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# OH! CHRISTMAS TREE

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## SCENE 1 - THE MARRIAGE COURSE

*ALGAR and LUCY (both in their mid-thirties), sit on chairs facing the audience.*

ALGAR: Yes, we are very different. Frankly, I think that's what makes it work. Lucy's an extrovert and sort of...relentlessly cheerful. Well relentless is perhaps not the best choice of words. It suggests somehow that I'd like her to relent and that's not it at all. I digress. Lucy's more positive than I am. Let's just leave it at that. Although – hang on – maybe I can't really leave it at that. I think the world's coming to an end. I'm not even sure that it hasn't already happened, which makes all of organized religion somewhat irrelevant. Lucy, on the other hand, is still optimistic about our prospects as a human race.

LUCY: Algar, maybe you could just -

ALGAR: Where do you sit on the spectrum, Pastor Larsen? Have the St Svengeborg Redeemers picked a window of opportunity for the end times? For the rapture? *(reacting to Lucy's jab in the ribs)* What? What?

*They both listen to a question from the unseen PASTOR, whose speech is represented by a stylized blah-blah-blah sound reminiscent of the teacher character in Charlie Brown.*

ALGAR: Yes, I teach young people. What's your point?

LUCY: I think Algar's more positive than he lets on. He has this kind of downbeat persona he puts on for his high school students but I think it's an act.

*Algar moves to another space.*

ALGAR: The nature of the apocalypse: with a bang or a whimper. Explain in 500 words.

LUCY: Algar's a sweetheart. Really. And he can compromise. I mean, here he is at a marriage course, even though he finds the whole concept – of the course, not the marriage – well, I think he said he thought it was “completely absurd.” No offense, Pastor. And - just before we came here, we had a little misunderstanding at the Christmas tree lot but I'm sure we're going to be able to work it out...

*LUCY does up her coat, dons a jaunty little Santa hat and moves into the next scene...*

## SCENE 2 – CHRISTMAS TREE YARD

*Tinny Christmas music is heard over the tree yard speakers. LUCY'S waiting. And waiting. Spots ALGAR offstage.*

LUCY: Algar?

*We hear a badly off-tune version of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” sung loudly and drunkenly. LUCY looks around, embarrassed. ALGAR enters.*

ALGAR: *(belting it out)* You better watch out, you better not cry...

LUCY: You're really late.

ALGAR: *(singing)* Better not pout...

LUCY: We said we'd meet here at five - I'm freezing to death.

ALGAR: Awww sweetie...let's go home!

LUCY: First we get a tree. Where were you anyway?

ALGAR: Tradin' cookies!

LUCY: What?

ALGAR: Christmas cookie exchange! At school. Remember?

LUCY: Sounds like you had a few too many rum balls.

ALGAR: Yup. I had a coupla-three glasses of wine, maybe more – lost track of time.

LUCY: I don't think so.

ALGAR: And now it's too late!

LUCY: Come and help me pick out a tree.

ALGAR: But it's time to see the Pastor.

LUCY: This is more important –

ALGAR: Really? More important than “marriage for dummies?”

LUCY: Yes! This is what – the fourth time we've tried to do this? Tell me what's going on!

ALGAR: This place...gives me the creeps.

LUCY: Why – what have you got against trees?

ALGAR: Nothing. I'm totally supportive of trees, which is why I'm loathe to cut them down and put tinsel on them.

LUCY: These puppies are already dead.

ALGAR: More's the pity. They use so many pesticides on those tree farms –

LUCY: Is this going to be some sort of environmental thing?

ALGAR: So my environmentalism is just some sort of shtick?

LUCY: No. Absolutely not. It's just –

ALGAR: Good. Because not only are these trees dripping with chemicals, fed to them over the entire growth cycle – years and years - but the pesticides also pollute local watersheds.

*LUCY sighs.*

LUCY: You know what – you're right. I haven't been very respectful of your beliefs. So: it pains me to suggest this - it hurts me to even contemplate this - but we could go to Canadian Tire right now and buy an artificial spruce.

*After a beat...*

ALGAR: What about the off-gassing?

LUCY: I'm sure we can find a tree that doesn't off-gas –

ALGAR: Doubt it.

LUCY: I'm more worried about finding a tree that actually smells like a tree. I love that smell –

ALGAR: We could rig up sort of a feedbag with spruce boughs in it for you to sniff-

LUCY: Or we could just keep this real. Come on – there's a beautiful Douglas fir right over there.

*LUCY starts to move off.*

ALGAR: Lucy – no. I do not want a Christmas tree.

*A brief stunned silence.*

LUCY: Algar, we have to have-

ALGAR: Why?

LUCY: Oh my God - who are you?

ALGAR: I told you last night –

LUCY: I didn't think you really meant –

ALGAR: I really meant –

LUCY: This is our first real Christmas together!

ALGAR: Exactly. And I really don't want a Christmas tree.

LUCY: Wow...this is kind of devastating.

ALGAR: Sorry. I've been trying to talk to you about this for weeks now but there never seems to be time, what with all the family parties and your work and the general holiday mayhem.

*LUCY stares off.*

LUCY: Look – a happy couple choosing a tree. He's wearing a Santa sweater. She's pregnant.

ALGAR: We don't have to be like everyone else.

LUCY: Maybe this is a good thing to discuss at the marriage course.

ALGAR: He'll just side with you.

LUCY: Not necessarily.

ALGAR: You don't think Pastor Larsen might have a slight bias toward Christmas?

### SCENE 3 – MARRIAGE COURSE

*We hear the PASTOR making a little speech as LUCY and ALGAR transition back to the marriage course.*

LUCY: My question, exactly. This just came right out of the blue.

ALGAR: Come on, Lucy – you know how I feel about Christmas –

LUCY: I know you spout the party line, like everyone else this time of year -

ALGAR: You think I'm faking this abject loathing of all the – *(responding to an interjection from the Pastor)* You really wanna know?

LUCY: Pastor Larsen has only met you once, Algar, and he's already heard your views on gospel music, paganism, pork –

ALGAR: All of which I love. But Christmas...

*Pastor murmurs an encouraging sound, as in: I'm perfectly open to discussing opposing views.*

ALGAR: *(to the Pastor)* Okay, surely even you can't deny how much misery has been caused by celebrating the alleged birth of Christ. *(an outraged noise from the Pastor)* A free for all of drug and alcohol abuse, running its rampant course from approximately December first right through to the Epiphany. Soul-destroying consumerism, drunken groping at the office Christmas party - and then there's the damage to the environment. The trees, the Styrofoam, the tsunami of cheap, disposable made-in-China Christmas bric-a-brac. A form of eco-terrorism, really. Yes. Terrorism. That's what this is, really. Birth of Christ equals birth of terrorism.

*LUCY stares at ALGAR, horrified.*

LUCY: Algar! I think what Algar is trying to say... *(stops, listening to the Pastor)* I'm sorry about this. Yes, I think we're ready for marriage – I really do - I guess Christmas – decorating for Christmas - is just one of those things we haven't really talked about. *(PASTOR interjects)* We just moved in together six weeks ago but we've been dating for over two years so I don't know how we avoided dealing with this. *(turning to ALGAR)* Oh wait – you were sick that first year – I remember you caught a flu around the time of the winter solstice and stayed in bed for a week. I was so busy I hardly got to see you. *(to the PASTOR)* I have a special events company and Christmas is nuts with all the parties. Last year...you went to that reunion and your flight home on Christmas Eve was cancelled. That was crazy – who schedules an event that close to Christmas?

ALGAR: Well, I know it's hard to imagine in your tinselly little Yule-centric universe –

LUCY: “Yule-centric?”

ALGAR: I may have overstated that just a little. Look - it's pretty much impossible to avoid the whole Christmas thing out there in the world. But I'd like to – I need to draw a line in the sand about what happens in my own home.

LUCY: You mean *our* home –

ALGAR: Right.

*The PASTOR interjects.*

ALGAR: Yes. Yes, we'll do that. Have a big old chat about "seasonal expectations."

LUCY: (*as she gets up to leave*) This whole Christmas thing—especially the tree—it's a deal-breaker.

*LUCY'S phone pings and she charges out, leaving ALGAR with the Pastor.*

ALGAR: So...how we doin' so far?

#### SCENE 4 - SCHOOL

*ALGAR at school, talking to his students. Student voices are represented by a stylized babble, similar to that of the Pastor.*

ALGAR: Settle...settle please. Okay. We have spent a lot of time this term talking about different political systems. Today we'll be talking about capitalism, which is especially relevant this time of year. Does everyone know what materialism is? (*a beat, then* :) No, Trevor - different "ism". Okay: "If everyone demanded peace instead of a new television set, then there'd be peace." Anyone recognize that quote? No? John Lennon said that. (*beat*) Anyone know who John Lennon is? (*beat*) Very good, Ashley. So: the assignment is to imagine a society which does not feature materialism as a cornerstone value. You could, for instance, imagine a society that does not celebrate Christmas, or any of the other holidays this time of year that, although they have a theoretical basis in religion or spiritual values, are really about the stuff. Actions speak louder than words, after all, except when your teacher asks you to write an essay. Five hundred words. Due Friday. (*a student question*) Yes, Ashley, I suppose it's true that people are more disposed toward charitable giving at this time of year. But there are many kinds of gifts that don't involve money. Like generosity of spirit and...compromise. Jason, stop texting - right now - or I will make you eat that phone.

