

ACT ONE
SCENE ONE

(A CHRISTMAS SONG is playing on the radio. As the SONG ends, the VOICE OF A DISC JOCKEY is heard.)

RADIO D.J.

(On the Radio)

Hello Chicago. You've got your radio tuned to WKQD and this is the Chris Cullerton show. It's just past six thirty on this brisk New Year's Eve and the studio thermometer says twenty two degrees. If you're heading out to one of those fabulous New Year's Eve parties, remember to bundle up. The snow is expected to move out of the area by midnight, but it's still pretty messy out there. If you have to drive, please drive carefully. We now continue our last night of all holiday music with this seasonal favorite.

(Another SONG begins to play. The stage lights come up. We are in the living room/kitchen area of a typical, middle class Chicago condominium. The kitchen, complete with stove and refrigerator is located near the front door. A small dining table and two chairs are located nearby. A hallway leads off to the bedroom and the bathroom and a glass sliding door leads out onto a balcony. The room's furnishings include a sofa and matching chairs, a coffee table and a small entertainment center. A camera on a tripod and a photographer's backdrop are propped up in the corner.)

(After a few moments, smoke begins to fill the kitchen. It is coming from the stove. The SMOKE DETECTOR SOUNDS and ARCHER rushes into the room. He is an attractive man in his late thirties to mid-forties. He is fresh from the shower and dressed in his bathrobe.)

ARCHER

Shit. Shit.

(ARCHER opens the oven to let the smoke escape.)

(ARCHER grabs a spare cookie sheet, rushes to the sliding door, opens it and fans the air until the SMOKE DETECTOR BEEPING stops.)

(ARCHER opens the front door and yells out to his neighbors.)

False alarm. Everything's under control. Everything's fine. There's no fire. Sorry.

(ARCHER returns to the kitchen and removes the tray of burnt food from the oven. He realizes that the food can't be salvaged and tosses it into the sink.)

Fuck

(ARCHER picks up the cookie sheet and violently smashes it into his forehead.)

God Dammit!!

(ARCHER tosses the tray onto the counter and returns to his bedroom to finish getting dressed.)

(After a moment, KNOCKING can be heard at the front door and the SOUND OF KEYS TURNING. The front door opens and AILEEN peeks in.)

2.

AILEEN

(Yelling)

Hello? Hello? Archer?

(AILEEN enters the apartment. She is dressed in the uniform of a discount department store employee and carrying a change of clothes and a bag of groceries. She places the groceries on the counter and returns to the living room to turn off the radio.)

Arch are you here?

ARCHER

(Off Stage)

What?

AILEEN

It's me, Aileen. I let myself in.

ARCHER

(Off Stage)

Aileen? Don't come in here. I'm not dressed.

AILEEN

I've seen you naked before. It's no big deal.

ARCHER

(Off Stage)

Thanks.

AILEEN

It smells like something's burnin'. You want me to check?

ARCHER

(Off Stage)

You're too late.

AILEEN

I'm starvin'. What are we havin'?

ARCHER

(Off Stage)

What did you bring?

AILEEN

Salad.

ARCHER

(Off Stage)

We're having salad.

AILEEN

Salad is not a meal. It's a course.

ARCHER

(Off Stage)

A lot of people eat salad as a meal.

AILEEN

Well, I'm not one of those people. I'm from Kentucky. I need meat.

(ARCHER enters the room. He is now dressed in comfortable sweatpants and a t-shirt.)

ARCHER

I'm sorry. The pork chops burnt. I think there might be a little left over ham. Check the fridge. You could put it on your salad.

AILEEN

Well, thank God I brought crackers. And, they were an impulse buy.

ARCHER

You really do need to give me my keys back.

AILEEN

Nope.

ARCHER

I'm tired of you just walking in

AILEEN

I didn't just walk in. I knocked. I need a drink.

ARCHER

Refill mine, will you?

AILEEN

Should you be drinkin'?

ARCHER

I took myself off the pills.

AILEEN

Arch . . .

ARCHER

(Changing the subject)

You got off early. I thought they were starting that sale.

AILEEN

I don't want to talk about it. That job is really the worst. And, the people I have to deal with . . .

