The Homecoming
by Peter Coy

directed by Pat Kight
Albany Civic Theater

Auditions: Oct 1*, 2, 3, 4, 2006
Performances: Dec. December 1, 2, 8, 9, 10(m), 14, 15, 16,

*Children's audition, 4 pm. Mandatory for all children who wish to be in this play
The Homecoming

by Peter Croy

a new adaptation
of the novel
“Spencer’s Mountain” by Earl Hamner, Jr.

Premiered in December, 2005 at the opening of the Earl Hamner Community Theater at the Rockfish Valley Community Center, Virginia

Reproduced by permission of the author
Characters
(in order of appearance)

• Clay-Boy - A passionate, earnest and imaginative young writer, chafing to leave the nest
• Adult Clay-Boy - the grown-up Clay-Boy, who serves as on-stage narrator.
• Olivia - Mother of the Spencer brood.
• The children:
  • Shirley (late teens) - Tries to act more sophisticated than she is, but the little girl still sneaks through
  • Matt (mid-late teens) - Growing up, but still wages sibling warfare with his sisters
  • Becky (15) - Precocious, smart-mouthed, scrappy
  • Mark and Luke (12-13) - Twins (not necessarily identical). Rambunctious, baseball-crazy
  • John (8-10) - Young enough to still believe in Santa; a budding musician
  • Pattie-Cake (5-6.)- The "baby."
• Homer and Ida - Olivia's parents and the children's aging but vital grandparents.
• Charlie Snead - A neighbor (and poacher), good-hearted but often in trouble with the law.
• Birdshot Sprouse - Family friend, dirt-poor and perhaps a little slow.
• City Lady - A well-intentioned do-gooder
• Sheriff Ep Bridges - By-the-book lawman
• Hawthorne Dooly - Preacher at the local black church
• Etta and Emma Staples - The slightly daffy Staples sisters do a booming business brewing up their late papa's "recipe."
• Clay Spencer - The father of the brood. Strong, loving, generous.
THE HOMECOMING

ACT ONE

(Adult Clay-Boy enters. He talks to the audience.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
On Christmas Eve of 1933, my father had not yet come home.

(Olivia enters holding a Christmas cactus plant. She is examining it carefully.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
That is fact, and well remembered in my family. The rest of the story…

(Clay-Boy enters from outside. He is shivering cold.)

OLIVIA
Clay-Boy, how many times have I told you to put your jacket on when you go outside. I can’t have you getting sick on me, boy.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
The rest of this story is… well, I remember it was a night of miracles, of great changes.

OLIVIA
“Yes, ma’am”s not good enough.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

OLIVIA
You’re the oldest. You have to set an example for all the others.

CLAY-BOY
Mama, I wish…
ADULT CLAY-BOY
If I had any wish in life then, it was that she would stop reminding me of my responsibilities. It took all the fun out of things.

OLIVIA
Well. You are the oldest. There’s nothing you can do about that.

CLAY-BOY
What’s the matter, mama?

OLIVIA
This morning I went to the upstairs hall where I keep the Christmas cactus, where the winter sun’s the strongest. But one of you children had broken a windowpane. The cactus is dead, Clay-boy. It was full of little pink buds. Every last one of them is dead.

CLAY-BOY
I’m sorry, mama. Whoever did it, didn’t mean to. If there was a Santa, I’d ask him to bring you flowers.

OLIVIA
It doesn’t feel like Christmas.

CLAY-BOY
But it is Christmas, Christmas Eve. And you always say…

OLIVIA
I know what day it is, boy.

CLAY-BOY
It’s going to snow, mama. Grandpa Homer said it’s snow for sure.

OLIVIA
Snow. I wish spring was here, the first warm breeze and the forsythia blooming in the snow. I’ve had enough of this blustery cold and you children underfoot and bickering all the time.

CLAY-BOY
It’s Christmas, mama. It’s going to be a white one.
OLIVIA
The snow’s starting already.

CLAY-BOY
Look. It’s those little tiny flakes. It’s going to snow all day and maybe all night too.

OLIVIA
Your daddy’ll have to get through it somehow.

CLAY-BOY
He’ll get here, mama.

OLIVIA
Yes, he’ll get here.

CLAY-BOY
You always say Christmas is the time to be close. Family and friends.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
When we all can see God working in the world.

OLIVIA
And maybe even believe that miracles will happen.

CLAY-BOY
You say that every year. The Christmas spirit.

OLIVIA
I haven’t been able to find it so far and I have been looking for it, son. But Christmas seems to me just another day this year. And I think no matter how hard I try to make it special, it’s going to turn out just another day.

CLAY-BOY
What about Santa Claus? For the kids?
OLIVIA
I’ve asked Grandpa Homer and Grandma Ida to come have supper with us tonight.

CLAY-BOY
Mama, what are we going to have for Christmas dinner? We ate every scrap off the last ham from that hog Daddy butchered in the fall.

OLIVIA
I don’t know, boy. Maybe I’ll wring Gretchen’s neck and make stew and dumplings.

CLAY-BOY
Gretchen’s a laying hen. What’ll we do for eggs if we make a stew out of her?

OLIVIA
I don’t know that either. I’m feeling reckless. Let tomorrow take care of itself. We have three dollars from Daddy’s last paycheck.

CLAY-BOY
There are some sweet potatoes and dried apples in the bins. Some peas and beans you canned.

OLIVIA
We’ll get by. Your Daddy will be home soon. He’ll have his week’s wages.

CLAY-BOY
What about Santa Claus for the kids?

OLIVIA
I made some things. Dresses for the girls. Warm pajamas for you and the boys.

CLAY-BOY
They’ll know you made them, mama. They’ll know they’re not from Santa Claus. They’ll stop believing.
OLIVIA
Maybe it’s time they did. In hard times like these maybe it’s silly to let children go on believing in foolishness.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
Foolishness? Did mama really say that? I remember when I was little…

CLAY-BOY
Remember how we used to put out corn flakes for Santa Claus and carrots for his reindeer? It used to take me hours to get to sleep, thinking of him right here in the house.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
And then in the morning…

CLAY-BOY
In the morning when the presents were all under the tree and the corn flakes and carrots all gone, I really believed, mama. I believed.

OLIVIA
Times were different. We had money to spend back then.

CLAY-BOY
You reckon the Depression will last forever?

OLIVIA
I don’t know. Mr. Roosevelt says it won’t. Now stop worrying about things you can’t help. That snow’s coming down heavier and harder every minute. Look out there, Clay-Boy. Can you see that?

CLAY-BOY
What is it, mama?

OLIVIA
(Calling.) Y’all children want to see something pretty? Hurry now.
(Pattie-Cake runs in.)
PATTIE-CAKE
Where, mama? I want to see something pretty.

(She jumps into Olivia’s arms.)

OLIVIA
Oh, Pattie-Cake. You are getting big. I can’t hold you.

PATTIE-CAKE
I want to see, I want to see.

OLIVIA
Look out there.

(Becky enters, followed by Matt.)

BECKY
Leave me alone. Mama, Matt won’t stop bothering me. Matt keeps pushing and shoving me. He’s a big pest.

MATT
I am not. Becky’s just mad because Daddy’s not here to tell her she’s the most prettiest thing in the world.

OLIVIA
I don’t want to hear any of this.

BECKY
But, mama, I’m just trying to be left alone.

(Mark, Luke, Shirley, and John enter.)

MARK
Jimmie Foxx is too better than Babe Ruth. What do you want, Mama.

OLIVIA
Look out there.

LUKE
Foxx didn’t hit 60 home runs, did he?
PATTIE-CAKE
I still don’t see.

MARK
He won the triple crown.

BECKY
There’s nothing out there but the barn and some old field I saw a million times before.

CLAY-BOY
I can hardly see the mountain through the snow.

OLIVIA
Look there in the crab-apple tree. See up on the top limb.

MATT
There’s a red-bird.

MARK
A cardinal.

JOHN
That red is the only color out there.

PATTIE-CAKE
I can’t see it. Where is it?

CLAY-BOY
There in the top of that tree. See it?

PATTIE-CAKE
That red-bird. I can see it. I can see it.

MARK
That bird is going to freeze tonight.

OLIVIA
He won’t freeze. A red-bird has the knack of surviving winter. He knows it too. Otherwise he’d of headed south with the robins and the wild ducks and geese back when the leaves started to turn.
Look at those old clothesline posts. They look like ghosts dressed up in sheets.

I wish my daddy could fly.

That’s a stupid thing to say.

(Everyone laughs.)

If he could fly then he wouldn’t have to wait for the bus.

Daddy go flying around, somebody liable to think he’s a turkey buzzard and shoot him down.

A big old turkey buzzard.

Y’all leave Shirley alone. Don’t you worry about your daddy. He’s going to be home for Christmas. You stop fretting about it.

He won’t be home if he stops off at Miss Emma’s and Miss Etta’s.

You watch your mouth, young lady. Miss Emma Staples and Miss Etta Staples. Huh. The day your daddy spends Christmas Eve with two old lady bootleggers is the day I walk out of this house.

Where’ll we go, mama?

Your daddy’s going to be home. Y’all just stop worrying. I’ve got work to do. I don’t have time to be wasting on silly thoughts.

(Olivia exits.)
SHIRLEY
Mama hasn’t got the Christmas spirit.

PATTIE-CAKE
Where will we go if Daddy’s at those old ladies’ house.

CLAY-BOY
Pattie-Cake. Daddy’ll be home soon.

PATTIE-CAKE
Why does he have to be away all the time?

BECKY
It isn’t all the time, nut-head. He’s home every weekend.

CLAY-BOY
Becky!

BECKY
Well, he is here every weekend.

CLAY-BOY
Pattie-Cake, I’ve explained this all to you before. Don’t you remember?

PATTIE-CAKE
I don’t understand.

BECKY
What a little dumb-bell.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
The Depression came to Nelson County. Our father had to…

CLAY-BOY
There’s something called the Depression that happened in Washington or New York and it made the soapstone plant where daddy worked close down.

PATTIE-CAKE
How did that happen?
CLAY-BOY
I don’t know but all the men in Schuyler had to find other work so they could buy food for their families.

