

The Christmas Book

A full-length play

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THE CHRISTMAS BOOK

A rural farm house kitchen in 1949. The place is neat and tidy with a fireplace on the upstage wall. A few handmade Christmas decorations adorn the mantle above the fire place along with four unlit lanterns. A shotgun is mounted above the mantle. In the kitchen area upstage, along with a sink and some shelves and cupboards there is a small 1940's refrigerator and stove.

On the side wall is an outside door with a window next to it. Some hooks are mounted on the wall for jackets and boots are underneath the jackets. On the opposite side wall are two doorways. One doorway leads to the hallway that goes off to bedrooms and a separate door leads to a storage room just off the kitchen. There is a large kitchen table with chairs around it. It is important that lighting or projections be able to show up on the walls or a background of some kind. Each child has their own "corner" in the room. In one are some papers and crayons for drawing. In another are some books and in the last space are some wood carvings.

Standing in front of the fireplace warming himself is a large man who, from his facial features to some of his clothing, is obviously foreign to the people in the room. A large sack is set by the coat rack. As the lights come up MARY is hanging up EL'S coat. AVA, PETER, and ROSE are staring at the EL. The radio is tuned to a weather report.

SCENE ONE -DECEMBER 23- NIGHT

RADIO VOICE

Looks like we're gonna get quite a storm. Temperatures are dropping and snow is piling up...

MARY turns off the radio then moves to EL.

MARY

It's a miracle you found us.

EL

I seem to have taken a wrong turn a few miles back. It started snowing and I couldn't find the river crossing.

MARY

I'm Mary and these are my children (indicates each child) Ava is the oldest, Peter is our middle son and our youngest/ is named...

EL

(To ROSE) /Rose I'll bet.

ROSE

How did you know?

EL

Because of the color of your hair.

ROSE

What's your name?

EL

El.

ROSE

L? Like the Letter L?

EL

Yes. It's spelled a little differently but yes, El.

MARY

My husband should be home any time now.

ROSE

Our papa is coming home for Christmas with presents.

EL

Then I should be on my way. If you'll just point me in the direction of the nearest river crossing.

MARY

The nearest ferry is 10 miles from here and it shut down at dark.

EL

At dark.

ROSE

(Looking out the window) Where's your car?

EL

I'm on foot.

PETER

You walked here?

EL

Walking gives me time to think.

AVA

Did you see anyone on your way here?

EL

Only the light in your window.

PETER

Where ya from?

EL

I got off a ship and headed west.

ROSE

Why didn't you get off on the other side of the river?

EL

(Laughs) No, a ship from across the ocean.

PETER

The ocean?

ROSE

You dress funny.

MARY

Rose! (To El) I'm sorry we don't see many strangers around here.

PETER

(Explaining to ROSE) He's a foreigner.

EL

(Laughs) Yes. I'm a stranger in a strange land.

MARY

Where are my manners? Let me get you something to eat. Please sit.

EL

I should be going. Your husband will be/ coming soon.

MARY

/You must be starved if you've been walking all day.

EL

(Looks at all of them) I am hungry. If you're sure it's no trouble.

MARY

Not at all.

EL

Thank you.

MARY

Ava, get a plate for El. Rose, you get the bread and Peter, you get the butter, jam and potatoes. I'm afraid we don't have any meat right now.

EL moves to the table while MARY goes and gets the milk from a large container.

ROSE

What kind of boat...I mean ship were you on?

EL

It was what they call a steamer. I worked in the engine room shoveling coal.

PETER

Where's your home?

EL

A place called Kemet (pronounced Ku-mat).

PETER

I never heard of it.

EL

Some call it Egypt.

PETER

I've seen that on maps in our school. That's by the desert.

ROSE

Do they have camels?

MARY

That's enough questions. Let's let El eat. Ava and Rose finish cleaning up and Peter stoke the fire a little. (To El.) I'm sorry, they are just excited.

EL

It's alright. (To Rose.) Yes, there were camels.

The kids start to clean and stoke the fire as they keep an eye on EL eating.

EL

(As he eats hungrily.) This food is very good. Thank you.

MARY

I wish we had more to offer.

The back door burst open and TOM enters with carrying a suitcase and a bag.

TOM

Finally!

The kids run to him and hug him. EL stands and steps slightly behind Mary just out of TOM's direct sight.

AVA, PETER, ROSE

(All overlapping.) Papa! You're back. What's in the bag? Did you bring us presents?

TOM

I would've been here sooner but the truck broke down about 5 miles back. I had to walk the rest of the way. Wind's kicked up and snow's really coming down. I think we're in for a blizzard.

There are a flurry of questions.

PETER

Are we going /to get snowed in?

ROSE

/Did you bring us presents? / We got you presents.

AVA

/How long are you staying?

TOM

(Laughs) Hold on! Let me get my coat off first.

TOM sets his suitcase and bag down by the door and MARY helps him take off his coat.

MARY

Tom, we have a visitor.

TOM

A visitor?

EL steps forward and TOM sees him for the first time.

EL

I was lost and saw the light in the window. Your family welcomed me and gave me some food.

TOM

It's not a night for anyone to be out.

EL

I apologize for my intrusion.

TOM

(To EL) Nonsense. You're welcome here. Sit. Finish eating.

MARY gets food for TOM as he moves to the table. Both EL and TOM sit and eat.

TOM

Sorry, I didn't catch your name.

EL

Most people just call me El.

ROSE

(Excited to know the answer) Like the letter!

TOM

I'm Tom Ward.

ROSE

He came on a ship across the ocean.

TOM

Is that right?

EL

Yes.

PETER

(Showing off) From Kemat which people call Egypt.

MARY

Peter, let El talk with your papa.

TOM

Egypt, huh. Where ya headed?

EL

I go where I'm called.

TOM

I don't think anyone will be going anywhere until this storm passes. You're here for the night.

EL

I don't want to impose.

MARY

Nonsense. Rose and Peter go clear off the cot in the back room to make room for our guest. Ava grab some quilts from the chest in my room.

KIDS exit.

TOM

Where you're called, huh? Sounds like a preacher. You one of those bible thumpers?

MARY

Tom!

EL

(Laughs) No.

TOM

Then what are you?

EL

Just a person on a journey.

TOM

How do you make a living?

EL

I do odd jobs here and there, then move on.

