

Operation: Whispering Pines

By Karen Jones

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Operation: Whispering Pines

- 2 -

DEDICATION

This play is dedicated to the Glory of God and in honor Pastor Greg Burnett and his lovely wife, Nita. True, humble and loving servants of God. Love and miss you both.

STORY OF THE PLAY

Whispering Pines is a small, homey assistant living facility but for how long? On the death of the owner, the facility has passed to his daughter who is determined to unload this "albatross." She has lined up buyers but there's only one problem. Or really, six problems: the current residents. And together they agree they are not going out without a fight! Knowing that the new owner must find another facility to take them in, they come up with a plan. It's an elaborate scheme that will ensure that no one else will accept them. So "Operation: Whispering Pines" is put into action. Can the residents pull off a Christmas miracle, or will everything backfire, and they lose their "family of friends"?

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 m, 5 w, 8 flexible, children, doubling possible)

Staff

MAXINE SHARP: New owner of *Whispering Pines*.

BETTY: Head nurse. (Bob if played by a male.)

SELMA: Staff nurse. (Sam if played by a male.)

Elderly Residents

ELI BISHOP: (m) Levelheaded. Self-designated leader.

BERNICE HAWKINS: (f) Cantankerous and opinionated.

MYRNA CRAWFORD: (f) Dresses as the Ghost of Christmas Past.

SUZANNA WHITE: (f) Dresses as a gracious southern belle.

RUFUS DOBBS: (m) A little "spacey."

CLIFFORD SMITH: (m) "Wizard of Oz" enthusiast.

AGATHA PRESCOTT: New female resident.

Visitors

CHILDREN: Enough for a Christmas Nativity.

***PLUMBER**

***CHURCH YOUTH LEADER**

***TWO AUXILIARY WOMEN**

***TWO BUSINESS BUYERS:** (nonspeaking)

***Doubling possible:** The roles of the Plumber, Youth Leader, Auxiliary Women and Business Buyers can be doubled.

COSTUMES

Nurses Betty and Selma – Nurse uniforms

Plumber – Work shirt and pants

Maxine and business associates – Business suits

Residents, women's auxiliary, choir director / children – Streetwear

Biblical attire for Nativity

Scene 3: Special costumes

CLIFFORD: Scarecrow outfit. Patches on coat and trousers. Felt hat. Straw sticking out of pockets and hat.

RUFUS: Strainer / tin foil hat

MYRNA: White night gown / tinsel

SUZANNA: Tree skirt over a pink night gown

AGATHA: Gypsy attire: long flowing skirt, vest, scarf around head, numerous beads, etc.

Scene 1

(AT RISE: LIGHTS up on a typical office setting with desk, chair, phone, files, etc. MAXINE is seated behind the desk. She picks up the phone and punches a button.)

MAXINE: Mary, have you set up that conference call like I asked? What do you mean you can't get it to work? You just push the buttons on the base.... You know where it says "Conference"? Yes, that's the one. Now buzz me when you get it right. *(Hangs up the phone)*. Shesh.... such incompetence. How in the world did my father put up with her?

(SFX: Phone buzzes. MAXINE picks up impatiently.)

MAXINE: *(Barks.)* Maxine Sharp, here. Finally..... Have you made any progress yet?Well, what's taking you so long? You've had those contracts for months now. You should have been able to come up with something by now. *(Angrily.)*I don't have time to be patient. The clock is ticking. I need to get this closed before my aunt finds out what I'm trying to do. And speaking of which, how are we progressing on that front? ...Oh, for goodness sakes, that one should be easy. She's spent most of her life gallivanting around the world doing all sorts of wild things..... Well, get on it. You've got to the first of the year before I get someone else. *(Slams down the phone.)* I'm surrounded by incompetence.

(SHE and exits in a huff SL. LIGHTS down.)

Scene 2

(LIGHTS up on the community room. One resident, ELI BISHOP, appears to be asleep in one of the rockers. SELMA and BETTY are decorating the Christmas tree. They continue hanging ornaments throughout their conversation.)

SELMA: *(Hanging an ornament.)* So what is your take on everything? Is this going to be our last Christmas at Whispering Pines?

BETTY: *(Glances over to the sleeping ELI.)* Shush! We shouldn't be talking in front of the residents.

