

**YET TO COME**

an original stage script

Thomas R. Klassen

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Notes: Elements of the play are based on the short story *Adaptation* by Connie Willis. The quotation in Scene Three is from Fra Giovanni (147?-151?).

**CHARACTERS** (in order of appearance)

Shoppers

Harold Grey - department store clerk, father of Gemma

Charlotte Minchin - department store clerk

Yet To Come - temporary help in department store

Mr. Voskins - department store supervisor

Gemma Anderson-Grey - daughter of Grey and Margaret

Margaret Anderson - Grey's ex-wife, mother of Gemma

Present - friend of Yet To Come

Mama Montoni - restaurant owner/waitress

Sir Spencer Siddon - businessman and best-selling author

Photographer

Jacob Marley

**SCENE ONE** - December 23rd - morning - Bookstore in a shopping mall

*[The curtain is already raised as the audience enters the theatre revealing a bookstore in a large urban shopping mall. In the forefront, off centre to the left, resembling an island is a sales desk with register and telephone. Extending right and offstage left are displays and shelves. These like a maze maximize the distance between two points. The displays near the front are smaller and lower. Displays for Christmas books and*

paraphernalia, including Dickens' **A Christmas Carol** are visible near the sales desk. To the right is wall along which books are stacked and a door that opens to an office/stockroom. Christmas decorations and seasonal music/muzak cannot mask the sterility of the lighting. SHOPPERS, of all ages and dress, wonder through the maze entering and departing from the left, some making purchases at the sales desk. GREY is serving SHOPPERS at the register. In his mid thirties, slim, of medium height and clean shaven; his light brown hair is never quite in place. He wears glasses; his eyes portraying intelligence. He has a shirt and tie on without a jacket. An odd, but not unpleasant, mix of eagerness and seriousness is his normal expression. MINCHIN is re-arranging displays beside the sales desk. She is in her late forties, stockily built with black hair with a dress, with a hair style that does little to hide her plain appearance. She wears thick glasses, sometimes staring a moment to fully arrest an image. She continually arranges and rearranges displays and materials moving languidly as though afraid of rapid motion.]

GREY [to MINCHIN when no SHOPPERS are nearby]. Two more days till Christmas.

MINCHIN [wearily]. I can hardly wait. My feet ache. It gets harder each year.

GREY [analytically]. People don't know what they want.

MINCHIN. I wonder if Voskins will hire help? I tell him every day. Someone in a Christmas costume I tell him.

GREY. Only two more days.

MINCHIN. In the Toy Store they get to dress up.

GREY [*softly*]. Yes, Gemma liked the costumes from *A Little Princess*. It's always been her favourite book.

MINCHIN [*touched*]. Will you see her at Christmas?

GREY. After work on Christmas Eve. She's spending the rest of Christmas vacation with Margaret in New York with Robert's family.

MINCHIN. I wish --

[VOSKINS *enters nearly at running speed from the left with YET TO COME following at a slower pace. VOSKINS is a small man in his fifties, portly, balding, wearing a suit. He is perpetually in rapid motion, speaks rapidly and has a short attention span. Although often using the words "I think", he does none of it. Not an unkind man, he appears uncaring by his brusque manner. YET TO COME wears black trousers, shirt and jacket and a black gown and hood. The part can be played by a man or woman who should be somewhat above average height and slim. The face, of*

*indeterminate age, is visible underneath the stylish hood, as is black hair. Other than the gown and hood nothing is out of the ordinary about YET TO COME.]*

VOSKINS [*interrupting*]. Miss Minchin, Mr. Grey, this is your new assistant over the holidays: the spirit of Christmas future. Harry, could you do the training?

[VOSKINS *disappears into the office/stockroom without waiting for a reply*]

MINCHIN [*upset*]. Well, at least he could have given me credit for the idea.

GREY. I'm Harold Grey, please call me Harry. This is Charlotte Minchin [*they shake hands*].

GREY. In Dickens' story the name is Spirit of Christmas Yet To Come. Let's call you that?

[YET TO COME *nods in agreement.*]

GREY: Let me show you round. There are two registers, this one and the one over there [*pointing offstage to the left*]. They're fully automated, the screens tell you what to do. Here's the Christmas section [*pointing*]. We have nineteen *Christmas Carol* books: Disney's *Christmas Carol*, the Muppets' *Christmas Carol*,

and the CuddlyWuddlys' version. Behind are the *Christmas Carol* cookbooks, games, jigsaw puzzles, cassette tapes, cd's and videos.

[*They wonder into the maze and then offstage left, as MINCHIN serves SHOPPERS at the sales desk*]

[*VOSKINS coming out of the office*]

VOSKINS [*hurriedly*]. Where's Harry?

MINCHIN. Showing Christmas, uh, what's-the-name around.

