

Scene One

*Afternoon. Christmas Eve.
Barbara's feverishly decorated home. She is
standing at the window, anxious. She sees
Katherine and hurries to open the door.*

BARBARA
--Worried sick!

KATHERINE
I'm sorry. Everything was fine this morning when I went left and then I got on 95 and I don't know what happened—

BARBARA
Christmas Eve traffic is what it was!

KATHERINE
Yes—

BARBARA
I thought you'd been in an accident or something.

KATHERINE
I should have called. I was going to call you when I got to a rest stop and then—

BARBARA
When three o'clock came and went--

KATHERINE
Did we say three? I thought we left it open—

BARBARA
We said three. We definitely said three. That's why I was so worried.

KATHERINE
I honestly didn't remember that, Barbara.

BARBARA
It's alright. It's fine. You're here now. You're safe. Thank goodness!

She laughs almost hysterically. They hug each other tightly. A moment.

Well, come inside for heaven's sake. You must be freezing.

KATHERINE

Yes.

BARBARA

Temperature's been dropping all afternoon.

KATHERINE

It feels it.

BARBARA

(exiting with Katherine's coat) Sit down. Make yourself comfortable—Claire! You're aunt's here!

As Barbara putters about, Katherine takes in the whole room – the tree, the decorations, and, finally her eyes rest on a recliner. She moves toward it.

KATHERINE

It's started snowing.

BARBARA

Has it?

KATHERINE

Just a few flakes.

BARBARA

Well, they said it would.

KATHERINE

Did they?

BARBARA

Weather forecast said we haven't had a White Christmas in fifteen years.

KATHERINE

Oh.

BARBARA

Claire would have been four. Can you believe it's been that long?

KATHERINE

No.

BARBARA
Thank God you beat it, huh?

KATHERINE
Yes.

A beat.

BARBARA
Claire! (to Katherine) Did she not hear me? (back to Claire) Your aunt's here! All day she's been up there. Just sleeping or God knows what. She'd sleep till dinner if I let her.

KATHERINE
Is she alright?

BARBARA
Oh, she's fine.

A beat.

KATHERINE
The house looks. Wonderful.

BARBARA
Really?

KATHERINE
Yes. It's very. Festive.

BARBARA
You like the tree?

KATHERINE
It's beautiful.

BARBARA
I went to five places before I found it. Honestly, half of them were dry as a bone. But this one. This was a find.

KATHERINE
It's lovely—

BARBARA
Eighty dollars they wanted to charge me for it. Eighty dollars! But I charmed them down to sixty.

KATHERINE

(she smiles) Good for you.

BARBARA

(she winks) Ole gal still has it. Anyway. I just had to buy it. Blue spruce. Look at the shape of it. Is that not a perfect tree?

KATHERINE

It really is. Who put the lights on the house?

BARBARA

I did!

KATHERINE

You? Really?

BARBARA

(beginning of a story) You know me and ladders.

KATHERINE

I know—

BARBARA

We've had lights on this house every year since we've been here.

Katherine is silent.

BARBARA

We'd have them up the day after Thanksgiving. I'd be holding the ladder while Dan strung them. He'd make me so nervous the way he'd just lean over the gutters--

KATHERINE

Hmmm--

BARBARA

I couldn't bear to think of our little house without lights. Even the Gettings, THE GETTINGS, had lights on their house. Tacky as they are.

Silence.

So, I just made myself get up there. Claire held the ladder for me. Grudgingly.

Katherine smiles.

And I did just fine.

Claire enters.

BARBARA

Well! Look who's awake from the dead! Say hello to your aunt.

CLAIRE
Hey.

Claire goes to her and hugs her warmly. Katherine hugs her tightly.

KATHERINE
Honey. You look tired.

BARBARA
(displeased, but teasing) Probably be wouldn't be so tired if she weren't out every night--

CLAIRE
I'm not out every night--

BARBARA
Certainly seems like every night to me.

CLAIRE
Okay, Mom.

BARBARA
Nevermind. Come January when she's back in school—

KATHERINE
Oh?

