

FOR MASTER OF FINE ARTS THESIS

NATHAN'S SECRET GIRLFRIEND: A Christmas Play

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Characters:

KELLY, 22

STEPHANIE, 26

NATHAN, 28

GEORGE, 55, their father

We are in George Miller's home in Fort Collins, Colorado. The front entry of the ranch style home is flanked by a dining room and living room. It was decorated in audacious red and green wallpaper by George's late wife, Leslie. Shelves that once held knickknacks are cleared, making the space empty.

In the living room, a pathetic plastic miniature Christmas tree sits on a side table next to the sofa. Boxes of lights wait to be strung up. There's a well stocked wooden bar: The Millers are not amateur drinkers.

The dining room table is currently covered in oven racks and baking sheets piled high with hundreds of sugar cookies. Grocery bags of frosting and Christmas themed entertainment supplies clutter the table and the sofa in the living room.

ACT ONE.

KELLY, age 22, wears a ruffled apron as she frosts a snowflake cookie with a tube of store bought icing. Kelly's older sister, STEPHANIE nibbles on a cookie in disgust.

STEPHANIE

It's a shame to use artificial, this frosting is disgusting. I want the real thing. Something authentic!

KELLY

Dad even threw out the good china and her recipes. I wouldn't have agreed to go to Brock's for Thanksgiving if I knew he was going to trash her decorations.

STEPHANIE

He did a pretty good job throwing out Leslie's stuff. I would have driven up from Boulder if I knew he was going to dump her possessions, I could have used some kitchen stuff for my apartment.

KELLY

I'm doing the cookies from memory and I don't know how she made the frosting. You'll have to deal with the store bought kind. The fake frosting is bright. Like an ornament on the tree.

STEPHANIE

Plastic almost.

KELLY

What's with you? You've been cagey ever since you got here. Another broken heart? Who was it this time: the girl from the co-op, the lady who teaches your pottery class, or the chick who plays Santa's elf at the mall?

STEPHANIE

I'm happy being single for once.

KELLY

Then be cheerful.

STEPHANIE

Kelly, I'm worried about Dad. I was looking on his computer and-

KELLY

Stephanie! Don't wipe that frosting on the table. I'm not cleaning up after your messes.

STEPHANIE

You clean up after George.

KELLY

Dad can't clean on his own.

STEPHANIE

I get that Leslie's suicide weighs heavily on him, but really, it's like hammering the nails in the coffin.

STEPHANIE

Is that her apron?

KELLY

It's the only thing I was able to save. Just help me with the cookies, I've made twenty dozen batches for the neighbors, but they still need frosting.

STEPHANIE

You're mom's mini-me! You've become a manic cookie slave like her. Though she never would have used artificial frosting.

KELLY

There's a lot on my plate with school. Store bought icing seemed like a good idea at the time.

STEPHANIE

(*Alarmed,*) Why are there five place settings? I thought Brock was at his folks? George will like that...

KELLY

Brock's in Nebraska. Dad will be out of sorts, and I don't want to give him any reason to have a melt down.

STEPHANIE

Then who's coming?

KELLY

...I wasn't supposed to tell you.

STEPHANIE

Who's coming to dinner?

KELLY

Nathan made me promise. A promise is a promise.

STEPHANIE

Nathan made you promise what? Who is he bringing?!

KELLY

He has a girlfriend.

STEPHANIE

Not Nathan?! A girl? Nathan has a girlfriend and I don't? How is that possible? Do you think she has big boobs? Do think she's really old? Who'd pick him? Why's he bringing her? How rude! What's her name?

KELLY

I didn't press him for it.

STEPHANIE

I can't believe he'd spring this on us on Christmas Eve! What do you know about her?

KELLY

She's a mystery.

STEPHANIE

There's no reason he should tell you everything. I should be besties with him, you're so much younger than us. He doesn't even follow me on Twitter.

KELLY

Nathan doesn't use social networks. Who would he network with?

STEPHANIE

He follows you on Twitter. Why does he hate me? He hides his feelings worse than Leslie used to. He's a reclusive cyborg. He thinks he's better than us. A superior life form. Why didn't you tell me?!

KELLY

I shouldn't have said anything!

STEPHANIE

Does he think I'm not going to be stoked? I'm stoked. Of course I'm stoked. He's blocked me out of his life since he moved to Jersey. New Jersey ruins people.

KELLY

No he hasn't.

STEPHANIE

New Jersey ruins people.

KELLY

He's awkward.

STEPHANIE

When I told him I dropped out of grad school, he didn't return my voice mail. Has still not acknowledged it.

KELLY

It's not Nathan I'm worried about. You don't know how bad he's gotten.

STEPHANIE

When you said George threw everything out, I didn't think you meant all the holiday stuff. All the decorations gone.

KELLY

All the fancy cooking stuff gone. There's not even a tablecloth or placemat. The house has never been more empty. I think he's acting out. You know some depressed people give away their possessions before they- never mind. I keep a close eye on him. I'm pretending it didn't happen, especially with Nathan's guest coming.

STEPHANIE

Why tonight?! Not with all the stuff I found out about Dad. Seeing him float around here gives me the spooks, and when I was on his computer, I found-

KELLY

-Maybe if you were around the house more...

STEPHANIE

You know George gets worse when I'm here.

KELLY

He's always like that now.

STEPHANIE

When I got home this afternoon I had to update my blog on George's computer and I checked his search history. He's been searching stuff like The Hemlock Society. Suicide resources. No "how to" web sites. Just pages on the subject.

KELLY

Why didn't you tell me the minute you found out?

STEPHANIE

I've been trying to. George needs to be warned about Nathan's mysterious girlfriend so he doesn't implode.

KELLY

You don't know how things have been here.