TOM

We don't have any money and I'm afraid there isn't much to do around here.

EL

I'd be happy to lend a hand with any chores to repay your kindness.

MARY

We could use a hand putting the fence back up. Our cow gets out on a regular basis.

EL

I'd be pleased to do that.

TOM

I've fixed that fence three times now.

MARY

Then I guess this'll be the fourth time.

TOM gives MARY a look that says he doesn't like what she is insinuating.

(To TOM) The rail got wedged against the barn when it fell last time. (To EL) Maybe between you both could fix it once and for all.

TOM is clearly not happy about the insinuation he can't do it alone. The wind howls outside the house. AVA enters with the quilts.

MARY

(To EL) I'll put a couple of extra quilts on the cot in there. If it gets too cold you can leave the door open and the warmth from out here will help.

AVA and MARY exit.

EL

(Finishing up his food) I'm thankful to you both for the meal.

TOM

We don't have much but Mary can make a feast out of just about anything.

EL

Sounds like you've been away for a while.

TOM

I work at a small factory about a hundred miles north of here. They're always in need of workers during the winter months. It helps pay the bills.

EL

It must have been difficult for you to be gone for long periods at a time. I'm sure you prayed every day for your family's safety.

TOM

I've never found praying makes much difference when it comes time to milk a cow, fix a fence or pay the bank. God never showed up to lend me a hand. So I don't put much stock in praying, no offense.

EL

None taken.

TOM

You're a wanderer, huh? Ever worked a piece of land or had a family?

EL

No family but I did have a farm. After a long drought I stayed on out of sheer stubbornness, but--

TOM

Stubborn don't pay the bills or feed the livestock.

EL

Right, so I gathered up what I could carry and moved from place to place--looking for wherever I could lend a hand.

TOM

That what you mean by going where you're called?

EL

Yes.

MARY enters.

MARY

(To EL) The room is almost ready. The kids are finishing up.

EL

Thank you. I'll just put my things in there.

EL stands and picks up his bag revealing a book that has slipped out onto the floor which he doesn't see and exits. MARY clears away the plates and remaining food from the table. TOM walks to the window to look out. He rubs his hand through his hair. AVA steps on unseen by MARY and TOM.

MARY

Something's bothering you.

TOM

Why?

MARY

Everytime you rub your hand over your head like that means there's a problem.

TOM

I can handle it.

Without thinking TOM rubs his hand over his head again. MARY crosses to TOM at the window.

MARY

That's twice. That means it's serious.

TOM

They laid off all the seasonal workers at the plant. Said it was a lack of new orders.

MARY

What are we going to do?

TOM

Without that money we won't be able to buy any seed for the spring.

MARY

What if you can't find another job? We could lose the...

TOM

I'm thinking on it.

AVA

Are we going to lose the farm? Am I going to have to drop /out of school?

TOM and MARY turn and notice AVA standing there.

TOM

(Snaps at AVA) /I said I'm thinking on it! I'll take care of this.

Suddenly the electric lights flicker for a moment. TOM looks back out the window.

MARY

I better light a lantern in case the power goes out.

MARY grabs a lantern off the mantle of the fireplace and lights it and sets it on the table.

AVA

I'm sorry, Papa...

TOM then turns back to MARY and AVA.

TOM

No. I'm sorry to snap at you both like that. It's been a long day and I'm tired.

TOM looks down and spots the book EL had dropped.

What's this?

TOM picks up the book and looks at the strange writing on its cover. The book has a leather cover with intricate designs on the outside. It is about the size of a standard bible. MARY and AVA come over to look at the book.

MARY

It must have dropped out of El's bag.

TOM

Looks pretty old and worn.

They are examining the cover of the book as PETER and ROSE enter followed by EL.

ROSE

Is the power going out?

TOM

(Seeing EL) You must have dropped your book.

AVA

(To EL) What kind of a book is it?

TOM

(Looking at the cover) What's this writing on the cover?

EL

It's written in several languages. It's a collection of stories from the places I've been and people I've met.

The kids react with excitement to this statement.

AVA

Like a journal?

EL

More or less.

AVA

Can you tell us one of the stories?

ROSE

Are there sword fights and dragons?

PETER

Does it have pirates and buried treasure?

EL

(Laughs) Maybe you should tell me your stories.

ROSE

Oh, please tell us a story. Please.

PETER

Please!

AVA

Please.

EL

(Laughs) How can I say no? Very well. Let me think...

The room's electric LIGHTS GO OUT.

MARY

There goes the power. Let me light another lantern for you.

EL

No need. This light is just right.

EL sits at the table by the lantern.

(When he sees they are settled) It was a winter night with a heavy snow falling outside.

We hear the WIND outside. EL puts his hands up to the side of the lantern and begins to manipulate the light coming from the lantern. Everyone stays focused on EL and not the shadows on the walls he is creating.

A mighty wind howled across the land trying to strip the trees bare proclaiming with each roar it was the strongest of all.

The snow fell in great wet flakes covering everything below to show its icy power. The clouds watched as the evergreen branches were battered by the winds and the snow. Seeing the trees refuse to give up, the clouds decided they needed to celebrate the strength and beauty of the evergreen tree. So the clouds gathered together and blocked out the light of the moon.

El's hands cover the lantern completely and the room goes completely dark. Very faint music is heard.

Then the clouds began to let little beams of moonlight shine through.

The lantern begins to glow with colored lights emanating from it. As EL's hands move around the lantern the light shines out onto the walls behind the family with simple indistinct projected shapes that only the audience can see. The family is mesmerized by EL's hand movements and they see the images in their mind that the audience sees on the walls behind them. The projection on the walls slowly begins to take on patterns and colors and create a magical feeling as the music grows louder.

Shifting and moving the light began to reflect off the snow into different colors across the sky.

Different colors begin to appear on the walls like the Northern Lights.

Then the clouds began to narrow the colors onto the branches of the evergreen trees twinkling like stars in the moonlight.

The colors slowly separate into a vast star field.
The music slowly changes to a magical
TWINKLING SOUND.

No matter how much the wind blew or the snow tried to cover the branches they couldn't.

Now adorned by the stars and the bands of color the evergreen showed that even in the depths of winter, its green branches held forth the promise that Spring and new life will come again.

The projections form into colors and star shapes.

