

Act One - Scene One.

Before the curtain opens, the choir are singing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" from offstage as if from the radio in the room. The curtains open and Elaine Duffy enters singing along, she carries parcels, Christmas wrapping paper and scissors. Then Alan Duffy and the children enter one by one and begin to sing. When the song is over Alan turns the radio off.

Throughout this, the curtains to the French windows are closed.

Alan Well I can't hang around here.... Things to do. Won't be long.

Alan leaves to go towards the kitchen. As soon as he has left, the Grandmother enters from down the stairs and shuffles over to a chair. She settles down as if to go to sleep.

Rebecca Surely you're not going back to sleep Grandma.....you've only just got up.

Grandmother Don't annoy me. I'm running out of places to hide the bodies.

Grandmother settles down in her chair again. Elaine selects a parcel to wrap

Elaine So which of my delightful children is going to help me wrap some of these presents.

The three children all look at each other.

Rebecca I've got friends to meet in town. Sorry mum... I'd give you a hand, but I'll miss the bus.

Elaine (Jokingly) After all I've done for you over the years.

Rebecca (Jokingly) Be nice to me. One day I'll be choosing your nursing home.

Elaine and Rebecca are both smiling. Rebecca exits through towards the kitchen

Elaine And what about you two? What're your excuses?

John and Marie look at each other

Marie Don't look at me mum I'm going shopping. I still haven't got a present for great aunt Dora. I don't know what to get her. Do you have any ideas?

Elaine A sense of humour might be nice.

Marie Pardon?

Elaine I said scent is always nice.

Marie Cheers mum that'll do. I'll get my coat. *(Walks towards the door)*

Marie goes upstairs

Grandmother *(Looking round)* What's going on? Where are you going? If you pass the drinks cabinet I'll have a very small whisky.... For medicinal purposes only of course.

John Aren't you feeling well grandma? Would you like me to call the doctor?

Grandmother I'm feeling okay at the moment, but you can't be too careful there are a lot of germs around.

John I don't think I'd better get you anything. Mum'll skin me alive

Grandmother settles down again

Elaine *(To John)* I suppose you've got a good reason why you can't help me?

John Well I think it's a good reason.

Elaine What.... Something very important like giving blood, or registering for organ donation?

John No I'm going to help Jason plan his New Year party.

Elaine Well I'd hate to be responsible for the social event of the year being a failure. You'd better get off too.

John exits through the kitchen.

Elaine I thought they'd never go. Now I can get on with wrapping these presents.

Elaine starts to wrap the first present. Alan comes back in from the kitchen.

Alan What're you doing?

For a moment, Elaine stops what she is doing, half turns, looks at her husband and pauses.

Elaine Well, I thought I'd just change the oil in this engine. What does it look like I'm doing?

Alan Oh....you're wrapping presents then....

Elaine Not a lot gets past you does it Columbo?

Elaine returns to her present wrapping.

Alan walks to a point between the chair and the settee.

Alan Where are the kids?

Elaine Rebecca's meeting some friends. Marie's going to do some last minute shopping and John's going to over to Jason's house.

Elaine stops for a moment, looks up and sniffs.

Elaine What's that smell?

Alan I've just put the chestnuts on.....for my world famous stuffing.

Alan looks at Grandmother, who is now apparently fast asleep

Alan I see your mother's as active as ever.

Elaine Quiet.....you'll wake her.

Alan Wake her? She's as deaf as a post. *(He pauses)* No, on second thoughts, she's selectively deaf. Watch this.

He moves closer to the chair. His voice is now much louder

Alan Hello mother-in-law. Could you lend us a few hundred quid....we're a bit short with it being Christmas?

There is no movement.

Alan How about we have a long chat about that nice sheltered housing I found for you.....in Aberystwyth?

Still no movement. Alan then walks to the other side of the stage and speaks in a normal voice.

Alan Fancy a drink?

Grandmother opens her eyes and sits up a little

Grandmother I could force down a whisky.....

As Alan walks back towards the chair, Grandmother settles down again.

Grandmother Just a small one mind you.....I don't drink really.

Alan Don't drink? That's a laugh. She was employee of the month at Oddbins in November.

Elaine Will you leave her alone?

Grandmother Who's Joan?

Alan For pity's sake (*Shouting in grandmother's ear*) Nobody mentioned Joan you deaf old crone. I'm just getting your drink.