STEPHANIE

You're a saint for dealing with George, alright? I don't like seeing him full of ennui, those weepy eyes like a puppy.

KELLY

He stares out the window watching the snow for hours a day. The only pants he wears when he gets home from work are his old sweatpants with the holes in them. Grown men shouldn't wear sweatpants with holes in them. Brock and I got home from our Thanksgiving trip and he was tearing down the wallpaper. Trying to at least. Do you think he's a danger to himself? I barely recognize him. But, maybe Nathan coming home will be a good thing. We need a Christmas miracle. A surprise will cheer him up.

STEPHANIE

Or it could send him over the edge.

Suddenly, GEORGE, 55 year old patriarch of the Miller family, appears from the hallway. They turn to see him.

KELLY

Why are you sneaking?

GEORGE

I'm not sneaking. It's my house.

George grabs a few cookies and sits on the couch. The girls are awkward.

KELLY

I put bourbon in the cookies. Like mom always did.

GEORGE

Gee... I never noticed the booze before. Too bad you girls never learned how to cook.

KELLY

I cook for you daily. I'm cooking Christmas dinner as we speak.

STEPHANIE

Nathan has a surprise. He told Kelly. Not me. ...He's bringing home a woman.

GEORGE

Nathan?

STEPHANIE

Is bringing a woman. For Christmas. They'll be here any moment. ...Like a significant girlfriend.

KELLY

Nathan told me to keep it a surprise.

STEPHANIE

Why didn't Nathan tell us? Hoboken has ruined him.

KELLY

He's nervous. It's not like he has experience in this department.

STEPHANIE

Who would date Nathan? He's such a freak, why would he bring someone without telling us, especially tonight?

GEORGE

Your brother must have his reasons.

STEPHANIE

You treat Nathan differently than me and Kelly.

GEORGE

You're different people and deserve to be treated as such.

STEPHANIE

What exactly did he tell you about this chick?

KELLY

Nothing.

GEORGE

Then it will be a surprise.

George nibbles another cookie.

You're sure your mother put Bourbon in her sugar cookies?
I don't remember them being such alcoholic confections. When
she baked the house filled up with that smell, that sweet
Christmas smell. I miss that smell, sugar and nutmeg and a
promise of deliciousness to come.

Nathan enters from the front door
with two bags.

NATHAN

Season's greetings.

KELLY

Nathan! You're early!

Kelly rushes to embrace him.

NATHAN

Steph, It's good to see you.

GEORGE

Nathan.

STEPHANIE

Merry Christmas, bro.

George takes the bags from his son
as they look at Nathan expectantly.

KELLY

So you got here alright?

NATHAN

The flight from Newark was great.

STEPHANIE

I would have picked you up in Denver on my way into town.

NATHAN

The rental is nice. Compact. We get a little more freedom.
Hi Dad. (Pause.) Smells good.

STEPHANIE

Doesn't it? Kelly's been cooking a big meal for everyone to share.

GEORGE

Where is she?

KELLY

Dad!

NATHAN

You told?

STEPHANIE

Of course she told.

NATHAN

Figures.

KELLY

It came out at the last second. Steph wanted to tell Dad.

NATHAN

I wanted it to be a surprise.

STEPHANIE

It's still a surprise.

KELLY

I had to tell.

NATHAN

I know, it's only, I dunno.

KELLY

Nathan, we're eager to meet whomever you've brought.

NATHAN

About that...

STEPHANIE

Where is she?

NATHAN

Give me a second.

KELLY

It's cold.

NATHAN

I need to explain.

STEPHANIE

Did she dump you?

NATHAN

She wouldn't dump me.

STEPHANIE

Get her in here.

NATHAN

There are some things you should know...

STEPHANIE

Did you leave the car on?

NATHAN

No, but it's warm enough.

KELLY

It's freezing out there!

NATHAN

She'll be fine. I promise.

KELLY

It's super cold.

STEPHANIE

Don't be an ass, go get her!

NATHAN

Will you please listen to me for a minute. This is hard to explain...

STEPHANIE

Spit it out!

GEORGE

Get on with it.

KELLY

We're waiting patiently.

NATHAN

Thanks. I know it's been too long since I came home. I wish I could pull away from work, but things have been going so well and I can't always get away. I should have been here last year. I should have. But I'm here now. The thing is.... Although it's unconventional, and although I know the holidays are important, and this one in particular is a milestone for our family, I have to share something with you, and I need you to know more about what is important to me. Because who knows, it could be important to you too. Therefore, I need your patience... You might freak out. I'll understand if you do. But please don't judge this.

KELLY

Nathan, we love you.

NATHAN

Maybe that's why this is extra hard. OK. So... I brought someone home with me. Dad, I'm especially excited for you to meet her. She's someone special.

STEPHANIE

That someone special is going to catch hypothermia out there. She's going to freeze her nipples off.

KELLY

It always has to be about nipples, doesn't it Steph?

GEORGE

When do we meet her?

NATHAN

Hold on. First you have to promise something. All of you.

STEPHANIE

Promise?

NATHAN

So... she's been an important figure in my life.

KELLY

Awesome.

NATHAN

...But it might take you a while to get used to her.

KELLY

We can't wait!

NATHAN

...She's different.

STEPHANIE

Different is good.

NATHAN

She's not what you'd expect. And your first reaction will likely be strong. You might be confused.

KELLY

Don't worry about us.

NATHAN

It's only... seriously now, I'm asking you to promise to not judge the situation right off the bat.

KELLY

Of course.

NATHAN

You'll judge her at first maybe...

KELLY

We won't.

NATHAN

She's been with me for three years, and I probably should have mentioned her before now, but here she is.

STEPHANIE

Three years?

KELLY

You haven't mentioned her in three years?

NATHAN

It's serious. I'm serious, Ok?

