

GARY

I'm not feeling guilty and I'm not a grinch. If my heart was two sizes too small, don't you think someone would've noticed during my surgery?

MICKI

Whatever.

*(Noticing the page the scrapbook is turned to; amused)*

Remember that Christmas? The year of the infamous praying mantis infested Christmas tree?

GARY

Yes. I remember. When the heat inside the house tricked all the little praying mantis babies into thinking it was spring and they all emerged from their little pupas.

MICKI

*(Amused)*

That's your story.

GARY

It was a perfectly natural phenomenon.

MICKI

So you say.

GARY

It had nothing to do with me stealing the tree.

MICKI

Oh, I'm sure. Nothin' whatsoever. Whatever you say.

GARY

It was a coincidence. That particular tree just happened to be the one that some praying mantis mommy picked out to lay her three hundred eggs in.

MICKI

Right. And what do you s'pose the chances of that are?

GARY

I don't know. Pretty good, I guess. Maybe half the trees on that farm were infested with pupated praying mantises.

MICKI

*(Amused, exiting to the kitchen ...)*

Maybe.

GARY

It was not divine judgment!

*GARY picks up the scrapbook. DYLAN enters; all the children reanimate and join him on the couch.*

BROOKE

Mom said the bugs are divine judgment. Like the plagues in the Bible. She said God sent them to punish you for stealing the tree.

GARY

Brooke, Honey, I didn't steal the tree.

BROOKE

Mom said you did.

GARY

Mom was mistaken. She doesn't understand the circumstances.

BROOKE

Did you pay for it?

GARY

Well, not actually. See -

BROOKE

Did the owner give it to you?

GARY

I'm sure he would have if I'd explained our situation to'im.

BROOKE

So the owner didn't give it to you?

GARY

No. But -

BROOKE

Daddy, if you didn't pay for the tree and the owner didn't give -

*GARY shuts the scrapbook. DYLAN, BROOKE, and EMILY exit. The Christmas tree is replaced by the original and the gifts disappear. MICKI's phone rings. She enters*

*from the kitchen to get it, checks the caller ID, and answers.*

MICKI

Hey! Where y'all at? ... Oh, no! Well, do they know when you'll be able to leave?

GARY

Who is it? What's the matter?

MICKI

It's Dylan. Their flight was delayed 'cause of the weather.

*(Into the phone)*

No! They can't just cancel it, can they? ... Yeah, he's right here.

*(Hands the phone to GARY)*

GARY

Hey Son. What's goin' on? ... I heard about the storms up there, but I didn't realize it was that bad. Will they give you a refund on your tickets? ...

*(To MICKI)*

He thinks he can get a refund.

*(Into the phone)*

Look, Son, I know y'all were really looking forward to this trip, but I think this is all for the best. We've got nothing for any of you to do here. It's really not worth hauling Heather and the kids across the country just to sleep in a hotel and eat spaghetti for Christmas dinner.

... Yeah, I know the kids really wanted to see us, but they don't understand how bored they'd be. They're young.

They'll get over it. Y'all always did. ... Yes, we did have some very good times. Like last year! We had a great time last year, didn't we? ... Right! And we'll have some great times like that again once Mom and I are in a little better shape financially. But this year, y'all are better off just staying at home. Trust me. In fact, Brooke isn't coming either. ... Something came up at the college. We haven't heard back from her yet. ... No, we haven't heard from Emily. ... We will. Y'all take care, okay? We'll talk more later. Love you. Be safe. ... Okay, here's Mom again.

*(Handing MICKI the phone)*

They're gonna stay home. They're better off that way.

MICKI

*(Exiting to the kitchen)*

We're gonna miss you, Sweetheart. Both of us'll miss y'all very much.