PATTIE-CAKE
Daddy could work here around the house. There’s lots to do here.

CLAY-BOY
He’s got to make money, Pattie-Cake. Daddy’s got a job as a machinist at the Dupont Company in Waynesboro.

LUKE
That’s forty miles away, right Mark.

JOHN
Why doesn’t Daddy have a car?

CLAY-BOY
To get home, every Friday night he has to take the Trailways bus to Charlottesville and take another bus that brings him down to Hickory Creek. Then he has to walk the last six miles or hitch a ride if a car happens along.

PATTIE-CAKE
So he’s coming home now.

CLAY-BOY
Yes. He’s coming home. He wouldn’t stop at those old ladies’ house.

(Olivia enters.)

OLIVIA
Not on Christmas Eve, he wouldn’t.

BECKY
I bet you’d like to set some sticks of dynamite under their house and watch it blow sky high.
OLIVIA
That sorry old house with its shelves of Mason jars filled with that “recipe” of theirs. It’s nothing but bad corn liquor.

MATT
You’d want to blow up their house, mama?

OLIVIA
Of course not, Matt. That’s not a Christian thought, especially at Christmas. Come on, there’s work to do. Who wants to crack the walnuts for my applesauce cake?

ALL (BUT BECKY)
I do. Me, me, me, me….

OLIVIA
Then all of you out to the barn.
(The children scatter, collecting their jackets, scarves, hats, hammers, etc.)

OLIVIA

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

BECKY
You’re not going to look after me.
(She sticks her tongue out at Clay-Boy.)

OLIVIA
Becky, you do what your brother tells you to.

BECKY
Mama, I’m fifteen. I don’t have to listen to some boy just because he’s two years older.

OLIVIA
You’ll do what I tell you, girl. What do you say to me? Becky!
BECKY
Yes, ma’am.

OLIVIA
Now put on your jacket and go on over to the barn.

BECKY
Yes, ma’am.

OLIVIA
That’s better, young lady.

*(Olivia exits.)*

ADULT CLAY-BOY
I felt like some old mother duck.

SHIRLEY
Stop it, Mark. Ow.

MATT
John, watch out.

LUKE
*(Singsong.*) Ha ha ha ha ha…

SHIRLEY
Don’t throw that at me.

JOHN
I got you, I got you.

CLAY-BOY
Y’all watch yourselves. Somebody gets hurt, I’ll get the blame.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
Cracking walnuts was, of course, an excuse for all the children to get out of the house and into the snow.

CLAY-BOY
Lordy God, I’ll be glad when y’all grow up and learn sense.
ADULT CLAY-BOY
The barn was cold, and smelled of hickory smoke and fresh hay and drying wood and mice.

(Clay-Boy pulls a burlap bag of walnuts our of the bin.)

CLAY-BOY
When we go back to the house, y’all can bring some stove wood if you don’t want to freeze tonight.

(They all sit. Clay-Boy hands each a pile of nuts. They begin to work.)

PATTIE-CAKE
I wrote a letter to Santa Claus.

JOHN
It won’t do you a speck of good.

PATTIE-CAKE
How come?

JOHN
How you going to get it to him?

LUKE
He’s clean at the North Pole. No letter going to get to the North Pole by tonight.

PATTIE-CAKE
What’ll I do, Clay-Boy?

CLAY-BOY
You give it to me, honey. I’ll take it down to the post office and send it Special Delivery.

PATTIE-CAKE
I’m much obliged to you, Clay-Boy.

BECKY
He’s only pacifying her.
CLAY-BOY
Shut up, Becky before I spank your bottom till it’s red, white and blue.

BECKY
You just try it, big boy.

MATT
What did you ask Santa to bring you, honey?

PATTIE-CAKE
One whole page in the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue. A whole page of dolls.

JOHN
I been thinking about writing to him myself.

MARK
I’m getting a baseball glove.

LUKE
Me too.

MARK
A first baseman’s glove, like Jimmie Foxx.

SHIRLEY
What you asking for, John?

JOHN
A piano and a pair of ice skates.

MARK
That man can’t carry no piano down the chimney. He ain’t hardly any bigger than mama, little old fat fellow with a big belly.

LUKE
I saw a picture of him.

MARK
You saw a real picture of Santa?
LUKE
In a magazine.

MARK
So you figure he’s bringing you a present?

LUKE
Yeah. Don’t you?

BECKY
Huh!

CLAY-BOY
What’s that “huh” for?

BECKY
Everybody’s so ignorant around here.

MATT
What makes you say that?

BECKY
Who is this Santa Claus? Some little fat man in a sleigh? I haven’t seen no sleighs around here. And how does he get to every house in the world in one night?

PATTIE-CAKE
He just does it. Right, Clay-Boy?

BECKY
Huh! I’d like to see him try.

CLAY-BOY
No more talking out of you, Becky.

BECKY
I’ll talk if I want to.

MATT
You’re bad, Becky.

(Matt shoves Becky, knocking her to the ground.)
BECKY
Son, you’re going to be sorry you did that.

MATT
You want to make something out of it?

BECKY
You’re double durned right I’m going to make something out of it.

SHIRLEY
I’m going to tell mama you said a bad word and she’ll wash your mouth out with Octagon soap.

BECKY
You little old mealy-mouth thing. I hope you get a cold and sneeze your eye balls loose.

CLAY-BOY
You watch it, young lady. You just watch that biggity talk.

BECKY
I’m not going to have anything to do with any of you.

(Becky walks away from the crowd.)

BECKY
(To herself.) If daddy was here…

ADULT CLAY-BOY
But he was somewhere out there in this snowstorm…

BECKY
Why do they always give me nothing but trouble?

CLAY-BOY
You get back here and work with the rest of us.

BECKY
(To herself.) Next summer when I’m working in the garden, I’m sure enough going to chop off one of my toes, like it’s an accident. Then maybe they’ll feel sorry for me and stop picking on me all the time. They might even like me.
PATTIE-CAKE
There is too a Santa Claus, isn’t there, Clay-Boy?

CLAY-BOY
There is. Wait’ll in the morning. You’ll see.

LUKE
Yeah, you’ll see.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
As soon as I said that, I wished I hadn’t. Mama hadn’t had the money to buy any presents. I knew that. And daddy… Well, I had learned enough to know about the many temptations that lay in the path of a man who had labored hard all week and who had just gotten paid.

MATT
We got us just about a cup of walnuts here.

CLAY-BOY
A few more and we’ll be done.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
I remember thinking then: Here I am cracking walnuts for my mother to make applesauce cake. What am I doing? And babysitting a bunch of kids. What kind of a man am I going to be if this is what…

BECKY
*(Calling over to the others.)* There’s not going to be Christmas or Santa Claus or presents or nothing this year.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
Our father, Clay Spencer, was a hard man to measure up to. Like all Spencer men he was a crack shot, a good provider for our family, an honest look-em-in-the-eye man, an enthusiastic drinker, a prodigious dancer, a fixer of things, a builder, a singer of note, a teller of bawdy stories, a kissing hugging loving man whose laughter would shake the house, and who was not afraid to cry. If I was going to…
BECKY
And daddy’s not going to get home neither.

OLIVIA
(Singing.) O little town of Bethlehem how still we see the lie… etc.

JOHN
Mama’s got the Christmas spirit.

(All the children get up and go into the kitchen.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
The kitchen steamed with the smell of cloves and cinnamon and nutmeg.

OLIVIA
The Spirit just come up on me all of a sudden.

(Olivia is stirring the applesauce and singing.)

CLAY-BOY
Sure does smell good in here.

MARK
Can I taste the batter, mama?

OLIVIA
No you may not.

LUKE
That looks good, mama.

OLIVIA
Clay-Boy, you go get the tree.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

BECKY
I’m going too.

OLIVIA
No, you are not. You’re staying here and helping me out.
BECKY
I want to go. Anyway, it takes two people. Clay-Boy can’t do it all by himself. And daddy’s not here so I’ll…

OLIVIA
A girl’s place is to help in the kitchen. Cutting down trees is men’s work.

BECKY
Let Shirley help. She’s such a prissy butt.

LUKE
(Chanting.) Prissy butt, prissy butt.

SHIRLEY
I am not a prissy butt.

OLIVIA
I’m trying to get Christmas ready and you children aren’t helping me. Now get busy with those dishes. Becky, you wash. Shirley, you dry.

BECKY
Huh. Well, he won’t be able to do it all by himself. You just watch.

(Becky saunters obstinately over to the sink and starts to splash water around.)

BECKY
Damn, damn, damn. Double-damn.

(Olivia crosses to her swiftly and swats her on the seat of her pants. Olivia glowers at her. Becky crosses away from the others.)

BECKY
If daddy was here, he would hold me in his arms and tell me I was a Crackerjack and give me those whiskey-flavored kisses of his. When I grow up, I’m going to get a job in Waynesboro and ride the Trailways bus and come home every Friday night and blow whiskey breath right in mama’s face. And if mama ever says a word, I’ll just…
OLIVIA
Clay-Boy, you wear your daddy’s old sheepskin jacket. That’s the only thing going to keep you warm out there.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

OLIVIA
And button up that top button, you hear. I can’t afford you catching your death of cold.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
Ahead of me Spencer’s Mountain loomed snow-white, pine-green, arched with the misty blue of a cold, snowy December afternoon.

BECKY
There all kind of things out there on the mountain. There caves boys been lost in and never found, ever. There’s one cave with a hidden lake so deep down that when you drop a stone in from the rim, you could count to five before you hear the splash. I heard grown men talk about these. So they got to be true.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
Grandfather Spencer, who the whole mountain belonged to in olden times, Grandfather Spence would tell stories…

BECKY
Bears and bob-cats out there.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
Grandfather Spencer would tell a story:

Up on the mountain, when I was a boy, there used to be a big old buck deer that was white all over and had pink eyes. Lots of folks that never laid eyes on him used to claim there wasn’t no such thing. Some of them even claimed he was a ghost. I don’t say one way or another, ghost or flesh. All I know is I have laid eyes on him.
OLIVIA
Clay-Boy, don’t you listen to them stories. There never was an albino deer around here. No ghost deer either. And anyway, that deer’d be dead and gone. I never heard of one living longer than ten, eleven years maybe.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
And Grandfather Spencer would get a serious look on his face:
He’s up there. You mark my words!

