

SWEET AND SOUR SNICKERS

Cast of Characters

Aunt Coco – A no-nonsense domineering woman of eighty plus years. She is confined to a wheelchair and resents her lack of independence.

Hazel – An old-fashioned accommodating woman of sixty or so. She strives to do good, even if it isn't right or true.

Chester – Hazel's son, and a henpecked husband in his mid thirties.

Amanda – Chester's wife, also in her mid thirties. She is a helicopter parent, used to getting her own way.

Philbert – Chester and Amanda's twelve year old son. He tries to create a normal childhood for himself, despite his over-protective mother.

Wally – Hazel's son, who still hasn't quite settled down, even though he is in his mid thirties.

Hikari – Wally's Japanese girlfriend, whose position outside the family gives her insights into the behaviour of all the others. She is also over thirty years old.

Radio / TV voice – News items are broadcast from time to time throughout the play.

Scene I - Remembrance Day

The setting is Aunt Coco's apartment in a senior's home. Aunt Coco sits in her wheelchair in front of the television, which cannot be seen by the audience. Hazel is in a chair knitting.

Television: *They shall not grow old, as we who are left grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. (Bagpipes playing 'Amazing Grace' continue in the background.)*

Aunt Coco: *(Shaking her fist.)* God damn Remembrance Day! It's eleven o'clock in the morning. I should be watching 'The Price is Right'!

Hazel: *(Concentrating on her knitting.)* Don't worry, Aunt Coco. It'll be on again tomorrow.

Aunt Coco: *(Leaning precariously out of her wheelchair to make her point.)* I could be dead by then, Hazel. Although I know it doesn't matter to you. As long as you're knitting, you'd be happy to see grass grow on TV. But at my age I think I'm entitled to say how I feel when I'm missing one of my favourite shows.

Hazel: After I finish turning this heel I'll make some tea.

Television: *At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them. (Aunt Coco grabs the remote and turns the volume down to barely audible as the Last Post plays and fades away.)*

Aunt Coco: I'll bet the American channels are showing 'The Price is Right'. They call November 11th Veterans Day there, instead of Remembrance Day like we do, and they celebrate the survivors instead of crying over the victims. Sounds sensible to me. And that's the difference between Americans and Canadians. The Americans arrange these things so they don't have to interrupt their important television programs for bagpipes, cannons and morbid poetry. God bless Veterans Day. And God damn Silver Suites for only letting us watch Canadian TV!

Hazel: All of the veterans of the First World War must be dead by now, so whatever the day is called, it amounts to the same thing.

Aunt Coco: You've always got an excuse for everything, Hazel. And if patience really was a virtue, you'd be Mother Superior to the Saints. But don't you ever get tired of looping all those never-ending stitches?

Hazel: I've been making socks for Wally and Chester every year since they were born. After more than thirty years, it's... a Christmas tradition.

Aunt Coco: If you ask me, you're rushing the season. It's still six weeks away. And who really cares anyway? Christmas is just another day when I can't watch 'The Price is Right'.

Hazel: I do feel guilty about working on cheerful Christmas projects when I should be honouring our war heroes. But there's so much knitting to do. When Chester married Amanda and Philbert was born, my knitting obligations doubled. And of course, Philbert's feet grow bigger every year. And now Wally is getting serious about Hikari...

Aunt Coco: How can he be? She's Japanese!

Hazel: Who knows? She might be my daughter-in-law one day. So I think she deserves a scarf, like I make for all the ladies.

Aunt Coco: If it will lighten your workload, you can give her mine.

Hazel: Oh Aunt Coco, you're too generous. I'll put a special fringe on your scarf, for being so thoughtful.

Aunt Coco: Hazel, how can you be so sure everyone requires a new woolly garment year after year?

Hazel: Well, as I never see anyone wearing anything I've knit, it's obvious that they need replacements for things that must have worn out.

Aunt Coco: *(Rolling her eyes and gesturing in frustration. Hazel concentrates on her knitting and does not see her actions.)* Is that sock becoming your life's work? I'm getting thirsty.

Hazel: *(Holding up her knitting proudly.)* I suppose you could say that knitting socks and scarves is my life's work. And a labour of love. And though it may take a lot of time, every year on Christmas Day it's always worth it.

Aunt Coco: So I suppose your whole brood is going to descend upon your place as usual?

Hazel: Of course! It wouldn't be Christmas if the family didn't get together.

Aunt Coco: Then I want to be there too. I've decided to get out more, even if I'm stuck in this cursed wheelchair.

Hazel: The kids would love to see you!

Aunt Coco: I also want to make an announcement. And I'd like everyone to be present. I'm changing my will. You don't need my money, Hazel. Your only extravagance is the odd skein of angora wool. So I want to keep things in the family, but make sure that the people who get my loot will actually use it.

Hazel: I see.

Aunt Coco: So I'm counting on you to round everyone up for Christmas dinner. And if they don't come, you'd better knit me something useful for a change. A nice heavy sweater with raglan sleeves to keep out the winter chills. Silver Suites never keeps it warm enough in here. Cheap government-subsidized bastards.

Hazel: But we always get together for Christmas...

Aunt Coco: Good. Now all of this weeping and moaning on TV has worn me out. Make that tea you promised and then put me to bed for a nap. After that you can leave.

Hazel, looking relieved, folds up her needles and gets up to put the kettle on.

Scene II - A Few Weeks Later

The setting is Hazel's apartment. Hazel sits in her living room knitting a pastel green sock and nibbling on a cookie. There is a plate with several cookies beside her. She is aimlessly humming 'O Little Town of Bethlehem', while the news can be heard on the radio in the background.