VOSKINS. No matter. [*picking up the telephone on the sales desk*] Can he call you back? [*barely waiting for a reply before hanging up; to MINCHIN*] Tell Harry to call his wife.

MINCHIN. Ex-wife.

VOSKINS. Whatever. Another thing. Promotions has arranged an author autographing tomorrow. Tell Harry.

MINCHIN. What time?

VOSKINS. I'm not sure. They'll let me know later today. Don't know who. I think it's a big name. Promotions says we are lucky to get him.

[VOSKINS *hurries back to the office/stockroom and MINCHIN serves another customer*]

GREY [*offstage left*]. That's about it. Although this is the book department you see that its really more and more games, toys, stuffed animals, videos and CD's. [GREY AND YET TO COME *walk back on stage*]. Too bad, I like books better, especially the classics. Fewer and fewer people read them though; everyone wants the updated, shortened, colourized versions instead. [YET TO COME *nods*] You know, this Christmas we've sold hundreds of *Christmas Carols*, yet only one copy of the original [*pointing to a shelf*]. And you know what else? I'm the one who bought it, to read it with Gemma on Christmas Eve. [YET TO COME *nods gravely*].

MINCHIN. Margaret called for you, she wants you to call back.

GREY. Thanks. I'm done with the tour.

MINCHIN [*to YET TO COME*]. Come let's clean up these shelves [*pointing left*] before lunch hour rush starts. I'll show you register when we get customers.

[GREY *dials the sales desk telephone*]

GREY. Margaret, I got your message *[clearly talking to an answering machine]* I'll be at the store all day. Talk to you soon. Bye, bye *[hangs up the telephone]*.

*[VOSKINS hurries out of the office/storeroom]*

VOSKINS *[excitedly]*. It's confirmed! The time is set! *[rushes off to the left]*.

*[GREY is confused, accepts this, and begins to straighten books. He does so in an almost caressing manner. As though books were people, or more accurately children. No SHOPPERS are on stage at this time]*

*[MARGARET and GEMMA enter. MARGARET is above average height for a woman. She has shoulder length brown hair. Her appearance has a kind of wholesome naturalness and beauty that is either totally real or the result of careful cosmetics. She is thirty one. Dressed in a stylish pant suit, she carries a bag of gifts in one hand and small briefcase in the other. GEMMA beside her is nine years old with long blonde hair. She is dressed in a white and blue dress. Her stylish glasses and manner of speaking make her mature for her age. She smiles seeing GREY.]*

MARGARET. There you are.



GREY [*neutral*]. Hi Margaret. [*to GEMMA, with joy*] Hi angel!  
[GREY scoops her up and twirls her around]

MARGARET. I need to speak to you. Gemma, go over to the children's clothing shop right across the bookstore - the one we just stopped at - and see if you can find a hairpin to match your Christmas dress. I'll be right there.

GEMMA [*excited, looking offstage left and clearly seeing YET TO COME*]. It's, it's, in the black, uh... from the *Christmas Carol*!

GREY [*smiling*]. Yes, Christmas Yet to Come, the real thing.

MARGARET. Gemma! Go find a hairpin. Red, to match the dress Robert gave you. [GEMMA looks at MARGARET, then GREY]

GREY. I'll come see you in minute to talk about Christmas Eve.

GEMMA [*seriously*]. You haven't forgotten about the Christmas cake?

GREY [*laughing*]. No I haven't. The dark kind.

GEMMA [*pleased*]. With icing!

[GEMMA leaves, smiling at both parents]

MARGARET [*matter of fact*]. I'm sorry you're so busy you can't come to the phone when I call.

GREY. What did you want to talk about?

MARGARET. Your daughter's welfare. Or are you too busy for that as well?

GREY [*carefully*]. What about her welfare?

MARGARET. She needs braces. The dentist says she's developing an overbite that will need correction. It will be expensive [*her voice dies away instantly and she waits*] Robert has offered to pay for the braces which is very generous of him. He thought you might object. Do you?

GREY [*quietly*]. No.

MARGARET. I told him you wouldn't care. All you care about is your books.

GREY [*instinctively*]. You know that's not true.

MARGARET [*angrily*]. Truth! The only truth that matters is reality. And the reality is that you quit a well paying career

to work here. And you did that to keep Gemma from having decent child support payments.

GREY [*tenderly*]. You know why I quit the accounting firm.

MARGARET [*derisively*]. Your truth [*reciting*]: That having lost me and Gemma you couldn't bear to do with without books; that books are your lifeline. [*with conviction*] Well that's your truth, but its not real. What is real it that over the past two years you've been caring less and less about Gemma.

GREY [*in louder voice, striking back*]. What *is* clear is that you're systematically trying to take my daughter away from me.