The wind and the snow were forced to bow to the beauty of the simple evergreen. Then all joined in celebration.. for the first Christmas tree came to be that very night.

The colors fade away on the walls as the music and the lights fade as the Electric power lights come back on as EL removes his hands from the lantern.

TOM

The power's back on.

AVA

That was beautiful.

ROSE

I could see the colors and the clouds dancing in my mind!

MARY

(To EL) How did you make the light change colors like that from the lantern?

EL

I simply moved my hands to tell the story. Your imagination supplied the rest.

PETER

Is that the real story of the Christmas Tree?

EL

It is if you want it to be.

MARY

What a wonderful story. You have a gift.

ROSE

Oh! Oh! Papa, I made you a really nice gift/ for Christmas.

PETER

/Rose! You're not supposed to tell.

ROSE
But I'm not telling. I'm just /saying

PETER
/You're not supposed to say!

ROSE
But I wasn't!

ROSE
Mama, may we bring our presents in and put them by the fireplace?

PETER
But we don't do that until Christmas Eve.

ROSE
Please, Papa! I want you to see the pretty wrapping I put on your present!

TOM
(Laughs) Alright, Rose. Bring your present out.

AVA
What about our presents?

PETER
But it's not Christmas Eve yet.

MARY
I give up. Alright. Bring in your gifts, but no more talking about them. (To ROSE)
Understood?

AVA, PETER, ROSE
Yes.

They all leave to go get their presents and bring them back.

MARY
(To TOM) Rose has been so excited for you to open her gift. She's been talking about it for a week.

EL
You are fortunate to have such thoughtful children.

TOM
Thank you.

MARY

Once Rose gets an idea in her head it's hard for her to focus on anything else.

The kids all return with their presents. PETER and AVA put theirs by the fireplace. ROSE shows her wrapped present to TOM.

ROSE

Papa, mine is the one with the pretty red ribbon.

TOM

(To ROSE) I see that.

ROSE

Don't forget.

TOM

I won't forget.

Suddenly the electric lights go out and we are left with the light from the fire and the glow of the single lantern on the table.

There go the power lines.

MARY has crossed to the fireplace and takes down some additional oil lanterns off the mantle. She strikes a match from a box by the stove to light the lanterns.

MARY

(Gets the lantern lit) Ah, that's a little better.

MARY proceeds to light other lanterns and then places them on the table. Tom goes to the window to look out

PETER

Are we snowed in?

TOM

Looks that way.

MARY

(To the KIDS) It's late. I'm sure our guest and your papa are tired.

EL

(Taking his book) Thank you again for your hospitality.

MARY

Here, take this lamp for your room.

EL

Thank you.

EL exits.

MARY

(Handing a lantern) Peter take this lantern for the hall. You and Rose go get ready for bed.

ROSE and PETER exit with a lantern. MARY lights the last lantern as AVA moves to TOM.

AVA

Papa?

TOM

Yes?

AVA

I really don't want to drop out /of school.

MARY

/Ava you are not going/ to drop out of school.

TOM

/Just hold on /a minute.

AVA

/But what if we can't afford to pay/ the bills.

MARY

/You are not dropping /out of school!

AVA

/But where will we go if we lose /the farm!

TOM

/Everyone just stop talking. I will take care of this. (To AVA) You aren't dropping out of anything!

AVA

But Papa...

TOM

No more. Bedtime.

AVA

(Looks at them both for a moment, then) Good night.

AVA exits. MARY looks out the window.

MARY

What if/we...

TOM

I said I'll take care of it. I'm tired. I'm going to unpack.

MARY

I'll just clear away a few things and then I'll be in.

TOM picks up his suitcase and exits with a lantern. MARY picks up a few things and takes the last lantern with her as she exits so that the only light is coming through the window and from the fireplace. We can hear the wind howling outside. After a moment EL enters. HE carries the oil lamp with him and sets it on the table with his book. He sits and opens the book. After a moment he takes out a rough wooden pencil. He begins to write in his book. ROSE comes on, quietly unnoticed. SHE watches EL as he writes.

ROSE

Are you writing a story?

EL

I thought you went to bed.

ROSE

I had to get a drink of water.

EL

I just wanted to read a little before I turned in for the night.

ROSE

You weren't reading. You were writing in your book. What were you writing?

EL

A few thoughts.

ROSE gets water from the kitchen and brings her glass back down to the table to drink it.

ROSE

Do you always write what you're thinking?

EL

Sometimes.

ROSE

Why?

EL

We can't always see what's happening with our eyes. Sometimes we see things with our heart. I write those times down so I can remember.

ROSE

Were you writing about our family?

EL

I was writing my prayers.

ROSE

Mama just has us kneel down by the side of our bed and say ours.

EL

My knees are a little too old so I write them instead.

ROSE finishes her glass of water and then puts the glass away.

ROSE

Goodnight.

ROSE exits. EL sets the book down and then goes to look out the window at the mounting snow. HE exits leaving his book and the lamp on the table. After a moment ROSE re-enters. She tiptoes over and looks off where he exited and then steps quietly over to the book and opens it.

ROSE

(Reading) There was a curious young girl who had beautiful long red hair. (She stops and looks at her hair, then starts reading again.) Her hair seemed to glow in the light from the fire.

The SOUND OF WIND outside.

(Reading) The girl was in her home snug and warm, as the winter wind howled outside. The girl was excited because in two days it would be Christmas. She had made a very special present for her papa. It was a picture she had drawn of a beautiful red rose. She wanted to give it to her papa so he would remember her while he was away at work.

ROSE puts the book down and runs over to her present and brings it to the table. ROSE unties the ribbon on her drawing and opens the picture of the flower she drew.

The picture of the flower was so full of love that it grew from out of the page as if real.

As if by magic a real rose grows from the book.

(She gasps. Then returns to reading.) She needed to keep the gift a secret until Christmas so she carefully took the real flower and place it with her drawing. She vowed not to tell anyone about the magical flower until she could present it to her papa. Wait ! There's nothing else written. What happens next?

ROSE takes the flower and gently puts the flower with her drawing and reties the ribbon and places it by the fireplace then smiles and exits to her room. EL appears back at the door to the room still fully dressed. He looks off to where ROSE just exited. The Lights Fade.

