELEN

Your future and Piper's are not intertwined.

SPENCER

I'm going to be in her life much longer than you or Dad will be.

HELEN

Yes – but we won't allow her to become your burden.

SPENCER

She's not a burden, she's my sister – but she is going to be my responsibility one day –

HELEN

We're arranging her job, her living situation, and her finances now so you don't have to down the road –

SPENCER

Please listen, Mom. I would like – I am choosing to be part of all these decisions starting now. I'm not in the army anymore.

(A long silence.)

HELEN

I don't understand.

SPENCER

What's not to understand? I left the army – I wanted to leave and so I left. Why aren't you saying anything?

HELEN

Because I want you to say something.

SPENCER

I am – but you don't seem to believe any of it.

HELEN

I know you would never lie to me.

SPENCER

That's not the same thing.

HELEN

What is it you want me to say?

SPENCER

I don't have a set reply . . . I've wanted to tell you since I got back. Before then. But I didn't know how to tell you, or how you'd respond, or how I wanted you to respond –

HELEN

But it wasn't like this?

SPENCER

Maybe not. I don't know. So? – are you going to offer an opinion?

HELEN

I can't offer an opinion on what I don't understand.

SPENCER

What don't you understand?!

HELEN

Spencer – I know that you cannot just up and leave the army – not by choice, anyway.

(Spencer rubs his nose.)

SPENCER

I guess I'd hoped you wouldn't know that. Well – you'll want to know why I was discharged now, huh?

HELEN

Only if you want to tell me.

SPENCER

Don't – don't do that – all that 'I do if you want to' shit when you already have a fixed agenda –

(Helen reaches out as if to touch him, but Spencer jerks away before she can.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

No – that isn't – I'm sorry.

(Spencer remains tense, but resumes their baking and encourages Helen to do the same, perhaps nudging a utensil or bowl into her hands. Helen takes what Spencer gives her, but does not immediately return to their food prep.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

I was discharged because of a 'personality disorder.'

HELEN

What does that even mean?

SPENCER

Oh, it's just a fancy way of saying that I'm not cut out for the army and they don't want to pay any of my benefits.

HELEN

But – why you?

SPENCER

Why not me? I have difficulty respecting authority, trouble completing tasks, struggle to keep my temper in check –

HELEN

None of this sounds like you.

SPENCER

Don't overreact –

HELEN

Overreact? Oh, no, I believe I'm underreacting. Do they honestly think they can get away with discharging you on whatever they can pull out of their asses?

SPENCER

They did have reasons for kicking me out –

HELEN

Completely invalid ones.

SPENCER

Mom –

HELEN

No, don't object – I know you better than a bunch of strangers.

SPENCER

Well, to be fair, those 'strangers' have spent more time with me these past two years than you have –

HELEN

You're my son. This isn't right. As soon as Christmas is over, I'm going to place some calls.

SPENCER

What? – no! Mom, c'mon –

HELEN

I'm no stranger to fighting for what's right when it comes to my children.

SPENCER

You don't need to make any calls – who you even think you'd talk to is beyond me –

HELEN

I'll figure it out. I won't just stand by and watch while you're undermined by this corrupt, self-indulgent –

SPENCER

Mom – Mom! There's nothing you can do about my discharge. And even if there were, it'd be me that does it, not you.

HELEN

I didn't mean that I would go over your head – I meant that we would do it together.

SPENCER

But this is not your fight. It's mine.

HELEN

There's no shame in getting help from other people, when you need it.

SPENCER

Well, I don't need it.

HELEN

Okay. So, what are you going to do?

SPENCER

I – nothing. Nothing at all.

HELEN

You can't let people get away with injustice, Spencer –

SPENCER

It's not an injustice – it's all fine. I was acting out. I'd realized the army wasn't for me, and once I realized that, my behavior – changed.

HELEN

I thought you love being in the army.

SPENCER

I do – did – but there are other things I can love.

HELEN

You know I will always support you in whatever you pursue – but if you're saying that out of guilt, or a sense of neglected responsibility towards Piper –

*(With a movement like a spasm,
Spencer jerks around, knocks over a
chair, and yells.)*

SPENCER

Just because this entire house revolves around Piper doesn't mean my life revolves around her too!

(The tension in Spencer's body recoils inside him as quickly as it uncoiled. He rights the chair.)

