

The Wondrous Gift

A Christmas Story

By Burton Bumgarner

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STORY OF THE PLAY

It's Christmas Eve, (1960s) and Jake Johnson can muster only an uninspired, "Yeah, whatever," due to the stress of keeping his small, private hospital financially sound. In fact, he's just issued a new policy refusing to help anyone without health insurance, forcing patients to travel to the county hospital miles away. And there's no relief for Jake at home either as an elaborate family dinner has been planned which includes the Johnsons' estranged son Reese, and their daughter and her fiancé, whom Jake believes will be just another smart-alecky seminarian. Ill-will spreads even more when it is assumed the handyman and maid, Vernon and Opal, will forgo their family plans to assist at the dinner. Opal tries to invite the Johnsons to attend a Christmas service at her church, but as one of the wealthiest families in town, it won't do to be seen socializing with the help. When Jake receives a call that an indigent pregnant woman ready to deliver her baby has turned up at his hospital, he becomes infuriated. Can Jake set aside his inconsiderate, self-serving ways to discover the wondrous gift of Christmas?

How silently, how silently
The Wondrous Gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heaven.

*Part of the third verse of the song,
"O, Little Town of Bethlehem."
Phillips Brooks, 1868*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 m, 5-7 w, 1 girl, 1 boy non-speaking)

JAKE JOHNSON: Hospital board chairman.

LIBBY JOHNSON: Jake's wife.

REESE JOHNSON: Their son, a medical school resident.

KATIE JOHNSON: Their daughter, a college student.

OPAL DINSMORE: Works for the Johnsons.

VERNON DINSMORE: Opal's husband, also works for the Johnsons.

BRENDA DINSMORE: Daughter of Vernon and Opal.

DANIEL HANOVER: Katie's fiancé, a seminarian.

WANDA: A friend of Brenda.

ELIZABETH: A child.

JOHN: Elizabeth's younger brother, non-speaking role

NURSE: Hospital employee, minor role.

NEWSCASTER: A local TV/radio personality.

**DOUBLING: The roles of Wanda, Nurse and Newscaster may be doubled by one actor.*

Performance Time: About an hour.

SETTING

The setting is the den of Johnson's upper-class home. The den has sofas, chairs, bookshelves, lamps, and end tables. A decorated Christmas tree is USR. Near by is a nativity set on an end table. Left is a doorway to other areas of the house. DSR is a breakfast room table and chairs, indicating the kitchen. A newspaper is on the table. A smaller table with a coffee percolator and cups is nearby. DSL is a small table with a phone which also serves as his office at the hospital in the opening scene.

PROPS

Coffee cups
Newspaper
Suitcases
Toy pony
Nativity set
Toy car
Broom and dustpan
Dinner plates
Glasses
Wheelchair
Medical bag
Sheets
Towels
Prescription bottle
Book
Tea cup
Microphone and cable
Sandwiches

SPECIAL EFFECTS

Phone ringing
Flashing emergency lights
Doorbell ringing

ACT 1
Scene 1

(AT RISE: The voice of the NEWSCASTER is heard in the darkness.)

NEWSCASTER: Last week, Johnson Hospital Board Chairman Jake Johnson announced that the private hospital would take measures to shore up the quarterly losses reported earlier this month. In an address to the local Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Johnson stated that the hospital would make every effort not to repeat the mistakes of the past four months.

(LIGHTS up. JAKE is sitting at the table as if it is his office desk. He talks on the telephone.)

JAKE: We're talking about a private hospital! If people don't like it, then they can go to the public hospital! ... You've got what? ... A woman in labor? ... No insurance, huh? ... Well, what are they doing here?... Look, we really don't treat those kinds of people. Send them to the public hospital!

(BLACKOUT. JAKE EXITS.)

NEWSCASTER: Mr. Johnson's remarks were met with a lukewarm response from members of the Chamber. In other news, President-elect Kennedy will pay a visit to our area next month, and the severe winter storm that pounded the city has moved on, leaving almost a foot of snow on the ground and sub-zero temperatures. Looks like we're going to have a very cold, very snowy Christmas.

(LIGHTS up. JAKE ENTERS wearing an overcoat. He removes the coat and tosses it on a chair. He flops down on the sofa. LIBBY ENTERS with two cups of coffee. She hands one to Jake.)

LIBBY: Merry Christmas, dear. *(Indicating the tree.)* Look. Opal and I finished decorating the tree this afternoon.

JAKE: (*Bored.*) Great.

LIBBY: I take it you had another impossible day?

JAKE: Where'd you get that idea?

LIBBY: From the radio. You didn't make a very good impression.

JAKE: Those news people can twist anything you say.

LIBBY: But you sounded like profits were more important than people.

JAKE: Why can't people just leave us alone and let us run a hospital?

LIBBY: Because that would be too easy. I hope you'll be in a better mood for dinner.

JAKE: I wasn't planning on it. Why?

LIBBY: Because it's Christmas Eve. Katie's fiancé is joining us for dinner.

JAKE: Fiancé?

LIBBY: Yes. I told you about him two weeks ago.

JAKE: (*Sarcastic.*) Great. What is he? Another business major with a better idea about how to run a hospital? That last one was a real piece of work. Then there was the basketball player. I kind of liked him, but all he could talk about was basketball. Maybe that's *why* I liked him.

LIBBY: This young man is a seminarian.

JAKE: Just so he doesn't try and tell me how to run my hospital.

LIBBY: By the way, Reese is coming for dinner.

JAKE: (*Disappointed.*) Oh, Libby! Why?

LIBBY: Because he's our son.

JAKE: But he's impossible! He's opinionated and self-righteous!

LIBBY: I wonder how he comes by that.

(*OPAL ENTERS.*)

OPAL: Miss Johnson, I finished with the cleaning.

LIBBY: Thank you, Opal. Are you going to be able to help me with dinner? We're having guests, you know.

OPAL: Brenda is coming home this evening. Vernon and I were hoping to meet her at the bus station and then go to church.

LIBBY: Why not bring her here? She can help with the dishes. And you'll have plenty of time to get to your church.

End of Freeview

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