

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.

*TO READ THE REST OF THE PLAY CONTACT MICHAEL COCHRAN AT
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