#### SCENE 5

*LUCY talks to the PASTOR on her cell. (Note: we do not hear the PASTOR'S voice during phone calls.)*

LUCY: Okay. A tree loaded up with ornaments and tinsel is just...a tree loaded up with ornaments and tinsel? No. That's just not true. The Christmas tree reflects the entire history of the western world's celebration of this holiday as well as all of

my unique family memories. The tree is, I realize, the single most important element of the entire season for me. The yogenflutzen, the heefor pu, the... epicenter. Because no matter what else is going on during the holidays you can come home to the tree every night and have your spirit...rekindled. (*listens to an interjection*) Sorry Pastor, it's still a deal breaker.

## SCENE 6 – LUCY AND ALGAR’S HOME

*The living room. ALGAR is doggedly wrestling a TREE into a stand. It's the skinniest, scruffiest, scrubbiest tree you ever did see.*

LUCY: (*offstage, on the phone*) I'll return those trays to the caterer tomorrow. I'm so glad you were pleased. Merry Christmas to you too! (*ends call*) Algar? I'm home! I've been doing some thinking - and I realized I just haven't been very clear about my feelings and -

*LUCY enters, stops dead when she sees the tree.*

LUCY: You bought a tree. Oh, Algar...you didn't have to –

ALGAR: Oh I think I did.

LUCY: I mean you shouldn't have picked out the tree - all by yourself. I could have helped -

ALGAR: No problem.

LUCY: It's really...sweet.

ALGAR: What do you mean "sweet"?

LUCY: Sort of spiky and spindly but it's cute –

ALGAR: You mean cute-pathetic.

LUCY: Well okay, sort of. Sad but plucky. Like that three-legged dog we saw. The one that was wearing a sweater and pulling around a little wagon?

ALGAR: Honestly I just felt sorry for it. It looked like it needed a home.

LUCY: The dog?

ALGAR: No, the... (*a beat*) I also picked up the kitty litter.

LUCY: Thanks.

ALGAR: And I trimmed Mitzi's nails. Harold ran away before I could... (*noticing that LUCY isn't really listening, she's preoccupied with the tree*) get his done. So I sawed off his paws and fed them to the gold fish.

LUCY: Great...

ALGAR: Lucy?

LUCY: How much was it, anyway? The tree. Just curious.

ALGAR: One hundred and twenty dollars.

LUCY: Wow.

ALGAR: It's from a sustainable growth tree farm. And the money goes to Greenpeace.

LUCY: That's great.

ALGAR: I don't know why I'm getting defensive about a tree –

LUCY: I don't know either, honey –it's beautiful.

ALGAR: I'm sorry. As the good pastor pointed out, we haven't really had the Christmas talk and you probably feel betrayed. I probably feel ambushed.

LUCY: How did we miss this?

ALGAR: Well for one thing, this is the first year I've been required to attend all the family festivities –

LUCY: Invited–not required -

ALGAR: The non-stop Svenson bacchanalia –

LUCY: Once we were engaged, I think they figured-

ALGAR: - it was worth investing time in me?

LUCY: No! Well yes – now you're part of the family.

ALGAR: Right. I guess before I wasn't around that much during the season –

LUCY: Last year, when your flight was cancelled on Christmas Eve, I was feeling so sorry for you.

ALGAR: I was sorry to be away from you.

LUCY: But not sorry to be away for Christmas. Still - spending Christmas Eve in an airport, that's just sad.

*LUCY gives ALGAR a sympathetic nuzzle.*

ALGAR: Okay, I have to come clean. My flight wasn't cancelled, it was delayed. I could have made it to your parents' house around midnight but I went home instead.

LUCY: What? Are you kidding?

ALGAR: I'm so sorry I lied to you!

LUCY: Algar, what the hell...

ALGAR: Sorry! Look - when Janet and I were together she used to go home for Christmas - without me. I would hole up in our apartment and play video games and eat pizza in my underwear. I could almost pretend Christmas wasn't happening. Cause I really do hate it. But I know this is important to you so here we are.

LUCY: When were you planning on telling me all this?

ALGAR: I'm telling you now.

LUCY: It's December 13. Eleven days till -

ALGAR: It sorta crept up on me. No, more like, the season sort of knocked me over the head and dragged me into an alley. You've been wearing Christmas sweaters since Halloween -

LUCY: It takes a long time to get through my collection.

ALGAR: Your family cooked a goose on November 1<sup>st</sup> for crying out loud -

LUCY: And put up the tree -

ALGAR: Your sister did some sort of clogging -

LUCY: That was a liturgical dance - to commemorate Roonengrouten -

ALGAR: Which is?

LUCY: I told you this - the day Saint Estherina was martyred -

ALGAR: And pierced through with the holly bush -

LUCY: No, she was trampled by pilgrims / on her way to-

ALGAR: Her goose was cooked.

LUCY: Very funny.

ALGAR: Sorry, it was a great party. Honest. It's just, your family's seasonal kick-off is so early, and sort of ...dogged.

LUCY: Dogged.

ALGAR: Wrong word. It's just all sort of inarguable – inevitable -

LUCY: Is this our Christmas talk? Because if it is, it really, really sucks.

*LUCY moves off, emotional.*

ALGAR: Can you help me?

LUCY: I'll do anything. We can talk, go for therapy. Or not. We can work through this!

ALGAR: I mean the tree. If you hold it, I can bolt it into place.

*ALGAR secures the tree. It's probably crooked. A long silence as they both look at the tree.*

ALGAR: Festive.

LUCY: Oh, you wait.

*LUCY goes offstage for a moment and drags in a great big box of decorations. She starts piling things out of the box and onto the floor. ALGAR looks a little sick.*

LUCY: Some people put the angel on last – I like to do it first.

ALGAR: Hang on - we need to take things slow.

LUCY: The angel...?

ALGAR: The angel, the tinsel, the Satan buns -

LUCY: Satan – what?

ALGAR: Doesn't your family do some kind of Satanic ritual with special bread and / human sacrifice and –

LUCY: Oh you mean Saint Olaf loaf – that was for the advent of advent -

ALGAR: Whatever – I'm just worried this is some kind of slippery Scandahoovian slope.

LUCY: Let's just deal with the tree.

ALGAR: I will...try.

LUCY: I think you're going to feel differently about this once you get the full effect.

ALGAR: Uh-huh...

*ALGAR peers at the tree apprehensively.*

LUCY: Listen, I meant to tell you...I dropped by mom and dad's on my way home and the Pastor was there.

ALGAR: Oh yeah?

LUCY: Having a big old drink with Dad. Anyway, the Pastor had a suggestion.

ALGAR: About what?

LUCY: About working this out. He just came back from some sort of conference where he took a course on counseling techniques. He thought we might want to try some...props.

ALGAR: (*suggestive*) I'd love to try some props.

LUCY: Filthy boy. I think the Pastor's worried about us. Mom asked about the marriage course and the Pastor said "Fyrirga fou smenka." And then he sighed.

ALGAR: What the hell -

LUCY: It means something like "the reindeer and the sheep dog share the nest."

ALGAR: Okay...

LUCY: It's like saying there's trouble in paradise.

ALGAR: He said this in front of your family?

LUCY: Just Mom and Dad –

ALGAR: Which one of us is the sheep dog?

LUCY: Wait, Helga might have been there – Neela and Gudrun came in right at the end -

ALGAR: Now your entire family will be talking about us.

LUCY: I don't think anyone took it seriously. Well except for mom, you know how she worries.

ALGAR: Are you worried?

LUCY: I think we're totally solid. Except for the Christmas stuff. And you lying to me about last year.

ALGAR: I am so sorry—please forgive me.

LUCY: I'm working on it.

ALGAR: Is there anything I can do to--

LUCY: I guess I'm just wondering how you've dealt with this in the past. You and Janet never put up a tree...?

ALGAR: Nope. Like I said, she used to go home to her parents.

LUCY: Poor baby.

ALGAR: Her or me?

LUCY: Both of you. And before that, when you shared the house with all the hooligans, did you guys ever -

ALGAR: Hang up stockings and gather round the Yule log?

LUCY: And when you were little...

ALGAR: This feels like regression therapy.

*ALGAR gathers LUCY into a hug.*

LUCY: I'm serious.

ALGAR: How far back do you wanna go?

LUCY: Your earliest memory of Christmas.

ALGAR: Nothing springs to mind.

LUCY: Really? That's awful!

*LUCY hugs ALGAR, gives him a kiss.*

ALGAR: Mmm...since you put it that way (*kissing her back*) maybe it does suck to be me.

*Just when it looks like this encounter might turn amorous, LUCY'S cell rings. The ring tone is almost certainly a Christmas carol – possibly Jingle Bells rendered by barking dogs? LUCY hesitates, then looks at the call display. After mouthing “sorry” to ALGAR, she answers.*

LUCY: Lucy speaking.