MARGARET [*self composed*]. I'm trying to raise Gemma. [*pauses*] There is one more thing.

GREY. Yes?

MARGARET. Christmas Eve won't work.

GREY [*blankly*]. What?

MARGARET. We need to leave earlier for New York. Robert's parents are having a friend of theirs over for dinner. She's an orthodontist and she's agreed to look at Gemma's overbite.

GREY [*without thinking*]. I... I'm to have Gemma on Christmas Eve.

MARGARET [*kindly*]. I know. That's why I came to tell you in person, so we can rework the schedule. We're leaving mid afternoon. You can have Gemma before that.

GREY. Christmas Eve is the busiest day here, I can't be away. Can't she see the orthodontist another time?

MARGARET [*clearly prepared*]. She's a busy woman. I don't want Gemma on a waiting list for weeks here. This will speed up everything as she'll get a referral. I'd rather see a dentist who is a friend of the family than someone I don't know. I don't trust dentists. They can tell you anything and you have no way of knowing if it's right. Women orthodontists are rare and I think it's important that Gemma see a woman dentist.

GREY [*almost to himself*]. I was counting on Gemma being with me on Christmas Eve.

MARGARET. We'll be back the day after New Year's. You can have her then.

GREY. I'm scheduled to work inventory that week.

MARGARET [*voice dying away*]. Of course. [*tired*] The next weekend then. Whatever you like.

GREY [*looks away, then sadly*]. That's fine. The usual arrangements. I'll go find Gemma to explain --

VOSKINS [*coming back from the right with stacks of flyers and posters; interrupting*]. Put these up immediately and hand them out. There's no time. [*thrusting the materials to GREY and absently giving a flyer to MARGARET, he goes into the office/stockroom*].

MARGARET [*reading the flyer*]. Special Christmas Eve autograph signing by Sir Spencer Siddon of his number one best-seller *Making Money Hand Over Fist*. [*to GREY*] I see you're too busy to say goodbye to Gemma now.

GREY [*looking directly at MARGARET; slow and threatening*]. I'm coming to wish my daughter a Merry Christmas.

[*MARGARET shrugs and exits left. GREY gently places the materials on the sales desk and follows her. Only SHOPPERS are on stage until MINCHIN and YET TO COME arrive and look at the posters and flyers.*]

MINCHIN. We'll need more help. It's going to be a zoo.

[VOSKINS *appears in an even greater hurry than normal*]

VOSKINS. The final details from Spencer's office and publisher:  
[*reading from a page*] Straight back chair without arms; wood  
table seventy centimetres high; two fountain pens; maximum two  
books per person; no paperbacks. [*looking up*] Where's Harry?  
He was just here. We need to restack.

MINCHIN. This is a lot of extra work, especially right now.  
We'll need help.

VOSKINS. I'll check to find the right chair and table. [to YET  
TO COME] Why don't you take early lunch with Harry when he  
appears. Miss Minchin and I will cover. No more than thirty  
minutes!

**SCENE TWO** - December 23 - just before noon - Mama Montoni's restaurant

*[Mama Montoni's Fine Dining Restaurant is misnomer; it is a dismal-looking fast food diner specialling in take-out meals. Everything is old, including the displayed sandwiches and pies. The decor is outdated, stained and blackened by cigarette smoke. On the right is a counter with stools and a door that leads to the kitchen. On the left is the main door beside which on grimy windows the words MAMA MONTONI'S are pasted and through which the street and skyscrapers can be glimpsed. In the centre are small tables, only one of which is occupied.]*

*CHRISTMAS PRESENT is an enormous man but not slow of motion. His mannerisms and voice are large and strong. He is wearing a full-length, heavy green coat with white fur trim, under which is a tan coloured sweatshirt, pants and sandals with thick grey socks. His beard, girth and likeable face make it difficult to discern his age.]*

*[GREY and YET TO COME enter with YET TO COME leading the way.]*

*PRESENT [in booming voice]. Come In! Come In!*

*[YET TO COME sits with PRESENT while GREY stands just inside the door].*

PRESENT [*to YET TO COME*]. No, he can't make it for lunch today. I'm afraid, neither of us got a position. [*to GREY in booming voice and gesturing*] Come, man, know me better.

GREY [*going over and shaking hands*]. How do you do? I'm Harry Grey. I followed your friend here for lunch.

PRESENT [*heartily*]. Delighted to meet you. Sit down, sit down. [*grasping one GREY's hand in both of his*]. You work together.

GREY. Yes.

PRESENT. Might you be hiring more staff?

GREY. I'm not sure. It's not my decision but it's possible for a few days over the holidays. There'll be an autographing tomorrow.