SCENE 2 -CHRISTMAS EVE- MORNING

It is early morning. EL is sitting at the table writing in his book. He takes the last drink from a cup of coffee. EL closes his book and then puts his coffee cup into the sink and the book by the fireplace. He puts on his coat and goes outside into the snow. MARY enters and is in search of the coffee smell.

MARY

Coffee?

MARY finds a pot of coffee already made and pours a cup. TOM enters and looks out the window.

TOM

Coffee smells good. Looks like it snowed all night.

MARY

At least the wind stopped.

TOM

Drifts are pretty high out there.

MARY brings TOM the cup of coffee.

TOM

Thanks. (Takes a sip) This is really good. I've missed your coffee.

MARY

I didn't make it. I thought you did.

TOM crosses back to the table and sits.

TOM

I didn't make it.

MARY

Having you home, I slept well for the first time in months.

TOM

I didn't want to get out of bed this morning either.

TOM reaches out and pulls MARY onto his lap.

I've missed our early mornings while the kids were asleep.

MARY

It was nice. I wouldn't mind snuggling a little more. It's been 2 months since we last...

TOM cuts off MARY with a kiss when AVA enters dressed.

AVA

How come you didn't wake me up this morning? Rose and Peter are still sleeping.

MARY

(Getting up quickly.) We overslept.

TOM

Since you're up why don't you go collect the eggs and start the milking.

AVA

But the eggs are Rose's job and it's Peter's turn to milk the cow.

TOM

That's what happens when you're up first. The early bird gets the eggs!

AVA

But, Papa!

MARY

Go on. I'll make you some breakfast while you're doing the chores.

AVA

Do I have to?

TOM

Yes, you have to.

AVA grudgingly puts her coat on and exits to the barn. TOM sits at the table.

MARY

(Smiles at Tom) Welcome home. Let me see if El wants some coffee.

MARY

(Goes to door and calls off to El's room) El?

MARY looks in but he's not there.

MARY

He's not there. Maybe he's washing up.

MARY goes into the kitchen area and gets bread and butter.

TOM

There's something different about him. I'll give him one thing, he knows how to spin a tale.

MARY

I swear I saw the clouds dancing.

TOM

He goes where he's called. What does that mean?

MARY brings the bread and butter to the table.

MARY

The girls like him. I could hear them whispering to each other last night about what might be in his book of stories. Do you think he's some kind of teacher?

TOM

Most male teachers I know are skinny little bookworms.

MARY

Maybe he's a preacher?

TOM

He said he wasn't. He's seen hard work. You could tell by his hands. But what kind of work?

MARY

(Notices EL'S coat is missing) His coat is missing.

From outside we hear the sound of something being pounded on with a tool. AVA enters with eggs in a basket..

AVA

El is out fixing the fence.

TOM
What?

AVA
He got the log unstuck.

MARY and TOM look at each other then go to the window.

MARY
How on earth would he have gotten that fence log up? That must weigh...

TOM
I don't know but I'm not going to let him fix that by himself.

TOM and MARY quickly grab coats and EXIT out the back door. AVA puts the egg basket by the refrigerator, then goes back outside.

TOM
(From offstage) El! Wait a minute!

PETER enters the room with ROSE.

PETER
You're lying.

ROSE
I'm not. I swear it's the truth. It's a magic book.

Looks around the room.

PETER
I'm starving. Where is everyone?

ROSE
(Goes to the window) They're outside fixing the fence.

PETER looks at the bread.

PETER
I'm so sick of eating same thing day after day. I would give anything for a nice big juicy orange right now or a big piece of sausage. I can't remember the last time we had meat. (Groans) We'll probably never have meat again!

ROSE spots EL'S book.

ROSE

There's El's book!

*ROSE picks up the book and puts it on the table
by PETER.*

Open it.

PETER

What?

ROSE

This book is magic. I can't explain it but it makes your wishes come true.

PETER

That's impossible. How can it be magic?

ROSE

(Glances at her present) I can't tell you how. It just is.

PETER

That's silly!

ROSE

(Points to book.) Read a story!

PETER

What if El walks in?

ROSE

They're outside. I'll keep watch.

ROSE runs to the window to keep watch.

PETER

It's just an old book.

ROSE

Read something!

PETER opens the book.

PETER

(Reading) The boy stood at the table on a cold winter morning as outside the sound of a fence was being fixed.

We hear the sound of the fence posts being hammered on.

PETER

There was a cup of warm coffee still on the table.

PETER looks at the cup and feels its warmth.

ROSE

See, I told you.

PETER

It's just a coincidence. (Starts to read again) Suddenly they heard shouts outside and something crashed against the side of the house.

WE hear SHOUTS from TOM and MARY. A heavy sound crashes into the house. We hear WOLVES from outside.

ROSE

Papa's coming!

PETER shuts the book and stands up. ROSE runs to his side. Suddenly TOM and MARY burst into the house. TOM goes to the mantle while MARY stays at the door.

TOM

(Gets the shotgun over the mantle) Keep an eye on it!

MARY

I'm watching!

TOM grabs the gun and some shotgun shells and begins loading the shotgun as he exits back out followed by MARY. ROSE runs to the window to watch. PETER sits back at the table and opens the book again.

PETER

(Reading) A large deer was chased by a pack of wolves. The deer leapt over the fence and broke its leg. The man put the deer out of its misery!

A SHOT is heard. ROSE runs back to the table next to PETER.

ROSE

See, you just have to have read it and it happens!

MARY burst through the door. PETER shuts the book quickly and ROSE and PETER stand in front of the book hoping they weren't caught by EL reading his book.

PETER

What happened?

MARY

It was a deer! It just showed up out of nowhere.

PETER stares at ROSE who smiles with an "I told you so" look.

MARY

We need to hurry and get that deer in the barn before it freezes. We'll have meat and sausage for the whole winter!

EL enters.

I need a knife.

MARY searches the kitchen area.

EL

I've got a hunting knife in my things if you need it.

EL starts to go to his room.

MARY

(Finding the knife) I found it.

MARY runs out the door. EL returns to the door and then stops for a moment and looks at the two kids.

EL

What are you both up to this morning?

PETER AND ROSE

(Overlapping) Nothing! Not a thing!

EL looks at them both as if he can see through their denial.. Then he exits back outside closing the door behind him.

ROSE

I told you that book is magic.

PETER opens the book back up to look for the rest of the story.