SELMA: *(Looks over to ELI.)* Oh, don't worry about Eli. He's dead to the world.

BETTY: *(Admonishing.)* Now that term is not at all appropriate, is it? Considering where we work.

SELMA: Oh, lighten up. It's just an expression. And you didn't answer my question. Are they closing Whispering Pines or not? Surely as head nurse they've talked to you about it.

BETTY: Not really. You've heard the same rumors that I have. But I can tell you one thing; Maxine is not going to keep this "albatross" around her neck if she can help it. Her words not mine.

SELMA: Still, didn't Max stipulate in his will that all the residents would be able to finish out their days here if they so desired.

BETTY: True. But that doesn't mean that Maxine will abide by the terms. Mary says she's having her lawyers going over everything with a fine-tooth comb. She's determined to sell to the developers in town that want to turn this place into a golf course. Residents be hanged.

SELMA: But how does she think she can break the terms? The residents have clauses in their contract to protect against such a thing.

BETTY: Like I said, she's got her lawyers on it. I heard there were some loopholes she was trying to exploit.

SELMA: What kind of loopholes?

Operation: Whispering Pines

- 6 -

BETTY: Well, under certain circumstances, if she can get another care facility to take them in, she can be relieved of any liability. Unfortunately, the only other one of those places in the area is Golden Acres. And let's face it, it can't really compare to Whispering Pines now, can it?

SELMA: Hardly. It's so big and impersonal.

BETTY: Exactly. Not at all like the atmosphere we have here. Our residents are so close-knit, they're practically family.

SELMA: You're right. All they have is each other. It would just about kill them to be split apart. *(Looks over to the sleeping ELI.)* Is there anything you think we can do? Start a petition or something?

BETTY: I'm not so sure we could get enough signatures to count for anything. Like you said most of these folks are alone in the world now.

SELMA: But that's not fair! These folks have worked hard their whole lives. They deserve a little peace and quiet in their golden years. Not worrying about losing their home.

BETTY: You're preaching to the choir, Selma.

(MAXINE enters from SR.)

MAXINE: Aren't you two finished with that yet? I've got some important people coming in and I want this place to be perfect. *(Looks over to ELI.)* And try to keep things as quite as possible. I can't afford for things to fall apart on me now.

BETTY: What things would that be?

MAXINE: Never mind. Just do as I say.

SELMA: And when are these VIPs supposed to be coming in?

MAXINE: I'm not sure. They have a habit of arriving unexpectedly. Just keep things under control and we won't have to worry about it. *(MAXINE exits SL.)*

SELMA: That old biddy. I can't believe she is Max's daughter. He was such a dear.

Operation: Whispering Pines

- 7 -

BETTY: Well, they say that the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree. But in this case, that tree was high on a hill and this apple dropped over the fence, rolled off the hill, across the road and landed in a ditch.

(Both NURSES laugh. ELI gives a snort and stirs in his chair.)

SELMA: *(Looks around.)* Better be careful. We don't want to wake Eli. And besides that, Maxine may have a spy around here somewhere.

BETTY: I wouldn't be a bit surprised. She seems to know every little thing that goes on. And every little word we say.

SELMA: So, what do you think she meant about keeping everything as quiet as possible. Is she talking about us or the residents?

BETTY: My guess should be the residents. She probably doesn't want them to appear "difficult." Especially if these folks that are coming are from Golden Acres.

SELMA: Is that what you think?

BETTY: Well, it just makes sense that they would try to check everyone out before they accepted them as clients.

SELMA: Well, that won't be a problem. You couldn't ask for a sweeter bunch of people.

BETTY: More's the pity. *(Steps back to admire the tree.)* And that's why we need to see that this is the best Christmas Whispering Pines has ever had. It could very well be the last.

SELMA: Is that the reason for the little Christmas program this evening?

BETTY: It is. I just thought it would make a nice ending to this place, so I asked the local church if they could put on a little Nativity for us. Give everyone a sense of peace and hope. Not to mention how much the residents love children.

SELMA: Understood. So, should we give the residents the "heads up" about what's going on?

Operation: Whispering Pines

- 8 -

BETTY: They probably have an idea already. They're pretty smart cookies. But nevertheless, I don't want to put a damper on the festivities. So, let's just hold off until after Christmas. Who knows? We may get a Christmas miracle.