Alan goes to pour another drink

Elaine Stop moaning Alan. Where's your Christmas spirit?

Alan (*Gesturing towards Grandmother*) Most of it's inside her.

Elaine She's only had a couple this morning.

Alan A couple.....that's a laugh. She doesn't have a liver...she's got a dipstick.

Elaine Alan!

Alan Did you know her birthday's a national holiday in Scotland?

Alan moves to the coffee table and looks at the pile of presents. He picks up one, which is obviously a large vase wrapped in Christmas paper

Alan What's this then?

Elaine stands and with a loud sigh, takes the vase from Alan and gently replaces it on the table

Elaine It's a present for my mother

Alan looks at Grandmother

Alan What is it.....a glass?

Elaine It's a vase. She said she wanted one for her room.

Alan picks it up again and shakes it violently

Elaine *(Snatching the vase)* Will you be careful? If you break it I'll have to buy another and we haven't got the money.

Alan Don't talk to me about money.

Elaine We'll have to talk about it soon. You know we had another letter from the landlord this morning.

Alan Miserable old....

Elaine *(Interrupting)* He said he's coming round to see us.

Alan When?

Elaine Some time today.

Alan Well at least we've had some good news.

Elaine What's that?

Alan Your brother Jim and his unruly brood aren't coming this year. That'll save us a fortune. No presents to buy for them and we'll need a lot less food.

Elaine Don't be mean. They're not that bad.

Alan Not that bad.... They're like vertical locusts and they're so ungrateful. You'd think they were doing us a favour gracing us with their presence.

Elaine Well you might have a point, but at least they're better than your aunt Dora and she is coming.

Alan Aunt Dora is alright.

Elaine She's alright like the bubonic plague is alright

Alan Just.....

Elaine She's alright like famine; pestilence and flood are alright.

Alan I.....

Elaine Incidentally where are the other three horsemen of the Apocalypse spending Christmas?

There is a knock at the door. Alan and Elaine look at each other.

Alan That might be the landlord. Let's pretend we're not in.

Elaine *(Standing)* Don't be silly.

She crosses to the french windows, opens the curtain. There is a woman standing outside. Elaine opens the doors. Dora Duffy enters, carrying her suitcase.

Dora What a journey. The train was late. Well you expect that don't you? Then the bus was held up in traffic. Why you couldn't have just picked me up in the car I'll never know. Then I was ages crossing the main road. Would have been much easier if you'd even met me at the station but I suppose you'll say you didn't know what time I was coming, a simple phone call was all it needed and I couldn't phone you because I can't afford it and it's so expensive. Yes I would like a cup of tea thanks for asking. Is my room the usual one upstairs? I'll take my own bag; I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble. No respect that's what it is nowadays.....

She leaves through the archway. Alan and Elaine watch her go.

Alan *(Softly)* Nice to see you Auntie Dora

Grandmother finally stirs and starts to sit up in the chair.

Grandmother Did I ever get that small whisky?

Alan Yes dear.....you must have finished it. We've got some drain cleaner if you'd like a chaser....

Elaine Alan!

Elaine goes over to a cabinet

Elaine I'll get you one love.

Grandmother Ooh, thank you....

Dora comes back on stage

Grandmother Oh it's the grim reaper. *(To Elaine)* Better make that a large one.

Dora crosses to the settee and sits

Dora I don't think I approve of drinking hard liquor, especially at this time of day.

Grandmother No dear...you stick to the embalming fluid.

Dora Really!

Elaine hands a glass of whisky to Grandmother. She downs it in one.

Dora You're such a bad example.

Grandmother You know Dora, it's possible that your only purpose in life is to act as a warning to others.

Dora turns to Elaine

Dora *(Looking around)* Where did you put my cup of tea Elaine?

Elaine Oh sorry. I completely forgot. I'll go and make it now.

Dora stands and crosses to the archway

Dora It's quite alright. I'll make it myself. *(Muttering to herself)* I should have expected it really. Times have changed since my day. Older people were shown some respect then. Now it's all self, self, self.

Dora exits. Alan crosses to the fireplace

Grandmother sits forward and sniffs.

Grandmother Here, what's that smell?

Alan Oh that'll be my chestnut stuffing.

Grandmother Pardon?