PIPER

(off-stage)

What's wrong? Don't worry, everything's fine, Piper!

HELEN

Yes, everything is fine. Spencer accidentally knocked over a chair. But we are fine.

PIPER

(off-stage)

Spencer is happy! Spencer, you are feeling happy!

(When Spencer does not seem able to speak, Helen answers.)

HELEN

Yes – yes, Spencer is happy. Don't worry.

(They both wait to see if Piper is still upset, but Piper has gone silent and so is, presumably, content.)

SPENCER

(quieter)

I didn't want to leave for her. I wanted to leave for me. Okay?

HELEN

Okay, Spencer.

SPENCER

You see – I joined up with the army because I wanted to do some good. But – and I refused to see it for a long time – some people don't enlist to do good. They enlist to conceal their cruelty. Once you're part of the military, you can get away with anything so long as it's hidden – so long as the military's image continues to be nice and shiny.

HELEN

I'm afraid you've lost me, Spencer.

SPENCER

I mean – the routine tortures that go on in military prisons, or the undocumented deaths you only find out about on WikiLeaks, and that's just – the hypocrisy. I can't stand it.

HELEN

And did you . . . Are these things you only learned about after you enlisted?

SPENCER

Yeah. Well. Not exactly.

HELEN

So . . . what changed?

SPENCER

I guess I knew without . . . understanding. How the tortures or deaths might've just been things the military can do and leave behind, but . . . the people they happen to can't do that. Can't just move on, I mean. And at first I thought, well, even if other people do shitty things, that shouldn't stop me from doing what I know is right – but I can't fight a whole system of corruption by myself.

HELEN

No . . . that's impossible. It's one thing to try and make small, positive changes – it's entirely another to think you alone can change the world.

SPENCER

Right – right! That's why I wanted to leave – why I had to leave.

HELEN

Then it sounds like this really is for the best.

SPENCER

Yeah. Thanks. Just – don't tell Dad yet, okay?

HELEN

Well, I wasn't planning to tell him behind your back – but why do you not want to tell him?

SPENCER

I don't think he'll take it the way you did.

HELEN

Your father and I approach a lot of things differently, but when it comes to your future, we've always been united: we want you to do what's right for you.

SPENCER

Except he still thinks that he knows better than I do what's right for me.

HELEN

I promise he wants what's best for you, even if he doesn't always know how to express it.

SPENCER

Yeah. Okay.

(With an air determined to lighten the mood, Spencer taste-tests a dessert with his pinky finger.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

Hey – not too bad, if I say so myself.

(Helen prods him with the dull end of some cooking utensil.)

HELEN

Spencer! That's not sanitary.

SPENCER

Aww, c'mon, Mom – it's just going to be us at Christmas dinner. We already have each others' germs.

(Smiling, Helen finger-tastes the dessert, too.)

SCENE 5

(It is the middle of the night. The house is dark.)

(Spencer, in his pajamas, is busy trying to distract himself, such as by hopping channels or putting presents under the tree. He periodically rubs or hits his nose.)

(Piper, also in pajamas, enters with a blue tub of toys. When she sees Spencer, she halts.)

PIPER

Do you want Spencer to go?

SPENCER

Oh – hey, Piper.

PIPER

Do you want Spencer to go *please*?

SPENCER

You can be in here, too. I won't bother you.

PIPER

(louder)

Are you getting tired, Peter Pan? You look like you need a nap!

SPENCER

How about we make a deal? If you let me stay in here, I'll let you look at my swim team medals.

PIPER

(mimicking Spencer)

Piper, how many times do I have to tell you NOT to go in my room and touch all of my shit?

SPENCER

Wow, you don't think much of me, huh? Well, tonight, I'm giving you permission to look at some of my stuff, if you let me stay in here. Okay?

(Piper turns on the lights, then sets her toys upon the floor and begins to arrange them.)

SPENCER *(cont'd)*

I'll take that as a yes.

(Spencer exits. Piper continues to arrange her possessions.)

PIPER

(Italian accent)

So. The war starts again. There are ammunition mules going up.

(mimicking Lieutenant Henry)

Forget the war. You see, my dear, I was studying architecture. Do you know what that is?

(Spencer returns and sets a box beside Piper.)

SPENCER

There you go. Swim team and soccer medals from middle school through high school.