[*MAMA MONTONI enters from the kitchen with two plates of spaghetti and cutlery. She is in her late fifties, overweight and unkempt. She wears a white, none too clean, dress that is too small for her, a hair net and white shoes.*]

GREY. I'll have what they're having with a glass of water for here; and a tea, with sugar, to go. [*MONTONI makes no acknowledgement and disappears to the kitchen*] I didn't know



this place was here [*removes his coat and takes out a book from its pocket*].

PRESENT [*looking at the book*]. Ah, *A Christmas Carol*. An excellent choice of books.

GREY. I bought it to give to my daughter at Christmas and decided to read it again myself before giving it to her. [*quietly*] Now I won't be reading it with her at Christmas. [*changing topics*] I imagine it must be your favourite [*placing it on the table*].

PRESENT [*shaking his head*]. I prefer Mr. Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, so patient and cheerful in her imprisonment, and Trollope's *Barchester Towers*. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is also a favourite. I have always wondered if Edwin were truly dead, or if he could be brought to life again.

GREY. Do you read a good deal? It's rare I find someone who reads older authors, let alone Trollope.

PRESENT [*nodding*]. I find it helps pass the time, especially at this time of the year. [*theatrically*] When dark December glooms the day/And takes our autumn joys away. When short and scant the sunbeam throws/ Upon the early waste of snows/A cold and profitless regard... *Marmion* by Sir Walter Scott.

GREY. Fourth canto.

PRESENT [*beaming*] You are a reader too?!

GREY [*quietly*]. I find books a great comfort.

PRESENT. Tell me what you think of *A Christmas Carol*?

GREY. I think it's lasted all these years because people want to believe it could happen.

PRESENT. But you do not believe it? You do not believe a person might hear the truth and be changed by it?

GREY [*thoughtfully*]. I think Scrooge was easily reformed compared with the Scrooges I know.

PRESENT. You do not believe people change?

GREY [*slowly*]. There is a cost to change; few people pay the price.

PRESENT. What about the rewards?

GREY. The rewards are never as great as they seem.

[MONTONI comes in and slaps down a plate and glass of water in front of GREY, and a styrofoam cup to the side, then leaves for the kitchen. GREY begins to eat the spaghetti.]

PRESENT [*jovially*]. It is a pleasure to meet you Harold. I am the Spirit of Christmas Present.

GREY [*nearly laughing and trying to avoid choking on his food*]. Then you're missing your third. Where's Christmas Past?

PRESENT [*seriously*]. On the West Coast. He has been much corrupted by nostalgia and commercial interests.

GREY [*skeptically to both YET TO COME and PRESENT*]. You really believe you're the incarnation of Dickens' spirits?

PRESENT. No.

GREY [*incredulously*]. That you're really Christmas Present and [*looking at YET TO COME*] Christmas Yet to Come? That your mission is to reform misers and spread Christmas cheer? [*swinging his arm*]. Then why don't you do something? [*serious and increasingly bitter*] Use your magic powers. Help the needy. House the homeless. Reunite fathers with their children!

PRESENT. We have no such powers. We cannot change what is, or was. Our only power is to rebuke and to remind, to instruct and to forewarn.

GREY. Like books, which no one reads anymore.

PRESENT [*sadly*]. I fear we have fallen on hard times.

GREY. These should be good times; there are so many Scrooges to reform.

PRESENT. And so there are, but they are praised and rewarded for their greed, and much admired. [*sternly*] And they do not believe in spirits. They ascribe their visions to hormonal imbalances and Freud, and their therapists tell them they should feel no guilt, advising them to focus on themselves and look ever more deeply inward.

GREY. So what will you do?

PRESENT. Do? Why, man, there's nothing to do. Be ourselves; continue; believe.

GREY [*bitterly*]. As someone I know would say: We must look at the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.

PRESENT [*emphatically*]. The world is not the concern of individuals. Individuals are the concern of individuals.

GREY [*looking at his watch*]. I must go. Time's nearly up.

PRESENT. Time: our costliest expenditure.

GREY. What does that mean?

PRESENT. Why ask? You do not believe.

GREY. Don't misunderstand me. I'd like to believe. I'd like to see the world a better place and people happier, healthier, warmer and kinder.

PRESENT. What prevents you?

GREY. My eyes.

[MONTONI *comes back and slaps two bills down, and goes behind the counter. Harry leaves money, takes the unopened styrofoam cup and looks at his book still on the table*]

GREY [*suddenly, to MONTONI*]. I'm leaving the book as a tip. Excellent book! Very instructive.

[MONTONI *glares at GREY. GREY rises, as does YET TO COME*].

GREY [*to PRESENT*]. Good luck. It's been a pleasure.

PRESENT [*heartily*]. A delight, Harry. A true delight.