BARBARA
Tell her.

CLAIRE
I'm going to back to school in January.

KATHERINE
Oh, well, that's--

BARBARA
Got her registered last month.

KATHERINE
Oh. Good. (she looks at Claire, searchingly) That's good.

BARBARA
We wanted to surprise you. I figured four months was long enough. She needs to go back to school and get on with it, you know?

KATHERINE

Well, it was a very difficult time--

BARBARA

Oh, you don't have to tell me!

KATHERINE

No, I--

BARBARA

She's already behind a semester. And the thought of her missing more--

KATHERINE

Yes. Of course.

BARBARA

Anyway. The Dean was very nice and she's only taking twelve hours—

KATHERINE

Good.

BARBARA

And she's going to have the same roommate! Which worked out well.

KATHERINE

Oh. Good.

BARBARA

Karen. A really nice girl. The two of them hit it off almost immediately last year. Didn't you?

CLAIRE

Yeah. I guess.

BARBARA

She's nervous.

KATHERINE

Of course.

CLAIRE

I'm not nervous.

BARBARA

It's understandable. But once you get back in the swing of things, you will be glad that I pushed you. You'll be on the phone, saying, "Mom, you were right. I am so happy to be back in school."

Claire and Katherine smile at each other.

CLAIRE

(warmly) Do you want me to take this upstairs?

KATHERINE

That's alright, honey. I can do it.

BARBARA

She can do it. Let her earn her keep! You relax.

Claire exits

KATHERINE

You don't think it's too soon?

BARBARA

(looking at her) What? Why?

KATHERINE

She seems--

BARBARA

She'll be fine. All she needs—

KATHERINE

No, it's just that--

BARBARA

I'm just supposed to keep her around until she decides to snap out of it?

KATHERINE

No. I. (she stops) You're right.

Katherine is silent.

BARBARA

I had to do something.

KATHERINE

Of course.

BARBARA

Sitting around moping isn't going to bring him back.

A beat.

BARBARA

So. How about a Manhattan? I just made one.

KATHERINE

Oh, no. Maybe just some tea.

BARBARA

What? You don't want a Manhattan? We always have Manhattans at Christmas.

KATHERINE

I know, I--

BARBARA

Don't tell me you don't drink them anymore.

KATHERINE

No, I do, I--

BARBARA

You used to say that I made the best Manhattans.

KATHERINE

You do. That's definitely true.

BARBARA

I laid in all this hooch. C'mon. Let me make you a Manhattan.

KATHERINE

Well. Alright. Why not?

BARBARA

Good! I knew you couldn't say no to my Manhattans.

KATHERINE

Do you need a hand?

BARBARA

Oh, God, no. I could make a Manhattan with my eyes closed.

She looks at Barbara as she exits.

KATHERINE

(smiling) You look good.

BARBARA

Who me?

KATHERINE

You've lost weight.

BARBARA
Fifteen pounds.

KATHERINE
Fifteen?

BARBARA
Scarsdale diet!

KATHERINE
Really?

BARBARA
All of my winter slacks are too big on me! Can I just tell you how good that feels? I weigh less than I did the day I was married.

Katherine smiles.

And you know what? It wasn't hard. I just make simpler meals. It just seems like less of an ordeal with two of us. I mean, Dan was really the only one who cared all that much about what we ate anyway, you know?

Katherine is silent.

Always had to have some sort of red meat at every meal. Gravy. It's no wonder he--

KATHERINE
Barbara—

BARBARA
I'm going to try and lose another ten. Not at the holidays of course. I'm giving myself a break until after New Years. You have to give yourself some treats, you know? You can't completely deprive yourself. That's what I've learned. It's all about control. (she enters) Here you go. Just the way you like them. A little on the dry side.

KATHERINE
Wonderful. Thank you.

BARBARA
So. Merry Christmas!

KATHERINE
Merry Christmas.

They are silent.

BARBARA

(to Katherine) Claire didn't come back downstairs?

KATHERINE

I—

BARBARA

Claire! (she goes to the bottom of the stairs) What are you doing now?