KELLY

We're serious too.

NATHAN

You have to promise. Promise to not judge her.

KELLY

Promise.

NATHAN

Dad, you promise?

GEORGE

Sure.

STEPHANIE

We all promise.

KELLY

Go get her. She's got to be cold!

STEPHANIE

Poor thing.

KELLY

Nathan, it's negative out there.

NATHAN

Ok. Ok. Ok. I'll get her. I wanted to preface-

KELLY

Nathan.

NATHAN

Just-

STEPHANIE

Quit stalling and bring her in.

NATHAN

You all promise?

GEORGE/KELLY/STEPHANIE

We promise.

NATHAN

Ok. Good. Thanks. We'll be right back.

Nathan exits through the front
door.

KELLY

Three years?

STEPHANIE

Do you think she's a Mormon?

KELLY

Let's hope not.

STEPHANIE

She could be black. What if she's black? Or Asian?

KELLY

We're not a racist family.

STEPHANIE

You obviously don't read my blog, or you'd know I'm a rights
activist. I took two semesters of African American studies.

KELLY

At the University of Colorado.

STEPHANIE

An African American studies class can still be legitimate if taught by a white person. I loved those classes.

GEORGE

I hope so, I paid for them.

STEPHANIE

Bet she's a he. Some guy dressed in drag. That would actually be cool.

KELLY

What's taking them so long? I can't see her from the window.

STEPHANIE

This chick must have antennae or an extra boob if Nathan's this worked up.

KELLY

They're coming! They're coming! (They clear away from to door.) Nathan's nervous. I'm sure she's a very nice girl.

Nathan enters carrying a life sized, anatomically-proportionate, plastic doll dressed in a lovely dress and winter clothing.

NATHAN

This is Jiao Yi.

The family checks in with each other. Pause.

NATHAN

She's a girlfriend doll.

Longer pause. No one quite knows how to react. The tension is thicker than fruit cake.

NATHAN

...Don't worry. I know she's a doll, an inanimate object. It's a companionship thing.

KELLY

Can I take your coat, Nathan?

NATHAN

Will you take Jiao Yi's coat too, Kelly? I don't want to wrinkle it. It was expensive. Might as well make ourselves comfortable.

STEPHANIE

Do we have to talk to her like she's alive? Cuz, that will make me uncomfortable.

NATHAN

Of course not.

STEPHANIE

Praise be!

NATHAN

Does this have to be a big deal?

KELLY

Did I see this in a movie once?

STEPHANIE

What are you doing?

NATHAN

Introducing my family to an important part of my life. I hope you can appreciate the awkwardness on my end.

STEPHANIE

What does one of these plastic prostitutes cost ya?

NATHAN

I'll have you know Jiao Yi is a doll that improves a person's quality of life. She provides a sense of stability, companionship, and intimacy. Mock me all you want, but you're being close minded.

The family stands around as Kelly
collects the coats.

STEPHANIE

And she's your girlfriend?

NATHAN

Essentially.

STEPHANIE

Like an imaginary girlfriend? I'm only trying to understand.

NATHAN

She's a real doll.

STEPHANIE

You talk to her?

NATHAN

Sometimes.

STEPHANIE

You know she's never going to talk back?

NATHAN

Duh, Stephanie. She's a doll. She can't talk. But she's valuable. Respect her. Please make the effort? It's important.

STEPHANIE

Tell us Nathan, How *did* you two "meet?"

NATHAN

I found her online. I hadn't done anything like it before. But I took the plunge, and here we are. Three fulfilling years later. Couldn't be happier.

KELLY

We want you to be happy.

GEORGE

I'd be happier with a drink.

George pours himself and Nathan a
glass of Scotch.

NATHAN

I know you never expected this. But having a companion has made my life better. And it's not as uncommon as you think.

STEPHANIE

I feel like it's pretty uncommon.

NATHAN

In Colorado. And in most parts of the United States. But it's not uncommon in China or Japan.

KELLY

Lots of people do this in China and Japan?

NATHAN

A big enough population that there's a market for it.

STEPHANIE

There's a market for everything.

NATHAN

You can Google it.

GEORGE

Where did you, find out about this, opportunity?

NATHAN

I read an article in an airplane magazine. And it got me thinking. And then when I was in Beijing on business I saw some guys out with their companions. On public transit. In a restaurant. They seemed happy. Fulfilled. Comfortable.

STEPHANIE

You take her out in public?

NATHAN

Not before this trip.

STEPHANIE

This doll is offensive to humanity. She's an object of orientalism and her breasts are like Christmas hams!

NATHAN

If she doesn't affect you, why does she concern you? She doesn't hurt anyone. Artificial companions are helping people across the world in myriad forms. In fact, my selection is modest on the scale of dolls available. Visionary engineers are even crafting robotic companions to help people in need. It's where things are headed, believe it or not. I have a constitutional right to pursue my happiness, don't I?

STEPHANIE

You're proud.

NATHAN

There was an adjustment period when I first brought a companion into my life. But over the past three years I've become a new man. More confident in myself, more savvy in the boardroom, more decisive in my success. Dating women is expensive. Albeit I've made some sacrifices, but I'm saving money in this economy. I wouldn't have made the professional progress I've accomplished without her, that's a fact. Do you have questions? Ask anything.

STEPHANIE

Does she have a working cooter?

George spit-sprays his Scotch.

KELLY

Stephanie!

NATHAN

It's no big deal.

KELLY

I don't want to know.

Kelly cleans George's mess.

NATHAN

Jiao Yi has a complete female anatomy. With working sexual parts.

STEPHANIE

Like silicone?

KELLY

Eww!

STEPHANIE

He said ask anything.

NATHAN

No use putting it off. I'm not uncomfortable.