Alan *(Loudly)* I'm roasting my chestnuts.

Grandmother Well it's your own fault. You shouldn't stand so close to the fire.

The Kirby family, Joyce and Karen, and any extra children come through the audience singing "The First Noel". They reach the stage and climb on.

Alan *(Searching his pockets)* That was very nice...very nice indeed, but I seem to have left all my change in my other trousers.

Anita Don't be silly Alan, we didn't come here to collect money from you. Just to spread a little Christmas cheer.

Grandmother Oh how very nice of you. I'll have a large one.

Elaine Take no notice of her she's getting a little gaga. She'll be ninety-five this year after all.

May Ninety-five eh? Well I'd have said you weren't a day over seventy.

Grandmother Smarmy bitch..... *(She turns to Elaine)* And I'll have you know my mind is as sharp as a steel trap. It just needs oiling from time to time....usually with a nice single malt.

Anita We were just on our way to the church hall to rehearse the nativity play we're putting on for Christmas Eve . Thought we'd pop in and give you a sample.

May I just hope it all goes okay, we've had one setback after another.

Anita Don't be such a pessimist May. Everything will be fine you'll see.

Karen steps forward.

Joyce Did I ever tell you?.....I hate children.

Karen Joyce, I don't think this is the time or place...

Joyce Well look at that Lesley for instance. She's always playing practical jokes on me. Why is it always me?

Karen Now calm down Joyce.....What sort of jokes?

Joyce Yesterday she told me my mobile was ringing when I was on top of the ladders fixing the lights. It was only when I got down I remembered I don't have a mobile.

Karen She's only young.....give her a chance.

Joyce There are plenty of things I'd like to give her and a chance isn't one of them.

Karen If you dislike children so much, why did you volunteer to help?

Joyce I had to, it's part of my community service.

Everyone looks at Joyce and Karen in disbelief as they both smile nervously

Rachel Yes...well, are Rebecca and Marie ready?

Alan Sorry they must have forgotten... they're both out.

Amy How about John?

Elaine He's round at Jason's.

May See I told you so.

Anita Don't worry May, we'll just work round them.

May And just how do we manage that...? They're playing Mary, Joseph and the Angel Gabriel.

Elaine I'm sure they won't be long. I'll send them over as soon as they get in.

Grandmother I could stand in for Mary if you're desperate.

Alan They might be desperate.....but they're not deranged.

Grandmother makes rude gestures at Alan's back.

Anita Thank you Mrs McKenzie, that was a very nice gesture.

Grandmother I didn't realise you'd seen it.

Anita We'll bear you in mind in case of an emergency won't we May?

May Of course we will.

Alan crosses to where the drinks are.

Alan How very rude of me....would any of you like a.....*(He looks at Grandmother and then instead of saying the word drink, mimes someone drinking from a glass)*

May Not for me thanks.....I'm driving.

Anita Well I'm not. But I don't think we've got time really. Must get to the church hall.

Carol Are you coming to watch us?

Frances We've been practising for ages.

Ruth We're really good.

Emily We need all the support we can get.

Fiona Yesterday Anita said i was perfectly adequate. That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me.

Alan Of course we'll be there.

Elaine We wouldn't miss it for the world.

Alan Our children do have the main roles after all.

Lesley Yes that always struck me as a bit strange.

Amy It's not as if they were the only ones who auditioned.

Linda I auditioned and didn't get a very big part.

Lesley You had a big part before you auditioned, but they'll probably be able to hide it under your costume.

Rachel You would have thought that as your daughters we would've had preferential treatment.

Amy Mum wouldn't like anyone to think that she wasn't impartial.

Linda She could have given me a starring role I'm not related.

Amy True, but then you can't act either.

Rachel That's not very nice. True, but not very nice.

Amy I'm just glad that I got a part. It means I can spend rehearsals looking at John.

Rachel I thought you fancied him.

Amy He's gorgeous, but if you say a word I'll knock you senseless.

Rachel Surely she'd need some sense first before she could be knocked senseless.

Amy That goes for you too. Please Lesley don't say anything to him.

Lesley I'll give it some thought. I am, after all, open to bribery.

Anita Come on then kids lets get going.

Joyce That Lesley's looking at me, she's going to get me.

Karen Calm down Joyce. She's just a child.

Joyce Hitler was a child once.