SELMA: That's probably what it's going to take.

(SELMA and BETTY exit SL carrying the decoration boxes. After a brief pause, ELI opens his eyes and sneaks a look around.)

BERNICE: *(Peeps in from SR.)* They gone?

ELI: Yeah. You can come in now.

(BERNICE, MYRNA, SUZANNA, RUFUS and CLIFFORD enter from SR.)

BERNICE: *(Finds a seat in one of the chairs.)* Well, spill it. What did they say?

SUZANNA: Is it as bad as we think?

ELI: Worse. Best that I could tell, it seems that Maxine is trying to unload the place and us with it.

MYRNA: No. She can't do that. We have contracts.

ELI: Makes no difference to her. She's got her lawyers crawling all over the paperwork. They'll find something, you mark my words.

CLIFFORD: Oh, that's just not right. Max would be turning in his grave if he knew what his "no-account" daughter was up to.

ELI: I have no doubt. Unfortunately, he's way past helping us.

RUFUS: So, what do you reckon we can do about it? We don't have money to hire a lawyer. Everything I've got is tied up in this place.

CLIFFORD: That's true for all of us.

MYRNA: Surely, she can't just turn us out into the street.

SUZANNA: *(Wringing her hands.)* Oh dear. What will we do? I'm too pretty to be out on the street pushing around a shopping cart.

Operation: *Whispering Pines*

- 9 -

CLIFFORD: *(Soothing.)* Now Suzanna, I'm sure it won't come to that.

BERNICE: *(Huffs.)* I wouldn't be so sure. No one cares for the likes of us anymore.

RUFUS: True. Can't remember when the last time anyone came by to check on any of us.

MYRNA: Well, it is Christmas. Some of the churches usually come by for a visit. In fact, aren't the children supposed to come here tonight and put on a Nativity play for us?

SUZANNA: They are.

CLIFFORD: Hmm... they don't usually do that. I wonder what's up.

ELI: There could be a spy planted in their midst.

RUFUS: What do you mean?

ELI: The nurses talked like Maxine has some sort of undercover spy that might just sneak in and check us all out.

BERNICE: Check us for what? Cooties?

MYRNA: Just who are these "spies" you say might be coming?

ELI: They didn't say outright. But it might be the folks from Golden Acres.

ALL: Golden Acres?!

ELI: Yep. That's who Maxine is trying to push us off on.

SUZANNA: Not Golden Acres. My sister-in-law went there. She hated every minute of it. I just won't do it.

CLIFFORD: There's bound to be something we can do.

BERNICE: Like what? It's not like they are going to ask our opinion, now, is it?

RUFUS: That's for sure.

MYRNA: Then all hope is lost.

ELI: Not necessarily. We just have to come up with something to dissuade them.

CLIFFORD: Such as?

ELI: Well, I've been thinking about it and think I've come up with something. *(Looks around to make sure they are still alone and then motions.)* Gather round and I'll tell you about it. *(THEY gather around ELI. He looks around again and mimics talking as the LIGHTS fade.)*

Scene 3

(LIGHTS up. BERNICE is sitting at the card table, playing solitaire. ELI enters from SL.)

BERNICE: *(Looks up from her cards.)* What did Betty say?

ELI: Just not to break any laws and make sure that no one gets hurt.

BERNICE: *(Returns to playing cards.)* I'm not making any promises.

ELI: Calm down, Bernice. We can't be losing our focus if this is to work.

BERNICE: Well, I don't see why you had to tell her anything. She could spoil the whole thing.

ELI: Well, if I didn't, she might have tried to sedate us or something. We couldn't have that. *(Pause.)* Besides, she's on our side. I trust her.

BERNICE: *(Huffs.)* I'm not sure you can trust anyone anymore. The spy could be just about anybody. Did you see that plumber that came through here a little while ago? He looked mighty suspicious.

ELI: How so?

BERNICE: His britches were up around his waist with a belt. Now you tell me, does that seem natural?

ELI: Well, I'm not so sure that mooning the client is a prerequisite for a plumber.

BERNICE: Well, I never have seen a plumber that didn't. It's a sure sign that he's a spy and I'm going to show him—

ELI: *(Interrupting.)* Hush, here he comes.