ARCHER

(Cutting her off)

I'm glad you don't want to talk about it.

AILEEN

But, it's bad . . . really bad.

ARCHER

It hasn't even been a month.

AILEEN

My supervisor called me into his office again. Some lady told customer service that I refused to help her.

ARCHER

And?

AILEEN

Well, I was going on my break. It's not funny. Mr. Thistle can be pretty intimidating, especially for an 80 year old. I guess I'm just not a people person.

ARCHER

You should have thought about that before taking that job.

AILEEN

I'm going to let you in on a little secret. The customer is never right.

(Handing him a glass)

Here.

ARCHER

Thanks.

AILEEN

You want some help with that?

ARCHER

I think I can open a bag.

AILEEN

Let me get the plates. What's new with you?

ARCHER

Nothing.

AILEEN

How are things at the mall?

ARCHER

Same as before you quit.

AILEEN

Archer, I didn't quit. And, I've been fired from places a lot nicer than Pretty as a Picture. But, I do miss singin' over that loud speaker. You think Sims would take me back?

ARCHER

Aileen, you told him to shove a tri-pod up his ass.

AILEEN

But, do you think he'd take me back?

ARCHER

No. Besides, you've got a job. You'll get used to it. Just give it more time.

AILEEN
How are things going with Dr. Bronstein? I'm sorry. I promised I wouldn't pry.
(AILEEN takes a large sip of her drink.)

ARCHER
You better pace yourself.

AILEEN
I need to get a good buzz goin' before meetin' Carson.

ARCHER
You guys having another fight?

AILEEN
No, he just hates it when I sit at the bar. He pretends he doesn't see me and won't serve me. He says I embarrass him.

ARCHER
That's because you do.

AILEEN
Everyone thinks he's gay. It annoys me.

ARCHER
Well, it is a gay bar.

AILEEN
I just like to mark my territory. Some of those queens are relentless.

ARCHER
I think you can trust him.
(Handing her a plate)

Here, take this.
(They both sit down to eat.)

AILEEN
Oh, I know Carson is straight. I just get a little insecure. Some of those guys are prettier than me. You need a refill?

ARCHER
I'm good.

AILEEN
I told him I would meet up with him by eight thirty. I hope that's OK.

ARCHER
Aileen, it's fine. I told you that you didn't even need to come over.

AILEEN
I just didn't want you to be alone. I figured that tonight might be a little . . . Well, you know.

ARCHER
It's been a year.

AILEEN
One year tonight.

ARCHER
And, I don't feel anything anymore.

AILEEN
Don't say that.

ARCHER
It's true. Aileen, I'm fine. Wanna check?
(ARCHER holds out his wrists.)

AILEEN
(Angrily)
Don't you dare joke about that. I'm serious. It's not funny.

ARCHER
I'm sorry

AILEEN
You have no idea how that fucked me up.

ARCHER
I said "I was sorry. "
(After a moment)
Are we OK?

AILEEN
Pass me the crackers. Hey, they're pretty good, aren't they? Look, if you put two of 'em together, you can make a little salad sandwich. You sure you won't join us tonight? We're goin' to a big party at McGiffen's.

ARCHER
No thanks.

AILEEN
You never go anywhere anymore. You're like a hermit, always cooped up here . . .

ARCHER
I go to work.

AILEEN
You know what I mean.

ARCHER
I like to be alone.

AILEEN
It's not healthy. Give me one good reason why you won't come.

Straight bars make me nervous. **ARCHER**

Fine. But, if you change your mind . . . **AILEEN**
(*Fighting a yawn*)

Sorry. I am so tired. I haven't been sleepin' well. I had that dream again last night, that one I told you about . . . that audition one.

You didn't tell me about any dream. **ARCHER**

I didn't? **AILEEN**

No. **ARCHER**

Hmmm. I wonder who I told it too, then? **AILEEN**
(*Thinking*)

I'm waiting. **ARCHER**
(*After a moment*)

Oh, sorry. Well, I keep havin' this dream that I'm up on stage in this big ol' Broadway theatre and they're havin' open auditions for some new musical. Suddenly, this deep voice booms over the intercom and asks me to sing. So, I launch into I Feel Pretty. You know, I usually kill on that one. Anyway, things go great for the first few bars and I've got 'em right where I want 'em. Then, I feel somethin' kinda strange in my mouth. It turns out that it's a tooth. My tooth has fallen out. Before I can do anything about it, another one falls out, then another.