KELLY

I'm uncomfortable.

NATHAN

Having someone like Jiao Yi, it isn't, all about, sex. It's only a fraction of it. Some artificial companions don't even have sexual anatomy. There's far more to it than sexual recreation.

STEPHANIE

You take her to dinner and a movie first?

NATHAN

I treat her well and she treats me well. When I get home from work, I might turn on the TV for a little. Catch up on the news. A rerun of The Daily Show. Jiao Yi watches TV with me. She loves Jon Stewart.

STEPHANIE

At least she's not a Republican, am I right?

Stephanie punches her brother on
the arm.

NATHAN

You don't have to punch me, we're not children.

STEPHANIE

Waiting for the day you'll learn to hit back.

NATHAN

I wouldn't it a girl. I have respect for women.

STEPHANIE

You're a chauvinist. Jiao Yi. Case in point.

GEORGE

What else do you do with her, besides watching TV?

NATHAN

I take care of her. Shop for her. Brush or braid her hair. Doodle her name as I do the crossword puzzle. I make itunes playlists with her in mind and I absolutely love to dance with her! My girlfriend doesn't get in the way of work. She doesn't distract me from business and she's there when I need her.

KELLY

So, she's a companion, that you take care of?

GEORGE

You don't mind that she's plastic?

NATHAN

Have you ever had someone in your life whom you just had to lavish attention on? Someone you couldn't help but cherish, indulge, and caress. Someone in whom you saw a reflection of yourself, through the care you gave them? What you get out of love is what you put into it. I'm glad I could finally introduce her to you. I think you'll warm up to her.

GEORGE

What's her name again?

NATHAN

Jiao Yi.

GEORGE

Jow Wee. What an unusual name.

NATHAN

Jiao Yi. It's not uncommon in China. That's where she's from.

GEORGE

Interesting.

STEPHANIE

Is she using him to get a green card?

KELLY

Steph!

GEORGE

(Bowing seriously,) It's a pleasure to have you in our home,
Jow...

STEPHANIE

I need some wine.

Stephanie retreats to the kitchen
on her phone. Nathan is getting
upset.

KELLY

Welcome home, Nathan. I washed your sheets and made your bed.

NATHAN

You didn't have to go to that trouble.

KELLY

You don't come home often.

NATHAN

You'll have to come visit Jersey. No mountain top views, but
man, that skyline. Hoboken is perfect, close enough to the
city to feel a part of it, but far enough from the mayhem to
be apart from it. A great place to call home when I'm not
traveling for business. But I'm glad to be back in Fort
Collins, I figure it's important, since Dad didn't want any
of us to come to Thanksgiving.

GEORGE

You missed last Christmas and the past four Thanksgivings.
Glad you could clear your schedule.

NATHAN

It's hard with work. Money doesn't take a holiday. Global business doesn't cease just because the Christians are busy stuffing their faces. But it's important, I've been worried about you, so I'm glad to be here. And so is Jiao Yi.

Nathan squeezes Jiao Yi affectionately. Kelly plasters a smile on her face. George is bewildered.

NATHAN

I'm going to freshen up and put the suitcases in my old room. Unless you object to Jiao Yi staying in my room?

GEORGE

No. No, it's fine.

Nathan escorts Jiao Yi through to the hallway.

KELLY

You never let my boyfriend stay over in my room.

GEORGE

It's a little different.

KELLY

Why? Because I'm a girl? Or because Brock is a human being?

Stephanie barges in.

STEPHANIE

What are we going to do?

KELLY

Play along.

STEPHANIE

You want me to pretend it's not crazy he lugged that thing all the way from New Jersey?! What's wrong with him?

GEORGE

I don't get it.

KELLY

He knows it's a doll. When he called and told me- I never thought- he seemed so, happy. This is so weird.

STEPHANIE

He's spitting in our faces and dancing on mom's grave. He's more bonkers than Leslie was!

Kelly comforts her father and pours
him another drink.

KELLY

You will not speak about her in that way!

STEPHANIE

I don't want that trash in the house. Do you think he's on drugs? He'd have to be on drugs to think this doll is real.

GEORGE

I don't get it.

KELLY

Something must really be wrong. Maybe we should call my therapist and see if she can recommend something?

STEPHANIE

Nathan must be in need of help we can't give. He's toting around an inanimate object as his romantic companion on Christmas Eve. I don't want that thing in this house! Not tonight!

GEORGE

I really don't get it.

KELLY

Imagine what people were thinking when they saw him on the plane, and in the airport...

STEPHANIE

Would she count as a carry on?

KELLY

He must have bought her a ticket.

STEPHANIE

What a waste of money! Get that thing out of here!

KELLY

Keep your voice down.

STEPHANIE

What? Is Nathan's plastic geisha going to hear me?

KELLY

Dad, I'm worried.

GEORGE

Don't look at me. I don't get it. It's... strange.

STEPHANIE

Strange? It's flippin' unbelievable. This shit's crazier than Herman Cain. He has an imaginary girlfriend. He brought a sex doll with him all the way from Hoboken. Disgusting. Plastic cooch.

KELLY

Make her stop!

STEPHANIE

It's probly got a tight little ass hole too.

GEORGE

Two of my three children are perverts.

KELLY

Don't use vulgar language on Christmas.

STEPHANIE

Would you rather I bring a life-sized Barbie? I know it hurts because it's family, but there is obviously a legitimate psychiatric concern on the table.

GEORGE

All I want on the table is Christmas dinner.

KELLY

If we handle this wrong we're going to have an even bigger problem on our hands. Nathan's last Christmas, two years ago, he had a melt down when Mom pushed him about getting a girlfriend. He went berserk, and left for the airport a sniveling mess without saying goodbye to her. It's why he didn't come home last year. If we ever want to see him again, we'll have to treat this with some semblance of respect. He's sensitive.