(PLUMBER, with a toolbox in one hand and a clipboard in the other, enters from SR.)

PLUMBER: Have you all seen Nurse Betty? I need someone to sign this work order.

ELI: I think I saw her at her station down the hall. Just set your box down here. No need to be dragging that heavy thing around with you.

PLUMBER: Don't mind if I do.

Operation: Whispering Pines

- 11 -

(HE turns his back to the audience, bends over and places the toolbox on the floor. BERNICE and ELI both crane their necks and check out his backside. There is nothing to see. Bernice gives Eli an "I told you so" look with a small nod. Betty enters from SR.)

BETTY: I hear you've been looking for me. That was fast. You didn't need to check all over to find the problem?

PLUMBER: *(Straightens up.)* Yes, ma'am. Part of plumbing is listening for the problem. I heard everything I needed to. I just need you to sign work release for me. *(Hands HER a clipboard.)*

BETTY: No problem. Just let me take a look at that leaky faucet first and then I'll walk you out.

PLUMBER: Of course.

(HE beds to pick up his box as ELI and BERNICE still try to look. PLUMBER and BETTY exit SR.)

BERNICE: Well, if that was our spy, we let him get away from us!

ELI: Yep, you're right. I guess we need to be more vigilant.

BERNICE: Don't see how we can be. We don't know who we're looking for.

ELI: That's why we have to pull all the stops. Everyone is fair game.

BERNICE: So, you're saying any stranger that walks in that door gets the full treatment.

ELI: I don't see how we can do otherwise.

BERNICE: Okay. You're the boss. We've got to save our home whatever the cost. So if "it's take no prisoners," I'm all in. We'll show them just who their messing with.

ELI: Speaking of home, Betty told me that a new resident that is moving in today.

BERNICE: Right here at Christmas? That sounds pretty fishy.

ELI: I thought so too. Most folks would hold off until after Christmas to make a change like that.

Operation: Whispering Pines

- 12 -

BERNICE: Unless they were up to something.

ELI: Exactly.

BERNICE: So, Operation: Whispering Pines is a go then. I'd better go warn the others. *(SHE pushes her chair back and starts to rise.)*

ELI: Not necessary. I've already put the word out. They're getting ready even as we speak.

BERNICE: What if this new resident is not the spy we're looking for?

ELI: That would be unfortunate. But better safe than sorry I always say.

BERNICE: Alright then, let's get this show on the road.

(THEY give each other a high five. SELMA escorts AGATHA PRESCOTT in from SL.)

SELMA: Folks, I want you to meet our new resident. *(Indicates AGATHA.)* This is Agatha Prescott. Agatha, this is Eli Bishop and Bernice Hawkins. They can show you the ropes.

ELI: Nice to meet you.

SELMA: I'll just leave her in your capable hands. Call me if you need anything. And by the way, some ladies from the Women's Auxiliary are here. They've dropped by with little gifts for everyone. *(Exits SL.)*

BERNICE: Oh, great. Probably more of those dang fruit cakes for us to choke down.

ELI: Now, Bernice.

BERNICE: Now what? You know yourself they're as dry as a bone. Nearly took out Elmer last year. Glad Selma was around to do that "hind-lick" maneuver.

(Two WOMEN enter. They are carrying a basket with small, wrapped packages.)

WOMAN: Merry Christmas, everyone. We're from the Women's Auxiliary and we'd like to share these little gifts with you all.

BERNICE: Why?

Operation: Whispering Pines

- 13 -

ELI: Bernice...

BERNICE: Well, I want to know. We're here year-round and nobody gives a hoot until it's Christmas. And then they come out of the woodwork like roaches.

WOMAN: *(Taken aback.)* I'm sorry. Have we come at a bad time?

BERNICE: There's never a good time around here. So just skedaddle, why don't you? No one needs those dried out fruitcakes.

ELI: Bernice, these folks mean well.

BERNICE: Sure, they do. They just want to feel good about themselves. Well, I ain't falling for it.

ELI: *(To the WOMEN.)* Never mind her. She's a little high strung. We appreciate your coming.

BERNICE: No, we don't. Git!

(The WOMEN scurry out SR. AGATHA, still speechless, looks around worriedly.)