God. **ARCHER**

I know. It's disturbin'. But, the show must go on. So, I keep singin'. By the last note, all of my teeth have fallen out. I look just like my Great Aunt Charla. She didn't have a tooth in her head and she refused to wear dentures. At dinner, she just kinda gumbed everything, like some sort of ancient insect. She always looked like she was tryin' to swallow her cheeks. Anyway, that deep voice comes on again, thanks me for comin' and tells me that I have an amazing voice but they are lookin' for an actress with teeth. Then, the stage manager hands me a chocolate bundt cake and I wake up. What do you think it means?

I don't know. **ARCHER**

It has to mean somethin'. I've had it a few times. **AILEEN**

Maybe it means you should get dental insurance . . . or that you have a bundt cake in your future. **ARCHER**

It's not funny. It's exhausting. **AILEEN**

I know. That Zoloft I was on was giving me some strange dreams, too. **ARCHER**

Sex dreams? I love a good sex dream. **AILEEN**

No, but I do keep having this recurring one. It's weird. I'm walking home from the El. It's dark and I'm all alone. Then, I hear someone or something behind me. I don't know what it is. When I turn around, I don't see anything. But, I know something's there. It keeps getting closer and closer so I began to run . . . faster and faster. Then, I turn a corner, dart out into the street and get hit by a CTA bus. **ARCHER**

God. **AILEEN**

It gets worse. After I'm hit, my body is thrown up into the air and I land face down on the street. I can't move. I know my bones are broken 'cause I can see one punching out thru my skin. But, I remember that I don't feel a thing . . . no pain . . . nothing. The bus doesn't stop or anything. It just keeps going. And, there is nobody around. I'm just laying there in the street. Then, I hear that noise again . . . that noise from whatever is chasing me. As it gets closer, I manage to turn my head. And, just as it's about to touch me, I wake up. **ARCHER**

Oh. **AILEEN**

And for some reason, I think it was Brian. Why would he be chasing me? What do you think it means? **ARCHER**

I have no idea. Do you eat anything weird before you go to bed? **AILEEN**

No. **ARCHER**

Do you watch a scary movie or somethin'? **AILEEN**

No, just CNN. **ARCHER**

AILEEN
Oh, I love Anderson Cooper. He has the greatest hair, don't you think? Oh, that reminds me, can I ask you a favor? I was wonderin' if you'd help me with my hair. I wanna wear it up tonight and I can never get it to stay the way you can.

ARCHER
Sure.

AILEEN
I brought a change of clothes, too. I'm not takin' any chances. I want to kick off this year right.

ARCHER
Any word on your callback?

AILEEN
Oh, shit. I should be checkin' my phone. It's still on vibrate.

(Getting her cell phone)
They don't like it when we take personal calls on the floor. Can you believe that? It's like they don't even care that we have personal lives. Your reception sucks in here. I only got one bar.

ARCHER
It's better by the balcony.

AILEEN
(Checking her phone)
Nothin'. This waitin' is drivin' me crazy. They promised they would announce the cast by today.

ARCHER
Aileen, It's New Years Eve. I don't think anyone is going to call tonight.

AILEEN
Do you think I should call them? I have their number.

ARCHER
No.

AILEEN
This actin' stuff is a lot harder than I thought it would be. Sometimes, I wish I had a real career like you.

ARCHER
Mall photographer is not a career.

AILEEN
At least you get paid to be creative.

ARCHER
There is nothing creative about shooting pictures of babies in silly costumes.

AILEEN
I guess. Hey, I need you to do new head-shots for me. I think mine might be the reason I ain't gettin' cast.

ARCHER
I told you not to wear the boa.

AILEEN
They just don't seem to appreciate me here in Chicago.

ARCHER
At least you got a callback. That says something.

AILEEN
The Berwyn Community Players ain't exactly The Steppenwolf. But, it did go well. When I was singin' the line "Give me my rose and my glove," I looked over at the director and she seemed impressed. So did all the other nuns.