STEPHANIE

You're as crazy as him. I'm not a psychoanalyst, but maybe Nathan's brain chemistry is imbalanced. These things are hereditary, right? He could be crazy. I hope he's not dangerous too.

KELLY

If we confront Nathan, and freak out, he'll go nuts.

STEPHANIE

It's all pretty nutty to me.

GEORGE

I don't get it, but I want to know what he thinks he's doing. I'm going to put this on some ice.

George exits to the kitchen with
his drink.

KELLY

He made us promise to be considerate. Let's get through dinner. He seems relaxed, it could be fine, right?

STEPHANIE

You think we should treat this like its acceptable?

KELLY

What else can we do? He made us promise.

STEPHANIE

I didn't know what I was promising to. That's not fair.

KELLY

Be patient and open minded. At least til we know more.

STEPHANIE

I said this was an awful idea from the beginning.

KELLY

Will he try to bring her to church with us tomorrow morning?

STEPHANIE

We're going to church?

KELLY

We go every year.

STEPHANIE

Didn't go so well last year...

KELLY

It's not up for discussion.

STEPHANIE

Mom made us go to Church so she could end herself. Faked a migraine and swallowed her pills while we were taking communion on Christmas morning.

STEPHANIE

With or without the China doll, I'm not churchin' it tomorrow. Got it?

KELLY

Church on Christmas morning is an important family tradition.

STEPHANIE

It appears we're throwing tradition out the window. Or have you not noticed that Nathan's girlfriend is polycarbonate? He's a delusional jerk-off. Bringing that thing in this house shows how much he despises us. It's filthy and offensive.

Nathan and his girlfriend return
from the hallway.

NATHAN

Sorry you feel that way Steph, but I know what I'm doing. You're being close minded. This is for the best.

KELLY

Nathan, I'm worried about dad.

NATHAN

Me too. He barely looked me in the eye.

STEPHANIE

I think that's because of your companion, dipstick.

KELLY

Be civil! Tonight is hard enough.

NATHAN

...So Steph, you dropped out of school?

STEPHANIE

So Nathan, you stopped dating humans?

NATHAN

Why do you have to be like that? Always picking fights.

STEPHANIE

I want that thing out of the house. Why haven't you been home in a year? Why weren't you here last Christmas? Why did you bring a sex toy home on the anniversary of mom's suicide? What are you thinking?

KELLY

Stephanie, if you don't shut your mouth, I'm sending you to your room.

STEPHANIE

You can't do that.

KELLY

I run this house. I'm in charge of Christmas this year. And you promised Nathan respect. We have bigger fish to fry than you two being petty.

NATHAN

If you feel uncomfortable, it's your problem.

KELLY

Maybe she could stay in your room while we warm up to the idea?

STEPHANIE

Perfect, he can screw her while you cook dinner.

NATHAN

You'll come around. You'll learn to like her.

KELLY

Nathan, listen. Dad might be in trouble. ...Like mom was.

STEPHANIE

George has been googling suicide resources. I don't know what to make of it.

NATHAN

You haven't confronted him about it?

KELLY

You want to try to bring that up with him?

NATHAN

I don't know how to talk to him.

STEPHANIE

It's not unreasonable for him to be depressed since Leslie passed. Maybe he's finally dealing with his feelings. Keep tabs on him.

NATHAN

Kelly, I thought you said you had everything under control with Dad. I thought you said he was getting better.

KELLY

Apparently I don't have the snooping capabilities Stephanie has. I don't know what goes on in his head.

NATHAN

He must be lonely. Do you spend enough time with him?

KELLY

I'm here every day, what are you insinuating?

NATHAN

You're obviously not enough, Dad needs another solution to make a break through. You can't raise him out of depression on your own. You didn't even catch these web sites.

KELLY

You think I'd let Dad kill himself?

STEPHANIE

I don't want a repeat holiday funeral. What are we going to do with George?

George returns.

GEORGE

You and your doll settling in?

KELLY

Don't spoil your dinner with drinks.

GEORGE

I'm not spoiling anything, I'm getting in the holiday spirit with some spirits.

NATHAN

Dad, it really is great to see you. You look good. And the house looks cleaner than ever. Kelly and you seem to be getting along nicely.

GEORGE

It's good you could be here. I enjoyed Thanksgiving by myself. Wouldn't have gotten so much done around the house had we been occupied with Thanksgiving.

KELLY

I should have stayed home and stopped you from throwing Mom's stuff out.

GEORGE

I thought you supported my cleaning spree.

KELLY

Whatever makes you happy.

STEPHANIE

I was shocked when I came home and saw how empty this place is. The basement is like a gymnasium, or a mausoleum. Did you have to get rid of everything?

KELLY

If you kept the holiday stuff, I wouldn't have had to get new chintzy decorations from the Dollar Tree and Target.

NATHAN

The decorations look great, not like Mom's annual extravaganza, but it's still nice.

STEPHANIE

Kelly's cookies are great. You have to try Kelly's cookies, Nathan. Boozy cookies.

GEORGE

They're not as good as Leslie's. Those cookies could convert you to Christianity. Home made frosting. The real deal.

KELLY

I tried to remember her recipe.

Kelly serves Nathan a cookie.

NATHAN

With a little bit of Brandy baked in?

KELLY

Bourbon.

NATHAN

Brandy. Just a dash, along with the vanilla extract.

STEPHANIE

That explains it.

KELLY

Brandy, not Bourbon?

NATHAN

Afraid so.

KELLY

Screwed that up...

NATHAN

Cocktail cookies. Unique.

GEORGE

Is there anything wrong with wanting to live simply? I got rid of some clutter, so?