*She shoots ALGAR another apologetic look. This is going to take awhile. ALGAR circles the tree and then moves off.*

LUCY: (*on the phone*) I thought you'd settled on the cello for your walk down the aisle but we can certainly investigate – I don't know what Ode to Joy would sound like on an accordion.

## SCENE 7 – THE MARRIAGE COURSE

*During the scene transition we hear the PASTOR'S voice/gibberish enthusiastically explaining something. Lights up on LUCY and ALGAR listening. LUCY looks sincerely interested. ALGAR looks extremely skeptical. The PASTOR finishes his speech. LUCY pulls some HAND PUPPETS out of a bag she's been holding on her lap*

LUCY: Ta-da!

ALGAR: What the hell are those?

LUCY: Therapy puppets! For doing role play. To explore family relationships.

*The PASTOR provides further explanation while ALGAR grimaces.*

ALGAR: You want us to do a puppet show.

LUCY: Come on - it'll be fun.

*LUCY pulls on a hand puppet. ALGAR reluctantly follows suit.*

ALGAR: Okay. How do you work these things—

LUCY: You be... one of your parents. No wait - I'll be your mom. (*adopting a "mom" voice*) It's Christmas, Algie – are you excited about getting a tree?

ALGAR: (*half-heartedly using the puppet*) Nope.

LUCY: What about Santa?

ALGAR: (*puppet voice*) Santa...brings toys to all the boys and girls.

LUCY: He sure does.

ALGAR: (*skeezy Santa*) But first they have to sit on his knee –

LUCY: (*amused in spite of herself*) Bad Santa.

*The PASTOR interjects, making indignant noises.*

ALGAR: Sorry. I can't do this. You're welcome to interview me about the ghosts of Christmas past / but I don't think -

LUCY: Okay, okay – never mind. I think the Pastor just wants us to acknowledge our different family backgrounds, our different approaches to Christmas -

ALGAR: We're different – so what? That's part of the reason we fell in love.

LUCY: Yes! Yes, that's absolutely true. (*beat*) So how about... I will decorate one half of the Christmas tree and you...can decorate the other half with something that is meaningful to you.

*A long pause, then:*

ALGAR: Which half?

LUCY: I love you!

*They embrace. LUCY'S phone rings. She looks at the call display and rolls her eyes.*

LUCY: I better get this.

*ALGAR moves off in one direction, Lucy the other.*

LUCY: (*answering her cell*) Lucy speaking. (*beat, listening*) Absolutely. If wiener schnitzel has some special meaning to you and your fiancé, by all means. Can I

contact the caterer and get back to you, Becky? Bye for now. (*a beat, then she takes another call*) Hey, Gudrun – what’s up? No, that’s okay. It’s just - I’m dealing with a high-maintenance bride right now on top of all my Christmas parties. (*beat, listening*) Well the pageant is kind of a Lord of the Rings parody so maybe you can be a sexy little orc. Oh hang on, mom’s trying to call me. (*a beat, then* :) Hvor dan har due det? Svenka dolunk...yah... mom, I don’t have time – wait a second – (*back to Gudrun*) Hey Gudrun, can you do me a favour and help mom buy a noggatoken for Algar?

## SCENE 8 – THE LIVING ROOM

*ALGAR surveys the tree as though considering how to kill it. Loud, percussive un-Christmassy music plays (e.g. Nine Inch Nails?) and Algar hums/sings along. Finally hauls out a staple gun and begins attaching hockey cards to the tree. He runs out of hockey cards, thinks for moment, then pulls off one of this own (red) socks and ties it around the angel atop the tree. LUCY enters and watches. Changes the music to a Christmas carol. Unpacks ornaments during the following, puts a few on the tree. Adds tinsel, etc.*

LUCY: You’re decorating with...hockey cards?

ALGAR: Yeah. Boston Bruins.

LUCY: When I was a kid... the day we got the tree was almost as exciting as Christmas. All seven of us would pile into the station wagon.

ALGAR: Yikes.

LUCY: We would drive about an hour north of the city, onto this farmer’s land – he was a friend of dad’s – and crash around in the snow comparing trees. Then dad would cut one down. It was so beautiful out in the woods, at twilight. We were so excited. It was...

ALGAR: Magical?

*LUCY glares at ALGAR.*

ALGAR: I’m serious!

LUCY: While dad put the tree in the stand, my mother would make cocoa. I always got to put the angel on top of the tree - Dad had to lift me up to reach. Everyone would clap afterwards. Then my sister Helga, having donned her beautiful hand-embroidered forkle beforehand, would do the Svenka Sworga dance. Roughly translated: Welcome spirits and saints of Noel. Mom always cried. We were

allowed to stay up late staring at the tree once it was decorated. Then prayers and to bed. Sweet dreams - let the anticipation begin.

ALGAR: Nice.

LUCY: Only I was always too excited to go to sleep. Mom would come into my room to check on me and I'd be vibrating. "Baby Lucia, olen – menski. Olen" (*translating*) Go to sleep, baby Lucia. "But mom I'm so excited - I want Christmas to be here." Then she would say: Roonenverten oombotten, nydelig punshka: "It will be Christmas in your dreams so go to sleep my little punshka."

*LUCY seems a bit misty, lost in a moment of nostalgia.*

ALGAR: What's a punshka?

LUCY: A deep-fried dumpling filled with cheese and herring.

ALGAR: With sour cream on top? Your family seems to put sour cream on everything.

LUCY: So the point is--

ALGAR: I know, I got it – it's a lovely story.

LUCY: The point is... (*indicating the hockey cards*) I would hate to think you were making fun of me.

ALGAR: No way! I started saving these hockey cards when I was a kid. In fact I have never stopped adding to the collection. You know why?

LUCY: You love hockey –

ALGAR: Yes! And you know why it's just exactly the right thing to put on the tree? Because hockey is the closest thing I have to a religion. So the cards are a little like my articles of faith, my religious icons, my-

LUCY: And the sock?

ALGAR: Okay – that little...flourish. I spose that was a little bit of...

LUCY: Attitude.

ALGAR: At least it's red. Never mind. I'm sorry.

*LUCY takes the sock off the tree and sniffs it.*

LUCY: I mean – it's not even clean.

ALGAR: Got it. *(Beat)* I am trying.

LUCY: I know you are. *(sound of incoming text)* Sorry, Bridezilla Becky. *(texting a response)*

ALGAR: You know what – the hockey cards suck.

*ALGAR starts ripping the cards off the tree.*

LUCY: No, no – if you want-

ALGAR: No, it's stupid. Me trying to make some kind of point. I don't even know what. I'm not a fan of the "season" and you are. So what? That's no reason for us to suffer on and on into infinity, right?

LUCY: Right.

ALGAR: I mean - this is a whole new deal. This – what you and I have. Turn the page, Algar. Turn the page. There – just like that. It's you and I creating a whole new life together.

LUCY: Yes!

*They embrace. After a few moments of nuzzling...*

LUCY: Did you happen to see on the pastor's course outline that he wants us to talk about "intimacy"?

ALGAR: Let's make something up. It should probably involve animals.

LUCY: Speaking of which...

ALGAR: Animals?

LUCY: Pets. I saw the cutest thing on the weekend and I've been meaning to -

ALGAR: Tear off my clothes and make me bark for treats?

LUCY: No! I mean sure – but this was actually an idea about the tree.

ALGAR: Great.

LUCY: You know that neighbourhood that the Clarks live in, overlooking the ravine?

ALGAR: Grandview Heights.

LUCY: That's it. There's an off-leash area right on the edge on the park. Everyone from the neighborhood walks their dogs there. At Christmas, the dogs exchange cards!

ALGAR: What?

LUCY: Well their owners write them, of course. "Fido wishes Binky the best bow-wow Christmas ever!" "Hamlet and Pearson say Joyeux Noel!" Etcetera. And – this is the best part – they attach them to a spruce tree in the park. The tree's probably 40 feet high. By Christmas Day, it'll be covered with cards and lights. And some of the dogs wear Santa hats and jingle bells on their walks - cute, huh? So I had this idea -

ALGAR: What about the cats?

LUCY: What about them?

ALGAR: The cats don't exchange cards?

LUCY: Well no – it's more about the dogs who meet each other in the park – and their owners –

ALGAR: Right. Because the cats wouldn't be caught dead exchanging cards. The cats, although known to sniff a butt or two, aren't really all that social. I guess my point is: I'm more of a cat. And you're more of a dog. I mean – of course – in temperament, not –

LUCY: I get it -

ALGAR: Just – not to beat the analogy over the head – but if you've ever tried getting a cat to wear a costume, like a Santa hat, well they just hide under the couch, right? And that's a bit like me, I suppose.

LUCY: Uh-huh.

ALGAR: But you had an idea?

LUCY: Never mind.

ALGAR: Come on.

LUCY: I just thought it might be...therapeutic. Our cats and the fish could write Christmas cards to each other -

ALGAR: You mean I could write them.

LUCY: Well yes – and then we’d hang them on the tree.

ALGAR: Mitzy and Harold would send cards to Balzac and Cheryl -

LUCY: Maybe-

ALGAR: You think Balzac is aching to express himself?