CLAY-BOY
He’s up there somewhere.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
The wilderness silence and the snow silence descended on me as I trudged upward through a landscape of dark leafless trees.

OLIVIA
You remember the tree, the one you children picked out last summer when we were up picking blackberries?

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

SHIRLEY
That pretty hemlock we all found.

CLAY-BOY
Yes.

JOHN
You think you can find it again?

CLAY-BOY
I’ll find it.

OLIVIA
Now y’all children got to get out of my kitchen.

LUKE
Santa is too going to bring me a New York Yankees cap.
MARK
And he’s bringing me four tickets to next year’s world series in Philadelphia.

LUKE
He is? How do you know it’s going to be in Philadelphia?

BECKY
I can’t believe what a dim wit you are, Luke.

MATT
Mama, the radio’s broken. Who’s been messing around with the radio?

JOHN
Mama, Mark’s going to the World Series. That’s no fair.

OLIVIA
Out of the kitchen, all of you. Upstairs.

JOHN
He is going. He said had the tickets.

PATTIE-CAKE
Can I go, mama? I want to go too.

BECKY
(Exiting.) This is the stupidest family in the whole world.

SHIRLEY
Mama, I made something really beautiful for the tree. Do you want to see it?

OLIVIA

(The children exit.)
ADULT CLAY-BOY
That old sheepskin jacket smelled of my father, a faint scent of tobacco smoke, a remembrance of gunpowder from when he went hunting for quail or rabbit or wild turkey that we needed more and more since the Depression came.

(Clay-Boy pushes his hands into the pockets of the jacket to keep warm. But he finds a crumpled pack of camels and a box of matches. He pulls them out and looks at them.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
I had forgotten about the cigarettes.

(Clay-Boy takes a cigarette out of the pack and puts it in his mouth. He strikes a match and thinks about lighting the cigarette.)

CLAY-BOY
I wonder how I look. This is the way daddy holds it. I probably look like a man.

(The match burns his fingers and he throws it to the ground.)

CLAY-BOY
Oww!

ADULT CLAY-BOY
As much as I wanted to be like my father…

CLAY-BOY
I’m nearly as tall as he is right now. Shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
As much as I wanted to be like him, something was pulling me in another direction.

CLAY-BOY
He thinks I’m strange. He sometimes watches me writing in my school tablet. The other children are all out playing capture the flag.
ADULT CLAY-BOY
I didn’t tell anyone about my writing. I hid everything I wrote away like some secret vice.

CLAY-BOY
I’ve got so much to tell, so much that I can only tell in the words I write in those school tablets. And soon it’ll be time for me to be a man and put away this crazy idea of writing; learn to be a man, put away this childish writing, cause a man’s got to make a living and provide for a family.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
The woods was softly filling up with snow, transforming rock and bush and clay bank into new and magical forms. I crossed a small ice-crusted stream where underneath the ice the water gurgled slowly.

CLAY-BOY
There’s that place where daddy’s going to build his house, the one he’s promised mama.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
His dream to build a house with his own hands, a house his wife and children could see him build, a house that would give strength and love to their lives because they would see the strength and love that he built it with.

CLAY-BOY
He promised the house to mama on their wedding night.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
“I can see it now,” he told me, “a white house with green shutters, your mama sitting up there on the front porch of a Sunday.” The vision of it never left his mind.

CLAY-BOY
But he never has gotten beyond excavating the basement. Every summer he digs it out. Then the fall and winter rains come and fill it back in. Now the Depression’s on us and he never has the time to work on it.
ADULT CLAY-BOY

Or maybe the heart.

CLAY-BOY

He still keeps his stash of tools up here. I guess he expects to build his house one day.

(Clay-Boy finds the axe and exits.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY

I came to an open meadow and there was the tree, a six foot tall, perfectly symmetrical eastern hemlock. I crawled under the low branches to examine the trunk. The upper branches had caught the snow so none had fallen on the earth below. A thick circle of needles covered the ground. There was a small pile of pine wood knots that my father had thrown there. They caught flame readily and he would use them later for starting a fire.

There was a quick movement in the meadow. My whole body caught and froze. I had thought I was alone. I turned and saw on the edge of the pine woods, a female deer, her head raised, her black moist nose pointing to the sky. Then she started across the field.

What brought her here? Maybe some dogs or a wildcat had separated her from the herd. Maybe she was late in season, still looking for a mate. She moved toward me in her graceful undulating motion, setting her thin hooves gently in the snow. She began to graze on the tips of a persimmon thicket. I was glad I hadn’t brought a gun as my father would have. We needed the meat and I would have had to shoot her.

All of sudden she spooked. In a single motion she flagged her tail and sprang away. But as quickly as she bolted, she came to a stop and seemed to sink into the snow. She was trapped in a deadfall. Last summer daddy and I had filled a gully with dead limbs and branches to cut down on erosion. The snow was covering it and the doe had mistaken it for solid ground.
Now she was trapped and thrashing about wildly, sinking deeper and deeper into the mesh of dead tree limbs. I rushed toward her with the axe in my hand.

It would be a simple matter to kill her with one swing of the axe. I am the son of a hunter.

But I wanted to free her. I knew the direction the branches lay in. I thought I could drag some out of the pile. She might get loose.

As I got close, she only trashed about more fiercely. When I got within arms length she suddenly stopped, paralyzed with fear, her eyes blinking with hatred.

I looked down into the maze of branches to see what I could do. Then I heard a high, nasal, angry snort from out in the meadow. I turned. Something moved in the snow. A massive, albino buck. I could see even from where I was the pink eyes grown red with anger.

Although late in the year, the buck still had his rack of antlers, he was still in rut, probably enticed here by the scent of the doe. He stood still, then stamped the ground twice.

The nearest cover was the Christmas tree. I made a dash for it and slid under the branches, hunching behind the trunk.

The buck turned, lowered his head, and with a quick rush attacked the tree. The wood and buck clashed. For a moment the antlers were held tight by the branches but with a powerful wrench the buck freed himself. He withdrew to gather himself for a second charge. This one was more powerful than the first. The tree shuddered with the impact of antler against wood.

Then, do you know what happened, the rack of antlers simply dropped to the ground. Already past their normal time to drop, they simply cracked away from the buck’s skull.
Confused, the buck back away. But then in a new rage, He attacked the tree again with his front hooves, rearing up and slashing down through the branches. Soon every branch would be stripped from the tree. No place to hide.

I had left the axe out near the doe. I looked around for a weapon. I grabbed one of the pine knots. This wasn’t going to protect me.

Than I thought, fire. I had always heard wild animals hate fire. I reached into the pocket of the jacket and took out the matches. I held the flame to the splintery underside of the pine knot. One splinter caught, then another. A drop of resin sputtered. I sheltered the flame with the jacket and waited. It grew into a glowing torch.

The buck was ready for a new assault. As he came close I stood and pushed the torch into his face. He reared and bolted away. He stopped on the edge of the woods and looked back, pawing the ground.

I moved out from the tree holding the torch high. The doe had almost freed herself. I pulled one branch from the pile and she leaped from the gully and bounded off into the woods. The buck turned and followed.

I yelled at him.

CLAY-BOY AND CLAY (TOGETHER)
Merry Christmas, you hellion.

CLAY
It was getting late. Dark would be on the ridges soon. Throwing the axe over my shoulder, I headed home. At the foot of the mountain, I found another hemlock almost as pretty as the first and chopped it down. Just at that moment the grey day darkened into night. But the lights of home were within sight.

(Clay-Boy walks into the kitchen.)

OLIVIA
I was getting ready to send out a search party for you.
CLAY-BOY

Those cakes sure do look good.

OLIVIA

You stay clear of them cakes, boy, you hear. And where have you been all this time.

CLAY-BOY

I just poked along, mama.

OLIVIA

Nothing happened out there?

CLAY-BOY

No, ma’am.

OLIVIA

I thought you’d got lost. Nothing happened?

CLAY-BOY

No, ma’am.

OLIVIA

Did you get the tree?

CLAY-BOY

Yes, ma’am. It’s out on the porch.

OLIVIA

You’re being awfully quiet. Is there something you’re not telling me?

CLAY-BOY

I was in the barn making a stand for the tree. It’s all ready to bring in. Where is everybody?

OLIVIA

I sent the children over to bring Mama and Papa back for supper. They needed to get out of the house.

CLAY-BOY

I’ll bring the tree in.
(He brings in the tree.)

OLIVIA
There’s something about a tree in the house.

CLAY-BOY
The smell of outside.

OLIVIA
There’s a feeling of mystery about it. And memory of something.

CLAY-BOY
All the summers it stood out there in the hot sun and the long cold winters. And maybe the tree next to it getting struck by lightning in one of those big thunderstorms. And think of all the wild things that rested in its shade or nestled in its branches.

OLIVIA
Why, I declare, son, you do carry on. You sure that’s the same tree we picked out last summer?

CLAY-BOY
No, it’s not, mama. Something broke some branches on that other one.

OLIVIA
What in the world would have done that?

(There is a loud stomping of feet on the porch.)

CLAY-BOY
The children are back.

(Olivia runs to the door.)

OLIVIA
Maybe they ran into your father…

(The children and Homer and Ida enter. Homer greets Olivia loudly.)
HOMER
Merry Christmas, daughter.

OLIVIA
Come on in, Papa. How are you, Mama?

IDA
I think I got a crick in my back.

HOMER
That woman is crazy.

IDA
Don’t listen to him.

OLIVIA
What’s the matter now?

HOMER
She’s been racing all over Nelson County taking orders for the Larkin Company. Old woman like her ought to be home setting by the fire in a rocking chair ‘stead of scooting round like a snow plough.

IDA
I made three dollars and that’s three dollars we wouldn’t have if I hadn’t been out taking orders.

CLAY-BOY
Pattie-Cake. I got something to show you.

PATTIE-CAKE
What is it, Clay-Boy?