[*door slams as GREY and YET TO COME leave*]

**SCENE THREE** Christmas Eve - afternoon - Bookstore

[The bookstore is transformed. Photos of Sir Herbert Spencer and promotional materials for **Making Money Hand Over Fist** dominate. On the right are stacks of the book and along the wall are boxes of books. Behind the boxes along the wall past the door to the office/stockroom part of a table is visible. SHOPPERS are negotiating the maze of displays in the rear and right, some stopping to make purchases. MINCHIN and YET TO COME are engaged in stacking more books, PRESENT has a stack of paper in his hand. GREY arrives wearing a coat.]

GREY [holding a brown paper bag; to MINCHIN and YET TO COME]. How are things going? Miss Minchin, here is your tea. [to YET TO COME] Your sandwich. [to PRESENT, surprised] What are you doing here?

PRESENT [beaming]. We have found employment. I am your assistant for the afternoon. I am to hand out numbers for queueing up.

GREY [taking off his coat and storing it behind some boxes]. I can't imagine that many people will come. [suspiciously to PRESENT] You're not planning some sort of demonstration against Sir Spencer?

[PRESENT *shakes his head and* VOSKINS *appears from the office/stockroom*].

VOSKINS [to GREY]. Ah, you've met our new helper. I think we're all set. We're very lucky Sir Spencer could fit us in [he goes out to the left].

GREY [*ironically*]. Very lucky.

[SHOPPERS *arrive and line up in front of the table*. PRESENT *gives them slips of paper with numbers*.]

[SPENCER *arrives with a photographer in tow*. He is dressed in a three piece dark blue suit and red tie. Like the photos of his promotional materials he is immaculately manicured and trim, like a model. SPENCER *immediately settles down behind the boxes out of sight of the audience*. His voice is heard and the camera flashes occasionally.]

SPENCER [*cool authority*]. Christmas is an excellent time to think about the future. An excellent time to plan a financial strategy for the new year.

[The line of SHOPPERS *begins to move*. At the rear of the line is MARLEY. He is in his sixties, drawn and tired, dressed in an old-fashioned coat, trousers and hat. He carries a briefcase in



*one hand, attached to his wrist by a heavy chain. In his other hand is a copy of Spencer's book.]*

GREY [*upon seeing MARLEY; to himself*]. Jacob Marley! [*to PRESENT*] You're actually going to try to reform him? [*PRESENT nods*] Why?

PRESENT. It is our work.

GREY. You make it sound like a job.

PRESENT [*simply*]. In a sense it is. This is what we do.

GREY. If you're serious about improving the world why not try something with a better chance of actually working?

PRESENT [*intrigued*]. Such as?

GREY. Why not play Santa for the kids at a hospital? Why not help at a shelter? Buy lottery tickets and donate the winnings to charity. Steal from the rich and give to the poor?

[*frustrated*] I don't know. I do know you're wasting time with this little game.

PRESENT [*seriously*]. I assure you this is no game.

GREY. Then what is it? A way to get your kicks?

PRESENT. This gives us pleasure as any vocation should.

GREY [*gravely*]. You should find a better way of doing it then. I'm happy to accept that you think you're the spirits of Christmas or whatever. Hell, I've got to accept crazier notions like Margaret believing I don't care for Gemma. I just wish you'd do a more convincing job. You need a different approach, my friend. We've got books in the business section that can help you!

PRESENT [*thoughtful*]. Indeed. I have always found our results to be satisfactory.

[PRESENT and GREY watch MARLEY who has reached the table. The interaction of MARLEY and SPENCER is not visible.]

SPENCER. There are those who say that money isn't everything [*pause*]. It isn't everything! [*pause*] Money is the *only* thing.

[A few SHOPPERS applaud; MARLEY departs as additional SHOPPERS join the line]

GREY. I told you.

[YET TO COME *enters from the left holding hands with GEMMA. She is wearing a white and red dress and a red hairpin carrying a purse.*]

GREY [*surprised, delighted*]. Gemma! What are you doing here?

GEMMA. I wanted to tell you I'm sorry I can't come for Christmas.

[GEMMA *sits on a box of books and GREY on another. Her box is higher than his and hence they appear to be the same height. YET TO COME departs left, while PRESENT hands out more slips of paper to the SHOPPERS in line.*]

GREY. Where's your mother? You didn't come here alone did you?

GEMMA [*pleased*]. Mommy's up on third floor in the Toy Store. [*beaming*] I told her I'd changed my mind about wanting one. A bride doll with green eyes for my bed.

GREY. Did you tell her you were coming down to bookstore?

GEMMA. She told me to go look for another hair pin so I wouldn't see her buying the doll. [*sweetly*] I wanted to tell you I'd rather be with you at Christmas.

GREY [*touched and impressed*]. I love you. [*he takes her hand*]

GEMMA [*seriously*]. I think when I do come that we should pretend that it is Christmas Eve, like the little princess and Becky.

