

Copyright © 2007. Anne Phelan. Sample. **LET NOTHING YOU DISMAY:** A Play in Two Acts. N.B. A earlier version of this play was known as “Creche Scenes.” For scripts and production rights, contact anne@annephelan.com.

Characters:

Pete (also plays Fr. Joe, Jesus Guy)	20s/30s
Bruce (also plays Lion, Altar Boy)	30s
Alice (also plays Church-goer)	40s/early 50s, dressed for a Christmas party: jewelry that looks like Christmas tree ornaments, red and green clothing; well-tanned and looks if not wealthy, quite comfortable and suburban
Dan (also plays Lion, Church-goer)	20s
Monica	30’s or 40’s; it’s hard to tell; washed out- no color in her skin face; wears bright colors which wear her, making her look even more washed out
Julie (also plays Ellen, Tanya, Church-goer)	30s/40s
Stacey (also plays Churchgoer)	30s/40s

The play takes place in the present, this or last Christmas Day.

If doubling, PETER can also play DAN, and MONICA can also play STACEY.

An earlier draft was read in the Play Lab at the Eleventh Annual (Edward Albee) Last Frontier Theatre Conference in Valdez, Alaska in June 2003. The cast was Alan Goy, Sarah Mitchell, Teri Ralston, Nick Sholley, Carl Thelin and Sara Waisanen.

A previous version of this play was performed as a showcase at The Producer’s Club, New York City, December 1998, produced by Spirit Productions. Meganne George designed the set and costumes. Rychard Curtiss designed the lights. The music was by Douglas Wagner. The cast included Sharon Beard, Jeff Biehl, Patti Booth, Kevin Brown, James Robinson, Claire Schafer and Kirsten Walsh. The play was directed by M.L. Kinney.

“Dog” was first produced as a solo piece by the Abingdon Theatre Company at The Producer’s Club in December 1996. It was directed by Chris Brady.

Act One

Scene One: Pete's Christmas Story

(ALL the actors are shopping- THEY're at a supermarket on Christmas Day. The lighting is harsh, suggesting fluorescents, and canned music plays "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" or something of that ilk. PETE has a six pack of cheap beer in a shopping basket. BRUCE holds a shopping basket with a frozen turkey dinner in it. ALICE pushes a shopping cart that holds a box of Melba toast rounds. DAN has two Advent calendars shoved in the back of his pants. MONICA has a shopping cart with a six pack of Ensure®. JULIE has an angel made out of fiber optic strands with a big "On Sale" tag on it in her shopping basket, and STACEY holds a can of *pate de fois gras*. A baby doll lies down center)

PETE:

(As the lights start to change, HE looks out at the audience and holds up HIS six pack)

It's the Boy Scout motto: Be prepared. So what if they threw me out of the Cub Scout den?

(JULIE exits as the other actors move upstage. PETE takes a beer from the six-pack and opens it, takes a drink. BRUCE crosses upstage left and DAN crosses upstage right. THEY are playing the two lions in front of the New York Public Library. For the holidays, they wear green wreathes around their necks. PETE cases the joint. HE picks up the babydoll off the stage and stuffs it under his coat. HE looks for some place to put it. PETE crosses up to the stage left lion, and puts the doll in its paws. HE crosses back downstage)

I work by Grand Central Station. Unless you're connected to the U.N. or a little old lady who shops at Lord and Taylor, the neighborhood has nothing to it. It's all expensive suits. If you dress like me, they look right through you. I play a game. If I get on the elevator with one of them, I try to figure out how much what they're wearing set them back. Multiply that by a five day work week and you get some fraction of how much they pull down a year. It's got to be a couple hundred grand or a trust fund for most of them. These aren't people who haunt sample sales.

(HE drinks his beer)

PETE (CONTD.):

I know it isn't Grand Central Station- I can hear my dad's voice in my head saying, "It's a terminal. It's Grand Central Terminal. Only stupid people call it a station." He's right, but so what? Grand Central Station used to be cool. Barracini's, the candy store, was great. They had Empire State buildings a foot high. Solid chocolate. And then some suit decided that what they really needed was a mall with a food court. He didn't care that people move to New York to get away from malls.