CLAY-BOY
Close your eyes. You got to close your eyes. Here, I’ll cover them. Now let me guide you. Shhhh… y’all be quiet. This is for Pattie-Cake.

(Lights come up on the tree. Clay-Boy faces Pattie-Cake towards the tree.)
CLAY-BOY

All right.

PATTIE-CAKE

The tree. It’s a beautiful tree.

CLAY-BOY

Now y’all go up and get those special things you made for the tree. We’re going to
decorate the tree.

JOHN

But daddy’s not here. He always likes to do that with us.

BECKY

Well he’s not here and we’re just going to have to do it without him.

CLAY-BOY

He’s on his way.

BECKY

You don’t know that, Mr. know-it-all.

CLAY-BOY

He’s on his way and it’ll be a surprise for when he gets home. Go on up and get
your things.

(The children exit.)

HOMER

Where is Clay, daughter?

OLIVIA

Somewhere between here and Waynesboro. Be here soon, I reckon.

IDA

I wouldn’t count on it.

OLIVIA

What do you mean, mama?
IDA
I’ll bet you he’s down yonder drinking whiskey with those Staples women right this second.

HOMER
Your mother’s a pillar of that Baptist Church of hers. She never misses an opportunity to remind you that you went and married a heathen.

IDA
Or he’s playing poker in that rundown black church…

OLIVIA
Mama, I won’t have you talking about Clay that way.

IDA
Well, he drinks, don’t he?

OLIVIA
He takes a drink. There’s a difference. And anyway, it’s Christmas Eve. Clay’ll want to be here with his family. He’s on his way.

HOMER
At least he’s working. That’s more’n can be said for the rest of us.

OLIVIA
He provides for us.

IDA
Those Spencers never were…

OLIVIA
You owe something to “those Spencers”. They were pioneer people here, came with nothing but an axe and a mule and a rifle. This is fought-for land.

HOMER
That’s right, woman. They endured on this land. Flood, fire, loneliness. And sickness – diptheria, whooping cough, scarlet fever. War, too. War Between the States. We owe something to the Spencers resting in that graveyard out there.
OLIVIA
There was just wilderness here and they made it a fit place to live.

IDA
Well, they haven’t done much with that mountain out there. It’s still just a mountain. If I owned it, I’d of done something to…

OLIVIA
Clay’s grand-daddy used to say you can’t own a mountain any more than you can own the ocean or a piece of the sky. You hold it in trust, take life from it, and once you’re dead, you rest in it.

IDA
I don’t see Clay doing much around here.

HOMER
Hard times. I was listening to the radio a while ago. They’re doing right smart talking about this New Deal.

OLIVIA
It’s what this country needs all right.

IDA
I hear ‘em talking about it all the time, but I don’t know what it means.

HOMER
It means we got a man in the White House that’s doing something. Roosevelt says he’s going to open the banks, get the country moving again, and I believe he’ll do it.

OLIVIA
What we need is a politician we can have some faith in. God knows there’s not many men in this world we can trust.

HOMER
There’s some that feel this country is going to the dogs but I don’t pay ‘em no heed. I say Roosevelt is going to keep his word.
IDA
They say she’s real nice. Joe Phillips was up in Washington on the Veterans March. She came out there and shook hands with everybody, tasted the stew and all. Joe said he got up as close to her as I am to you.

OLIVIA
I don’t care what they do as long as they get the mill open and Clay can come home to work again.

HOMER
Clay ought to be showing up pretty soon.

OLIVIA
I expect him any minute.

(Clay-Boy has gotten a ladder and has hung a silver star to the topmost point of the tree. John and Mark enter.)

JOHN
I got mine, Clay-Boy.

CLAY-BOY
What you got there, John?

JOHN
I painted these pinecones gold. They’re real pretty.

MARK
It took me three hours to polish this up to where it’s all shiny.

CLAY-BOY
That’s a beauty. Find a place on the tree, Mark. Right in front there.

(Shirley enters with a construction paper chain she’d made and goes to the tree. She silently drapes it over the branches. Luke, Matt, and Pattie-Cake come on.)

LUKE
Here, Pattie-Cake. Let me help you with that.
PATTIE-CAKE
I can do it, Luke. Let me do it.

LUKE
All right, all right. Go ahead and do it.

(Becky enters carrying a bird’s nest. She stands watching the other children.)

MARK
That’s a turkey. That’s the same thing you made for Thanksgiving.

PATTIE-CAKE
Well, we’re gonna eat turkey for Christmas dinner.

BECKY
We are not. We ain’t got no food, much less turkey. Mama doesn’t know what we’re going to have. Some nasty old dried up sweet potatoes.

CLAY-BOY
Matt and Luke, go ahead and hang your things on the tree.

(Becky crosses to the tree and begins to look for a place for her nest.)

MATT
You can’t put that dirty thing on the tree. It’ll be full of mites and there’s an old rotten egg that’s going to smell to high heaven.

BECKY
You don’t know what you’re talking about. This egg’s not rotten. I blew all the stuff out of it. Inside it’s clean as a whistle.

MATT
I don’t care. It’s still got bird poop on it. Who wants a nasty thing like that on a Christmas tree?

BECKY
I do. I got every right to put it on. And it’s not nasty anyway.
SHIRLEY
You’re such a crazy, Becky.

BECKY
Oh, go… paddle your canoe.

(Becky begins to put the nest in the most prominent spot on the tree.)

CLAY-BOY
Becky, you might just consider someone else in this family before you…

BECKY
You can’t tell me what to do. Who do you think you are, daddy or somebody? This house isn’t where I belong anyhow. I ought to of been born a rich city girl and I’d be up in Charlottesville in my full length mink coat shopping for diamonds at Keller and George.

MATT
All I’ve got to say is Santa Claus is going to take one smell of that bird poop and he’s going to head right back up the chimney.

LUKE
If Santa doesn’t come, it’s all your fault.

PATTIE-CAKE
Santa’s not going to give us anything?

BECKY
What’s the matter with you, cry baby. Santa’s not coming to this house no ways.

PATTIE-CAKE
Santa won’t come because of you.

SHIRLEY
Look what you’ve done now, Becky.

MARK
You ought to be ashamed of yourself.
BECKY
Oh, you’re all a bunch of piss-ants.

LUKE
Mama, mama, Becky’s done a bad thing.

(Olivia crosses to the tree.)

OLIVIA
What’s the matter?

SHIRLEY
Becky made Pattie-Cake upset and she ruined the tree with bird poop and she said a bad word.

BECKY
I did not.

OLIVIA
You asking for a spanking, girl?

BECKY
And for your information, children, Santa’s not coming to this house this year cause there’s no such thing as Santa Claus. It’s just something mama and daddy made up. And we don’t have any food for Christmas dinner.

LUKE
That’s a lie.

PATTIE-CAKE
That’s not true. I don’t believe you.

(Suddenly there’s a loud sound of footsteps, stomping the snow off of his boots on the front porch.)

OLIVIA
Clay!

BECKY
There’s daddy.
(The children yell and race to the door.)

ALL THE CHILDREN

Daddy, daddy. He’s here. Etc.

(There standing at the back door is not Clay Spencer but Charlie Snead.)

BECKY

Oh, it’s you.

PATTIE-CAKE

You’re not my daddy.

JOHN

It’s just Mr. Charlie, mama.

OLIVIA

Hello, Charlie.

CHARLIE

Hey, you children. Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas Olivia. Hey, there, Mr. Homer. Miss Ida. How are y’all?

IDA

Pretty good for old folks.

CHARLIE

I reckon you was expecting somebody else.

OLIVIA

We’ve been waiting on Clay to come home from Waynesboro. You heard of him being around somewhere?

CHARLIE

No. I did hear a rumour of a poker game down to that old black folks church yonder. But Clay wouldn’t of gone there tonight. Not Christmas Eve.

IDA

You hear tell of any whiskey drinking? Those old moonshining ladies…
CHARLIE
No, ma’am. This snow has kind of put a lid on most things.

IDA
A man who wants his drink’ll find it regardless of a blizzard.

CHARLIE
Ep Bridges been around tonight?

OLIVIA
The sheriff?

CHARLIE
Just wondering.

HOMER
Ep Bridges? You want my opinion of that man?

IDA
No one wants your opinion of…

HOMER
He’s a red faced, two hundred and ten pound piece of pure beef fat and malice, walking around with that Colt 45 strapped onto his belt…

OLIVIA
Papa, you don’t need to…

HOMER
Did you know he’s the descendent of a Hessian deserter back in revolutionary times?

OLIVIA
He hasn’t been around here.

CHARLIE
Can you kids keep your mouths shut if I let you in on a secret?

ALL THE CHILDREN
Yeah, sure, etc.
(Charlie steps out onto the porch and returns with a wild turkey gobbler that had been shot through the head. He holds it out.)

CHARLIE
I knew Clay wouldn’t of had the chance to go hunting so I thought he’d appreciate a little meat on the table.

OLIVIA
Oh, Charlie Snead. (She is close to tears.) I didn’t know what we were going to do. We’re much obliged to you.

CHARLIE
Don’t say a word about it. It’s my pleasure.

IDA
I thought hunting season was over.

CHARLIE
It is, Miss Ida.

IDA
Don’t it scare you to break the law on Christmas Eve?

CHARLIE
No, ma’am. It don’t. Why should people go hungry when there’s game aplenty?

IDA
Seems like a sin though. I don’t think I could eat it.

OLIVIA
Well, you’re going to if you come to dinner tomorrow. This turkey is the answer to my prayers. Ain’t no sin. I declare I think I’ll cook it tonight. Won’t Clay Spencer be surprised when he walks through that door and finds a turkey roasting in the oven.

IDA
Well, he’s going to have to get here first before he can be surprised.

PATTIE-CAKE
Where is my daddy, Mr. Charlie?
CHARLIE
He’s coming home, Pattie-Cake. Don’t you worry.

IDA
Where’s there’s liquor and cards…

OLIVIA
Mama!

IDA
Well…

PATTY-CAKE
Daddy wants to be home with us, don’t he, mama?

OLIVIA
He does, girl. He certainly does.

CHARLIE
Well, I best be going. I’ve a few more stops to make.

OLIVIA
Thank you, Charlie.

