

LOSING TOUCH

Cast

Prudence – old lady - member of the choir
Petunia – old lady - member of the choir
Sydney Fox – mid-forties man – member of the congregation
Reverend Alice Jones – mid forties woman – minister
Simon Fox – seven year old boy (non-speaking role)

Other Cast

Members of the congregation and choir (possibly played by pre-recorded voices with organ accompaniment)

Setting

The play takes place in a non-descript Protestant church. At the back of the stage is a cross, signifying the altar, and in front of it is a large advent wreath made of evergreen boughs, with five electric candles, four candles spaced around the sides, and one in the centre. One side candle is already lit. The cross and wreath are illuminated by stage lighting in a holy way. Reverend Jones stands downstage by the wreath and the cross. Angled to one side of the cross and wreath, half way downstage or more, is the choir stall. This is where Prudence and Petunia sit, dressed in choir gowns. Sydney Fox sits in his pew at the back of the church, which is at the front of the stage on the opposite side from the choir stall. He is angled to appear to be facing the wreath downstage, but his profile is visible to the audience. The stage should be arranged so the audience has the feeling that they are also in the congregation, sitting at the back of the church. The play opens in the middle of the Christmas Eve evening service. All scenes are continuous.

Scene I

Members of the congregation and choir are singing “Away in a Manger” in the background.

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head,
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

Prudence and Petunia speak in whispers over the Christmas carol, and they whisper throughout the play. Petunia is fumbling with her blue hymn book. Prudence is holding open a red one.

PETUNIA: Prudence, what hymn is this?

PRUDENCE: “Away in a Manger”, Petunia.

PETUNIA: No. What NUMBER?

PRUDENCE: Oh. Four hundred and nineteen.

PETUNIA: Is that in the blue book?

PRUDENCE: No. The red one. Here, share mine.

PETUNIA: All these carols sound the same to me.

PRUDENCE: Would you like a peppermint, Petunia?

PETUNIA: Bless you, dear.

Scene II

Prudence and Petunia sit down when the carol is over. Petunia unwraps her crinkly candy wrapper.

REV. JONES: On Christmas Eve, we commemorate the perpetual rebirth of Jesus in our hearts.

PRUDENCE: Alice Jones makes the service run like a Swiss watch, doesn't she, Petunia?

PETUNIA: I suppose. But I always liked it better when our minister was a man. Do you remember Reverend Abercrombie?

REV. JONES: So to celebrate the miracle of our saviour's life, which still touches us today, it's time to light the second candle on our beautiful advent wreath.

PRUDENCE: He had a marvelous voice.

PETUNIA: And such a firm handshake.

REV. JONES: This candle, representing Peace will be lit by Simon Fox.

PETUNIA: Reverend Abercrombie baptized my son.

PRUDENCE: Mine too.

REV. JONES: It reminds us that Christ is the Prince of Peace...

PETUNIA: And I taught Sunday School for him.

PRUDENCE: You and I taught Sunday School together, Petunia.

REV. JONES: So let us all join our voices in the Advent hymn.

PETUNIA: Such a fine man...

Simon Fox approaches the Advent wreath, as the organ starts the advent hymn, sung to the tune of Away in a Manger. Prudence and Petunia stand for the hymn. Sydney Fox stands up in his pew.

Scene III

Members of the choir and congregation sing.

A candle is burning, a candle of Peace,
A candle to signal that conflict must cease,

Sydney Fox starts speaking after the first line of the Advent Hymn, which fades away on the second line.

SYDNEY: What a waste of time. Lighting candles and singing songs to dead Jesus. None of this garbage would get anyone to Heaven even if there was a Heaven. If I were God, I wouldn't be touched by this charade. I'd be insulted that earthlings had made up such uninspired rituals to worship me. Once a year is all I can stand of this nonsense. Oh for the day, Simon my boy, when you outgrow Sunday school and your mother stops sending you. Then I'll be free from this lunacy altogether. The worst thing is - everyone here pretends to like it. That's what I hate most. The hypocrisy. Or the stupidity. Whichever. Yes. Stupidity.