LUCY: Sure – with a little help -

ALGAR: A haiku! (*composing on the fly*) I am a goldfish. You are a stupid mean cat. At least I can swim.

LUCY: Not exactly what I had in mind.

ALGAR: Mitzy to Balzac: “You are going to die-die-die in the new year! I’ll slurp you right out of the bowl, sucker!”

LUCY: It’s about getting into the spirit!

ALGAR: You thought it might be therapeutic for me to write cute Christmas cards – to drum up some sentiment via the pets – to trade on my naturally warm feelings for them in order to-

LUCY: I don’t know! I thought it might be fun --

ALGAR: Fun? This is behavior modification –

LUCY: It’s called working on a relationship.

ALGAR: Was the pet poetry your idea or did the old Pastor suggest –

LUCY: It was my idea!

ALGAR: Speaking of the old Pastor, can you explain to me again why we’re spending all this time at the marriage course when you’re so busy -

LUCY: If we want to get married at St. Svengborg’s we have to finish the marriage course –

ALGAR: I got that – but surely this could wait until the new year. The wedding’s not till Easter --

LUCY: But Mom wants to announce our engagement on Christmas Eve –

ALGAR: Fine.

LUCY: In church – so we need the go-ahead from the pastor -

ALGAR: Seriously?

LUCY: Yes! It's just – my mother wants to make jeggenfritza to celebrate the engagement -

ALGAR: What is jeggen -

LUCY: It's special fruit cake - you soak it in liquor and eat it on your 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary -

ALGAR: My point is you're already busier than a one-legged – whatever –

LUCY: We have two more lessons, let's just get it done. You know if you wouldn't argue with him, it would all go a lot faster.

ALGAR: It is beyond my limits as a human being and a citizen of the universe not to take issue with some of the Pastor's statements.

LUCY: Just...

ALGAR: Alright, alright!

*ALGAR stomps off.*

LUCY: You know, I have to work five Christmas parties between now and the big day. Plus put the finishing touches on a Christmas Eve wedding. Plus – my mother wants me to help her shop and I'm not finished shopping for my sisters and I have to finish writing the family Christmas pageant. I don't have time to fight with you! Why can't you just let me have my way?

ALGAR: *(offstage)* I heard that.

## SCENE 9 - THE MARRIAGE COURSE

LUCY: Well as my mother no doubt mentioned to you, Pastor, my ex and I weren't actually married. So my ex-husband was not actually my husband and no, in answer to your question, he was not a godly man. Nico was an ungodly mess, if you want to know the truth. *(PASTOR interjects)* Oh, my family was terrific during all that – very supportive. Almost too supportive. Like the piñata pie, for instance. Right when Nico and I first got serious he made a random remark about some dessert his mother used to make for Christmas and that sent the whole family into a tailspin searching the Internet for a recipe. I tried to tell them that

Nico was probably making it up but it was like they were worried he might abandon me unless he got his stupid piñata pie. (*PASTOR asks a question*) Oh, it's just kind of a custard with Smarties and jubes – (*PASTOR interrupts*) What did I learn from that experience that I can apply to my relationship with Algar? You got me there, Pastor. Never trust a Leo with Scorpio rising? I'm sorry. That was a very glib answer to a serious question. (*Pastor speaks*) Yes, I promise. Maybe I'll even have an answer by the time Algar is done telling you about his first marriage. Over to you, Algar.

ALGAR: Um...first of all, sorry about last night. (*beat*) My first wife, Janet, thought I was negative. She was right. I screwed up and she left me and I'd really, really, really like not to have that experience again.

*LUCY stares at ALGAR. After a long beat she reaches out a hand to him.*

LUCY: I'm sorry I've been so busy that we haven't really had a chance to talk. And I'm sorry about all the family Christmas parties. Why don't you... let me know which ones you'd like to – which ones you think you can stand to attend and we'll go from there.

ALGAR: Great. Thank you. And you – you should go ahead and decorate that darn tree however you like.

LUCY: Oh honey – really? (*beat, to the PASTOR*) I'll tell you what I do know, what I learned the first time around is—as long as you're both really trying, then you should just...hang in there. Algar is not the least bit religious and yet he agreed to get married in a church. Not that I'm religious either – no offense, Pastor – but I knew it was important to my parents that I stand under the corn silk canopy and kiss the kransekake. And although I don't actually care about any of that, I really do want to be married to Algar. So here I am. And Algar is right here with me.

## SCENE 10 – SCHOOL

ALGAR: (*to students*) Thank you for all your very thoughtful attempts to imagine a world without materialism. I was happy to see that some of you took it a step further and wrote about a world without Christmas. (*noise from a kid*) Hey! Sit down – now. I have to say it warms the cockles of my little old heart to imagine a December with no ritualized tree slaughter, meaningless consumerism and false emotions manufactured to disguise the very real feelings of guilt and regret stirred up at this time of year. I've asked the principal for permission to have a bonfire in the quad on Friday, in honour of something that's actually worth celebrating: winter solstice. Anyone know what that is? (*beat*) Trevor! Eat that or throw it in the trash! In medieval times it was the last feast before deep winter began. Plenty of mead went down the gullet so that people could temporarily forget that they might starve in the months to come. We won't be drinking mead but we could toast

some marshmallows. Jason! Thank you. And... we could burn some other things, too. Imagine what a powerful statement it would be if we all took one or two of the meaningless gifts from under the tree and threw them on the fire. Or how about we just up-end the mall across the street, shake it like a big cereal box and empty all the crap into the ravine! Yeah!

*School buzzer rings to signify end of class. Students chat among themselves as they leave the classroom.*

ALGAR: Don't you see? Without the bloody merchandise the whole Christmas conceit comes tumbling down! No commerce, no Christmas! No gifts...no tree!

#### SCENE 11 – THE LIVING ROOM

*The tree is absolutely loaded up with ornaments and tinsel and every kind of garish Christmas crap imaginable. In fact the whole house is decorated. LUCY stands in the middle of the room, admiring her handiwork. She paws through a stack of CDs to find the perfect Christmas music, then charges offstage. ALGAR enters, home from work. He's startled at the sight of the tree.*

ALGAR: Ahh! What the –

*LUCY enters.*

LUCY: Hey!

ALGAR: Hey...

*A beat. LUCY watches ALGAR eyeing the tree.*

LUCY: So...I decorated the tree. The whole house, really.

ALGAR: I see that.

LUCY: You said I should go ahead –

ALGAR: I know.

LUCY: Which was so sweet of you.

ALGAR: I know.

LUCY: I think even Pastor Larsen was impressed.

ALGAR: Terrific. I live for his approval.

LUCY: I just mean –

ALGAR: I know. I think we should have a glass of wine.

LUCY: No, I have to do the Mr. Lube party tonight.

ALGAR: Fun.

*A text comes in on her phone.*

LUCY: Speak of the devil – *quickly answering the text-* and then make fifty Santa hats.

ALGAR: What for?

LUCY: The flash mob for the pipefitters union? I told them flash mobs are passé but the executive secretary has the bit in her teeth and -

ALGAR: Right. You told me this – I forgot.

LUCY: I wish you'd say something about the tree.

ALGAR: I guess I didn't realize this – the decorating - was happening today.

LUCY: I actually did it in the middle of the night –

ALGAR: What?

LUCY: I couldn't sleep – and I wanted to surprise you.

ALGAR: Ah...

LUCY: I thought you might see it before you left for school-

ALGAR: I went out the back door.

LUCY: So...?

ALGAR: I just need a moment to...

*ALGAR knocks back the rest of his drink to fortify himself and moves to examine the tree. LUCY points out the highlights.*

LUCY: Some of these ornaments are from the old country. My sisters and I made those gingerbread men. The tinsel ropes are from my grandmother.

ALGAR: Right.

LUCY: I guess the thing is...now that we have a tree it finally feels like Christmas.

ALGAR: It sure does.

*ALGAR peers at a pile of parcels under the tree, picks one of them up and shakes it. Picks up another and shakes it, too.*

ALGAR: What the hell?

LUCY: Oh those -

ALGAR: These boxes are empty!

LUCY: They're for decoration.

ALGAR: Pretty boxes full of air. Full of nothing. Not even hope.

LUCY: That's a touch melodramatic -

ALGAR: Sorry, it's just a lot all at once. And I've had kind of a day.

LUCY: Yeah?

ALGAR: The kids were so wired -

LUCY: Excited about Christmas -

ALGAR: Yeah, I tried to beat it out of them but they've had years of conditioning -

LUCY: It'll be over before you know it.

ALGAR: Christmas?

LUCY: School!

ALGAR: Well that's the thing. The principal wanted "to have a word."

LUCY: What? Why?

ALGAR: A couple of parents complained about my attitude. One of them referred to me as a "nihilistic, killjoy Scrooge."

LUCY: Oh my...

ALGAR: See, we were talking about materialism in class. I was telling the kids about SPUG – Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving.

LUCY: Uh-huh.

ALGAR: Fact. It was a real thing, started in 1911 by a few prominent Americans, to restore the real meaning of Christmas. Theodore Roosevelt was a member.

LUCY: So what could be wrong with telling the students about that?