CHARLIE
Goodnight, y’all.

EVERYONE
Goodnight.

OLIVIA
Now, all of you back in there and keep decorating that tree. Mama and Papa, you make sure it’s made real pretty. Go on.

(They all to into the tree. Clay-Boy stays behind.)

CLAY-BOY
Mama?

OLIVIA
What is it, son?
CLAY-BOY
You reckon daddy’s stopped somewhere?

OLIVIA
I don’t reckon anything.

CLAY-BOY
Christmas Eve is a time when we all want to be together…

OLIVIA
(Cutting him off.) I don’t know where your father is, Clay-Boy. We just got to wait.

CLAY-BOY
He wouldn’t…

OLIVIA
You got chores. It’s time you’re milking the cow.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am. If he…

OLIVIA
Get to your chores, boy.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

(Olivia exits.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
My father had a wonderful deep laugh. And he could sing Christmas carols like no one else. A kissing, hugging, loving man…

CLAY-BOY
If daddy’s somewhere else, not here with us on Christmas Eve…

PATTIE-CAKE
(Calling from the other room.) Clay-Boy, come in here and help us dress up the tree. It’s going to be the most beautiful tree we ever had. Daddy’s going to be right happy when he sees it.
CLAY-BOY
If he’s somewhere else on Christmas Eve, I don’t know what to think…

PATTIE-CAKE
Clay-Boy!

CLAY-BOY
(Calling to Pattie-Cake.) I got chores, Pattie-Cake. I’ll be in later. (Quietly to himself.) Daddy, you got to get home soon.

(Clay-Boy exits as the lights fade to black.)

END OF ACT ONE
ACT TWO

(Adult Clay-Boy enters.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
When my father went off to work in Waynesboro, among some other chores I inherited were the morning and evening milking of our Guernsey cow, Chance. It was a quiet time. A time to think.

I thought about that white buck and his skittery doe. I thought their fawn would be born late, maybe not mature soon enough to make it through the winter. I told myself to keep an eye out for a little white fawn that might need me to take care of him.

CLAY-BOY
That old albino buck ain’t going to, that’s one thing sure. Who’s there? Daddy?

(Birdshot Sprouse enters.)

BIRDSHOT
Clay-Boy?

CLAY-BOY
Who is it?

BIRDSHOT
It’s me, Birdshot.

CLAY-BOY
Birdshot. You scared me for a minute.

BIRDSHOT
I come to tell you something.

CLAY-BOY
You hear something about my daddy?

BIRDSHOT
Well… no. I ain’t heard nothing about him.
CLAY-BOY
You walked all the way out here in this storm to tell me something.

BIRDSHOT
Yeah, I did. I got a surprise for the kids.

CLAY-BOY
Birdshot, have you eaten supper?

BIRDSHOT
They gave me a can of Vienna sausage, a box of crackers, and a Nehi down at the pool hall.

CLAY-BOY
You need a place to sleep?

BIRDSHOT
No. My daddy’s back home. He done trapped 23 coons along the Rockfish and he’s feeling pretty proud.

OLIVIA
(Off.) Clay-Boy!

CLAY-BOY
Let’s go on over to the house.

OLIVIA
(Off.) Clay-Boy!

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am?

(They cross to the kitchen. Birdshot hangs back a little.)

OLIVIA
Who’s that with you. Birdshot. Well, come on out of the cold.

BIRDSHOT
Merry Christmas, Miss ‘Livy.

OLIVIA
You too. You had your supper?
BIRDSHOT
Yes, ma’am. Where’s your boys and girls?

OLIVIA
In there around the tree.

BIRDSHOT
I got a surprise for them. There’s this city lady from Charlottesville down outside the post office and she’s handing out presents to all the children.

CLAY-BOY
*(Calling to the children.*) Hey, everybody. Get your coats on. We’re headed to the post office. There’s a lady there handing out presents.

*(The children hurry in, followed by Homer and Ida.)*

BECKY
Let’s go, everybody.

JOHN
Is she like Santa Claus?

BECKY
How do I know?

PATTIE-CAKE
Can I get a doll?

MATT
Get your coats on.

OLIVIA
Wait a minute! You’ve forgotten something.

LUKE
What did we forget?

OLIVIA
We don’t accept charity in this family.
PATTIE-CAKE

It’s Santa Claus.

OLIVIA

No, it’s not. It’s some rich lady from Charlottesville who’s come down here to…

IDA

Aw, shoot, Livy. What wrong can it be in them getting a toy or a candy bar?

OLIVIA

Clay feels real strong about it. He won’t even allow me to take that WPA food the government’s handing out.

IDA

There’s such a thing as a man being too proud.

OLIVIA

There’s such a thing as a man providing for his own. And Clay Spencer does that.

IDA

I don’t see him in evidence nowhere tonight providing for his own.

OLIVIA

He’ll be here.

CLAY-BOY

Mama, couldn’t we just go down there and watch other people get things from the lady?

OLIVIA

What fun would that be?

BECKY

It’s something to do.

OLIVIA

Isn’t it something to do here being together and waiting for Santa Claus?
CLAY-BOY
Well, I think I’ll just walk down there and see. Get a little fresh air. I’m old enough to go to the post office by myself. Ain’t no harm in that.

OLIVIA
I guess there’s nothing to stop you.

SHIRLEY
Can’t we go too, Mama? We won’t take anything from the lady.

JOHN
We’ll just watch.

PATTIE-CAKE
We won’t do anything wrong, Mama.

OLIVIA
You’ll be a good girl, Pattie-Cake, will you?

PATTIE-CAKE
Yes, mama.

OTHER CHILDREN
Please, Mama. Please.

HOMER
Aw, let them go, daughter.

OLIVIA
Maybe. If Pattie-Cake says she’s going to be good… and as long as your big brother’s going to make sure, I don’t see there can be a lot of harm.

PATTIE-CAKE
Thank you, Mama.

BECKY
Come here, little girl.

(Becky gives Pattie-Cake a big hug.)
BECKY
I do love you sometimes. You can be real useful. You want me to carry you on my shoulders?

OLIVIA
Don’t y’all stay late. And take care of Pattie-Cake.

BECKY
Yes, ma’am.

HOMER
Daughter, we’ll be headed home, too, before we get snowed in.
(The crowd heads out into the snow.)

MATT
We’re going to get some presents.

PATTIE-CAKE
A doll, a doll.

JOHN
Maybe there’ll be a piano.

BECKY
A piano?

JOHN
Well, some ice skates maybe.

MATT
We’re going to get presents.

BIRDSHOT
I don’t know what all she’s got.

LUKE
I’m getting a baseball glove.

SHIRLEY
Be careful.
MARK
She’ll have a Philadelphia A’s cap for sure.

BECKY
John thinks he’s getting a piano.

PATTIE-CAKE
I’m getting a doll.

CLAY-BOY
Y’all be careful now. No roughhousing. And no snowballs, Matt.

(They come to a pool of light where the City Lady is standing next to a large bag of presents. The children keep their distance from her.)

CITY LADY
Hello, children. My, there are a lot of you. (Counting) …7,8,9. Let me see. I think I have enough for all of you. This snow just keeps coming down, doesn’t it? I haven’t seen this much snow since last winter when we were skiing in Switzerland. Here we go, one for a big boy. You, there. (Looking at Clay-Boy.) This one’s just right for you.

CLAY-BOY
(To Birdshot.) You take it. Go on. (Clay-Boy pushes Birdshot gently forward.)

CITY LADY
(Handing a package to Birdshot.) Merry Christmas, young man.

BIRDSHOT
I’m beholden to you, ma’am. (He goes back to the group.)

ALL
Open it, Birdshot. Go ahead. Open it. Open it.

(Birdshot clumsily rips open the paper and finds a rich brown tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbows and buttons of real leather and a soft brown silk lining.)
You take it Clay-Boy. It’s too nice for me.

(Becky gives him a shove.)

Put it on and stop being silly.

(Birdshot slips his arms and shoulders into the jacket.)

It’s like magic. You look different.

Here, Birdshot. Stand up tall. There. Let me fix your hair. And close your mouth. Something might just fly in.

You look like a man.

Well, you look just about passable.

(Singsong.) Becky’s in love with Birdshot. Becky’s in love…

(Joining in.) Becky’s in love with Birdshot.

Shut up, you stupid little cow pie.

Becky!

Becky’s in love with…

Matt! (He stares the group down.) Birdshot, how do you feel?
Like a dude, Clay-Boy.

CITY LADY
I’d say you look almost ready to go to the University.

BIRDSHOT
I’m much obliged to you, lady.

CITY LADY
Here’s a present for a little girl. *(Looking at Pattie-Cake.)* How about you? What’s your name?

PATTIE-CAKE
Pattie-Cake Spencer.

CITY LADY
What a cute name. Well, Pattie-Cake Spencer, you come on over here.

*(Clay-Boy holds onto Pattie-Cake.)*

CLAY-BOY
We’re not taking any presents, ma’am. We’re just here to look.

CITY LADY
Oh.

CLAY-BOY
Our family doesn’t take charity.

MATT
That’s what our daddy says.

CITY LADY
I know how you feel. I wouldn’t want to accept charity either.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

CITY LADY
What’s your name?
CLAY-BOY
Clay-Boy Spencer.

CITY LADY
You look like a bright boy. Soon you’re going to have to make all the decisions for yourself, your own life.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

CITY LADY
I want to tell you what I’ve seen here tonight. All the children that were here before you. You know, son, I first came to Nelson County last fall, driving through looking at the autumn leaves. But all I could see was the people, you people. I could see the Depression in everyone’s face and eyes. I could see it in the old people, the children. It made me want to do something.

CLAY-BOY
Nobody’s going to be able to do anything.

CITY LADY
I can’t bring an end to the Depression. Not even the government can do that. But I thought maybe I could bring a little joy into the lives of the children here.

JOHN
Like Santa Claus?

CITY LADY
You’re a smart little boy. Yes, just like Santa Claus.

CLAY-BOY
Our daddy says we can provide for ourselves everything we really need.

CITY LADY
So I collected toys and clothes and books, anything I could get from my friends in Charlottesville and I’ve brought them down to you. And what I’ve seen here tonight has been joy.
PATTIE-CAKE
Can I get a doll, Clay-Boy?