KELLY

Nothing got moved or changed for ten months and then poof, gone without warning. To a dump, not Goodwill! I couldn't put up any of her things, the garlands, nativity scenes, quilts, stockings! The only remnants of her are these ugly walls. Like our family moved out.

GEORGE

What's done is done.

NATHAN

You know, I never realized Mom's wallpaper was so garish.

STEPHANIE

It's bad.

GEORGE

She had bold taste.

KELLY

With so many Tchotchkes everywhere, you could barely see the wallpaper. It blended in.

NATHAN

This paper should go, Dad.

KELLY

I'm not ready to part with the wallpaper. We have nothing to remember her by, since Dad destroyed everything. Why erase every trace of her?

GEORGE

It's my house. I'll do what I see fit.

KELLY

I have to take care of things in the kitchen. Steph?

STEPHANIE

Off to do women's work. You boys behave.

Stephanie follows Kelly into the
kitchen.

NATHAN

You know what one of my favorite things to do with Jiao Yi is?

GEORGE

Do I want to know?

NATHAN

She's a great dancer. Come here. Stand up.

He grabs Jiao Yi and gestures for his father to join him in the middle of the room. Nathan bends her arms into waltzing position.

NATHAN

Here. Put your hands around her waist.

GEORGE

Like this?

NATHAN

Hold her like a woman.

GEORGE

Tai Chi's pretty sturdy, isn't she?

NATHAN

Hold Jiao Yi like you really mean it.

GEORGE

(Trying to hand the doll back to his son,) I have two left feet.

NATHAN

She won't mind.

GEORGE

Son, I'm not comfortable.

NATHAN

Show me your moves.

GEORGE

I don't have any moves, it's been decades.

NATHAN

Go back to when you were twenty and you wanted nothing more than to sweep mom off her feet.

GEORGE

I dunno...

NATHAN

Find the romance inside of you.

GEORGE

(He gets into position.) Like this?

NATHAN

Pull her in close to you, so she knows she's in good hands.

GEORGE

I feel ridiculous.

NATHAN

Dance your troubles away.

Nathan plays "Baby Its Cold
Outside" from his iPhone and
cajoles his father into swaying
back and forth with the doll.

GEORGE

I haven't danced since my wedding night.

NATHAN

You can do it.

GEORGE

Leslie was a worse dancer than me, but she made us practice
and practice, we met with a dance coach so we would look
perfect at the reception. Leslie wanted us to look perfect.
I look foolish.

NATHAN

Don't think about that. Just enjoy dancing.

GEORGE

I don't feel right about this.

NATHAN

You can do it, Dad.

GEORGE

(Throwing Jiao Yi on the ground,) I don't want to!

NATHAN

(Picking her up and tending to her,) I didn't mean to-

GEORGE

I didn't mean to throw her on the floor. But you-

NATHAN

I shouldn't have forced you.

Stephanie enters, concerned about
the commotion. Nathan straightens
out Jiao Yi's appearance.

STEPHANIE

Everything Ok in here?

GEORGE

Fine. Just having some fun.

STEPHANIE

What's with the music, Nathan?

GEORGE

Your brother was about to waltz with Chai Tee. Go ahead, son,
dance.

NATHAN

Forget about it.

GEORGE

Show me how it's done.

NATHAN

Yeah?

STEPHANIE

Freaking ridiculous.

GEORGE

Show me how you dance.

NATHAN

Here goes.

Stephanie gets out her phone to video record the dance number as Nathan gets into position, holding Jiao Yi firmly, but with gentility. His face lights up with her in his arms. He begins swaying.

GEORGE

Look at you.

NATHAN

We've had a lot of practice. And she's a good partner.

Nathan spins her around, careening through the living room with romantic sweeps. He grandly dips Jiao Yi and then tenderly brings her in close to him. George claps gleefully. Stephanie can't believe her eyes. Nathan spins her once more and then kisses her on the cheek with intensity, like a sad goodbye kiss. Stephanie puts her phone away. Nathan turns to his speechless father and sister.

NATHAN

What do you think, Dad?

GEORGE

You could be in White Christmas.

STEPHANIE

You dance with her often?

NATHAN

When we're in the mood.

Kelly returns.

KELLY

We should sit down for dinner. What did I miss?

STEPHANIE

I'll show you later.

Kelly starts frantically cleaning.
George pours a drink.

KELLY

Sorry for the state of the house, Nathan. Wish I could have finished decorating. It got a way from me. The stupid tree isn't even decorated, how hard is that?

NATHAN

We can decorate it together.

STEPHANIE

Before or after dinner? I'm famished!

KELLY

You wouldn't be hungry if you ate meat like rest of us. Do you know how hard you are to cook for?

STEPHANIE

Vegetarianism is one of my convictions, guys. Learn to accept me for who I am.

The girls exit with the cookie
accoutrements. The men sit on the
couch with Jiao Yi between them.

NATHAN

Mom would be proud of Kelly's cooking.

GEORGE

Though the food won't ever be as delicious, Leslie would have applauded the effort.

NATHAN

I'm glad Kelly's been here for you. I wouldn't want you to be lonely.

GEORGE

I'm holding up.

NATHAN

You worry about me, don't you? Same as I worry about you.

GEORGE

It's Kelly who we should be concerned about. Encourage her to look at her options. Leslie always felt Brock was a numbskull, I think he's a pretentious jerk. Fortunately Brock's at his aunt's house for the holidays, so we won't have to see him. Let's count our blessings.

Kelly enters wearing oven mitts
that hold a casserole dish in each
hand. She is pursued by Stephanie,
who carries a big salad bowl in her
hands and a wine bottle under her
arm.

STEPHANIE

I can't believe you put hot dogs in the macaroni! Bitchy move, sis.