(Piper systematically takes one medal at a time from the box, rubs it against her mouth, and arranges the medal among her other possessions.)

PIPER

Do you want Spencer's military awards?

SPENCER

You don't want – I haven't done anything deserving a military award.

(The following sequence of dialogue overlaps.)

PIPER

Spencer won an Army Service Ribbon in December 2011 –

SPENCER

Well, they award that to basically any idiot who can get through boot camp without blowing his foot off –

PIPER

(starts to rock)

– a Physical Fitness Badge in December 2011 –

SPENCER

– that's not even a medal, just a patch on my training uniform –

PIPER

(louder)

– a Sharpshooter Army Marksmanship Qualification Badge for Pistol in April 2012 –

SPENCER

– okay, that one is a medal, but not a great one, didn't get the highest score –

PIPER

– an Expert Army Marksmanship Qualification Badge for Rifle in September 2012 –

SPENCER

(cups nose)

– yeah. Okay, you're right, you don't need to recite them all –

PIPER

– an Excellence in Rifle Competition Bronze Badge in January 2013 –

SPENCER

PIPER! STOP!

PIPER

(dropping a medal)

WHY DO YOUR EARS HURT, LOST BOY?

SPENCER

(quieter)

Okay. You were right and I was wrong. Silly Spencer.

PIPER

Silly Spencer.

(Piper resumes rubbing medals against her mouth, but her body is still rocking.)

PIPER (cont'd)

Tomorrow, Spencer will bring you the military awards.

SPENCER

That wasn't part of our deal. Be happy with the medals I gave you.

PIPER

Today, you will be happy with the medals I gave you. Tomorrow, you will look at the military awards.

SPENCER

We're not negotiating this.

PIPER

Do you want to tell a story, Wendy?

SPENCER

Once upon a time, Spencer made a deal with Piper that, if he let her look at his medals, she'd let him stay in the living room. But Piper got greedy and wanted more medals – like how Peter Pan got greedy and tried to drag Wendy to Neverland, even though she didn't want to go. Peter Pan wanted Wendy to tell him and the lost boys lots of stories, more stories than they could ever need . . . So Spencer told Piper she had enough medals, and then Piper was happy. The end.

PIPER

Do you want a different story?

SPENCER

There's nothing wrong with that story.

PIPER

(imitating George
Bailey)

Well, in my book, my father died a much richer man than you'll ever be!

SPENCER

Okay, hey, why don't you tell me a story?

PIPER

Like what, Captain Hook?

SPENCER

Like – what's up with your new bracelet?

PIPER

(reciting a
commercial)

When a loved one with a medical condition – such as autism or Alzheimer's – wanders away from home, families go sick with worry: will their loved one encounter an unkind stranger? Or lose their way and not return home for days?

*(Piper hums the commercial music,
an overly jaunty tune.)*

PIPER (cont'd)

Conquer these worries with Wander Responder, voted the number one tracking system by police and caregivers across the nation. Worry no longer: order your Wander Responder bracelet today.

SPENCER

Okay. Weird commercial. But cool device. Nice that Mom and Dad get to sleep more without having to worry.

PIPER

Mom and Dad get up at 5:45 a.m. every weekday and 7:15 a.m. every weekend.

SPENCER

Well – a bit more.

PIPER

Spencer gets up between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. when home on vacation.

SPENCER

Yeah . . . he used to. Before he, like Piper, became a night owl.

PIPER

You don't want Spencer and Piper to be owls.

SPENCER

No – sorry – I just meant that we're bad at sleeping.

(Piper cheerfully recites dialogue from A Farewell to Arms as she peruses the medals.)

PIPER

(Italian accent)

But I am – I am very moved to see you so badly wounded. How did it happen?

SPENCER

Snoozing until 2 p.m. isn't as much fun as it used to be.

PIPER

(Italian accent)

I will see you are decorated for bravery. Did you carry someone on your back?

(Spencer becomes determinedly happy. Piper starts to rock.)

SPENCER

But no point getting caught up in all that.

PIPER

(Lieutenant Henry's voice)

I didn't carry anybody. I couldn't move.

SPENCER

Somehow you've survived all these years without much sleep – I'm still learning to do the same, but –

PIPER

Do you want Spencer to go?

SPENCER

Oh, come on.