CITY LADY
Children opening presents – baseball bats, wind-up toys, winter gloves, kaleidoscopes, that jacket your friend is wearing. No one should begrudge a child that small amount of happiness. Your daddy would want this for his children. Don’t you agree, Clay-Boy?
(Clay-Boy looks at her silently.)

CITY LADY
Here’s one for a little girl. Pattie-Cake?
(Pattie-Cake looks up at Clay-Boy who doesn’t move or talk. Then she runs over to the City Lady and takes the present.)

CITY LADY
Merry Christmas, Pattie-Cake.

PATTIE-CAKE
Merry Christmas, ma’am. (She stands looking at the package.)
(The children stand in a group looking downstage. Clay-Boy stands slightly apart.)

MATT
What’s daddy going to say? We supposed to earn everything we get.

SHIRLEY
We won’t tell him.

BECKY
He’ll find out.

MARK
We can hide it till he’s gone back to Waynesboro.

LUKE
He won’t know.
JOHN
We can’t do that. That’s not right.

BECKY
Mama will know. She won’t let that be.

LUKE
Let’s see what she got. Pattie-Cake!

(Pattie-Cake runs back to the children.

MATT
What is it?

MARK
Open it up, Pattie-Cake.

(Two small, elegantly shoed doll feet appear as she opens the box and folds back the tissue paper. Finally the face surrounded by a halo of yellow hair.)

PATTIE-CAKE
Oh, isn’t she beautiful.

(Pattie-Cake suddenly bursts into tears.)

BECKY
What’s wrong?

PATTIE-CAKE
It’s broken.

CLAY-BOY
I’ll fix it, honey. I’ll fix it.

PATTIE-CAKE
It’s face is all ugly and scary. I hate it.

(She drops the doll in the snow.)

CITY LADY
What’s the matter Pattie-Cake?
ADULT CLAY-BOY
A great feeling of shame swept over me. I knew then that I had betrayed my father.

CITY LADY
You left your doll.

CLAY-BOY
Our family doesn’t take charity, ma’am. We have everything we need.

(Becky reaches over and picks Pattie-Cake up in her arms.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
We turned away started for home, not one of us looking back.

BECKY
Sons of bitches. It’s just like daddy always claims. Nobody ever gave away anything worth keeping.

MATT
Birdshot got a nice jacket that suits him just fine.

BECKY
Not even Santa Claus gives anything good, even if there was a Santa Claus.

(The children cross to the kitchen.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
When we got home, mama was waiting. It seemed that she had decided something while we were gone.

OLIVIA
Y’all children go upstairs and take off your wet socks. And Becky you make sure they don’t leave them on the floor. Clay-Boy, you stay here. I want to talk to you.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

(The children exit. There’s a pause.)
CLAY-BOY
What’s the matter, mama?

OLIVIA
I didn’t want to say it in front of anybody, but I’m worried about your daddy.

CLAY-BOY
It’s a right snowy night. I don’t know what might be holding him up.

OLIVIA
Could be any one of a thousand things. Bus could of slid off the road. Maybe he’s already at Hickory Creek and snow’s too thick for him to walk the six miles home.

CLAY-BOY
Maybe. I could go look for him.

OLIVIA
There’s a village custom that we never had cause to use, boy. If the man of the house is not home when he ought to be, you send out the oldest child in the family to look for him.

CLAY-BOY
I can go.

OLIVIA
I’ve always been proud I never had to send a person out after your daddy. But I thought maybe you could find Charlie Snead. He’s got that old truck and he could give you a ride over to Hickory Creek.

CLAY-BOY
Or over to those old ladies’ house, the one’s that sell that liquor.

OLIVIA
Don’t you be talking like that, Clay-Boy.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.
OLIVIA
I suppose you could look for him there. There’s that old black church, too, where he plays poker sometimes, I hear.

CLAY-BOY
I saw Charlie’s truck down in the village at the pool hall.

OLIVIA
You go try and catch him. Tell him we’ll pay for the gas.

CLAY-BOY
I’ll tell him.

OLIVIA
Don’t say anything to the children. Don’t want them to worry. Wear your father’s sheepskin jacket. What you going to wear on your head?

CLAY-BOY
My cap’s a little wet but it’ll do.

OLIVIA
Here. This was going to be your present from Santa. You’re getting it early.

(Olivia hands him a package. He opens it. There’s a red woollen cap.)

CLAY-BOY
It’s right pretty, mama.

OLIVIA
I knitted it nights after you’d gone up to bed. Pull it down over your ears. I made it plenty long so your ears wouldn’t freeze.

CLAY-BOY
Thank you, mama.

OLIVIA
And if somebody asks what you’re doing out, don’t tell them you’re looking for your daddy. You understand?
CLAY-BOY

Yes, ma’am.

(Clay-Boy walks away from Olivia.)

CLAY-BOY

I shouldn’t be having to look for you, daddy, not on Christmas Eve, not ever, damn it. You got mama all worked up. You shouldn’t of done this to us.

ADULT CLAY-BOY

Where the road bent round, I looked back at the house. But all I could see was just vague patches of light where the windows were. I turned and went into the darkness.

(Sheriff Ep Bridges appears out of the snow.)

CLAY-BOY

Sheriff Bridges!

EP

Who’s that?

CLAY-BOY

It’s Clay-Boy Spencer.

EP

What you doing sneaking around out here?

CLAY-BOY

I’m not sneaking. I’m looking for Charlie Snead.

EP

Oh, you’re looking for Charlie, are you.

CLAY-BOY

Yes, sir. I saw his truck earlier this evening down by the pool hall.
EP
You see that ten point buck he shot laying in the bed of the truck? Maybe he promised some of that meat to your family.

CLAY-BOY
No, sir. I’m just looking for him.

EP
Well, you won’t be finding Charlie Snead anywhere around here. He tried to tell me that deer was a one of Clyde Robbins’ calves he run over by accident on the road. I done arrested him for hunting out of season and he’s resting real peaceful in the Lovingston jail.

CLAY-BOY
You put him in jail?

EP
What you want with that no-count Charlie anyway?

CLAY-BOY
I was hoping he could give me a ride in his truck.

EP
Where’s your daddy, boy?

CLAY-BOY
He’s coming home from Waynesboro.

EP
Your daddy’s not home yet on Christmas Eve? I got a pretty good idea where he is. I heard of a poker game over to that old colored church. I headed over there earlier but the road’s too bad. I’d of been mired up to the axle before I went a hundred foot. I just gotta let them play tonight. I ain’t walking anywhere through this snow.

(EP turns and begins to walk away.)

CLAY-BOY
Sheriff?
EP
What is it?

CLAY-BOY
You going to Lovingston?

EP
Going right now.

CLAY-BOY
You’ll be going by that church on your way.

EP
By the road to it.

CLAY-BOY
You wouldn’t give me a ride, would you?

EP
You figuring to get mixed up with a poker game?

CLAY-BOY
No, sir.

EP
It’s against the law for me to carry riders. You asking me to break the law, son?

CLAY-BOY
No, sir.

EP
Well, you watch out what you ask people to do. You got that?

CLAY-BOY
Yes, sir.

(Ep turns and begins to walk away.)

CLAY-BOY
Merry Christmas, Mr. Bridges.
EP
(Stopping.) What’d you say, boy?

CLAY-BOY
I said, Merry Christmas.

EP
Yeah, Merry Christmas. Oh, what the hell. It’s Christmas. Come on and get in the car. I’ll carry you to the church. I ain’t taking you up that road, though. You’re going to have to walk.

CLAY-BOY
I’m much obliged for the lift, Mr. Bridges.

(EP exits.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
The First Abyssinian Baptist Church was a half a mile up a dirt road. I trudged through dark and the drifts of snow, not really knowing if I was on the road or not. Finally there was a light. I had found the poker game. I figured my father was there, laughing and joking and risking the paycheck that we needed at home.

I stamped the snow off my boots and opened the door to the church.

Instead of five drunken men sitting around a table playing cards, ten rows of startled black church goers turned to see who was interrupting their Christmas Eve service. I stood there frozen. I saw in their eyes a wave of resentment moving toward anger. I had no right to be there. I was a white man that might be here bent on some kind of mischief. I had no right.

CLAY-BOY
I… I’m sorry. I thought… I didn’t mean to…

(Hawthorne Dooly, a tall black men in a dark suit steps forward.)

DOOLY
Clay-Boy? Clay-Boy, what you doing out here on a night like this?
CLAY-BOY

Hawthorne?

DOOLY

*(Speaking to his congregation.)* Everybody, this is Clay-Boy Spencer, Clay Spencer’s oldest. Y’all remember Clay’s the man who helped us put this new roof on the church last year, got that tin from over in Waynesboro. Did you know that, Clay-Boy? Your daddy’s been real helpful over the years.

I didn’t know.

DOOLY

What you doing out here?

CLAY-BOY

I got lost.

DOOLY

You got lost? Well, why don’t you find a seat right here. We’re just finishing up our service.

CLAY-BOY

Yes, sir.

DOOLY

We were just remembering how the shepherds and the wise men came to glorify the little baby Jesus. The scene in the stable and Jesus in his bed of straw in the manger. Let us all close our eyes and remember.

*(He closes his eyes and after a moment he begins to sing. NOTE: Another traditional Christmas song may be substituted)*

Oh holy night! The stars are brightly shining, It is the night of the dear Savior’s birth. Long lay the world in sin and error pining Till He appear’d and the soul felt its worth.

Etc…. *(The song ends.)*
DOOLY
Glory Hallelujah! We thank Thee Father for the Gift of Thy Son. Help us to be worthy of Thy sacrifice, and to walk in Thy light all the days of our lives. Amen.

Amen.

DOOLY
(To the congregation.) Merry Christmas, brothers and sisters. Merry Christmas. Goodnight, goodnight.

CLAY-BOY
I didn’t know you were a preacher.

DOOLY
I’m a farmer, Clay-Boy. I do this ‘cause I feel I just might be able to help some folks.

CLAY-BOY
I didn’t mean to interrupt your service. I didn’t think y’all would be here.