PETUNIA: That boy with the candle looks like young Sydney Fox!

PRUDENCE: That's because he looks like his father, Petunia. See him? In the very last pew.

SYDNEY: Sometimes I worry about Simon. He's up there today for learning the most Bible verses in Sunday School. Some honour. I had to tell him that memorizing Bible verses was girlie stuff, and would never get him anywhere in the real world. People who think the Bible matters end up headed nowhere. Living in the suburbs, collecting bowling trophies and eating Slushies at the Joe Burger. You have to be tough to get ahead. I've got to make Simon realize that.

PETUNIA: The same receding chin.

PRUDENCE: And the same too-close-together eyes. Poor child.

SYDNEY: Joe Burger's. Their food sucks. Always has. We don't let Simon drag us there like a lot of parents do. But I needed a coffee this afternoon to warm up between errands. It was getting late, and I still had to find the computer gismo that Simon had asked Santa Claus for. And the Joe Burger was right there. That loony beggar man blocking the door was a nuisance, but I yelled "Don't touch me!" and went past him anyway. I thought it was a joke when the girl taking my order asked, "Would you like an Eggnog Slushie with your coffee?" But I guess she had to ask everyone that question today or get fired.

PETUNIA: Wasn't Sydney Fox smart as a whip, Prudence? He always knew his Bible verses.

PRUDENCE: But sometimes he was too clever for his own good.

SYDNEY: The Eggnog Slushie. Yuk. A mass-produced fake-food quote-unquote "treat", fabricated for the common consumer. Full of artificial ingredients and redundant calories. A Joe Burger exclusive. Only someone suffering a touch of insanity would buy a paper cup full of badly-flavoured ice like that.

PETUNIA: Yes. Whenever Sydney got into trouble in Sunday School, he made sure we couldn't hold him responsible.

PRUDENCE: But he never convinced us that it wasn't his doing. His eyes always gave him away.

SYDNEY: The Slushie tasted even worse than I expected. I only bought the small size of course, as an experiment. But what a tremendous chance to experience an example of what keeps the masses in their place! That's what made my first, last and only sip of Eggnog Slushie worthwhile.

PETUNIA: I still believe Sydney took the money from the collection basket that day, Prudence. It couldn't have been anyone else.

PRUDENCE: I think he did it more than once before we caught on to him.

SYDNEY: When I left the Joe Burger, that untouchable beggar was still there. And it suddenly occurred to me that the Eggnog Slushie was made for people exactly like him. It's phony rum taste is probably better than what he's used to, so I gave him my drink. And while I thought he wasn't looking, I dropped a few pennies into his hat and took a few dollar coins out. As payback for the Slushie. And to demonstrate that my fingers hadn't lost their touch.

PETUNIA: We couldn't accuse him outright, without actual proof. And he swore those seven nickels we found in his pocket were his own.

PRUDENCE: Reverend Abercrombie called a special meeting of the elders. My husband had to go.

SYDNEY: But as I walked away, I felt a sharp wet smack on the back of my neck. And then an icy trickle down my spine. That's when I realized what an ungrateful coward that dirty beggar truly was. He'd thrown my Eggnog Slushie back and hit me from behind. A real man would have confronted me face to face. I could have turned around and called the cops to get him into trouble. My word against his. No contest. But I was in a hurry. And I wasn't going to sink to his level. So I just kept on going.

PETUNIA: Surely Sydney Fox outgrew his petty thievery long ago, Prudence, and he's a good Christian father now.

PRUDENCE: Perhaps, Petunia. But I don't believe we've seen him in church since last Christmas Eve.