CLAIRE

(from the top of the stairs) Nothing!

BARBARA

Come down and visit. It's Christmas.

KATHERINE

It's alright--

BARBARA

(calling to Claire) I've got eggnog for you.

KATHERINE

--We have time to visit. I'll be here—

BARBARA

I didn't buy all this eggnog just so it could go to waste--

KATHERINE

Barbara.

BARBARA

No reason she can't be social. How's your Manhattan?

KATHERINE

Strong. Good.

BARBARA

I made them dry. Just the way you like them. It's funny, I bought the more expensive vermouth this time? It's Christmas and all, you know? I have to say you can tell the difference. This is a really good Manhattan. I'm not going to skimp anymore.

Claire enters.

BARBARA

Why don't you get yourself some eggnog? You can even put a little rum in it if you want.

Claire slumps down in the chair.

You know I don't drink it anymore. Please don't tell me I bought that eggnog for nothing.

CLAIRE
Okay. (she exits)

BARBARA
(to Katherine) Do you drink eggnog? I can't remember.

KATHERINE
Sometimes.

BARBARA
I should have offered you some. Did you want some eggnog instead??

KATHERINE
No. The Manhattan is just fine. (a beat) I can't remember the last time I had a Manhattan—

BARBARA
Probably last Christmas, right?

A pained silence between Claire and Katherine.

BARBARA
I always thought I should have been a bartender. You know? I can really make a good Manhattan.

CLAIRE
(entering) You have to be able to make drinks other than Manhattans, Mom.

BARBARA
Oh, be quiet. (they laugh) I used to make gimlets. Years ago. Nobody drinks gimlets anymore. I don't even know if I remember how to make them. I'm going to freshen this one up.

Barbara exits to the kitchen.

KATHERINE
I think it's just great that you're going back to school, honey. (a beat) I'm sure it's going to be hard.

Claire is silent.

But I'm proud of you for doing it.

Silence.

Your mom is right. It'll make you feel better. It'll be good to be with your friends--

CLAIRE

It'll be good to get out of this house.

KATHERINE
(smiling) Well, that too.

Claire smiles back.

BARBARA
(from the kitchen) You must be famished. I didn't even offer you anything!

KATHERINE
No, I had some lunch. At one of the rest stops.

BARBARA
Dinner's not for awhile, yet. I'll bring out some nuts. The high school was selling mixed nuts this year--

KATHERINE
Well, alright--

BARBARA
Four years we went through those high school sales with Claire, you know? Stadium seat cushions--. What else did you sell?

CLAIRE
Oranges.

BARBARA
God yes, the oranges. They were hard as a rock. There was a freeze in Florida that year. (she laughs, a beat) Holiday cards another year. I thought I was finally done, you know? Claire's graduated, I'm done with buying things from the high school. And then this kid comes to the door with mixed nuts—. It was raining buckets and he looked absolutely miserable. And suddenly I'm buying five cans of them! Old softie!

KATHERINE
Oh, my--

BARBARA
Well, they're good to have around for the holidays, you know? For guests.

KATHERINE
(goes to the window) That was good thinking.

BARBARA
And I figure I can always re-use the tins. They came in these nice decorative tins.

Silence.

KATHERINE

It's really starting to come down.

BARBARA

Really?

She emerges with a bowl of nuts.

KATHERINE

(nodding) My car is already covered.

BARBARA

(going to the window) Claire, come look.

CLAIRE

I see it.

BARBARA

You can't see it from there. Come to the window.

Claire goes to the window.

Look at that. It's gorgeous, isn't it?

KATHERINE

It's gotten so windy.

CLAIRE

It looks cold.

BARBARA

We're going to have a White Christmas. (she looks at Claire) We haven't had one since you were four. Did you know that?

CLAIRE

No. Really?

BARBARA

I can't even remember you being that small.

She impulsively puts her arm around Claire, despite Claire's resistance.

They silently look out the window at the falling snow.

It's going to be a good Christmas. A really good Christmas.

End of Scene