DOOLY
You didn’t think? It’s Christmas Eve, Clay-Boy. We’re going to celebrate Jesus just like everybody else. We all got the same God.

CLAY-BOY
I just didn’t think, Hawthorne. I’m sorry.

DOOLY
No need to be sorry. We were glad to have you with us. I expect you’re out this way looking for your daddy?

CLAY-BOY
I reckon so. Mama told me not to tell anyone, though.

DOOLY
He ain’t here tonight.
CLAY-BOY
No, sir.

DOOLY
Have you tried the Staples place?

CLAY-BOY
You think he’s with those two old lady bootleggers?

DOOLY
They ought to celebrate Christmas just like the rest of us.

CLAY-BOY
But Daddy ought to be home with us. He oughtn’t to be somewhere else.

DOOLY
You remember when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was?

CLAY-BOY
To love thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy strength.

DOOLY
And the second is like unto it. Love thy neighbor as thy self. Well, your daddy’s not a real strong church person. But that second commandment is something that’s part of him probably since he was born. He just naturally knows that there’s a little bit of God in all of us, like a scrap of heartwood smoldering that needs to be tended to so it’ll burn right.

CLAY-BOY
But doesn’t daddy come and play poker in your church? That’s not treating you right.

DOOLY
Some things seem to balance out in the end.

CLAY-BOY
Well, Daddy ought to be home with us tonight.
DOOLY
Yes, he ought to be. If I was you, I’d go look for him at the Staples ladies’ house.

CLAY-BOY
I don’t know if I can get there, Hawthorne. It’s so far out.

DOOLY
It ain’t that far if you got transportation. You come and ride on General with me.

CLAY-BOY
You got your old mule out here tonight?

DOOLY
How am I going to get around without him, son? You come ride with me. Look. The snow’s stopped. There’s even a star out.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
We could have been two of the wise men hurrying after the star of Bethlehem.

(Miss Emma Staples enters. She wears a plain black woollen dress.)

EMMA
Hurry along, Etta.

ETTA
(Off.) I’m almost ready, Emma.

EMMA
You remembered to take off your overalls and put on a dress?

ETTA
(Off.) Of course I did.

EMMA
It is Christmas Eve.

ETTA
(Off.) I know, sister.
EMMA
You had forgotten. You would have gone to bed without even thinking about Christmas if I hadn’t reminded you.

ETTA
(Off.) That’s nonsense. I love Christmas. So many memories.
(Miss Etta Staples enters. She is dressed in a lavender silk dress.)

EMMA
My, Etta! You could win a beauty contest.

ETTA
You look nice, too.

EMMA
It’s a shame I’m the only one that’s going to see you in your finery.

ETTA
Ashley Longworth might come by.

EMMA
There’s always a chance, I suppose.

ETTA
I believe he’s dead, sister. Where’s the crèche?

EMMA
It’s on the table ready for you to set up.

ETTA
This is so exciting. I feel just like when we were little.

EMMA
If only Papa was still alive. I miss him so on these special occasions.

ETTA
Isn’t that the dress you bought to wear to his funeral?
EMMA
It’s the prettiest dress I have. No sense in letting it just hang there in the closet.

ETTA
It does suit you, Emma. Sister, is that my brooch you’re wearing?

EMMA
No, sister, it’s mine. Papa gave it to me.

ETTA
(Speaking in unison.) …to me. (Pause. They stare at each other. Then Etta turns away.) Do you think everyone got enough recipe for the Christmas celebrations?

EMMA
Well, if they didn’t, it’s mighty late and the snow’s too deep for people to be travelling abroad.

ETTA
Is it snowing?

EMMA
Put the manger there, yes, that’s where Papa liked it.

ETTA
I thought I might try a different place.

EMMA
No, it goes there.

ETTA
Well, I guess I’ll put it there then.

EMMA
Thank you.

(There is a knock on the door.)

ETTA
Good heavens!
Now who could that be?  

Someone run out of recipe.

(Calling through the door.) Who is it?

(Off.) Clay-Boy Spencer.


Why, you’re just caked with snow. It’s been snowing, Emma.

You look frozen to death. Come by the fire and warm yourself. Etta, this boy is frozen through and through.

Why, that’s your daddy’s jacket you’re wearing. It fits you just like it’s yours.

Take off your shoes, Clay-Boy, and let them dry while you visit. Etta, bring some of that eggnog and put some recipe in it.

Don’t go to any trouble. I can’t stay but a minute.

Nonsense. Take off those wet socks before you come down with lung trouble. They’re soaking wet. It’s a wonder you haven’t got frostbite. You sit down and wait right here. Put your feet up by the fire.
CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

EMMA
Doesn’t that feel better now?

CLAY-BOY
I thought my daddy might be here.

ETTA
Here we go. This will warm you up. There’s cinnamon on the top. And just a pinch of nutmeg. Go on. Drink it. It’ll warm you from the inside.

EMMA
It’s Papa’s recipe. Papa used to make it all the time and then when he passed on we used to get so many calls for it that Sister and I just kept on making it. Drink hearty. There’s plenty.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

ETTA
We had a gentleman stop in last week all the way from Fauquier County. He loved it so he took a whole gallon back home with him. People come from all over Virginia to see us.

EMMA
It gives us something to do in our old age and makes people happy, so I can’t see why we shouldn’t keep right on providing. Etta, help Clay-Boy with another cup.

CLAY-BOY
It’s powerful good.

ETTA
It is, it surely is.
EMMA
How are your mother and all those dear children?

CLAY-BOY
Everybody’s fine.

EMMA
Your father never comes here but what he says for us to come over and visit. But we never seem to get out any more.

ETTA
We’re getting old, hard to get around when you’re old.

EMMA
You’re daddy says you make good grades at school.

CLAY-BOY
He tells you that? I didn’t think he cared.

EMMA
What are you going to do with your life?

CLAY-BOY
I don’t know yet.

EMMA
What do you want to do with it?

CLAY-BOY
They seem to think real high of daddy over where he works. He says they’ll put me on over there if I learn a trade.

EMMA
Are you interested in taking up a trade?

CLAY-BOY
None that I know of.

EMMA
If you had your choice, what would you be?
CLAY-BOY
Well… I never have told this to anybody. You know those Big Five tablets, like you do homework in? Well, I keep one under my mattress. I write in it, stories, things I can’t talk about, only write them.

EMMA
You want to be a writer. You might ought to take up writing as a profession.

CLAY-BOY
I think I could be one. But I never could provide for a family or make a living.

ETTA
I keep my letters.

EMMA
Under her mattress.

ETTA
From my beaux. And now that I know you’ve been snooping, I’m going to hide them somewhere else.

EMMA
From her beaux. Way she tells it you’d think she had a regular Hallelujah chorus lined up at the gate.

ETTA
I wonder whatever happened to Ashley Longworth. I never told you this, Emma, but Ashley kissed me once.

EMMA
If you told me once, you told me a thousand times.

ETTA
He was a student at the University, don’t you know. He like hunting and fishing and Papa gave him permission to go on our land. Ashley just got to be a regular fixture out here every weekend. On my twenty-fifth birthday, October 19, 1892, he asked me to go for a walk. The woods were on fire with color and there was a little breeze. A little shower of leaves fell around us. Ashley reached up very impulsively and touched my cheek. That’s when he kissed me.
EMMA
Having no idea Papa was standing a hundred feet away.

ETTA
Papa was very upset. I heard from Ashley once, a farewell letter, then nothing. I think he must have died in one of the wars.

EMMA
We ought to sing a Christmas carol. Papa’s favorite was It Came Upon A Midnight Clear. Do you know that one, Clay-Boy?

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

EMMA
Let’s all sing.

*(They sing a carol. After the first verse, they break off.)*

ETTA
The nice thing about life is you never know when there’s going to be a party. Your father is such a kind man to bring us a little joy now and then. It can’t be much fun for him to entertain two old ladies. He surely does have a splendid voice.

EMMA
There wouldn’t have been much of a party if Clay-Boy Spencer hadn’t taken it in mind to stop in.

ETTA
Let’s sing another carol.

EMMA
I expect Clay-Boy’s got to be getting home. It’s almost Christmas.
CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am, I do.

(He begins to put his socks and shoes on.)

ETTA
Why, with all that snow, you’ll never get home walking, unless Santa Claus comes and gives you a lift.

CLAY-BOY
I certainly appreciate everything you ladies have done for me tonight.

(Miss Etta goes and whispers something in Miss Emma’s ear.)

ETTA
Excuse my bad manners. But we’ve arranged a little surprise for you.

(Miss Etta exits.)

EMMA
I know you didn’t come out here tonight to have a party with two old spinster ladies. You came looking for your daddy, didn’t you.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

EMMA
He’s a very special man, your daddy. Takes care of people the way he knows how.

CLAY-BOY
Do you know where he is? He hasn’t come home.

EMMA
I don’t know where he is. But I know one thing. This is Christmas Eve and wherever he is, he’s trying his damnedest to get back home to his family. That’s one thing sure. And if he had come here, we’d have sent him off home just as fast as we could.

(Miss Etta enters, dressed warmly for the outside.)
CLAY-BOY
I really need to be going.

ETTA
Oh, you’ll be home before you know it. Wouldn’t you like one more eggnog for the road?

CLAY-BOY
I think I had just enough.

ETTA
It does make you feel good.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

ETTA
Now, come along.
(There’s a jingle of bells.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY
Outside, I drew in my breath at the magic landscape. The snow had stopped and the sky was a deep blue without a cloud in sight. The full moon shone on an expanse of virgin snow.
(They cross to some chairs.)

ETTA
It’s Papa’s sleigh.

EMMA
We’ve kept it dusted and polished all these years, just waiting for an occasion. Thank you for this wonderful evening, Clay-Boy. Hurry up, get in before Lady Esther falls asleep again.
(They sit down and wrap themselves in a lap robe. The sleigh bells jingle.)

EMMA
Gee hup, Lady Ester. Gee hup.
ADULT CLAY-BOY
The old black mare moved forward through the snow, and once she realized how easily the sleigh flowed behind her, she broke into a lively canter.