I don't like working the late shift on Fridays- it interferes with my drinking. Everyone should have a hobby. You'd never think how difficult it is for me to keep this one up. My main bar on the West Side got Disney-fied. The next two got pulled down so some real estate guy could build luxury condos in Hell's Kitchen. By the time you get to Christmas Eve, it's pretty pointless. I mean, the Value Drug where I buy cigarettes starts selling Christmas cards in October. *Au Bon Pain* replaces their loop tape of "The Four Seasons" on November 1 with Christmas carols. I just want Christmas over by the time it gets here. Why do people say it's for kids? Because of the Baby Jesus? Because kids can be greedy and cry if they don't get what they want and it's OK because you can say they're just kids? The rest of us have to keep pretending we love the scarf from Aunt Rose. Even though you barely made the rent this month, you can never ask for what you need.

(ELLEN enters, carrying a book. SHE goes to PETE, throws her arms around him, nuzzles his ear. HE giggles. SHE reads)

Ellen's not really my girlfriend- I call her that for brevity. She's until-something-better-comes-along. She's much more into me than I am into her. I know guys are always supposed to say that- at least that's what the women at work tell me. But she is. She lives in this totally beat walk up building in the East 40's. If there's one guy pissing against a car on that block, he's in front of her building. The apartment was her great aunt's, so of course the rent's like 250 a month. She can never afford to move. It smells like a great aunt- mothballs and stale perfume. I imagine the aunt had a double life. She was a clerk at the U.N. by day, a madam by night.

(ELLEN is not amused)

She ran girls out of the building so the diplomats could bop in for a quickie during lunch. She was dead by the time I met Ellen.

PETE (CONTD.):

The church by Grand Central is St. Agnes. She's the saint who always has the sheep. They do some good stuff. But they're also a major Operation Rescue outpost. You know, I think maybe they're right- I think abortion probably is wrong a lot of the time. But the way they terrorize people and feel smug about being good Catholics- it makes me want to vomit.

When we were kids, we used to fill balloons with bleach so when they burst they'd ruin your clothes. And I'd think if I could just get the pastor. Imagine a bleach balloon popping on the pastor's nice black suit. He's the one who rounds up those annoying people to say the Rosary in the subway on Thursdays during the rush hour. What are they praying for, anyhow? The rats? The M.T.A.? So I'm walking to the post office on Christmas Eve to mail a card to my old Cousin Heinie- he's in a home and nobody pays any attention to him. And I've got to walk past St. Agnes. They've got a *crèche* out- shepherds and a sheep and Mary and Joseph. But the Baby Jesus is in the manger already. Even though it's lunch time Christmas Eve. St. Agnes is just as bad as *Au Bon Pain*. And being New York, Baby Jesus is wired- thick black wire is tying him to the manger. Baby Jesus in bondage.

Ellen's parents can't stand me. She's meeting them at JFK to fly to Ireland. The whole family's rented a castle. They're the kind of people who always say something's "just family" if they can. All holidays, for starters. It's not like they couldn't find room for me in a fuckin' castle. And Ellen does exactly what they tell her half the time. It's like she can't see they totally dominate her. Or she doesn't care.

Christmas Eve, I pull the late shift- all my co-workers suddenly have to leave town. And Ellen's got some party to go to which I want to miss anyhow, so I stay.

(ELLEN exits)

I go over to O'Neill's for a couple beers. I start thinking about Ellen's kitchen. How there's a drawer full of tools by the window. And how I know there's a big, bad set of wire cutters in there. Once I get to Ellen's, she's finished packing. She goes to bed because she's getting up at four to make the plane. I can't sleep. So I dig out the wire cutters. They look pretty sharp. They've got that nice thick rubber on the handle. The last time it wasn't me- I was just along for the ride. We had a living *crèche* on Christmas Eve, out in Port Washington. Somebody got keys to where the donkey was and we kind of liberated him. He wandered

PETE (CONTD.):

around town all night, braying. I know he could have been hit by a car or something, but it was funny. And nobody ever figured out who did it.

It's only a block to St. Agnes. There's nobody around to stop me, not even a Christmas rat. The wire cutters work perfectly. What I can't figure out is where Baby Jesus wants to go. The point isn't just to free him- I mean, I don't want to take him home with me. Anyhow, Ellen would make me put him back. And I don't want to put him on the top of the Chrysler Building like some dumb ass frat boy would. Maybe he would like to go to Grand Central. Baby Jesus is heavier than I thought. And it's hard to carry him and try to cover him with my coat. I mean, if I do run into somebody and I'm just flashing him around, they're going to know he's the birthday boy. The main entrance on 42nd Street's too much of a risk- that's like defying somebody to see me. I can't get into the station- they lock it up at two so bums can't sleep there. So I put him down on Lexington, at the side entrance.