ELI: Come on over here, Agatha, and let's get acquainted.

(AGATHA walks cautiously past BERNICE. She and ELI sit in rockers.)

ELI: So where do you come from?

AGATHA: Originally from right here in Partridge. But it's been a while. I left when I was in my twenties and haven't been back for ages.

BERNICE: *(Fishing.)* Really? Who's your kin? Might know some of them. I've been here my whole life.

AGATHA: Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't. It was so long ago.

(BERNICE exchanges glances with ELI.)

BERNICE: Well, it couldn't have been that long ago. We're about the same age. I'm sure I could pull up a face if you'd just spit it out.

Operation: Whispering Pines

- 14 -

ELI: Now Bernice, don't go pestering Ms. Prescott like that. I'm sure we'll get to know all that stuff in time. So, is there a Mr. Prescott?

AGATHA: I'm afraid not. He passed quite a few years ago.

ELI: Kids?

AGATHA: I'm afraid we were never blessed that way.

BERNICE: Not so sure, they're a blessing. After all, mine stuck me in here, didn't they?

ELI: Now Bernice...

BERNICE: Now what? It's the truth.

(SUZANNA swoops in from SR carrying a vase of spring flowers.)

SUZANNA: *(Cheerfully.)* Hello, hello. How is everyone this fine day?

(SUZANNA sets the vase on the card table. Annoyed, BERNICE starts picking up her cards.)

BERNICE: You're a little off season, Suzanna. This is Christmas, not Easter.

SUZANNA: Nonsense. Flowers are always in season. Isn't that right, Eli? *(SHE looks at AGATHA.)* Oh my, I didn't know we had guests. My name is Suzanna. Suzanna White. And you are?

AGATHA: Agatha Prescott.

SUZANNA: So very nice to meet you. I had a cat named Agatha. Come to think of it, I've not seen her for a while. *(SHE starts looking up around and under the furniture)* Here, kitty, kitty, kitty.

BERNICE: Why, Suzanna, that cat's been—

ELI: *(Interrupts.)* Up in the attic chasing those dang mice again.

AGATHA: Mice?

SUZANNA: Oh my, yes. This place is crawling with them. But you needn't worry about that. My Agatha is such a good mouser. *(Laughs a little.)*

SUZANNA: *(Cont'd.)* And she has the cutest habit of bringing her little conquests as gifts to us. Isn't that right?
(Looks at ELI and BERNICE.)

BERNICE: *(Huffs.)* Oh yeah. There's nothing like waking up to a mouse carcass on your pillow.

AGATHA: *(Gasps.)* Oh my.

SUZANNA: Oh, I do so worry about her, though. Some of those mice are actually quite large.

BERNICE: Those are called rats, Suzanna.

AGATHA: Rats?!

ELI: *(Ignores her comment.)* Now don't worry, Suzanna. I'll tell Selma to keep a lookout for her.

SUZANNA: Oh, would you? That's so nice of you. I've just got to get ready for my party. *(To AGATHA.)* Tell me, Agatha, have you come out yet?

AGATHA: *(Confused.)* Excuse me?

ELI: Suzanna is having her debutant ball this evening. Isn't that, right?

SUZANNA: *(Dreamingly.)* Oh, yes. I can hardly wait. It's going to be beautiful. Not many girls get a Christmas Cotillion you know.

AGATHA: *(SHE looks questionably at ELI.)* Cotillion?

ELI: Suzanna is our resident Southern Lady. She's going to be the belle of the ball this evening. Aren't you, Suzanna?

SUZANNA: *(Giggles.)* Oh, go on now, you charmer. You're going to have me blushing.

BERNICE: *(Mutters.)* Oh, give me a break. *(Lays her cards on the table.)* Don't you need to get ready for your dance, Suzanna? You don't want to wait till the last minute.

SUZANNA: You're exactly right. It's just that I've misplaced my cape. *(Looks around the room and spots the Christmas tree skirt.)* Oh there it is. *(Retrieves the skirt and gives it a shake.)* Why in the world is it on the floor? I sure hope it didn't get dirty. *(Exits SL.)*

AGATHA: Is she alright?

BERNICE: *(Shuffling the cards.)* As right as she ever was.

ELI: Don't worry about Suzanna. She has her little quirks. But then, who doesn't?

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