KELLY

Mom's Midwestern tradition. Let's get along.

STEPHANIE

I apologize for bickering in front of company. Wouldn't want to upset or offend Nathan's manufactured girlfriend.

NATHAN

She doesn't mind. I warned her ahead of time that you're the outspoken one.

KELLY

Let's eat before it's cold. Let's go. Chop chop! Dinner time!

GEORGE

You got it, Leslie.

George exits, but the girls turn around before going to the kitchen. Stephanie mouths "Leslie?!" to her siblings.

KELLY

I know, that was weird.

STEPHANIE

(Whispered) Did Dad just call you Mom?

KELLY

I think so.

NATHAN

You did say "Let's go. Chop chop. Dinner time." Like mom used to.

KELLY

Oh god, that's why! Whhooo.

STEPHANIE

If he had Alzheimer's, we could commit him, right?

Nathan leaves Jiao Yi on the couch. They exit to the kitchen.

A moment later, George enters with a basket of rolls. He double takes on Jiao Yi, places the rolls on the table and saunters over to the couch. As he's about to touch her Nathan enters. George snaps to attention.

NATHAN

Want to give me a hand with Jiao Yi? Bring her over here and we'll sit her down. Just pick her up.

George hands the doll over to Nathan. He sits his companion down at the table. This requires considerable work and bending of limbs.

NATHAN

She's remarkably flexible. The design is fantastic.

GEORGE

Engineers are doing amazing things these days.

Nathan gets the plate settings in order as his father drinks. The girls return with the remainder of the Christmas bounty.

KELLY

Pick around the hot dogs.

STEPHANIE

How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not interested in wieners.

KELLY

Do you want to say prayer?

GEORGE

I don't feel like...

KELLY

I can say it.

NATHAN

Mom would like that.

Kelly dims the lights to make dinner more special.

KELLY

Could we hold hands?

STEPHANIE

That would be nice.

GEORGE

(Grabbing hands,) Great idea, Kelly.

STEPHANIE

Hit us with your best prayer.

They hold each other's hands.

KELLY

Dear God, we thank you for Christmas Eve night, a holy night that comes only once a year, to bring us together. A night in December. We're sorry we don't pray often enough, but here we are on the eve of the birth of your lord, calling unto you. We thank you for letting us be here safe and sound, whether we live across the country, less than an hour away, or in this very house taking care of our father. We harken thanks for this food, that was very expensive, and very arduous to make, especially considering the ill-equipped kitchen after Dad's purge, but God, we thank you for what we have. It's all we have, we're stuck with it, and we are thankful. Stephanie, your hands are clammy, let go.

STEPHANIE

Forgive me.

KELLY

That's better. Thank you, holiest Lord, for reminding us what's important, a family dinner with lots of food. We thank you Lord, for bringing Nathan home. We miss Nathan so much. We want him to visit Colorado more often or at least Skype or something. And we thank you for the Christmas tree. It may be small and plastic. But it's our small-

GEORGE

Wrap it up.

KELLY

We thank you most of all, for this moment together remembering one of the most beautiful and amazing women the world has ever known. We ask that you put the holidays in our hearts, especially this one. Her favorite. Amen.

GEORGE/NATHAN/STEPHANIE

Amen.

KELLY

I shouldn't have prayed so long. Now the food's cold.

STEPHANIE

Could we nuke it?

KELLY

It's that bad? You need a microwave? Christ!

GEORGE

Luke warm like the rest of our lives...

NATHAN

The rolls are perfect.

KELLY

They come in a cardboard tube. Hard to mess up.

George fixes a drink.

STEPHANIE

Pour one for me while you're at it. At least Kelly Belly didn't put hot dogs in the wine. You couldn't even make the pasta course vegetarian?

NATHAN

Does the blue box count as a pasta course?

KELLY

It's Dad's favorite. That's how we do things.

NATHAN

For Kelly's sake, let's be cheerful and celebrate.

STEPHANIE

Why should this be a celebration? Because you brought "company?" Let's celebrate our delusions! I'm having so much fun! I hope you're girlfriend is having as much fun as I am. None of you are facing it. Dealing with it. We need to talk about her in order to move on.

KELLY

Let's talk about normal things.

NATHAN

How was school this semester?

KELLY

Crazy stressful. I've been home with Dad more than studying. Brock was in two of my classes, which was totes sweet of him because he took them as electives.

NATHAN

What are your options when you graduate?

KELLY

Brock's uncle has an advertising firm in Denver. He has a great job waiting for him. I think we'll be happy together.

GEORGE

You wouldn't be happy in a big city.

KELLY

What am I going to do here in Fort Collins?

GEORGE

What would you do in Denver?

KELLY

Teach preschool. Be a tele-marketer. Walk dogs, sit on babies, I dunno.

NATHAN

Get out and see the world, Kelly. You could also teach preschool in Seattle, or Miami, or Paris, or Beijing. Set your sights higher.

STEPHANIE

Go live with Nathan and his girlfriend and teach the ABCs to the children of Hoboken. Who says you need a job? Jiao Yi over here is sitting pretty. Be a housewife. Look how well dressed Jiao Yi is. I bet her clothes cost more than mine.

NATHAN

I'm sure they did. (Nathan adjusts Jiao Yi's dress.) Kelly, Mom would want you to continue your education. In today's world a Bachelor degree doesn't get what it used to. She wanted us to have master's degrees so we can be successful.

STEPHANIE

Is that a jab about me dropping out? Not everyone needs an MBA. Mom never had a job.

GEORGE

Do whatever you want.

KELLY

Except move in with Brock?

GEORGE

You two are young.

KELLY

We've dated for five years.

STEPHANIE

Remember your prom dress? You were the cutest heteronormative prom couple ever.

GEORGE

Dig up those pictures. Remind Brock how fit he used to be.