He doesn't look right. It's like I'm putting him at the service entrance. It is his birthday, after all. So there's only one other place he can go. I get him on my back, and then put my coat on over him. So I look like the Hunchback of Murray Hill. I've got to do all these shimmys to get my arms into the coat sleeves and not drop him. I'm getting cold. Ellen's all warm, she's sleeping. She'd never think to do this- I mean, she wouldn't think there was a problem. She'd point at the *crèche*, and oo and ah, and walk away. So which of us does that make better? I don't have to wait for the light at 42nd Street. There's one old Buick dragging a tailpipe coming down the street, that's it. I see an old grandpa rat under the Park Avenue overpass. Maybe he's on his way to get a snack at Ranch One Chicken? Best fries in the City!

We get to the corner of Madison- that building is full of employment agencies. I ought to know, I've got applications in at every one. They never actually send me out on interviews. It just gives me the illusion that some day I might have a job that isn't so soul-crushingly dull. Baby Jesus' chin is digging into my shoulder blade. I rest his butt on the edge of the

PETE (CONTD.):

building and try to move him. Now his chin's on my spine. I push him up so the top of his head's sticking out of my coat- that's better. He's getting heavy. I'm freezing- my coat's buttoned but there are big gaps where the wind comes in. I only remember Manhattan's an island when the wind blows like this. There's a drunk in the middle of the sidewalk. Sees me and starts yelling something that sounds like: "Sanctuary!" He comes after me- he's trying to touch me. I can't run too fast or I'll drop Jesus. But the guy- he moves a lot faster than you'd think. I almost get to Fifth Avenue when he catches up with me. I don't know what he's going to do- he's scary. And then, he rubs my back. Like in the Middle Ages, you were supposed to rub a hunchback's hump for luck. Then he walks away. He's thrilled. I made his Christmas.

I cross Fifth Avenue so I'm at the bottom of the library steps. I just want to finish this. Go back to Ellen's and crash. The beer's wearing off and I can really feel the cold. I go to the nearest lion statue. The library puts wreathes around their necks for Christmas. But there's something about the way the wreathes lie on the lions' necks, they look like green life preservers. I lie down on the steps and unbutton my coat. Baby Jesus is in there, the drunk didn't hurt him. His halo's a little bent. I get the coat off him and on me. I pick him up and put him in the lion's paws. I was right: he's just the right size. I look over at the other lion. One's called Patience and the other's Fortitude but I'm never sure which is which. It's not like if you yell out "Patience," the right one will come over to you to get their tummy rubbed. But he looks fine in this lion's paws. I try to bend his halo back, but it's so cold I'm afraid the metal will snap, so I leave it. I start up to the corner, and look back at them- Baby Jesus and the lion. And you know, he looks pretty happy about the whole thing.

(DAN, playing the lion with the baby doll, takes BRUCE's wreath, and exits. PETE rejoins the shoppers as THEY animate, chugging HIS beer)

End of Scene One

Scene Two: Bruce's Porthole View

BRUCE:

(BRUCE comes downstage as DAN re-enters)

I, uh, don't really have Christmas dinner plans. I don't want to crash any of my friends' dinner, they'll want to know why I'm in town, and where ... There's no food in the apartment, so...

(The shoppers freeze)

I'm having nightmares about Captain Steubing. You know, from "The Love Boat." All the main characters are in my dream: Gopher and Isaac and Bernie Koppel the doctor and Lauren Tewes, the social director. The captain just looks like he did on the series, but he's really turned into Captain Queeg from "The Caine Mutiny." Somebody's stolen Isaac's special, secret *Mai Tai* formula, and the captain won't rest until he finds the culprit. It's like the strawberries in "The Caine Mutiny." Just when the captain's convinced I did it, and wants to make me walk the plank - I wake up, terrified. We read all this stuff before we picked this cruise, and there's this sort of Love Boat cult I found out about. Every Valentine's Day, four thousand couples renew their wedding vows on a replica of the boat. Like Moonies on the high seas, I guess. They're not anyone I'd like to have over for dinner. This cruise was supposed to be our combination tenth wedding anniversary/Christmas gift to each other. I love ocean liners, and I've never sailed on one. Just walked around them at the pier. And Cheryl badly needed a vacation. She's a lawyer with a big firm so they make her work these un-Godly hours. But she saved up her pitiful scraps of vacation time so that we could do this for Christmas. Just us. No family Christmas, no listening to my father recite the first ten lines of "A Child's Christmas in Wales" and not being able to remember the rest. No snide remarks from her mother about how Protestants don't really know how to celebrate holidays. Or her father making fun of my bow ties, and giving me one more ridiculous than the next each year. Last year was Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, and his nose really did light up. Christmas afternoon we drive up to Croton to see my family, and Christmas Eve we spend with hers.