PETER

(Flipping through the book) Where is the story I just read? All the words are different now.

ROSE

That's what happened to me, too.

PETER

What did you wish for?

ROSE

(Glances at her present) I can't tell you. I made a vow!

PETER

A vow?

ROSE

The book told me to keep it a secret.

PETER

Do you think that El knows we were reading his book?

ROSE

He looked at us as like he knew.

PETER

We can't tell anyone about this.

ROSE

I swear.

Double swear!

PETER

Triple swear!

ROSE

ROSE and PETER cross their hearts. Then cross hands and shake.

PETER AND ROSE

I swear.

AVA enters from outside.

AVA

You both missed the most amazing thing.

ROSE

We read...saw it from the window.

AVA

Papa just shot a deer that jumped the fence they were fixing.

ROSE

Peter made the deer appear.

PETER

Rose, you swore.

AVA

Swore what?

PETER

Nothing.

ROSE

The book makes things happen.

AVA

What /book!

PETER

/Rose you swore to keep it a secret.

ROSE

But not from Ava.

PETER
From everyone!

AVA
What are you both talking about?

ROSE
El's book. It's magic.

PETER
You don't know that for sure.

ROSE
It is. It made my wish come true.

AVA
What? When?

ROSE
Last night, but I can't tell you about that because I promised.

PETER
Oh sure, keep a secret about your stuff!

ROSE
Just now when the deer jumped the fence the book made it happen.

AVA
Stop it. What are you both talking about? That deer outside had nothing to do with El's book.

ROSE
Tell her, Peter.

PETER
(Glaring at ROSE.) Rose told me the book was magic so I told her I would prove her wrong and I read a story...

AVA
So?

PETER
So...the story was about a deer jumping the fence and I read it just before it happened.

AVA

That's impossible

PETER

It's not impossible because it happened.

AVA

Show me the story in the book.

ROSE

We can't because it's gone.

AVA

(Looks at them) I don't believe either of you. You both make stuff up to get out of doing work. This morning I had to go out and do your chores because you were both still asleep. This is just another trick.

ROSE

No, it isn't.

AVA

Mama sent me in to tell you both she wants you outside in the barn to help with the deer right now.

AVA glares at them as she exits into the back room to get a bucket. They both run and put on their coats and then rush out the door.

PETER

You swore!

ROSE

I couldn't help it.

PETER

See if I trust you again!

ROSE

Don't be like that.

PETER

Come on. We better get out there before we get into more trouble.

ROSE

It's not my fault. (Going out the door) You're the one who read the story....

AVA re-enters with a bucket. As she past the book she decides to sneak a peak at it and then looks to see if anyone is watching. She opens the book and leafs through the pages until she comes to a page with a note stuck inside the book. She holds the note and then reads from the book.

AVA

(Reading from the book) Ava didn't believe her brother and sister.

AVA drops the book as if it gave her an electric shock. After a moment she picks it back up and begins to read again.

(Reading) She was just about to discover something important when her mother entered.

MARY enters from outside.

MARY

Ava...

She sees AVA with the book.

What are you doing with El's book?

AVA

I...was...

MARY

You shouldn't be reading other people's books/ without their permission.

AVA

//I wasn't reading it! I mean... I couldn't help it.

MARY

I'm disappointed in you. I thought I had taught you better than to lie to me.

AVA

I'm not lying! I just picked it up when you walked in. Rose and Peter told me the book makes things happen.

MARY

What?

AVA

They said it made the deer appear. I picked it up and it called me by name.

MARY walks to AVA and takes book.

MARY

That's nonsense.

AVA

I'm not lying! Read it for yourself.

MARY looks in the book and reads.

(Reading) The mother took the book in disbelief. (To AVA) Did you write this?

AVA

No! How does it know what we are doing?

MARY

(Reads) The woman's husband was worried about the loss of his job and she was worried too. The memory of a letter she had received from her mother came back to her.

AVA

What letter?

MARY stands up from the table putting down the book and goes over to the shelves. She takes down a box and goes back to the table. She takes the cover off the box. Inside are letters.

It's here somewhere.

AVA

What is?

MARY

A letter from my mother.

She quickly sorts through the letters until she finds the one she is looking for.

(Reading) My dearest Mary, just after you were born my mother gave me a gift. I am now passing it on to you. I know you've been going through a difficult time with the birth of your first child coming early while your husband was away.

MARY sits down in the chair stunned. AVA look at her mother confused.

AVA

What does she mean?

MARY

It was back when there were very few jobs. Your papa found a job that took him away for a couple of months. He planned to be back before you were born but you came early. Your papa didn't see you until you were a month old. When your grandma found out you'd been born she wrote me this letter.

MARY brushes AVA's hair from her face. AVA becomes self conscious.

You look alot like her you know.

AVA

What else does the letter say?

MARY

(Reading) I know you feel alone. I'm sending you this pendant along with the advice my mother gave me. She told me sometimes the best thing we can do for others, is to just let them know they aren't alone. Even though we may be separated by distance or by feelings we are always with them in our hearts. That advice has served me well. I hope you will find the same strength and peace this pendant has given me. In time I hope you will pass this on to your daughter, Ava, just as my mother did to me. Love Mama.

AVA

What pendant?

MARY puts the letter down on the table.

MARY

It was on a chain that I always wore. You loved to play with it as a baby. I used to hang it on your basket. One day I lost it. I couldn't find it.

Suddenly they hear a SCRATCHING sound right under their feet.

AVA

What's that?

MARY

It sounds like something under the floor boards.

They start to follow the sound around the room until it stops a spot near the fireplace. AVA leans close to the floor by the fireplace trying to locate the spot..

AVA

I think its stopped right here.

AVA peers through a crack in the floor or into a crack in the stone by the base of the fireplace.

Wait! (Moving her head back and forth) There's something shiny there. I need something to hook it with.

MARY runs over to the kitchen area and comes back with a fork. She hands it to AVA who carefully reaches in and pulls out a small pendant.

MARY

It's my pendant! This is where I used to put your basket while I worked. It must have fallen into that crack.

AVA hands the pendant to MARY.

AVA

Here.

MARY holds it next to her heart and then looks at AVA.

MARY

No. I think this miracle was meant for you.

MARY puts the pendant around AVA's neck.

This is yours now. Your grandma and I, want you to have it.