ALGAR: I suppose I did put a bit of a spin on the concept –

LUCY: Yeah?

ALGAR: That, along with the paper I assigned –

LUCY: What paper?

ALGAR: I told you about this – at least I think I did. I hardly see you these days –

LUCY: So tell me again -

ALGAR: I assigned a last little paper, about materialism, and I suppose I may have given the impression –

LUCY: Let me guess - you gave high marks to the Grinches in the class –

ALGAR: Oh come on, just because not all of the kids are little Christmas robots –

LUCY: Am I a Christmas robot?

ALGAR: I mean some of them come from different cultures -

LUCY: I'm aware of that but --

ALGAR: A few of the kids went home and told their parents that I wanted them to throw away their Christmas presents.

LUCY: And is that true?

ALGAR: No! Well sort of.

LUCY: Algar! Are you going to lose your job?

ALGAR: I don't think so but –

LUCY: What about getting a permanent contract like we had both really, really hoped you would?

ALGAR: Sorry, I just wanted to inspire the students to be a tiny bit thoughtful about meaningless gift-giving.

LUCY: Really? Is that really what you wanted?

ALGAR: Then I come home to empty boxes under the tree and I can't help but see the irony...

LUCY: They aren't meant to be ironic! They're just placeholders –

ALGAR: But we really don't need to hold a place, you see, because I've decided I don't want any gifts.

*Sound of a text incoming on Lucy's phone.*

LUCY: So? You're getting them anyway.

*Another text. She quickly types a one-word reply.*

ALGAR: And my gift to you doesn't get wrapped up and put under the tree. It's not a thing, it's an experience –

LUCY: Sounds wonderful – I can't wait.

ALGAR: So between the two of us there's nothing to put under the tree. Ergo...maybe we don't need...

*LUCY turns away, emotional. Her phone starts ringing.*

LUCY: *(answering)* Lucy speaking. *(a beat)* Nuts, shellfish and dairy? No problem. Bye! *(hangs up, to ALGAR)* She's added twenty-seven people to the guest list. Four of them have food allergies, the rest would "prefer" gluten-free. Ten of them are kids. So now she wants a bouncy castle at the reception.

ALGAR: You okay?

LUCY: I'm just...tired. Tired of fighting about the tree. Tired of Mr. Lube and the Santa hats and the Christmas Eve wedding couple who are so incredibly high maintenance that I could just -

ALGAR: I know you wanted to expand your business but do you really want to get into the whole insane realm of weddings? Especially this time of year -

LUCY: I did their company Christmas party last year and one thing led to another - for them – and for me –

ALGAR: And how is that going to work, anyway? Aren't we supposed to be at your parents Christmas Eve –

LUCY: I'll set up the wedding reception in the morning and then check in on them later -

ALGAR: What a ridiculous day to get married –

LUCY: Well see that's the thing. It isn't, really, because one of their things as a couple is how much they both love Christmas. They met at a Christmas party, they do advent calendars for each other with little love notes. They're looking forward to a lifetime of Hallmark holidays – with each other and a dozen kids.

ALGAR: Lucy - sweetie - I can't compete with that.

LUCY: So there's that and I have all my regular Christmas parties and then we go to the Advent supper at Mom and Dad's Sunday. If you're coming. Don't know if that's on the approved list. And I just broke my third glue gun and I still have centerpieces to make and I don't have gifts for Lillibeth and Neela. Gudrun keeps phoning –

ALGAR: She's right across the street – why doesn't she just walk over –

LUCY: She's at mom and dad's --

ALGAR: - two blocks away –

LUCY: - making cookies for the Christmas pageant.

ALGAR: Ahh yes, my first Svenson family Christmas pageant.

LUCY: It's going to be fun!

ALGAR: Yeah?

LUCY: We perform the pageant – a skit, really - have an amazing feast, then gather around the big tree at mom and dad's. It's my favorite party of the entire season! Because that's when I finally get...the feeling. It's like...a click in my brain. Or a tingle or a zing or –

ALGAR: A zingle?

LUCY: It's...spirit finally kicking in. You know?

ALGAR: I'll take your word for it.

LUCY: But first I have to finish writing the skit, making your costume, making my costume for the skit and the song we always sing before the meal and—

ALGAR: Here, you sit -- I'm going to get you a very large glass of wine-

LUCY: I don't have time! I came home to work on Santa hats and to see how you liked the tree and you hate it –

ALGAR: I don't hate it –

LUCY: Don't lie to me!

ALGAR: I really hate it.

LUCY: But why?

ALGAR: Uh...I don't know how to describe it.

LUCY: Please try.

ALGAR: I feel sort of... (*clocks LUCY's look*) I'm sorry, Luce – I'm just really not used to all this.

LUCY: You know, sometimes I feel like I don't know enough about you, honey. I mean I've never met your parents –

ALGAR: You've talked to them on the phone –

LUCY: That's not quite the same as meeting them, and really getting a sense of where you came from. I wish they didn't live so far away.

ALGAR: They're coming to the wedding.

LUCY: I guess I would just like to know where the landmines are. Especially with respect to family traditions. I've already been blindsided by the birthday thing –

ALGAR: I did appreciate the effort that went into the Star Wars skit. But I've never been good at costume parties. Or costumes. (*suggestively*) I'm pretty good at taking them off, though...

*ALGAR pulls LUCY into an embrace, attempts to derail the conversation with some nuzzling.*

LUCY: Do you think you could fill me in on the Christmas thing? So I don't screw up anything else?

ALGAR: You haven't screwed up. What would you like to know?

LUCY: A typical Wolanski family Christmas. Tell me a story...

ALGAR: Okey-doke.

LUCY: Do you need some puppets?

ALGAR: No, thank you. (*a beat*) Christmas was always kind of a dead zone. The three of us trapped in the house together. My father is one of those silent, repressed, types so Christmas isn't exactly his favourite time of year. My mother did a lot weeping into her tea towel. I think that was because -

LUCY: Sounds awful.

ALGAR: No, it was fine, just not hysterically ho-ho-ho.

LUCY: Uh-huh.

ALGAR: I don't know what you want me to say. Do you want me to make up a story about coal in my stocking or Yuletide beatings or poison in the Christmas porridge --

LUCY: I just wanna know what happened. Or didn't happen.

ALGAR: Okay. So the old man made good coin so there were always a lot of gifts under the tree. Possibly over-compensating for the fact that there were no other kids -

LUCY: Lots of presents. Instead of empty boxes. That's nice.

ALGAR: Not necessarily – gifts are no substitute for real communication.

LUCY: That's why you don't want presents from me – you don't think we have real communication?

ALGAR: No! I just don't need anything, Lucy.

LUCY: Okay, okay. Carry on with the Wolanski family Christmas. Lots of gifts under the tree -

ALGAR: Well, yeah, but it was always nasty stuff, like winter boots or corduroy pants. Not a lot of toys.

LUCY: No Santa?

ALGAR: No Santa.

LUCY: Why not?

ALGAR: My father didn't approve of "lying to children." My mother was a bit more fanciful but she just didn't have the power to overrule.

LUCY: So lots of gifts but no communication, no real love -

ALGAR: Well I wouldn't say that exactly.

LUCY: So your parents loved you but they had trouble expressing it. Except through excessive and meaningless gift-giving which didn't feel genuine to you.

ALGAR: What – the truth isn't dramatic enough for you?

LUCY: You're getting testy. I'm just trying to understand.

ALGAR: I'm trying to understand too. So the Wolanski family Christmas was...  
*(searching his memory, not liking what he sees there)...*

*The sound of an incoming text on LUCY'S phone. LUCY darts a nervous glance in the direction of the phone but tries to stay focused.*

LUCY: Go on.

*Her phone rings. She glances at the call display.*

ALGAR: Just answer it.

LUCY: I just – just a second. *(answers)* Mom - *(a beat, then:)* Glugen pansen. Pansen!

*She hangs up.*

LUCY: Sorry. You were saying...

ALGAR: I dunno. Never mind.

LUCY: I wanna hear about –

ALGAR: It's okay –I was done.

LUCY: Are you sure? *(a beat)* Are there any special Polish-German-Prussian Christmas traditions I should know about?

ALGAR: Oh that's all we need. More traditions.

LUCY: What's that supposed to mean?

ALGAR: I mean I think your family's got that covered. Between Saint Estherina and the Satan loaf and the jeggenfritza -

LUCY: Careful...

ALGAR: And all the other things I love, I think it would just get confusing to add more...fun into the mix.

LUCY: *(an outburst)* What's going to happen if we have kids?

ALGAR: What do you mean?

LUCY: I mean, will we have a real Christmas or –

ALGAR: What's a real Christmas?

LUCY: You tell me.

ALGAR: I don't know – we'll figure it out.

LUCY: When?

ALGAR: Later! I gotta go - I'm meeting the principal for coffee, to smooth things over. I could postpone but -

LUCY: No, you go. I have to...

ALGAR: Do Mister Lube, so to speak.

LUCY: Yup.

*LUCY collapses into the sofa.*

ALGAR Luce – sweetheart—is there anything I can do to help you?