GREY. In *A Little Princess*?

GEMMA. Yes.

GREY. They pretended it was Christmas Eve?

GEMMA. No! When the little princess was cold or hungry or sad she pretended her room was a castle. The little princess pretended all sorts of things when she couldn't have what she wanted. So I think we should pretend it's Christmas Eve, and light the tree and say things like, It's nearly Christmas.

GREY. Can we pretend to eat dark Christmas cake or should we actually eat some?

GEMMA [*seriously*]. This is serious! We'll be together next Christmas and until then we'll have to pretend. [*solemnly*] I'm going to have a good time in New York.

GREY [*heartily*]. Of course you will. You'll get heaps of presents [*hugs her*]. You'd better get back before your mother finishes buying the doll and misses you.

GEMMA [*with innocent pleasure*]. She won't. The bride dolls are all sold out. I asked when I was here yesterday. She'll send them to check the stockroom.

GREY. [*smiling to himself*] Yes.

GEMMA. I'd better go. Robert's picking us up.

GREY. Yes, and tell your mother you don't want the doll before she turns the stockroom inside out and calls the store manager.

GEMMA. I do want it though. The little princess had a doll...

GREY. I thought you said they were all sold?

GEMMA. They are, but there is one in the display window, and you know Mommy. She'll make them give it to her.

GREY. You're right!

GEMMA. I'd better go.

GREY [*regretfully*]. Yes. [*they hug each other*]

GEMMA [*with determination, looking back*]. I'm going to have a good time in New York. [*she leaves*]

PRESENT [*coming around the boxes*]. What a sweet child. You are very lucky.

GREY [*not meaning it*]. Yes.

SPENCER [*without being seen*]. Money. Money is the only constant in the world. Without it life never balances. Count on money and all else will take care of itself.

[*SPENCER departs although there are still people in line. VOSKINS follows him off stage to the left, along with the photographer*]

MINCHIN [*coming around the boxes with a book, upset*]. He stopped signing at exactly three o'clock although there are still people in line. Spencer just walked away saying he was late for his plane.

GREY. He's just your ordinary Scrooge.

MINCHIN [*putting the book on the sales counter*]. I'll talk to Voskins' about this. [*marches off stage to the left*]

[*YET TO COME appears from behind the boxes. He along with PRESENT and GREY begin to box up the unsold books and serve*

SHOPPERS. *During an interlude* PRESENT *opens the book left by*  
MINCHIN.]

GREY. I thought you kept to authors from the past?

PRESENT. Research.

GREY. Ah.

PRESENT. The philosophy of this [*weighing the book*] is no  
different from that espoused a thousand times before.

GREY. The importance of having property, of having things...  
belongings?

PRESENT [*pleased*]. Exactly! From the cave dweller who sought  
to hoard food from his companions, to the farmer along the  
ancient Nile who sought to expand his land at the expense of his  
neighbour's.

GREY. Why expect it to change if it's always been this way?

PRESENT. People can change. People with vision and courage can  
change this. For example, religion teaches the value of sharing  
and spiritual growth.

GREY. And religions are less important now than ever before. And when they are important it's to justify gaining property from your neighbour. Look at the Middle East, Africa, Europe... anywhere.

PRESENT [*neutral*]. Sad. [*optimistically*] Yet progress has been made.

GREY [*bitterly*]. Progress? Progress because in parts of the world we don't kill each other openly? We gently push people into underemployment, unemployment, welfare, poverty, prostitution, isolation and irrelevance.

PRESENT. What I see --

GREY [*interrupting angrily*]. Of course we do. People care about themselves. That's the way we're born and the way we've been for millions of years. Take a look at a plant: it will reach for the sunshine even it means depriving its neighbours of the sun. The plant doesn't share, it fights for its wellbeing at all costs.

PRESENT. People are not plants therefore the analogy does not hold. People can choose, plants and animals are driven by instinct.



GREY. Adding choice changes nothing. We choose to look after ourselves first. We can't help choosing ourselves above others because that's what millions of years of evolution have made us do. The well-off fight to keep what they have, and struggle to get even more.

PRESENT. But there are exceptions.

GREY. A few choose differently, but they don't do well. Look at you! What difference did you make today?

PRESENT. You're angry.

GREY [*sad and tired to himself*]. I've fallen on hard times. I have a right to be.

PRESENT [*gently*]. Your daughter.

GREY. Yes, Gemma. At Mama Montoni's you said that individuals matter; that change can only come from the individual.

PRESENT [*pleased*]. Exactly.

GREY. Do you know why so few individuals work to improve themselves or the world? Why --

VOSKINS [*offstage via the public announcement system*]. The store is closing. [*the Christmas muzak is turned off*]

[SHOPPERS *begin to move in a frenzy, buying whatever is available and occasionally knocking displays to the floor. The conversation between GREY and PRESENT increasingly is interrupted by SHOPPERS thrusting books at them to be rung through. At times the conversation halts altogether as both are occupied, at other times their voices are raised although they are side-by-side at the sales desk*].