KELLY

He put on weight once he stopped football. So?

GEORGE

It's not good for a young man to be obese. It's bad for his heart, I'm looking out for the big lug.

KELLY

You're rude.

GEORGE

He's belittling towards this family. Leslie never liked him.

KELLY

She doesn't get a say anymore, does she?

GEORGE

Why don't you bring Brock over? You spend so much time with him and never bring him here!

KELLY

How's he supposed to interact with you? With us? You can't fault him for being uncomfortable. It's a lot to handle. He tries. He tries very hard, but our family makes him squirm. No one in his family kills themselves. No one in his family brings a doll home for the holidays. It's not normal.

GEORGE

Let go of him if he disapproves of your family so much.

KELLY

That's not going to happen.

GEORGE

Kelly, your mother would want you to reconsider Brock. He's a judgemental jerk.

KELLY

I won't! I'm marrying him! We're engaged!

GEORGE

You and Brock are doing what? No, no, no. Not my baby. Not Brock.

STEPHANIE

Why didn't you tell me? You never tell me anything!

KELLY

You'd blab it all over the internet like you do with everything else!

GEORGE

You're not ready for that commitment. You can't get married young like I did. You couldn't. He's slick and shifty, he drains your energy. You want to marry an out of shape linebacker who's too slick for his own good?

STEPHANIE

If you marry Brock you'll be like a sex-doll housewife to him.

KELLY

He's knows what he wants out of life, unlike you, he doesn't waste all his time smoking pot and bouncing from fling to fling. Brock is stable.

NATHAN

It's a big commitment. He'll hold you back. He'll hold you down.

KELLY

Like a doll doesn't hold you back? You're stuck in arrested development! You don't know what love is, Nathan!

NATHAN

All you people do is judge, and criticize, and dismiss the things that make me happy.

STEPHANIE

Because you're as insane and imbalanced as Leslie was!

GEORGE

We're not enough for you, Nathan!? You're ungrateful!

KELLY

You can't put my relationship and your toys in the same category. I love Brock and he loves me. His family loves me. He proposed in front of his whole extended family at Thanksgiving! They supported and congratulated me!

GEORGE

I won't let you marry Brock!

KELLY

You won't LET me?! It's not up to you! (*Retreating to her room in tears,*) Forget it. Dinner is over. Merry Christmas!

GEORGE

Kelly!

STEPHANIE

This is your inflatable slut's fault.

GEORGE

Stephanie, apologize to your brother this instant! His girlfriend doesn't deserve your ridicule!

STEPHANIE

What the fuck Dad? You have to defend Nathan every time? Where's my defense? Oh yeah, I don't need you to fight my battles because I'm self-sufficient.

NATHAN

I'm more than self-sufficient, I'm self-reliant.

STEPHANIE

You have a giant plastic doll. You're too self-reliant.

NATHAN

You promised you would respect my life choices. I asked for understanding. Where is it? You of all people should know how hard it is to reveal a socially unaccepted secret to your family. It's important you support me.

STEPHANIE

You can't equate my sexuality and this fantasy life of yours. No way. I have a world telling me I'm wrong for loving another person. Your situation is a one sided relationship with an inanimate object. My actions and natural human preference are scrutinized by oppressive systems of prejudice.

NATHAN

You're selfish and cruel and that's why you'll always be alone!

STEPHANIE

I'm going to bed too. Happy mother truckin' Holidays, Bitches!

She exits.

GEORGE

Merry Christmas, Nathan.

NATHAN

Dad, I haven't been entirely honest.

GEORGE

Who has?

NATHAN

Dad, There's more to Jiao Yi. I've given all of myself to my companion doll over the past three years, but I realized it was time to move on. I embarked on my journey with Jiao Yi knowing it would come to an end. And, I'm ready to graduate, if you will.

GEORGE

What are you talking about?

NATHAN

Jiao Yi's name means "Beautiful Gift." When I christened her, I knew I was giving myself a gift of time and simplicity, but I didn't imagine what a gift she would end up being. I've loved my companion passionately, and through her discovered a capacity for profound commitment I never thought myself capable of. And now it's time to pass that gift on to you, Dad.

GEORGE

Nathan, what are you getting at?

NATHAN

I want you to take Jiao Yi. She'll comfort you. Kelly's told me how dejected you've been. You never leave the house. This could help you.

GEORGE

I don't think I'm interested, son.

NATHAN

Won't you hear me out?

GEORGE

I'm not taking your used doll.

NATHAN

She's not used. I bought a new one for you.

GEORGE

I don't understand.

NATHAN

I parted with my Jiao Yi earlier this month. I donated her to an Asian charity that unites dolls with low-income disabled people. I said my good-byes to her, and I'm ready to start dating. I purchased this doll for you. Jiao Yi Two. I want you to have her. She'll be a beautiful gift. Let me do this for you.

GEORGE

You're a strange person, Nathan.

NATHAN

Dad, this is what you need.

GEORGE

I need to be left alone. Facing you kids... It's a mess, and Leslie isn't here to pick up the pieces.

NATHAN

Hold on to her, here, take her. Tell me it's not comforting to hold her in your arms.

George throws the doll on the couch.

GEORGE

Nothing will replace Leslie.

NATHAN

You don't have to give me an answer right now. I'm going to my room. Promise me you'll consider it. Mom can't be replaced, but you need something to move on.

Nathan leaves George and Jiao Yi alone. George slams another drink. He looks around the empty room, searching for something. His eyes land on the doll. He scoops her into his arms and begins to sway. His eyes light up with memory and sadness. He looks toward the ceiling and the torn wallpaper.

GEORGE

Am I perfect enough for you?

END OF ACT ONE.

ACT 2.

...

See the author for complete text.