PIPER

(getting louder)

Do you want Spencer to go please.

SPENCER

We made a deal —

(Piper hurls one of Spencer's medals across the room.)

PIPER

(Italian accent)

Surely there was something heroic. Tell me what you did.

SPENCER

Keep it down — don't need to wake the whole house —

PIPER

(Lieutenant Henry's voice)

I WAS BLOWN UP EATING CHEESE.

SPENCER

You don't like to stay in your bedroom either when you can't sleep — if you could just once try to relate —

(Piper throws a medal at Spencer.)

PIPER

(Italian accent)

WELL, DON'T WORRY, BABY. I WILL FIX YOU SO THAT YOU ARE GOOD AS NEW.

(Spencer storms off-stage. Piper's rocking slows, but she remains agitated. Mimicking Spencer's tic, she rubs and/or hits her nose.)

PIPER (cont'd)

(Italian accent)

You will see! Every day I learn to do things smoother and quicker. Soon, very soon, you will be walking again.

SCENE 6

(The whiteboard reads, 'TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24TH: CHRISTMAS EVE.')

(Spencer, Bruce, and Helen are eating dinner. Bruce and Helen are tense and focused on their food.)

SPENCER

So, who's excited for the parade tomorrow?

BRUCE

Can't wait.

SPENCER

I'm hoping *The Muppets* come back. That was great, the year they had a performance – whatever year that was.

(Silence.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

Always great to see Regis, too. *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* isn't the same without him.

HELEN

I agree.

SPENCER

Did you know most of the parade isn't live? It used to be until, I don't know, the early '90s, but then Disney decided –

BRUCE

That's great. Excuse me – I'm going to get Piper.

HELEN

Bruce.

BRUCE

It's dinnertime.

HELEN

We've talked about this.

(Spencer begins to fold his napkin into small squares.)

BRUCE

And I still don't agree with you. When the family sits down to dinner, then the family sits down to dinner.

HELEN

She made it clear that she doesn't want to join us tonight, and we are going to respect her wishes.

BRUCE

Respect her – oh, so next time she walks out of the bathroom without her pants on, or bites you on the breast –

HELEN

Stop it –

BRUCE

– or throws herself down on the floor of Trader Joe's when they're out of gluten-free pretzels, we should respect those wishes, too?

(Piper's off-stage yelling overlaps with Helen and Bruce's argument.)

PIPER

(off-stage)

Do your ears hurt, Mrs. Darling?

(Spencer begins to shred his napkin along his crease marks.)

HELEN

Those actions aren't comparable to not eating with us –

BRUCE

It's always comparable. You seem to think Piper will just learn acceptable behaviors without having them enforced –

HELEN

You enforce them all day long! You can't expect her to be perfect 24/7.

PIPER

(off-stage)

Yes, Mr. Smee, my ears DO hurt!

BRUCE

I don't expect her to be perfect – I expect her to one day have a job and be part of society as much as she's capable –

HELEN

And you think I don't want those same things?

BRUCE

What I think is you don't realistically know how to help her achieve those goals –

PIPER
 (off-stage)
 I'm so sorry your ears hurt, Tiger Lily!

HELEN
 Just because someone takes off their pants at home doesn't mean they're going to strip on the job, too. Different actions are appropriate for work and for home –

BRUCE
 But that's just it, Helen – she doesn't know the difference.

HELEN
 That's why we're teaching her!

PIPER
 (off-stage)
 MAYBE WE SHOULD SEE THE EAR DOCTOR CALLED PETER PAN!

BRUCE
 We? When do *you* ever –

(Spencer hurls his napkin scraps upon the table and storms off-stage. Bruce and Helen fall silent.)

(Spencer enters and returns to his chair.)

SPENCER
 Well, if anyone cares, Piper would appreciate it if we'd stop yelling – and I'd say that yelling isn't acceptable behavior at work or home.

BRUCE
 We're aren't yelling. Sometimes your mom and I – we have difficulty understanding each other. But it doesn't mean we don't love each other.

SPENCER
 Please don't talk to me like I'm five.

BRUCE
 Then please don't talk to us with such snark.

SPENCER
 (exaggerated cheer)
 So – how 'bout them Muppets in the parade?

HELEN
 Please – it's Christmas Eve.

BRUCE
 Yes. You're right.