PRESENT [*interested*]. Why?

GREY. Because they're worn down by life. Worn down by disappointments, by events they can't explain or understand, by forces outside their control. Look at Gemma: How can she understand the visits to the lawyers, being passed back and forth, having to choose sides, keeping two angry parents happy? How badly will all this mess her up? Look at the energy and effort she devotes to surviving in the middle of Margaret and me. Today she lied to one parent in order to please the other.

PRESENT. There are no limits to human energy. I have seen individuals literally move mountains. I have seen fortunes donated to charity in a minute, ethereal symphonies composed in a fortnight, novels written in a month, masterpieces painted in a week. I have seen the impossible accomplished more times than

I can tell, by the handicapped, by those described as weak or poor. Energy is never the limiting factor.

GREY. What is?

PRESENT. Passion is. Those drained of passion - of desire - are sad sights indeed. I remember many, who had no desire at all, living strictly by rote; yet, once they gained passion they were unstoppable.

GREY. What about those like Spencer? They have passion.

PRESENT. For material gain; yes. On their own many come to see that more is needed. Their realization may come late in life. The later, the sadder and more painful; but they are the easy cases for it is merely a matter of time. Those afraid or devoid of passion are in gravest danger.

GREY [*reflecting*]. Maybe I should admire Spencer. He is doing something and obviously doing it well. Maybe he has it right. We can count on money; we know how much we have; we know what it buys us. With everything else there is no such guarantee. You wake up one day and those you love are gone. At least with money you know it will always be there.

PRESENT. But money is not passion.

GREY. So what is?

PRESENT. That is not for me to say, or know. I only am certain of what happens when passion is lacking.

GREY. Passion comes to those who have something to risk, something to lose, something to gain.

PRESENT. Don't we all?

GREY [*thinking*]. I'm not sure. When you're beaten down there's nothing left. The past is best forgotten because it reminds you of happiness or sadness; the future is unpredictable and will never achieve its promise; the present is best dulled and avoided.

PRESENT. That's what Christmas is about. A time to reflect on - and savour - the past, future and the present.

GREY [*looking around, ironically*]. Really?

PRESENT. You remain convinced of my futility and that of my friends?

GREY. I am convinced of your obvious lack of results, here and anywhere else.

PRESENT. Results are not always what one expects.

*[The lights flicker and VOSKINS appears with MINCHIN. The number of SHOPPERS begins to thin out].*

VOSKINS *[disapprovingly]*. We'll need to get everything back to order before we leave tonight. Sales this year have been disappointing. We'll need to hustle for Boxing Day *[he goes into the office]*.

*[The final SHOPPERS leave the stage. YET TO COME and PRESENT carry out the table and chair used by Spencer. MINCHIN carries posters]*

*[The lights dim with shadows creating a Gothic and airy atmosphere. The music stops. No more SHOPPERS are seen.]*

PRESENT *[relieved; pulling out a book from his coat, opening it and reading theatrically]*. And well our Christmas sires of old, loved when the year its course has roll'd, and brought blithe Christmas back again, with all his hospitable train. From Scott's *Marmion!*

MINCHIN *[to PRESENT; impressed]*. You read so well. I could never understand that, if I read it. But I can when you say it. Have you been an actor?

PRESENT. Not in a professional capacity. At times I have helped out in some minor ways.

MINCHIN. You would have made a great actor.

GREY [*seriously*]. Charlotte, can I ask you a question?

MINCHIN. Sure.

GREY [*slowly, thinking*]. We've worked together for two years now. I bring you tea each afternoon. I know almost nothing about you except that you've worked here for a long time.

MINCHIN. I know little about you. You have a daughter and ex-wife, used to have a better job, and love books. That is all.

GREY [*contemplating*]. We know little about each other.

PRESENT [*quietly*]. There is much that is mysterious.

GREY. My love of books is what brought me to the store. What brought you?

MINCHIN [*proudly*]. I've been in the store for twenty-nine and a half years. It started as a summer job while I was in high school. When I quit school I asked for more hours and became permanent.

GREY [*almost to himself*]. Twenty-nine years. [*pensively*]  
Twenty-nine and a half years. Did you think it would be this  
long?

MINCHIN. All I wanted was a job.

GREY. Do you have regrets?

MINCHIN [*slowly*]. I did what I needed to. Regrets are for  
people who've got choices. I didn't have any.

GREY. I admire your sense of acceptance.

MINCHIN [*looking at GREY*]. I never said I accepted this  
[*swinging her arm to encompass the stage and entire theatre*]. I  
only knew there was no other choice.