AVA tucks it inside her blouse.

You told your Papa last night you wanted to help him. The best thing we can do right now is hold him close to our hearts.

ROSE runs in the back door.

ROSE

(Yells at AVA) Papa says Ava needs to stop dawdling and hurry up with the bucket!

AVA

(Yelling at ROSE) You're the one who's always dawdling!

ROSE runs back out the door.

AVA

Sorry, Mama. I shouldn't have yelled like that.

MARY

(To AVA) Go on. Your papa needs the bucket.

AVA grabs the bucket and runs out the back door. MARY walks back to the table and picks up the letter and brings it to her heart. She then puts it back into the box and puts the box back on the shelf. EL enters.

EL

Tom needs your help.

MARY

(Looks at him unsure if he is talking about the deer or the loss of his job) What do you mean?

EL

In the barn with the deer.

MARY

Oh, yes.

MARY exits back outside as the lights fade.

SCENE 3 -CHRISTMAS EVE -NIGHT

MARY, is just taking the last remains of dinner dishes from the table to the kitchen.

ROSE

That was the best Christmas Eve dinner ever!

PETER

I'm still hungry. I could eat all of it again!

AVA

You're always hungry.

TOM

(To Mary) You outdid yourself.

MARY

It's Christmas Eve. It's a time to celebrate! I had been saving up a little of the summer garden for a special occasion and I believe this was it.

EL

The food was exquisite.

AVA

(To EL) I bet you've had food from all over the world.

EL

Yes. Some good and some...(laughs) not so good.

ROSE

What was the best thing you've ever eaten?

EL

I think this meal.

PETER

What was the worst thing you've ever eaten.

EL

I prefer not to think of that. I prefer to remember this meal as one of the best.

MARY

(Genuinely touched and embarrassed by the compliment) Your arrival has brought all sorts of wonderful surprises.

MARY puts her hand on AVA's shoulder.

TOM

It was lucky that you were out working on that fence so early this morning.

EL

I just happened to be at the right place at the right time.

TOM

Your luck brought us quite a gift. Thank you.

EL

I didn't do anything but stand there.

AVA

It was amazing how you stopped those wolves.

TOM

What?

AVA

The wolves were chasing the deer and El just put up his hand and they stopped and turned around. Almost like they obeyed him.

MARY

That's silly. Maybe they were afraid of people.

EL

(To AVA) When they saw all of us it scared them away.

MARY

Whatever it was I'm going to call it a Christmas miracle and be grateful for it.

We hear the SOUND OF WIND.

TOM

Sounds like the wind is kicking back up. (He crosses and looks out the window) Snow's really coming down. Some of those drifts are over six feet tall.

ROSE

Is it time for the Christmas Cream yet?

EL

Christmas Cream?

MARY

(Smiling to EL) It's a family tradition we celebrate on Christmas Eve. Ava, why don't you get the bowls. Peter, you get the snow but don't go far from the door. Rose, you go and get the milk and I'll get the sweet syrup. Tom, why don't you get your special cider out.

AVA goes to get the bowls while PETER puts on his coat and takes a large bucket outside to collect snow. ROSE runs to the refrigerator and gets the milk jar. MARY gets some sweet syrup in a jug. TOM goes to a shelf in the kitchen and gets a sealed jug of special cider.

TOM

(Grabbing cups) I haven't sampled this since last fall so hopefully it's good.

*This is a tradition that has obviously happened every year. PETER comes back in with a large bucket packed with snow and proceeds to put some in the bowls (*Ice cream pellets or Ice pellets can be used for this effect). Ava has laid out on the table. ROSE pours in a little bit of milk and MARY pours the sweet syrup in each bowl on top of the snow and milk. TOM pours cider into cups and everyone takes a cup and a bowl.*

ROSE

I love Christmas Cream. I could eat it every day!

AVA

I love Papa's special cider.

PETER

I love them both!

Everyone raises their cup.

MARY

Bless this family and this food (looks at EL) and to those who we share this evening with.

ALL EXCEPT TOM

(Celebratory) Amen.

Everyone drinks from their cups.

ROSE

Papa, this is the best cider I've ever tasted!

TOM

(Savoring the taste) Not bad at all. (Taking another sip.) I was able to save a few good apples this year.

MARY

Everyone eat before the snow melts.

Everyone digs into the sweet bowls of Christmas Cream. Lots of happy sounds as they eat.

ROSE

(Not finished with her bowl yet) Can we have seconds?

PETER

Me, too!

AVA

And me!

MARY

(Laughs) One bowl is plenty!

EL

I must say this is delightful.

MARY

A fresh snow always makes the best.

ROSE

Would you tell us another story from your book?

EL

One of my stories?

PETER

Yes.

MARY

(To El.) We would love to hear a story of your travels.

TOM walks to the window to look out at the snow still coming down.

EL

How about if I tell you about a miracle that happened on this very night many years ago.

AVA

Yes, please!

EL

Very well. The sun had gone down. The crops in the field had all been emptied. A cold wind was blowing across the land.

We hear the SOUND OF THE WIND outside and then it transforms into a dreamlike quality with a slight echo, faint and far away.

The bare stalks shivered and crackled in the winter wind. Everyone had gone inside to gather around the fire for warmth. A young man and a woman were on a journey. Their footsteps echoed off the cold stones as they hurried to find a place to lay their heads down for the night.

We hear AN ECHO FOOTSTEPS ON STONE.

They went to the first house and knocked on the door

We hear an ECHO OF A KNOCK.

They asked for shelter but were turned away.

We hear an ECHO OF A DOOR SLAM.

They went several more places. Each time they were turned away.

We hear an ECHO OF SEVERAL DOOR SLAMS.

Finally out of desperation, they found the only place that was left to take shelter--cold and dark inside, but at least out of the wind.

The wind SOUNDS FADE.

The woman tried to smile even though she was in pain. The man gently moved the animals out of the way and made a bed of straw for his wife. The woman was about to have a child who had come unexpectedly into the world.

AVA looks at MARY who smiles back at her. We hear the ECHO SOUNDS OF A COW AND SOME OTHER ANIMALS.

Even though it was a difficult time for this child to be born he would come to be loved by so many. As the woman lay down and closed her eyes the man stood at the window and said a prayer.

We hear the sound of a BABY CRY softly.