GARY *sits back on the couch and wipes away a tear. He pauses a moment to regain his composure, then picks up the scrapbook and opens it. He turns a few more pages into the book and stops to reflect. Again, the artificial tree is replaced by the real tree, which is now decorated to a grand scale with homemade ornaments and strings of popcorn. (NOTE: This tree will appear again near the end of the play.) There are four wrapped gifts under the tree: a model rocket kit (labeled "Brooke"), a copy of "Charlotte's Web" (labeled "Emily"), a Barbie doll (labeled "Sterling"), and a Transformer action figure (labeled "Dylan"). DYLAN/13 and BROOKE/11 enter from the hall, yawning, stretching, rubbing their eyes. EMILY/9 and STERLING/7 follow, dancing and chanting "Merry Christmas." The children, all dressed in pajamas, gather around the tree. GARY watches.*

EMILY

*(Reaching for her gift)*

Let's open our presents!

BROOKE

*(Holding EMILY back)*

Not yet, Emily! Let's wait for Mom and Daddy to get up.

DYLAN

It ain't even seven o'clock yet.

EMILY

They'll sleep for hours.

BROOKE

No they won't. They'll be up soon and they'll want to watch us open our presents.

DYLAN

Why do they care? They a'ready know what they got us.

BROOKE

They care because they like seeing how surprised we are when we open them.

DYLAN

Surprised? We a'ready know what we're gettin'. We picked out our own presents. Remember?

BROOKE

No we didn't.

DYLAN

Yeah we did.

EMILY

Mom and Daddy told us to each pick one thing.

STERLING

One cheap thing.

BROOKE

They just told us to pick one thing we wanted. They didn't say they would get us what we picked.

EMILY

But you know they did.

STERLING

That's why it had to be cheap stuff.

BROOKE

You don't know that. It's a surprise.

DYLAN

Well, I know what I'm Getting. It's a model rocket kit.

STERLING

I got a Transformer!

EMILY

I got a Barbie doll and you got "Charlotte's Web," Brooke. That's what you asked for. Remember?

BROOKE

I know what I asked for, Emily. And I also know that opening presents is supposed to be a surprise.

EMILY

But it's not a surprise when you know -

BROOKE

And you do not know what you're going to get when you open your present.

DYLAN

But -

BROOKE

Trust me, Dylan. You will be surprised.

*(Crosses to the couch and sits beside GARY. She wears a mischievous grin.)*

GARY

What're you grinnin' about?

BROOKE

Oh, nothing.

DYLAN, EMILY, and STERLING *rush to GARY.*

DYLAN

Dad, can we open our presents now?

EMILY

Please? I want my Barbie!

BROOKE

You don't even know if you got a Barbie.

EMILY

Yes I do! It's what I asked for!

STERLING

Can I open my Transformer, Dad?

BROOKE

Sterling, it's a surprise.

STERLING

Dad, can I open my surprise Transformer, please?

DYLAN

Since we a'ready know what you and Mom done got us for Christmas.

BROOKE

Done got?

GARY

How do you know Mom and I got you what you asked for?

EMILY

Didn't you?

BROOKE *elbows GARY and gestures for him to keep mum. The other children don't see this.*

GARY

I'm not gonna answer that. It would spoil the surprise.

DYLAN

Why would you have us pick out one thing -

STERLING

One cheap thing -

DYLAN

If you weren't gonna get it for us?

BROOKE

Maybe they just wanted you to think they were getting you one thing so they could surprise you with something completely unexpected. Did you ever think of that? No!

MICKI *enters from the kitchen.*  
DYLAN, BROOKE, EMILY, and STERLING  
*all freeze as GARY turns his attention to MICKI.*

MICKI

*(Putting her phone down)*

Well, I guess we're down to just Emily and her kids. I hope they're ready to eat three batches of cookies.

GARY

I'll help. It'll be a sacrifice, but I'm willing to try.

MICKI

Our Christmas is fallin' apart and you make jokes.

GARY

I have a good teacher. Besides, it's not falling apart.

MICKI

Hello! Three of our four kids and half our grandchildren won't be here. Don't that disappoint you none?