ETTA
Oh my! Isn’t this a treat, sister.

EMMA
Indeed it is. Indeed it is.

ADULT CLAY-BOY
Each turning of the road brought a new white landscape that sparkled in the moonlight.

EMMA
I haven’t had so much fun since I can remember. Don’t worry, Clay-Boy. Your daddy will be home when you get there. I promise you that.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, ma’am.

(Lights come up on the kitchen. Sleigh bells are ringing softly. Olivia and Becky enter.)

BECKY
Is it Santa Claus?

(They are looking out the window.)

OLIVIA
It’s Clay-Boy.

BECKY
Clay-Boy?

OLIVIA
It should’ve been your daddy. Clay-Boy should’ve found your daddy.
BECKY
Why ain’t daddy coming home tonight?

OLIVIA
I don’t know, Becky.

BECKY
Where is he, mama?

(Clay-Boy enters carrying a big Mason jar.)

CLAY-BOY
Is daddy home yet?

BECKY
No, he’s not home yet.

OLIVIA
Who was that let you off at the gate?

CLAY-BOY
It was Miss Emma and Miss Etta. They sent this. Said it was Christmas cheer.

OLIVIA
It’s bootleg whiskey is what it is.

CLAY-BOY
What do you want me to do with it, mama?

OLIVIA
I don’t care.

CLAY-BOY
I’ll just rest it here for now. Don’t you use it for frosting on your applesauce cakes?

OLIVIA
The turkey’s done and getting cold. Why’d I bother to cook it when your daddy’s not coming home?
CLAY-BOY
He’s coming, mama.

OLIVIA
Somebody tell you that? One of those old spinster ladies?

CLAY-BOY
Wherever he is, he’s trying to get here.

OLIVIA
Well, he might ought to try a little harder. And sometimes trying just ain’t
good enough. Now you two go on and get to bed. All the others are asleep.

CLAY-BOY
I’ll wait up a little longer, mama.

BECKY
I’m going to go up. I’m not sitting around any longer for someone who ain’t
likely to come.

(Becky exits.)

CLAY-BOY
Daddy might not of been able to get out of Waynesboro. Or maybe his bus
skidded off the road.

OLIVIA
I don’t know, son. I can’t think about things like that. I don’t know anymore.
You go on up to bed.

CLAY-BOY
I’ll go up and lay down, but I’ll keep my clothes on in case word comes.

OLIVIA
No one changed for bed tonight. We’ve all been waiting.

CLAY-BOY
Goodnight, mama.
OLIVIA

Goodnight, Clay-boy.

CLAY-BOY

Merry Christmas.

OLIVIA

Yes, merry Christmas.

(Suddenly a huge racket and shouting is heard outside and on the roof.)

CLAY

(Off.) Hey, you old fool. Get off that roof. You there. Stop right where you are.

CLAY-BOY

What in God’s name is it?

OLIVIA

It sounds like your daddy, but I don’t know.

CLAY

(Off.) Damn you, don’t you try to get away. Come back here.

(Noises of a struggle off stage continue. The children rush into the kitchen.)

CLAY

You there. Don’t you touch that house. Git.

CHILDREN


(The door flies open. Clay Spencer stands there half-frozen, his arms overflowing with bundles.)

OLIVIA

Clay Spencer, where have you been. I’ve been worried sick about you.

( Olivia buries her face in her hands.)
Mama, don’t cry. He’s home.

(CLay puts his bundles down on the table, kneels on the floor, and takes the children in his arms.)

Daddy, daddy, daddy, etc.

Yes, yes, yes…

(After a minute he rises and goes to Olivia. He kisses her tenderly on the cheek. Then he picks her up and dances about the kitchen shouting joyously.)

God, what a woman I married!

Put me down, you old fool. Put me down.

(He finally puts her down and Olivia adjusts her clothes in mock annoyance.)

Where in the world have you been?

I missed the last bus out of Charlottesville, so I had to hitchhike to Hickory Creek. From there it was every blessed step of the way on foot.

Well, you must be nearly frozen. I’ve kept some coffee warm.

What’s in them bundles, daddy?

Beats the tar out of me.
SHIRLEY
Where’d they come from?

CLAY
Well, I’ll tell you. I was coming up the walk, knowing you kids were asleep, trying not to make a noise. All of a sudden something come flying across the sky and landed right on top of the house.

JOHN
We heard it.

MARK
Yeah, we did.

CLAY
Well, I looked up and there was a team of some kind of animals about the size of a year-old calf. Something kind of pointy on their heads.

PATTIE-CAKE
Reindeer!

LUKE
Yeah, reindeer.

CLAY
I never saw one, but that’s what it was all right. It kind of stopped me in my tracks. Then first thing I see, this old son-of-a-gun jumped out, all dressed up in black boots and a red suit trimmed with white fur.

JOHN
Santa Claus!

CLAY
I never laid eyes on the old coot before. Didn’t know who he was. I just thought it was somebody trying to break into the house, so I picked up the biggest rock I could find, and…

LUKE
You hit him with a rock?
CLAY
Not exactly, but I scared him so that the sleigh started slipping off the roof and landed right there in the backyard. The old man started cracking his whip and called for them reindeer to take off. But I caught up with him just before that sleigh left the ground.

MARK
You talked to Santa Claus?

CLAY
No, but I wrassled him and just before he got away, I grabbed a big armful of stuff from the sleigh.

MARK
You think he brought me a baseball glove?

MATT
All this came from the sleigh?

CLAY
Right there on the table.

PATTIE-CAKE
(To Becky.) You see, Becky. He is real.

BECKY
You’re right, honey. You’re double-durned right.

PATTIE-CAKE
Which one is mine?

CLAY
Try that one there.

(All freeze in a tableau. Clay-Boy stands slightly apart. Becky also has separated herself from the group.)
Shrieks of joy filled the room as Pattie-Cake found a brand new golden-haired doll that cried and opened and closed its eyes. There was no piano, but John found a pair of ice skates. Luke got a genuine baseball glove and Mark an authentic Jimmie Foxx Philadelphia A’s cap. Shirley opened her illustrated copy of Heidi and began to read immediately. For Matt there was a battery crystal radio set that he could listen to whenever he wanted. And there were monkeys that magically climbed up strings, teddy bears with soft fur and button noses, jumping jacks, jack-knives, bouncing balls that jingled, banks in the form of mules that kicked when a penny was inserted, and nuts and candies.

(Clay crosses to Becky.)

CLAY
Hey, girl. How’s my favorite crackerjack?

BECKY
Fine.

CLAY
Something wrong?

BECKY
No. Nothing’s wrong.

CLAY
Let me see that glorious smile.

BECKY
I didn’t think you were coming back home.

CLAY
No snowstorm’s big enough to keep me away from my girl.

BECKY
I didn’t think you wanted to come. I didn’t think you cared about us.

CLAY
Well I can prove how bad I wanted to be home. Here’s something special for you.

(He gives her a big hug and then holds out a small box.)
To go with that full-length mink coat I been promising you.

*(She opens the box and find a pair of cut-glass earrings.)*

BECKY

Oh, daddy. Real diamond earrings.

CLAY

They’re real Woolworth’s diamonds.

BECKY

I bet you got them at Keller and George on Main Street in Charlottesville.

MATT

I reckon you might take off them overalls and put on a dress now you got earrings.

BECKY

Maybe after I give you a fat lip.

CLAY

Livy, this one must be for you.

OLIVIA

What in the world could it be?

CLAY

You been wishing for springtime.

*(He hands her a package. She opens it gently, finding a flower pot containing three hyacinths.)*

OLIVIA

Oh, Clay.

*(The actors again freeze in a tableau. Except Clay and Clay-Boy.)*

CLAY

Clay-Boy.
CLAY-BOY
I don’t need a present, daddy.

CLAY
You’re all grown out of Santa Claus, I reckon.

CLAY-BOY
Yes, sir.

CLAY
Grown men like us got more things on their minds, don’t we. Providing for the family…

CLAY-BOY
Yes, sir.

CLAY
Well, son… I got you something anyway.
(Clay hands Clay-Boy a package.)

CLAY
Go on.

CLAY-BOY
I didn’t need a present.

CLAY
I know you didn’t. But you might like it.
(Clay-Boy opens the package finding a stack of writing paper a fountain pen and a jar of ink.)

CLAY-BOY
Writing paper and a brand new fountain pen.

CLAY
And some writing ink. I wonder how news got all the way to the North Pole that you wanted to be a writer.

CLAY-BOY
Daddy… I guess he’s a right smart man, Santa is.
CLAY
I don’t know a thing about the writing trade, Clay-Boy, but you just give her all you got and I believe…

PATTIE-CAKE
You didn’t get nothing, daddy.

CLAY
Sweetheart, I’ve got Christmas every day of my life. Just look around…

OLIVIA
All right everybody. I see some sleepy children. Off to bed now. You can play in the morning.

CLAY
Bed time.

(With only a few objections, the children file off to bed.)

OLIVIA
You must have spent every cent of the paycheck.

CLAY
Just about.

OLIVIA
What are we going to live on this coming week?

CLAY
Oh, woman, my wife. We’ve got love, woman. Love. Everything we need.

(He embraces her warmly. They stand that way as the children begin to say goodnight.)

BECKY

LUKE
(Off.) Goodnight, Becky, goodnight, Pattie-Cake.
PATTIE-CAKE

(Off.) Goodnight, John…

(All the children start to say goodnight to each other. They stop as Adult Clay-Boy begins to speak.)

ADULT CLAY-BOY

On Christmas Eve 1933, my father was late arriving home. That is fact. And it is fact that I did become a writer. I still use the fountain pen he gave me. My journey has taken me far from Nelson County but there is not a night that I don’t travel in my mind those back roads and misted blue mountains and hear again those sweet voices.

(There is a moment of silence before the children begin to say goodnight to each other again.)

BECKY

Goodnight, Clay-Boy.

CLAY-BOY

Goodnight, Becky.

CLAY

(Loudly, ending the ritual.) Goodnight, everybody.

(All is quiet.)

And merry Christmas.

ADULT CLAY-BOY

Merry Christmas.

(Lights fade to black.)

END OF PLAY