(He holds out his hand over the table and Helen grasps it. Bruce turns to Spencer, but Spencer is determinedly eating his dinner. Bruce retrieves a clean napkin from the center of the table and holds it out to Spencer.)

BRUCE (cont'd)
 (trying to joke)
 A peace offering. Besides, you need a new napkin.

SPENCER
 Can't argue with that.

(Spencer takes the napkin, but has trouble meeting Bruce's eyes.)

BRUCE
 (quietly)
 The Disney Parade is my favorite part of Christmas.

HELEN
 (mock horror)
 Not the quality time with your family?

BRUCE
 Nope. Or the delicious food, the presents, the excursion to the movies once things get boring inside the house . . .

HELEN
 Boring? Us? Never.

(They both laugh. Spencer forces a smile.)

SPENCER
 You can say a lot of things about the Rawleys, but predictable is not one of them.

BRUCE
 Which is a funny thing to not be able to say about a family that schedules the exact minute each person brushes their teeth.

(They all laugh, Spencer too.)

SPENCER
 Or takes a shit, even.

BRUCE

Spencer – !

SPENCER

Hey, it's true! Last Christmas, I went into the upstairs bathroom to, well, use the bathroom – and I remember thinking it'd be fine to use that bathroom at eight forty-five, because Piper's bath doesn't start until nine. But all of a sudden Piper started banging on the door, yelling, "Is it time for your bath?" And I said, "No, Piper, your bath's at nine." But the schedule had changed while I was gone, so she shot back, "No, your bath's at 8:45!" So I said, "Look, I'll be out in a minute, just let me finish up on the toilet, okay?" And she replied, totally matter-of-fact, "No, you will *not* let Spencer finish up on the toilet, okay?!"

(By this time, they are all laughing.)

BRUCE

Don't ask the question if you don't want the answer, remember?

SPENCER

Yeah, yeah – I know.

HELEN

At least you got a good story out of it.

SPENCER

A story that no one will ever get apart from you guys.

BRUCE

(a shrug)

Well . . .

(Silence. Then Spencer faces his father.)

SPENCER

Dad – Dad, I want to tell you something.

BRUCE

Of course. What's going on?

SPENCER

I'm not in the army anymore.

BRUCE

What? Why?

SPENCER

I was discharged.

(Helen begins to clear the table.)

BRUCE

What do you mean? What for?

SPENCER

'Personality disorder' officially, but that doesn't matter –

BRUCE

Why doesn't it matter? And what disorder? You've never even seen a psychiatrist – you've never needed to see one.

SPENCER

Well – the military thought otherwise. But it's fine –

BRUCE

How is it fine?

SPENCER

'Personality disorder' is just whatever they term some kind of 'maladaptive behavior' – so in my case, I had difficulty respecting authority, trouble completing tasks, struggle to –

BRUCE

But that's bullshit –

SPENCER

Dad –

BRUCE

(turning to Helen)

Don't you agree that this is bullshit?

HELEN

I think it is definitely a diagnosis doled out for political, rather than factual, reasons –

BRUCE

(to Spencer)

Exactly – you're one of the most reliable people I know – probably *the* most out of a group of twenty-year-old idiots –

SPENCER

Dad! – please let me finish.

BRUCE

I'm just saying – I'm sorry. Go on.

SPENCER

I wouldn't call it a disorder, but the reasons behind it are true: I didn't respect authority there – I couldn't – not when I didn't respect the person with that authority.

(MORE)

SPENCER (cont'd)

I agree with what the military is supposed to stand for, but not what they actually do.

BRUCE

And what is that?

SPENCER

Oh – the shit you see on the news. The torture in our 'humane' prisons, or the death toll of unarmed civilians in Afghanistan . . . And I couldn't take those double standards. I need to do something with my life that I can feel good about – instead of just guilty.

BRUCE

I'm proud of you, Spencer.

SPENCER

You are?

BRUCE

Of course. It's easy to get caught up in ideals. It's much harder to re-evaluate something you love.

SPENCER

Well . . . sometimes I wish I'd stayed on the easy path.

BRUCE

Long-term, it isn't bad to see things as more than either-or.

SPENCER

I guess not.

BRUCE

And I know you hate feeling as though you've failed. But this wasn't a failure – you had to do what was best for you.

SPENCER

Yeah – that's a good way to look at it. Thanks, Dad.