SYDNEY: If Simon's so great at learning quotations about religion, I'll teach him Voltaire's saying. "If God didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent him." Those words also pertain to Santa Claus, Eggnog Slushies and anything else created to subdue and placate the world's blithering idiots. Like those two touched-in-the-head grannies there, who won't shut up. I'd better not tell Simon the quote applies to Santa Claus though. His mother would kill me.

PETUNIA: It's the devious close-set eyes, isn't it?

SYDNEY: So that will be your gift of peace from me, Simon. You'll never attain it by lighting candles and singing hymns. You have to contrive peace by keeping the Slushie-

slurping rabble at bay with foolish platitudes about God. Or any other appropriate means of control. Excellent. Some day Simon will thank me for this advice. If I'd been that enlightened when I was seven years old, it would have spared me the grief of learning a lot of useless Bible verses.

PRUDENCE: And the weak receding chin.

SYDNEY: But Voltaire will be our secret, Simon. We don't need to tell your mother everything. Sometimes life's more peaceful that way. I know Voltaire would agree.

The second light on the side of the Advent wreath lights up. The choir and congregation finish singing the final two lines of the advent hymn verse. Petunia says her line over the final line of the hymn.

For Jesus is coming to show us the way,
A message of Peace humbly laid in the hay.

PETUNIA: Let's hope the boy only looks like his father.

Simon Fox and Sydney Fox sit down.

Scene IV

REV. JONES: Thank you Simon. And congratulations. Simon achieved the reward of lighting our Candle of Peace by learning all of his Bible verses.

PETUNIA: Reverend Jones never memorized her Bible verses when she was in Sunday School.

PRUDENCE: That's why Reverend Abercrombie made her play a sheep in the Christmas pageant, instead of the Virgin Mary like she wanted.

REV. JONES: Soon we'll be lighting our third Advent Candle of Joy.

PETUNIA: Alice Jones was a very pouty sheep.

PRUDENCE: I don't think she appreciated Reverend Abercrombie.

REV. JONES: But first, let us thank Jesus for touching our souls, as we sing our offertory hymn, the last two verses of "Away in a Manger".

The hymn begins with a short organ introduction, and then the congregation and choir sing the last verses of Away in a Manger softly in the background. Petunia, Prudence and Sydney speak over the hymn.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes,
I love thee, Lord Jesus; look down from the sky,
And stay by my side until morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay,
Close by me forever, and love me I pray,
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,

And take us to Heaven to live with thee there. Amen

PETUNIA: Did Reverend Abercrombie ever touch you, Prudence?

PRUDENCE: No one ever touched me the way Reverend Abercrombie did, Petunia.

SYDNEY: (*Feeling his pocket*). Oh Damn! I spent all my spare change this afternoon, and I've only got a twenty left for the offering. And this horror show isn't worth that price of admission. Hmmm. Maybe this is my chance to get even with God and make him pay for my wasted evening. That incident with the beggar shows I haven't quite got the touch I once had. So bring on the collection plate. I could use the practice.

Reverend Jones passes around the collection plate. When she gets to Sydney Fox, she slaps his hand as he puts it over the money there.

PRUDENCE: He had such gentle hands. And lips. I still remember.

PETUNIA: Such a fine man.

Scene V

PRUDENCE: I've got one more peppermint, Petunia.

PETUNIA: Bless you dear. (*Taking the candy*). Where will you be spending Christmas?

PRUDENCE: With my son, of course.

PETUNIA: I'll be staying with my son too, Prudence. His name is Jesus. Jesus Abercrombie.

PRUDENCE: My son's also named Jesus. Abercrombie Jesus. He lives in a huge house with all our friends. And he's picking me up in his bus after the service.

PETUNIA: My son has a big house full of people and drives a bus as well. And he's always there when I need a ride home.

PRUDENCE: Have a Merry Christmas, Petunia.

PETUNIA: Bless you dear. Merry Christmas to you too.

The hymn ends with a swell in volume, and a final Amen.

REV. JONES: Let us pray.

Prudence and Petunia clasp their hands and look up. Sydney Fox rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

Cut to black.