LUCY: Sure – get a job. *(a beat)* Just kidding. I'll see you later.

ALGAR: Right.

LUCY: Love you...

ALGAR: Love you too.

*ALGAR kisses LUCY and leaves. LUCY sighs wearily, puts on some music: Var Julskinka Har Hymt (Our Christmas Ham Has Gone Missing, an actual Swedish song). As she listens a smile breaks across her face and she hurries off.*

## SCENE 12 - COFFEE SHOP

ALGAR: *(answers his phone)* Hello. Pastor Larsen? *(listening)* Well. Maybe I do need to talk to someone about my seasonal antagonism. I mean beyond the perfectly reasonable objections I've already articulated. So I suppose it's time for a little pseudo therapy. Not that I view our sessions as anything other than completely – um, productive. I guess I just have a sort of natural antipathy toward oversharing. About family. With family. I haven't really maintained a big connection with my parents whereas Lucy is really still smack dab in the bosom of her great big tree-worshipping tribe. *(listening)* Ah...uh-huh. I see. I didn't realize... the entire Svenson family is pretty concerned? About what, exactly? *(listening for another few moments)* See the thing is, they're not actually directly involved in this marriage. *(listening)* Gee, what would you suggest? More puppets? Sorry, Pastor – I gotta go. Bye.

## SCENE 13 – THE LIVING ROOM

*Lights up on the living room and the tree, completely stripped of its decorations. A note sits propped up in the branches.*

ALGAR: *(as he enters)* Luce! Are you home? I think we need to–what happened to the decorations on the tree?

*ALGAR moves to the tree, plucks the note out of the branches.*

ALGAR: Lucy...?

*Sound of sleigh bells. Tinny recorded music. LUCY enters, wearing a Christmas-ham-on-a-platter costume, complete with pineapple rings.*

LUCY: *(singing)* Our Christmas ham has gone missing...

ALGAR: What is - what are you wearing?

LUCY: *(singing)* Var Julskinka Har Hymt -

ALGAR: Ooh...wow, look at you...go.

*She puts a Santa hat on ALGAR and leers suggestively.*

ALGAR: Luce...

*Just as she is about to remove a layer of clothing -*

ALGAR: Stop! Please don't force me to associate sex with Christmas –

LUCY: I hate you!

ALGAR: Joking! I'm joking –

LUCY: I'm not!

*ALGAR grabs LUCY and kisses her.*

ALGAR: You are luscious...

LUCY: I thought I'd help you develop more positive associations with Christmas. I even stripped the tree so we could start over –

ALGAR: What's this super sexy hump?

LUCY: It's a Christmas ham – on a platter –

ALGAR: Ham? I thought the pageant theme was Lord of the Rings –

LUCY: Yeah, but this is for the song we always sing before the meal – Var Julskinka Har Hymt -

ALGAR: *(picking something off the costume)* What is this – a sexy pineapple ring?

LUCY: I keep thinking you just need to get into the spirit. But have you ever had the zingle in your entire life?

ALGAR: Not that I know of. I'm sorry.

*LUCY looks demoralized as she gathers up pieces of her costume.*

ALGAR: How'd your party go?

LUCY: Fine.

ALGAR: My meeting with the principal went very well. He shook my hand at the end and said he feels much the same way about Christmas.

LUCY: Oh, really.

ALGAR: Well that's good, isn't it? Because—

LUCY: Because pretty soon you'll convert the whole world to – what's your little club called – SLUG? Society for the Loathing -

ALGAR: Spug. Society for the Prevention –

LUCY: Whatever.

ALGAR: Are you mad? Because I thought the priority was me to have a job. Because the family's probably worried about me being a deadbeat, right?

LUCY: What?

ALGAR: Like Mr. Pinata Pie?

LUCY: No, of course not—

ALGAR: Funny, because the Pastor tells me your family is worried about our Christmas tree but maybe that's even more troubling than whether or not I have a job. Actually I'm going to run that by you again in case it sounds funny. Your family is deeply concerned that we don't have ornaments on our tree.

LUCY: Well so am I! I never realized before how hard it is for me to get into the spirit without a tree – every time I look at that sad, scrawny, naked...

ALGAR: And every time I look at it I just feel...never mind.

*A simmering pause.*

LUCY: We need to see the Pastor.

ALGAR: Right now? It's nearly ten o'clock.

LUCY: Oh, he'll be up. Having his night cap—a big old noggatooker full of schnapps.

ALGAR: I think it's too late—

LUCY: I'll call him.

ALGAR: Luce...

LUCY: Just – go and start the car!

SCENE 14–THE MARRIAGE COURSE

*ALGAR sits waiting for the Pastor. We hear muffled, off-tune humming of a Christmas carol. LUCY rushes in, with a coat thrown over her ham costume. A tense silence.*

LUCY: Sorry - I had to take a call from Bridezilla.

ALGAR: The Pastor's just getting himself a cup of coffee.

*More off-stage bellowing of a carol followed by a loud belch.*

ALGAR: And some pickled herring. And some more Schnapps.

LUCY: Shh...

*The Pastor's humming fades out abruptly.*

LUCY: Pastor! Thanks for meeting with us on such short notice.

*LUCY shoots ALGAR a look.*

ALGAR: Uh–yes, thank you.

LUCY: As you have no doubt gathered ...*(an interruption from PASTOR)* No. It's a costume and I broke the zipper when I was trying to get it off and – *(the PASTOR chuckles, sings a line or two of the song Our Christmas Ham has Gone Missing)* Yes–ha–ha–just–never mind. As I was saying... Algar and I are still struggling with – Algar and I have completely incompatible views about Christmas. About how to celebrate Christmas -

ALGAR: About whether to mark the occasion with a fruit cake or a strip tease or -

LUCY: Of course this has less to do with Christmas and more to do with our respective family backgrounds. Well you know *our* family, Pastor - we love spending time together. My sisters and I always-

ALGAR: You know what's weird – when they talk to each other, they stand nose to nose. Like boxers. Absolutely no sense of personal space.

LUCY: We're very close!

ALGAR: Okay, not like boxers, like birds. Beautiful birds.

LUCY: What's your point?

ALGAR: Let me finish. At first I kind of loved the fact that you were from this big jolly family and I thought I might start to dig all the insane holiday rituals and the endless parties. But I'm not feelin' it, you know?

LUCY: Algar's family apparently just avoids the whole holiday mess.

ALGAR: You know, as a student of history, I have to say that this is exactly the kind of emotion that fuels nationalism.

LUCY: Oh give me a break –

ALGAR: I'm serious. Everyone breaking out into their little tribes to celebrate Christmas. Protecting their Yuletide turf. It breeds animosity, elitism, feelings of superiority. Thus creating a dangerous cocktail of "other-ness." Nazi Germany all over again.

LUCY: Really, Algar?

ALGAR: Well obviously it's not the same / sort of –

LUCY: Pastor? Hello? (*a few incoherent noises from the PASTOR*) You know I'm starting to get a completely different perspective on that fateful Halloween party–

ALGAR: The night we met? What about it?

*LUCY grabs a couple of the therapy puppets.*

LUCY: (*to the PASTOR*) Did I mention he was the only person at the party who wasn't wearing a costume?

ALGAR: (*to the PASTOR*) Lucy was dressed up as a– yam --

LUCY: (*to the PASTOR*) A pumpkin! (*using her puppet*) I said – what are *you* supposed to be...? (*as ALGAR*) I'm a super hero. I'm super...shy.

ALGAR: I didn't say it like that –

LUCY: (*to the PASTOR*) And then the charm offensive -

ALGAR: Luce...

LUCY: (*as ALGAR*) You look ravishing. I might have a crush on your squash --

ALGAR: Come on, I said some really witty stuff – remember?

LUCY: *(using puppet)* You're not wearing a costume.

ALGAR: About you being a sweet potato—

LUCY: Shush. *(as ALGAR)* The last time I wore a costume, a gang of mean boys beat me up —

*(to PASTOR)* Which I realize now was probably a lie —

ALGAR: That totally happened —

LUCY: But I got sucked in -

ALGAR: I couldn't think of anything to wear so I thought I'd pretend it was against my principles to wear a costume.

LUCY: I said *(using her puppet)* I love Halloween almost as much I love Christmas! And you said nothing -

ALGAR: What was I supposed to —

LUCY: You never said — *(using puppet)* oh I hate Christmas --.

ALGAR: I told you later —

LUCY: But why didn't you say anything that first night? If you had told me -

ALGAR: You're saying — let me get this straight — that if I had mentioned my feelings about Christmas right then, we wouldn't have gone home together? Sorry, Pastor-

LUCY: I just wish you'd told me before I fell in love with you —

ALGAR: You fell in love with me that night —

LUCY: Sorta. I don't know — it was probably just - yes. Yes I did.

ALGAR: And if you'd known what you were getting into—

LUCY: I just mean— now it's almost Christmas and we're in this terrible limbo. No tree, no zingle, no...

*A long beat, interrupted by a little speech from the Pastor in soothing tones.*

ALGAR: You have a suggestion —

LUCY: We are completely open to suggestions.

*LUCY and ALGAR listen. LUCY looks horrified.*

ALGAR: Cool.