A gift was given to the world in the middle of the night. A gift of hope, a gift of faith, and a gift of love.

ROSE

That was about the baby Jesus.

EL

You are very perceptive.

MARY watches TOM for a moment.

MARY

(To the KIDS) It's getting late and it's time for bed.

PETER

Can't we have another story?

MARY

Unless some children I know go to bed soon, there may not be anything that to open on Christmas morning.

ROSE

Presents!

MARY

(Laughing) Yes presents. No stack all these cups and bowls by the sink please.

They kids take away the bowls and cups.

MARY

(To EL) That was a wonderful story. Thank you. (To the KIDS) After you've finished go and get your stockings to hang by the fire.

The kids go off to get stockings.

EL

I think I'll turn in now as well. I'd like to get an early start in the morning. Thank you again for the wonderful dinner. Good night.

EL exits. The kids come back in and hang their stockings from the fireplace mantle.

ROSE

(To Tom) I can't wait for you to see your present tomorrow!

TOM

I can't wait either.

AVA

(Softly to Tom) Papa, I just want you to know...it doesn't matter if we can't keep our farm. I'll help however I can.

PETER

(Overhearing just as he was about to leave the room) Wait? Are we going to lose our house?

ROSE

Are we going to live in the barn, like Mary and Joseph?

MARY

No one is going to live in a barn.

PETER

I don't want to be homeless!

ROSE

I don't want to live in the barn by myself!

TOM

That's enough!

MARY senses TOM is upset.

MARY

(To the KIDS) Bedtime now.

ROSE

But/ I want to know...

MARY

/No buts! You heard your papa. (To Peter and Rose) Go brush your teeth and then to bed, (looks at Ava) all of you.

AVA, PETER, ROSE EXIT. TOM turns his back and crosses to look out the window.

MARY

They're just worried.

TOM

They think I'm a failure.

MARY

You aren't a failure.

TOM

It's my job to pay the bills and provide for this family and right now I can't seem to do either.

MARY

I didn't marry you because you were going to pay the bills.

TOM

Even you think I've failed.

MARY

No that isn't/ what I was...

TOM

/I saw my father work himself to death and then lose everything? You don't understand what that's like.

MARY

Do you think its been a picnic keeping the farm going while you've been off working? I've worked just as hard as you. I worry about how we'll make ends meet. Our kids have sacrificed, too!

TOM

So what am I supposed to do? We've got no money and a broken down truck. Without that truck I can't drive back to the city and look for work. Last year we barely made it through the winter. If I was any good at farming we wouldn't be in this mess.

MARY

That's not true.

TOM

I can't even fix a lousy fence so it stays up.

MARY

We've had a rough couple of years but it'll get better. You just have to have faith.

TOM

Faith doesn't pay the bills.

MARY

Why do you have such a hard time beliving in something other than yourself?

TOM

My father tried everying he could to save our farm. God never sent a miracle to save him.

MARY

I don't know exactly who El is, but his book seems to know what we need. Today there was a story about a letter my mother wrote to me right after Ava was born. How did it know about that? I've never told El that story. Then something under the floor led Ava right to the spot to find my lost pendant. How is that possible if it isn't a miracle?

TOM

It's just a story in a book and just a coincidence that you found that pendant.

MARY goes to the window.

MARY

How do you explain that deer today. We haven't had meat for a month. El shows up and suddenly a deer comes out of nowhere. The only thing I can call them are miracles. Why did El show up at a time when we need a miracle the most.

TOM

A necklace and a deer aren't miracles. They're just luck.

MARY

Maybe God was sending us a message.

TOM

I got the message loud and clear. I'm a lousy farmer who can't provide for his own family.

MARY

Why can't you just acknowledge that having faith isn't a weakness. It's a sign of strength.

TOM

I'm done talking about this.

There is a long silence as MARY looks at him. MARY sees that there is no use in arguing with TOM once his mind is made up.

MARY

Where are the presents for the kids stockings?

TOM

In my bag under our bed.

MARY exits to the bedroom. TOM walks over to the window and looks out. MARY and brings back a bag with the stocking gifts in it. TOM walks over to MARY and takes the bag.

I'm sorry. You go on to bed. I'll take care of putting gifts in the stockings.

MARY

Are you sure?

TOM nods yes. MARY walks to the hall door and the turns back to TOM.

Don't stay up too late. The kids will be up early.

MARY EXITS. TOM puts a few gifts in the stockings. When he is done he sits down at the table. He holds his head in his hands. He spots the book. TOM picks up the book.

TOM

A book of miracles...

TOM opens the book and reads from it.

(Reading) Faith shall set you free.

TOM slams the book shut as EL enters. TOM looks at EL.

TOM

Who are you?

EL

I told you, I go where I'm called.

TOM

I didn't call you. I didn't ask for anyone's help. I can carry my own burdens.

EL

Like your father.

TOM

What do you know about my father?

EL

I know that he only believed in the strength of his own arms.

TOM

I can carry my own burdens.

EL draws up to the table and rolls up his sleeve and puts his arm out to wrestle.

EL

Show me.

TOM

Arm wrestling? You want to arm wrestle?

EL nods his head.

TOM

Alright.

TOM pulls up and grasps EL's hand and the two of them begin to wrestle.

EL

Begin when you're ready.

TOM jerks his arm and begins to try to win with all of his might. As they wrestle we hear the distant SOUND OF A SOLITARY WOLF HOWL then slowly it is joined by CHORUS OF WOLVES HOWLING. This sound should slowly grow louder as the wolves get closer but not something that draws attention away from the arm wrestling. At first EL's arm slowly bends backwards as TOM seems to be winning. Then just as it looks like EL has lost slowly the balance shifts and EL brings their arms back up to center.

EL

Are you willing to give in?

TOM

Not a chance.

EL nods his head again and slowly moves TOM'S arm backwards until TOM is about to lose.

From outside the house we hear the SOUND OF THE WIND BUILD TO A ROAR around the house and the CHORUS OF WOLVES HOWLING are now right outside the house. TOM becomes aware of the wolves.

TOM

Let go of me.

EL

We're not done yet.

There is the SOUND OF SCRATCHING at the door that becomes more frantic. It turns into BANGING SOUND as the wolves throw themselves against the door. TOM turns his head towards the door.