The first time I met Cheryl's mother, I brought flowers. Perfectly acceptable flowers from a deli. Irises, maybe. And her mother went off! How she hated cut flowers because it meant

BRUCE (CONTD.):

putting them in water, and flower water was so disgusting it made her sick. She had given away all the vases so she couldn't have flowers in the house. Cheryl reamed her out, but her mother didn't care. So Cheryl wrapped the bottom of the flowers in a wet paper towel, and carried them like that all the way back home on the subway. She told me her mother has one flower in the house. Her parents went to Hong Kong, and stayed in some big hotel. There was a porter who'd sleep in the hall in front of each room. Her mother gave the porter a pair of underwear to take out to the laundry. The underwear came back, wrapped in tissue paper and ribbon, with an orchid on it. Cheryl's mother won't unwrap it. It'll be in the bottom of her bureau until the day she dies. That's her flower. Christmas Eve before we see her family is my favorite part. The city's quiet- most of the people you pass on the street say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" or at least "hello." Nobody rushes. It's like New York's been transformed into a town, if only for a day.

There's this quote from Forster- E.M. Forster, not C.S. Forrester, the guy who wrote the "Horatio Hornblower" books, although he's good if you're twelve. E.M. Forster says in some book, Howard's End maybe, that once two people get married a bell jar descends on them. I hadn't a clue what he meant until Cheryl married me. Then it made perfect sense. When you're just going out with someone, it's like, okay, there's the work me, the hanging out with the guys me and the girlfriend me. But once you're married, there's the marriage. I mean the rest of your life doesn't stop but the other things never meant as much to me. I'm not saying this right. What I meant is, if the marriage is okay, the rest of it's a helluva lot easier to deal with. If the marriage isn't going well, the rest is worse. Don't get the idea that we never fought, or disagreed. Strenuously. I could make Cheryl laugh; that meant a lot to me. The thing she thought was funniest I never meant to be. I've had this dream, ever since I was a kid and my parents took me to see Robert Shaw in the movie of "Treasure Island." I dream that I'm Jim Hawkins, the kid. And it's always the same scene, when he's in the barrel, terrified Long John Silver will discover him. It's me, though, in the barrel, trapped and scared to death that I'll be caught. Cheryl thought this was hysterical. She imagined me

BRUCE (CONTD.):

in my good suit and wing tips crammed into the barrel, and laughed for an hour.

(Crosses center. HE seems trapped)

They made me stay in the cabin. They didn't want me wandering around, looking morose in the sunshine. I don't think I'd add a lot to *Luau* Night, to be honest. They really didn't want me at meals, where someone might strike up a conversation with me. Afterwards, they had to

(Crosses back)

The purser told me this kind of thing happens a lot more than you'd think. He came in to talk to me a couple of times. It's not like they sent me to bed without any supper. All they did was feed me. I think they'd rather I were in a drunken stupor- they gave me two pristine bottles of Glenfiddich. I'd be more pliable that way. Like a dog at the vet after the first tranquilizer shot.

The City's changed a lot since I moved there in the early 90's. Back then, the *Times* was a real paper. More columns of type on each page. And New York City datelines- they got rid of them, too. Every day they'd print the schedule at the U.N.- the dateline was U.N., New York, and they'd tell you what was going on in the General Assembly. Implying that the U.N. was more important than movie gossip. And they printed the passenger ship schedules- the name of the boat, the destination and the pier it was leaving from. I loved that; I read it every week. But the ships got fewer and fewer, and finally they stopped printing schedules at all. I miss the elevator operators at Lord & Taylor's. I used to work in an office in the West 40's, where you could see the Hudson. When a liner passed, we'd all take a moment at the window. Everybody'd get real quiet while they watched it go by on its way up to the passenger terminal. I'd be jealous. I'd want to be the one on the Q.E.II. Sometimes I'd get goose bumps, and think how the Titanic never made it here. It was supposed to dock at a pier in the 20's, where the sound stage where they shoot "Law and Order" is now. Do Jesse Martin and Sam Waterston ever think about that? So now I am the one on the Q.E.II. It was supposed to be a happy trip. Romantic. The Q.E. II is the best ship still sailing. Christmas for adults. Beautiful stateroom. Plenty to do if we felt like it, which we probably