ARCHER
Aileen, if you don't get this part . . .

AILEEN
You don't think I got it, do you?

ARCHER
I don't know. But if you don't, promise me you won't take it personally.

AILEEN
I won't. I never do.

ARCHER
Ha!

AILEEN
What's that supposed to mean?

ARCHER
Annie.

AILEEN
Well, that was different. I would've been a great Grace or Lily, but Cecille? Come on. She does nothing.

ARCHER
She picks out all the clothes.

AILEEN
It's not funny. You don't know a thing about show business. There are small parts.

ARCHER
Well, you do need to start somewhere.

AILEEN
Just say it. You think I'm too old to play Laurie.

I didn't say anything. **ARCHER**

But, you were thinkin' it. Many of the early Oklahoma settlers were older gals. It's a fact. Google it. **AILEEN**

I believe you. **ARCHER**

Then, what? **AILEEN**

I just don't think I can take another month of your being depressed. **ARCHER**

Look who's talkin'. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. That was a terrible thing to say. **AILEEN**

No, it wasn't. It's true. You've got to quit worrying about me. **ARCHER**

I can't help it. **AILEEN**

I'm not gonna try anything again. **ARCHER**

Promise? **AILEEN**

I promise. **ARCHER**

I really wish you'd come with us. Maybe you could meet a nice guy. I'll bet Dr. Bronstein would approve of that, wouldn't he? **AILEEN**

I'm taking the fifth. **ARCHER**

But, why? We tell each other everything. **AILEEN**

No, we don't. **ARCHER**

Well, I tell you everything. **AILEEN**

And most of it, I don't want to know. **ARCHER**

Because you are a prude. **AILEEN**

I am not a prude. I'm not. **ARCHER**

Then, tell me somethin' personal about yourself. And by personal, I mean sexual. **AILEEN**

Why does personal have to mean sexual? **ARCHER**

Because sexual is always more interestin'. Come on. It's nothin' to be embarrassed about. Sex is natural. Why if Carson and I don't do it at least two times a week, I can't focus. **AILEEN**

Too much information. **ARCHER**

I'm serious. I can't concentrate on a thing. My mind starts driftin' and my vision gets blurry. Remember when I wrecked the Citation? That was durrin' the two weeks Carson went to visit his folks in Alabama. I was sittin' behind the wheel and started thinkin' about him. Suddenly, everything went cloudy. I didn't even see the red light. And, remember how I kept lockin' myself out of my apartment? God, those were two of the longest weeks of my life. I don't mind tellin' you, I killed a lot of kittens. **AILEEN**

What? **ARCHER**

You know. **AILEEN**

I don't know. **ARCHER**

Yes you do. **AILEEN**

I have no idea what you are talking about. **ARCHER**

Killing kittens. I told you that story. **AILEEN**

No, you didn't. I think I would remember. **ARCHER**

Hmm. I wonder who I told it too then? **AILEEN**
(Thinking)

I'm waiting. **ARCHER**

AILEEN
Oh, yeah. Well, when my little brother was about fifteen my Mom walked in on him when he was havin' his . . . his . . . his private time.

His what? **ARCHER**

His private time. **AILEEN**

What does that mean? **ARCHER**

He had taken matters into his own hands. **AILEEN**

I still have no idea what you are talking about. **ARCHER**

Are you backwards or what? He was playin' with himself . . . wackin' off. **AILEEN**

Oh. **ARCHER**

AILEEN
And, mom went crazy. She screamed so loud our neighbor Ol' Miss Lottie took shelter in her storm cellar. She thought it was the tornado siren. Anyway, after she composed herself and talked to Pastor Martin on the phone, she sat us both down and told us that our bodies were temples and it was a sin to touch ourselves.

Of course she did. We got that in school. **ARCHER**

Then, she said that every time someone abuses their body, God sends an angel down to kill a kitten. **AILEEN**

What? That's horrible. **ARCHER**

She's always been dramatic. I think that's where I get it. **AILEEN**

What a terrible thing to tell a kid. **ARCHER**

Lucky for me I've always hated cats. **AILEEN**