TOM

Are you crazy? They're trying to get in. I have to get my gun.

EL

(Without looking) It's in the barn.

TOM

If they get in here we're all going to die!

TOM desperately tries to pull his arm away from EL but he can't.

I have to protect my family!

TOM

Let me go!

EL suddenly pushes TOMS arm down easily and wins the competition. TOM groans in pain.

You broke my shoulder.

The animals are now banging themselves wildly against the door and howling. TOM tries to stand but can't..

I can't stand up! They're about to break the door down.

TOM grabs him by the shirt with his one good hand.

TOM

Please. Whoever you are. Help me.

EL walks past TOM to the door. The wolves sound as if they are about to tear the door down. EL opens the door; TOM recoils in anticipation and the WOLVES SOUND stops instantly. All we hear is the sound of the wind.

TOM

Where did they go?

EL walks over to TOM and reaches out with his hand and touches TOM's shoulder. TOM's passes out and slumps in a chair.

Blackout.

SCENE 4 -CHRISTMAS DAY - EARLY MORNING

In the blackout the stockings have additional gifts put in them. A book wrapped in cloth with a note for Mary is placed by the fire. Rose's gift for Tom is replaced with a different rose. As the lights come up TOM is asleep at the table. ROSE quietly comes into the room and makes her way to her stocking. She feels that it is full of gifts and gives a little cry of delight and runs to the door to call off.

ROSE

Ava! Peter! We have presents. Come on!

TOM begins to stir at the table. ROSE runs back to the stockings and is quickly joined by AVA and PETER. MARY enters the room and crosses to TOM.

MARY

You never came to bed.

ROSE grabs the present for her father and brings it to the table.

ROSE

Here's my gift to you Papa. Open it! Open it!

TOM

(Feeling his shoulder and moving his arm in amazement) My shoulder...

ROSE

(Insistently) Papa, open my gift. Papa please.

TOM starts to say something else and then really sees ROSE who is standing holding out her present in front of him. TOM takes the drawing out of the cloth bag and sees's . ROSE's drawing has been transformed into glitter rose rising up from the page mounted on a board with a stand.

MARY

It's beautiful (To Rose)

ROSE

I made it just for you Papa so you wouldn't forget me while you're away at work.

TOM

I would never forget you!

TOM hugs ROSE.

PETER

(Excited) Look what I got in my stocking!

He brings his stocking to the table as he pulls out an orange and a hunting knife.

How did you know I wanted an orange? I got a new knife too!

MARY

(Looks at TOM questioning) Oranges?

AVA brings her stocking too the table.

AVA

(She gasps with delight) I got an orange too!

AVA takes out a box and some papers and looks at the box.

I got a pen and pencil set with my name on it. (Looks at the papers and shrieks) and an application to that school I wanted to go to next year!

AVA stops and looks at TOM.

But what about money?

TOM looks at his family. They all look at him.

TOM

With your help...I think we'll be okay.

AVA hugs TOM. ROSE is opening her stocking.

ROSE

(Excited) I got an orange too...and colored drawing pencils!

ROSE squeals with delight as she grabs the brightly colored pencils.

ROSE

It's exactly what I wanted! I want to show El my pencils!

ROSE breaks away to go to EL's room. MARY hugs TOM.

MARY

Where did you /find all...

ROSE comes back into the room.

ROSE

He's gone! His things are gone!

MARY looks at where El's coat used to hang.

MARY

His coat's gone.

AVA

(Goes to the window looking) There are no footprints outside the door.

MARY

Maybe he left early this morning and the snow covered his footprints. It's odd he didn't say goodbye.

PETER discovers a bag by the fireplace.

PETER

Look there's a present and a note with Mama's name on it.

He takes it to the table and they all gather around it. Everyone is excited as MARY opens the fabric wrapping and takes out a book.

MARY

It can't be... (She opens the cover of the book.) It's my mother's bible! When my mother died we searched and searched for it. It has all the names of our family generations written in it. (To TOM) I told you miracles happen.

AVA

Can I see it?

MARY hands the bible to AVA who begins to look at all the names.

PETER

I'm hungry!

MARY

I'll make us all a big breakfast.

PETER

Good, because I'm starving.

ROSE

You're always starving.

PETER starts to peel the orange. AVA looks at the front pages inside the bible.

AVA

The list of our family names written at the bottom of this page is wrong.

MARY

What do you mean wrong?

AVA

Look.

AVA hands the book to MARY.

MARY

(Reading.) Mary Elsie Ward and Jacob Thomas Ward. Children Ava, Peter, Rose, and John?

TOM looks at MARY.

TOM

Let me see that.

MARY and TOM look at each other.

PETER

(Interuppting) When are we going to eat?

ROSE

Eat your orange!

MARY smiles at TOM.

MARY

It's a day to celebrate miracles. Peter, I'm going to make the biggest Christmas morning feast you've ever seen! Ava, would you grab the bag of flour from the back room.

AVA EXITS into the back room.

ROSE

Papa, El didn't give you a present.

TOM

Yes he did you just can't see it.

ROSE

El told me some things can't be seen with our eyes. They can only be seen with our hearts.

AVA comes back.

AVA

El left a book on top of the flour! There's a note for Rose on it.

She hands book to ROSE.

ROSE

(Reading) Dear Rose. Here is a story to start your own book.

ROSE opens the book and starts to read the story.

(Reading) When Jesus was born a little shepherd girl heard the news and decided that she wanted to see the child. She followed the three Wisemen to the stable. After seeing the gifts from the Wisemen she was afraid because she had nothing to give. She sat down in the cold winter snow and wept. An angel watching took pity on her, and as her tears touched the cold snow they turned into little white flowers with pink tinted petals. The shepherd girl took the flowers and presented her gift of love to the baby in the manger and the Christmas Rose was blessed for all eternity.

ROSE puts the book down.

ROSE

Papa, am I your Christmas Rose?

TOM

You are, indeed.

TOM gives ROSE a hug.

AVA

Mama and Papa you haven't opened your presents from me yet!

PETER

Or me!

PETER drags TOM towards the fireplace to open his gift. Tom takes Mary's hand and she looks at him and smiles as they walk to the fireplace to open the additional presents. There is excitement and joy from all as the lights fade to a spot on the ROSE on the table as a tiny sprinkle of glitter falls onto it from above.

The lights fade out.