GREY. But you could --

MINCHIN [*interrupting, tersely*]. You don't know.

GREY. I am sorry. You are right. I don't. I didn't mean to  
sound judgmental.

MINCHIN [*accepting his apology*]. I know you didn't. [*there is  
silence*]

GREY [*inspired*]. Could you excuse me for a minute? [*looking at YET TO COME*] Can you help me? [GREY goes out and YET TO COME follows]

PRESENT [*cheerfully*]. Among friends it is impossible to be judgmental. Harry is thinking about a conversation I had with him earlier.

MINCHIN. I like him. Harry's a decent person but doesn't really fit in here. [*suddenly*] You know things don't you?

PRESENT. Some things.

MINCHIN. Not the ordinary things?!

PRESENT. I have lived in different places. After a while you can see some patterns. A mother with her fifth child sees its development differently from her first child. The cries are easier to interpret.

MINCHIN. You said five children.

PRESENT. A number plucked from the air.

MINCHIN. What pattern do you see in me?



PRESENT. You misunderstand me. I do not look; if I ever tried I know I would see nothing. Sometimes I see, that is all.

MINCHIN. Still, what about me?

PRESENT. You ask of me what I do not have. Perhaps my friend knows more.

MINCHIN. Does he, uh she, uh, ever speak?

PRESENT. My friend can, but prefers not to. Some people find the words distressing.

MINCHIN [*in thought*]. Yes, words can be upsetting.

[GREY and YET TO COME return. GREY carries a candelabrum in one hand with burning candles, in the other a large Christmas cake, over his shoulder is a portable sound system. YET TO COME cradles a bowl of hot cider under one arm, glasses and a several tablecloths tucked under the other. The lighting becomes softer and more Gothic and the shadows more intricate as the candelabrum is set down on a stack of books.]

GREY [*explaining*]. The displays are longer needed, and the samples need to be eaten.

MINCHIN. What a good idea.

[YET TO COME sets the sound system to play Arcangelo Corelli's Concerto No. 8 (Christmas concerto). He then pours a glass for each, covers several of the boxes with the tablecloths and cuts the cake.]

GREY. If we have to be here tonight, we might as well celebrate Christmas Eve.

PRESENT. A splendid feast!

GREY. What does Christmas mean to you Charlotte? [MINCHIN looks at him suspiciously] How do you celebrate? [justifying his question] I'd hoped to spend the evening with Gemma, eating, playing and reading with her.

MINCHIN [carefully]. There's one thing I've done each Christmas Eve. [reflecting] As a teenager, the same year I started working here I got a piece of paper from, uh, from... [stops]. We'll it doesn't matter... When I got it I promised to read it every Christmas Eve. [proudly] And I have!

GREY [interested]. Would you read it to us?

[MINCHIN looks away, then at PRESENT and lastly at YET TO COME]. I've never shown it to anyone; I'm not sure why - it's not a secret. Maybe because I got it I didn't want anyone else to

have it [*she looks at YET TO COME AGAIN*]. I suppose you could see it if you're really interested.

GREY. I am.

PRESENT. I believe you must know I am.

MINCHIN [*still undecided looks to YET TO COME who nods his head and she takes an envelope from her purse; to PRESENT*]. I'm not much of reader, could you? [*handing him the envelope*].

PRESENT [*solemnly*]. I would be honoured [*opens the envelope and 'reads' without glancing at the page*].

I salute you: There is nothing I can give you which you have not got; but there is much, very much, that while I cannot give it, you can take.

No Heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in to-day. Take Heaven! No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present little instant. Take peace!

The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. There is a radiance and glory in the darkness could we but see, and to see we have only to look. I beseech you to look.

And so at this time I greet you. Not quite as the world sends greetings but with profound esteem and with prayer that for you now and forever the day breaks and the shadows flee away.

[*there is silence as PRESENT folds the paper and returns it in the envelope to MINCHIN*]

GREY [*touched*]. That's wonderful. Do you know who the author is?

[MINCHIN *shakes her head*].

PRESENT. Anyone might have written it. It is quite old.

MINCHIN. The odd thing is that each year it means something different to me, almost like the words change from year to year. Hearing it read for the first time changed it again this year  
[*there is silence*].

PRESENT [*takes a glass to make a toast*]. To those who know how to keep Christmas!

GREY [*raising his glass*]. To books which instruct and sustain us through hard times.

MINCHIN [*raising her glass*]. To Christmas traditions.

PRESENT. Come, come. We haven't had a toast from Christmas Yet to Come.

MINCHIN. Yes, yes. Speak.

YET TO COME [*voice clear and childlike, like GEMMA's*]. To Christmas. To Christmas. [*voice stronger*] God Bless Us Every One.

[*CURTAIN*]