LUCY: Not cool –

ALGAR: I think it might help me –

LUCY: I can't believe you of all people would suggest such a thing –

ALGAR: Wow, that's very progressive of you, Pastor. "Burning regrets."

LUCY: We are not burning the tree!

ALGAR: No – we are burning the regrets attached to the tree – just think, maybe all my bad feelings about the holiday will go up in smoke!

LUCY: *(starts to leave)* We're through here. I mean totally done!

ALGAR: Uh, Lucy–

LUCY: Here – take your stupid puppets!

*LUCY throws a bunch of puppets at the PASTOR. Indignant outburst from the Pastor.*

LUCY: *(to PASTOR)* Oh don't worry–this doesn't affect your role in the Svenson family Christmas pageant. See you tomorrow!

ALGAR: I thought the pageant was Thursday –

LUCY: Thursday is Christmas Eve!

ALGAR: Okay, okay–let's just talk this through–

LUCY: Pastor, why don't you come to our house and help Algar trash the tree, burn Santa in effigy, have a few more drinks!

*LUCY charges off.*

ALGAR: Lucy, wait – don't go! Lucy....

*LUCY exits. ALGAR runs after her, then runs back in.*

ALGAR: Sorry about–Lucy’s under a lot of pressure at work and–listen–as you know, Lucy and her mother were hoping, we were all hoping we could do the official wedding announcement on Christmas Eve. The thing is - Lucy’s way too stressed to finish the marriage course before then so what I’m really hoping for is that we can just say hallelujah we’re good to go on the old nuptials. Just say we’ve passed the course with flying colours. Okay? Because we do not have the time or the inclination to- *(listening)* You know what – I don’t actually need your “blessing” to do anything!

*ALGAR charges off, then runs right back in.*

ALGAR: *(to the Pastor)* You mind if I wait here for a cab?

## SCENE 15 - LIVING ROOM

*Late morning the next day. LUCY, wearing her costume for the Christmas pageant, is sewing some sequins on a costume or some such task. She’s also knocking back a glass of wine – definitely not the first one. ALGAR enters.*

ALGAR: Lucy! Where the hell– what happened to you last night?

LUCY: Didn’t you get my text? I told you I was going to Gudrun’s–she fixed the zipper on my ham costume so I could get out of it–

ALGAR: But when did you come to bed?

LUCY: I didn’t. I slept on the couch. *(a beat)* I didn’t want to wake you

ALGAR: You weren’t here when I got up and you weren’t answering your phone so I went to your parents and you weren’t there either. Your mother made me eat a bunch of cookies and– *(a beat)* Are you drinking wine?

LUCY: Why, yes I am.

ALGAR: Ah...is something...wrong?

LUCY: Besides last night?

ALGAR: Well I mean–

LUCY: Let me see. This morning I had a meeting with my Christmas bride. They’ve called off their wedding.

ALGAR: Why?

LUCY: Irreconcilable differences. About Christmas.

ALGAR: That's ...too bad.

LUCY: Oh, it gets better. Came home and had a conversation with your mom.

ALGAR: What?

LUCY: She phoned. Turns out she wasn't clear whether the wedding was on the Friday or the Saturday. But really I think it was just an excuse to call. We had a nice long chat.

ALGAR: Oh yeah?

LUCY: I can't wait to meet her.

ALGAR: And I'm sure she's looking forward to meeting you.

LUCY: I asked her what they were doing for the holidays. Not much, it sounds like. So I invited them to come here. She said yes.

ALGAR: Lucy, no --

LUCY: She was resistant at first. She wanted to make sure I was sincere. I told her I'm incredibly sincere and I think it would help her son be more sincere if we could clear up some family history --

ALGAR: Lucy -- you did not -- tell me you did not --

LUCY: They're flying out Christmas Day. She'll get back to me as soon as they confirm a flight.

ALGAR: Let's phone them back right now before this goes any further.

LUCY: This... is my Christmas gift to you.

ALGAR: I'm going to phone them back and say we won't be here.

LUCY: Please, Algar. We need to resolve some of this stuff so that we can move forward.

ALGAR: We won't be here! Because my gift to you is a trip to Hawaii. We open presents at your parents' place tomorrow night, then head to the airport.

LUCY: Algar, we'd miss Christmas Day and the rest of the holiday season!

ALGAR: That was kind of the idea.

LUCY: What about the cranberry stomp, the Saint Ethel fish fry –

ALGAR: You think I haven't been paying attention. You think I'm just having some kind of knee jerk reaction to the holiday season. But in your heart of hearts, I think you'd love a little break from it all.

LUCY: That's completely outrageous –

ALGAR: You're exhausted. You need a holiday. I should admit that it even crossed my mind that we could elope. Get hitched under the palm trees. Maybe that would be simpler than...

LUCY: This is... huge.

ALGAR: Yes, yes it is.

LUCY: This is some kind of totally screwed up Gift of the Magi thing.

ALGAR: What?

LUCY: I don't want to go to Hawaii.

ALGAR: I don't want to spend the holiday with my parents.

LUCY: Algar, your mom sounded kind of happy.

ALGAR: Then you better phone them back before she gets any happier –

LUCY: How could you be so mean?

ALGAR: You're the one who invited them – without consulting me!

LUCY: It's Christmas!

ALGAR: That's your answer for everything, isn't it? The sky is falling – it's Christmas! I jumped off the bridge – because it's Christmas!

LUCY: I just think it's weird that you don't communicate with them –

ALGAR: We communicate! I phoned my mother on her birthday. They're coming to the wedding –

LUCY: What wedding?

ALGAR: What do you mean by that?

LUCY: I mean we no longer have a venue since I just quit Pastor Larsen's marriage course –

ALGAR: So getting married in Hawaii might be nice –

LUCY: Oh my family would love that – you think they're upset about the tree?

ALGAR: Okay, okay - we'll find a different pastor and eat meatballs in a different church basement or – whatever you want!

LUCY: Really?

ALGAR: Did it ever occur to you that your family might be the oddballs? The ones operating outside the norm? I don't need to live in my parents' laps -

LUCY: You haven't talked to them in two months.

ALGAR: How do I make you understand this -- I am not close to my parents. I am not spending Christmas trapped in a house with them. I am going to Hawaii. I hope you're coming with me –

LUCY: I don't know what I'm doing! Right now we have to go to the Christmas pageant.

ALGAR: You're kidding.

LUCY: They're expecting us—and the cheese tray—

ALGAR: Don't you think this conversation is slightly more important?

LUCY: You have a part in the skit – I made you a costume.

*She holds up a green garbage bag.*

ALGAR: No...thanks.

LUCY: You know it's traditional for the newest member of the family to play a part and you know very well that involves wearing a costume—

ALGAR: I can't –

LUCY: You promised. And we gotta set up tables and chairs. You said you'd help.

ALGAR: No! In case you hadn't noticed, we've got some major shit going on here. We have to phone my parents and tell them not to come. You know how you felt about the tree? Well this is my deal-breaker.

*Long beat, then LUCY turns to leave.*

LUCY: I'll phone your mom later. Right now, I think I need to be with my family.

ALGAR: (*stricken*) I thought *I* was your family.

LUCY: I just – I have to -

ALGAR: Lucy, if you walk out that door -

LUCY: I have to go – I need to go!

ALGAR: Lucy!

*But she leaves.*

ALGAR: You forgot the cheese tray!

*ALGAR stares after her for a long moment, then opens the green garbage bag containing his costume. It's hard to say what the costume is supposed to represent but it looks like sort of a Christmas troll/drag queen. Algar's expression hardens. He goes offstage for a moment and returns with an AXE.*

## SCENE 16 – THE SVENSON FAMILY CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

LUCY: Welcome everyone to the Svenson family Christmas pageant. (*canned applause, excited noises*) As some of you know this is an annual tradition that has been going on since... well since I was idiot enough to agree to it. Just kidding. Happy to help all of you celebrate by - supplying costumes and writing the script and rehearsing the show with my extended family who have an incredible sense of entitlement (*a little bit of nervous laughter*)... I mean an incredible sense of fun. Always the big...fun. Oh hello Pastor Larsen – did you manage to get a little punch? You always get your punch, doncha? You and Dad. Well thank you for once again agreeing to play – or actually insisting that you reprise your divine hammy-ness as Holy Moly, the fourth wise man. So... on with the show, I guess. Oh - Uncle Otar Olaf will be playing the part I had actually designated for my fiancé Algar. As he is unable to join us tonight. Who knows if he will ever join us again? Cause Christmas is definitely not his thing. Anyway, he was meant to play the role of Findebar, the farting elf. Findebar has been exiled to his own lonely little room in Santa's workshop because of his digestive problems. So this seemed

like the perfect debut role for my future husband. (*titters of laughter*) But...he's not here. (*uncomfortable pause as LUCY surveys the "audience"*) Special thanks to Uncle Otar Olaf for stepping up to the plate. Without a costume. I mean he'll be wearing clothes. I freaking well hope he's planning on wearing clothes, anyway, because the thought of Uncle Otar Olaf buck naked as the farting elf is – yikes, I don't think the nightmares would ever stop. (*an uncomfortable silence*) Just kidding. It really is time to get on with the show. So without further ado... (*LUCY can't seem to continue - she runs off.*)

*BLACKOUT.*

## SCENE 17 - THE LIVING ROOM

*Lights fade up on Lucy and Algar's apartment. Mysterious shapes loom in the semi- darkness.*

LUCY: (*off*) I'm home. Algar?