BRUCE (CONTD.):

wouldn't. We took the trip for the boat, not the sights. We met on a whale-watching ship. The one place Cheryl wanted to see was Dominica. Not the rain forest or the hot springs, but the beach. It has black sand. I thought it would just be hot, like asphalt. She said it would be like someone took black opals and crushed them, enough for a whole beach. She loves opals. They're her birthstone. She told me that on our first date.

Our table mates- they assign you to tables- certainly had healthy appetites. One guy couldn't make it through lunch without three entrees. The weather was a little rough the first two days, but yesterday I woke up and looked out of the porthole. The sea was like glass, like a smoked mirror behind a bar. I tried to wake up Cheryl, but I couldn't. I called the steward, who called the doctor, who was nothing like Bernie Koppel. He confirmed the worst. It was Christmas Eve and she was dead. Then, it was like this machine sprang into action. They took Cheryl's body away to do a preliminary autopsy. I wanted to come- I didn't want her to be alone with strangers. But the doctor said there was no room- the morgue only seats two. A stewardess came and packed up all our clothes. They moved me into another cabin, away from the center of the action. They re-did the seating plans for meals so that our table companions wouldn't wonder where we were. The autopsy results came back- she'd had a massive heart attack, even though she was only 35.

(Like an old-fashioned news reel announcer)

And the Q.E. II pulls out of Charlotte Amalie, on her way to Dominica.

The Christmas decorations were unbelievable. Fake snow looks really funny to me when it's 80 degrees. Every possible surface was festooned with ribbon, holly, pine roping, candles, twinkle lights, those white plastic reindeer, mistletoe, bells. They must have to put the ship in dry dock to un-decorate it.

(Crosses down stage)

Did you know that every passenger ship has coffins on it? One of the stewards was telling me. They plan some big event to distract the passengers- in our case it was Las Vegas Night. She - the boat- docked at Newport News and any passengers on deck were hustled off to their cabins. Part of the entertainment staff's job. And she took on caskets. Cheryl's in one of

BRUCE (CONTD.):

them now. She was in the deep freeze. Did they have a whole separate compartment, or was she next to the Ben and Jerry's? The steward said they're usually men who die on board. One last vacation with the wife for the golden wedding anniversary and bingo! But ten years- I don't know what ten years' symbol is. Copper? Small appliances? We actually got married in September, but I always wanted to propose on Christmas Eve. So when Cheryl came along, I did. She'd always thought it, too - that Christmas and engagements was perfect timing. That they somehow went together.

It's Christmas Day today. I feel like I have to tell her parents before I tell mine. I just can't. I can't find the right words. What I want to say is "She's dead and my life is over." That would be the truth, but it doesn't seem right to say it like that to her parents. I don't know a lot of married people our ... I mean my age where one of them's died. One guy I used to work with married this wonderful girl from Medford. They moved out to L.A. and had a little boy, and that bad flu that was going around five years ago? She got it and was dead in two days. I felt horrible for Doug, and it scared me. Two days? Unless you're in a car accident, who the hell dies in two days? This isn't medieval Europe, there's no pox or plague. AIDS doesn't kill that fast. I keep wondering what I could have done to lose my wife like this. Her grandmother lived to 87- that's 52 years Cheryl didn't get. Why is God punishing me like this? I took her for granted, I admit it. I don't like it, but I do. But everybody does that after awhile, don't they? Takes the person they love most for granted because they're always there? Habit, repetition does that. I did try. I never forgot her birthday. I finally stopped hassling her about leaving her shoes in a pile in front of the bedroom closet. And she would use every towel in the bathroom so there'd be no dry ones left for me.

Walking into our apartment without her.... My head feels like an over-inflated balloon. The least little bit more pressure and it will explode. All the loss has to go somewhere, and it's bigger than me. I can't contain it. I don't have kids to dote on as a substitute. It was just us. All I wanted, and all I had.

End of Scene Two