BRUCE

That discharge isn't going to look good on your permanent record, though. We ought to get your papers changed.

SPENCER

We don't need to do anything –

BRUCE

They can't be allowed to not only treat you that way in the military, but then also screw over your future –

SPENCER

It's fine. I'll be fine, wherever I end up next.

(Helen returns to the table.)

BRUCE

A lot of jobs won't even consider hiring you if you've got some sort of psychiatric label. And I'm guessing the same'd be true for college admissions offices.

SPENCER

It's not a real label.

BRUCE

Your future employers won't know that.

SPENCER

So they'll know when they meet me.

BRUCE

Assuming they don't put your resume right in the trash.

SPENCER

What does it matter? I don't have to disclose my medical history to employers or colleges anyhow.

BRUCE

Nobody's going to just let slide anything other than an honorable discharge. They'll want to know the reason — and then, whether you disclose or not, that opportunity's probably lost.

HELEN

Your father isn't saying people are right to act this way — you know the ridiculous struggles we're having to even get Piper a volunteer role or a job coach — but this is the reality. People will treat you differently because of this.

SPENCER

I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, okay?

BRUCE

Meaning . . . ?

SPENCER

Meaning, well, right now I'm not even sending out resumes or transcripts or whatever.

BRUCE

Okay. So what are you doing right now?

SPENCER

Not sure. I need some time to decompress.

HELEN

Well, there's no harm in planning ahead.

BRUCE

We know you won't be happy sitting idle for months.

SPENCER

I never planned on doing that – is that really what you think of me?

HELEN

Of course not. We're trying to help you.

BRUCE

And you don't need to use that tone with us –

SPENCER

I'm not using any tone. I'm frustrated. Why am I the only one in this house not allowed to express what they're feeling?

HELEN

That is not true.

SPENCER

Isn't it?

BRUCE

You know it isn't. I just ask that you not always be so testy with me –

SPENCER

Well, I'm sorry to spoil the delusion – yours and mine – that I'm perfect – because I'm not. I do fuck up.

(He gets to his feet.)

SPENCER (cont'd)

Sometimes I just don't want to have to be the rock – did you guys ever stop to consider that?

HELEN

No one ever said you had to be the rock, Spencer –

SPENCER

What else am I supposed to be when everyone else is a hurricane?

(He bolts from the kitchen. Piper comes running on stage.)

PIPER

Do you want some pret –

(She halts when she almost runs into Spencer. He halts too. Piper flaps her hands.)

PIPER (cont'd)
Do you – do you want Spencer to stop yelling?

SPENCER
I wasn't yelling.

PIPER
(flapping harder)
Is it time for Spencer to be happy?

SPENCER
I'm trying to be, Piper.

(Piper lingers a moment longer, then dives around Spencer and into the kitchen. Spencer exits.)

PIPER
Do you want some pretzels?

(Bruce fills a bowl with gluten-free pretzels. He hands it to Piper and she hovers.)

HELEN
Did you want something else, Piper?

PIPER
I don't know, Mr. Darling.

(She glances towards Bruce, anticipating a reaction, but he does not give her one.)

(Spencer returns, pulling on a jacket and nearly colliding with Piper again. As he passes the mantel, he slams his army photo facedown.)

(Piper quotes the novel Peter & Wendy, perhaps mimicking either Helen or the audio book narrator. Her dialogue overlaps with the rest of the family's.)

PIPER (cont'd)
Hook rose to the rock to breathe, and at the same moment Peter scaled it on the opposite side.

SPENCER
Going to Marcus's. Don't wait up.

PIPER

(louder)

The rock was slippery as a ball, and they had to crawl rather than climb.

BRUCE

Piper, I know it's a little loud in here, but you're fine.

PIPER

Neither knew that the other was coming.

HELEN

It's Christmas Eve, Spencer, so it might be wise not to interrupt –

SPENCER

Marcus is Jewish.

PIPER

(hitting kitchen
table)

Each feeling for a grip met the other's arm: in surprise they raised their heads.

BRUCE

Piper, everything's okay – why don't you show me your calm body? There you go – relax your hands . . .

HELEN

Okay – have a good time . . .

*(Spencer exits before Helen
finishes speaking. Sound of door
slam.)*

PIPER

Their faces were almost touching: so they met.

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