ALGAR: Uh-huh.

LUCY: (*as she enters*) What...happened here?

ALGAR: Um...carnage?

LUCY: You chopped up the tree.

*LUCY turns on a light and the carnage is revealed. Algar's wearing the top part of his Christmas pageant costume with only underwear, and is surrounded by the remains of the Christmas tree which he has hacked to bits with an axe. The surrounding area is also littered with bottles, the remains of the cheese tray, etc. LUCY takes in the scene.*

ALGAR: Yup. We're in trouble, huh?

LUCY: Yup.

*A silence.*

ALGAR: How'd the Christmas pageant thingy go?

LUCY: I kind of got derailed. I guess they probably did it without me.

ALGAR: Really?

LUCY: I was preoccupied - I wanted to come home and talk to you. But the family just wanted me to get on with their skit. And Neela was mad at me for showing up without the cheese tray.

ALGAR: (*peering into the wreckage*) I ate all the brie.

*Long beat. Lucy just looks at Algar. Waiting...*

ALGAR: I did try on the costume... (*in a burst*) I was like some kind of crazed serial killer. It was a... spree. You can't imagine – please don't even try to imagine how satisfying it was to hack that tree into firewood. All the while knowing it wasn't really the tree I was having a go at...

LUCY: What...?

ALGAR: Oh, I dunno, Luce. I just get sick of being made to feel like some kind of Christmas...loser. Everyone else is all lookit the widdle puppy wearing the Santa hat, or the widdle baby Jesus in the manger and most people, you know, even if they're not having a good year they can always draw on their Walton family Christmas memories. But I don't have those fuzzy kidlet memories to draw on – I can't go to the well for that. (*a beat*) Just so we're clear: there was no big drama in my childhood. Except...well, as I've already told you, my parents wanted more kids. Especially my mom... always wanted a big family. They had me in fairly short order and then that was it. My father refused to adopt and my mother refused to give up trying. So Christmas was...we lived in a big, empty house and in the early days we always had a big Douglas fir tarted up with all the usual stuff. Plus there was always a lot of...hope wrapped up under the tree along with the gifts. One year mom was even pregnant over the holiday season and... I think it was the next year we didn't get a tree because we were going away to Florida. Which became kind of a regular thing. Eventually the holiday décor was downgraded to a wreath on the front door or fake spruce boughs on the mantel or...sometimes not even that.

LUCY: I think you tried to tell me this before but I was so busy browbeating you with Christmas cheer -

ALGAR: It's okay - I don't think I really understood it all till I was in the midst of my tree slaughter.

LUCY: Yeah?

ALGAR: It's almost like the tree and all the holiday trimmings reminded my parents of their failure to procreate. And that meant Christmas was always just sort of...disappointing. Pretty lame, huh?

LUCY: All that focus on an imaginary child instead of you. That must have been-

ALGAR: Do you wanna hear something even more lame? I think that on some level I'd really like Christmas *not* to be disappointing. Maybe I'd like to – just once – experience a bit of the elusive but apparently very satisfying “spirit” you keep referring to.

*LUCY turns away, emotional.*

ALGAR: So that's it, huh? The deal breaker. You said the tree was the deal breaker.

LUCY: Algar...

ALGAR: I'd do anything – you know, go for some kind of specialized counseling, Christmas morning regression therapy – whatever you want. But I get the sense that it's too late.

LUCY: Stop - this is making me feel like a fraud.

ALGAR: What?

LUCY: I think...I find Christmas disappointing too.

ALGAR: Really?

LUCY: Not every single moment of it, of course, but so much of it is...challenging. So I just try harder, jump higher, make more cookies, eat more cookies...anything to recreate that feeling I used to get. And decorating a tree is a big part of that, of drumming up feeling. But my family is...

ALGAR: What?

LUCY: The holiday season is just – so complicated. Even without my business. You know Dad's a bit of a drinker and it's always worse around this time of year. Mom gets weepy about the old country. And the sisters...

ALGAR: They've got their own stuff going on.

LUCY: Helga's not all that happy with her marriage. Neela can't hold down a job. Gudrun and Lillibeth are always at each other's throats – they're so competitive about all their Christmas crafts. And I'm just...

ALGAR: You're just trying to make everyone else happy.

LUCY: Yes! And it's not working.

ALGAR: That's why I thought you might like to escape for a few days.

LUCY: I have never, ever been away this time of year...

ALGAR: Right. I see now how nuts I was to plan a trip.

*The phone rings. Neither Algar nor Lucy make a move to deal with it.*

LUCY: I ran away in the middle of the pageant.

ALGAR: So you didn't get your...zingle?

LUCY: Nope.

*Phone stops ringing and then starts again.*

ALGAR: You gonna answer that?

LUCY: I...don't think so.

*LUCY looks at the call display.*

LUCY: It's Gudrun.

ALGAR: They're just going to keep calling, aren't they?

LUCY: *(nods)* Did you phone your mom and dad?

ALGAR: No. *(the phone stops ringing)*

LUCY: I'm so sorry about that – I shouldn't have invited them and –

*ALGAR'S phone starts to ring. He looks at the call display.*

ALGAR: It's my mother.

*A long beat and then he answers.*

ALGAR: Hi...oh, that's too bad...Listen, Mom - maybe you and Dad could come another time... Lucy would like to get to know you and...it would be good to see you. *(a long beat)* That sounds great. Merry Christmas. *(hangs up)* They couldn't get a flight.

LUCY: Honey, did you just invite them to visit?

ALGAR: It sounds like they might come in January.

LUCY: Wow...

*Long beat then Lucy's cell rings again. LUCY answers.*

LUCY: Mom. Yeah, sorry about leaving the party like that. *(listening)* No...I can't turn around and come right back. I mean I don't want to. Algar and I...are going to Hawaii.

ALGAR: *(a shocked whisper)* We are?

LUCY: Yes, spur of the moment. Just something different. Just... *(listening)*...I know – yes – I know. Yes but... *(in a rush)* Mom, we're leaving–tonight– we'll be back for New Year's. God Jul!

*Breathing hard, LUCY "hangs up" her cell phone.*

ALGAR: Seriously?

LUCY: Yes.

ALGAR: Come on - you don't really want to be away from your family on Christmas Eve.

*The phone rings again. LUCY turns it off.*

LUCY: Yes. I think I do...just this once. Maybe I need a complete break from it all. Maybe we need to go someplace where they don't celebrate Christmas.

ALGAR: I'll make up a country and get us a rezzie.

LUCY: No...we're going to Hawaii. As long as you're there, it'll be great.

ALGAR: That's a lot of pressure. If we get there and it's really awful I don't want you to hate me.

*A long beat.*

LUCY: Then let's stay here.

ALGAR: Right. Better phone your mom before she gets up a posse.

LUCY: No, I mean let's stay here. And just not tell them.

ALGAR: You mean... hole up like escaped criminals?

LUCY: Yeah.

ALGAR: But your sister's right across the street!

LUCY: I know – I feel so wicked. We'll have to black out the windows, eat by candlelight... (*a beat*) But what about the plane tickets?

ALGAR: I paid a fortune for flight insurance so–

LUCY: But what if –

ALGAR: I don't care—I'm canceling the trip.

LUCY: Are you sure?

ALGAR: Are *you*?

LUCY: Yes. I think we need... a clean slate.

ALGAR: Agreed. (*a beat*) But what are we going to eat?

LUCY: I think we have pickles—and bacon.

ALGAR: We can order pizza, get them to come to the back door --

LUCY: Brilliant! The only thing is... (*looking around the apartment*)

ALGAR: I'll clean up this mess.

LUCY: It's not that. It's just that... whatever we do this year – we're establishing a tradition. It's important.

ALGAR: You need a tree.

LUCY: We need... something.

ALGAR: (*running off*) I have an idea.

*ALGAR returns with a cactus.*

ALGAR: Ta-da!

LUCY: That's... perfect.

ALGAR: Decorations?

LUCY: I don't know. A red sock?

ALGAR: Or we could decorate with... poetry.

LUCY: Haiku.

ALGAR: From the cats to the goldfish. And to each other.

LUCY: I'll get some paper.

ALGAR: Wait. Let me give this a shot. *(after a beat)* Oh sweet Lucia Svenson...

LUCY: Too many syllables.

ALGAR: Oh sweet...sweet Lucy.

LUCY: Yes, my beloved?

ALGAR: When we are old and grey –

LUCY: No. *(counting off the syllables on her fingers)* Old and grey, someday...

ALGAR: We will remember the first...

LUCY: Very best Christmas.

ALGAR: Love from Mitzi and Harold and Cheryl and Balzac and...me.

*We hear the tinkle of a bell or a harp strum - magic. Both LUCY and ALGAR hear it, smile.*

*They kiss as the lights fade...CURTAIN*

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