Radio: Canadian peacekeeping troops are celebrating victory today. Assisted by local military forces, they completely annihilated a cell of enemy insurgents in an overnight raid. It's estimated that at least fifty rebel soldiers were killed in the operation. Four militia allies sacrificed their lives for the cause, and several more were injured. Canadian Corporal Ben Sawyer suffered second degree burns to his elbow in the altercation and has been flown to Berlin for advanced medical treatment. There were no other Canadian casualties. In other news...

Hazel: *(Holding up the sock.)* I hope Philbert will like this colour.

The doorbell sounds. Looking flustered, Hazel quickly tucks away her knitting and turns off the radio. Then she opens the door. Her son Chester, with his wife Amanda and son Philbert crowd into the hallway.

Hazel: Chester. Amanda...

Chester: Hi Mom!

Philbert: Hey Grandma!

Amanda: Sorry we didn't call ahead. But we've given up our cell phones. All those nasty electronic waves in our ears! Bad for the brain, you know. Especially for youngsters like Philbert. Right, Chester?

Chester: Yes dear.

Hazel: Can I get you something to drink?

Amanda: No thanks. We're not staying. Philbert's bowling league is having its annual fundraiser this afternoon. Will you come with us?

Hazel: Well, I'm getting my hair done at two thirty, and I wanted to pick up a pot roast for tomorrow night. Wally and Hikari are coming to dinner.

Amanda: (*Chuckling.*) No problem. Beauty appointments are special. Gotta keep lookin' good. Right, Chester?

Chester: Yes, dear,

Hazel: Perhaps...

Amanda: (*Waving.*) We'll give you more notice next time.

Hazel: Would you like a cookie, Philbert?

Amanda: It's got to be nut-free! You know I never let Philbert eat nuts. In case he's allergic to them. They could be fatal.

Hazel: Yes, yes. Nuts, I know. (*She wraps a couple of cookies in a napkin and gives them to Philbert.*) They're chocolate chip. I baked them this morning.

Amanda: What do you say, Philbert?

Philbert: Will you give me twenty bucks, Grandma? (*Hazel hesitates, looking confused.*)

Amanda: It's for the Bowl-a-Thon. To support the youth league.

Hazel: (*Uncertainly.*) Oh. Of course. A worthy cause, I'm sure. (*Hazel opens her purse and gives Philbert a twenty dollar bill.*)

Chester, Amanda, Philbert (*Together as they leave.*) Bye Mom, Thanks Grandma, See you soon, etc.

When they have gone, Hazel shakes her head, retrieves her knitting and continues from where she left off.

Scene III - Immediately Later

Chester, Amanda and Philbert are in the family car. Chester is driving, and Philbert is in the back seat. The traffic report is on the radio.

Car Radio: *In Warner's Corners traffic, there's been a serious crash on Millburn Street at the Cameron Bridge, involving at least four automobiles and an intercity bus. Police are at the scene and have confirmed there are multiple fatalities.*

Amanda: *(Turning off the car radio.)* Terrific. An accident between us and the bowling alley. Now we'll have to take a detour, and we're already running late because you wanted to stop at your mother's. And didn't I tell you she'd have some lame excuse, Chester?

Chester: *(Keeping his eyes on the road and his hands on the steering wheel.)* Yes, dear.

Amanda: *(Seething with indignation.)* We offered her a chance to spend some quality time with her grandson, and she decided her hair was more important. Her god damned hair! Unbelievable! That just shows exactly where her priorities are. *(Turning to the back seat.)* PHILBERT! – don't you touch those cookies until I've checked them first! So if your mother doesn't want to spend time with us, we're not going to spend time with her. We'll find something else to do for Christmas this year. Right, Chester?

Chester: Uh...

Amanda: RIGHT, Chester?

Chester: Yes, dear.

Amanda reaches back with her hand, and Philbert surrenders the napkin with the cookies to her. Holding the package to her nose, she inhales a series of short sniffs. Then she takes a bite from a cookie for a taste test. Finally, she finishes eating the cookie, and with several assenting bobs of her head, she hands the one remaining cookie back to her disappointed son, who crams the whole thing in his mouth, before his mother can change her mind. Everyone then chews and stews in silence.

Scene IV - The Next Evening

Hazel, Wally and Hikari are in Hazel's living room, relaxing after dinner. Wally is on the couch, reading the newspaper, which is wide open in front of him. Hakari sits at his knee, reading aloud the headline and cover story which faces outwards, as if to practise her reading in English.

Hikari: Sub-Saharan starves as rations rot. African victims of the world's latest natural disaster are being denied food and other aid by the uncooperative governments of their own countries. With relief efforts blocked, food supplies from around the globe are spoiling in the heat, causing tens of thousands to die of starvation. This second man-made calamity threatens to cause even more deaths than the original catastrophe.

Hazel: *(Passing around her chocolate chip cookies.)* Would you like another cookie with your coffee, Wally?

Wally: *(Taking a cookie.)* Sure, Mom.

Hazel offers a cookie to Hikari.

Hikari: *(Taking a cookie)* That was a wonderful dinner, Mrs...

Hazel: Oh, please, Hikari dear, just call me Hazel.

Wally: (*Putting aside the newspaper.*) Mom's always been a great cook. Except for one infamous lunch when we were kids. Mom made sandwiches for Chester and me using some tainted tuna she didn't realize was bad. And even though we complained about how awful it tasted, she made us finish them up before we could leave the table. Then we went back to school and got totally sick. We've never let her live that one down.

"Hazel: (*Blushing.*) I was so embarrassed. Even the cat wouldn't eat the fish that was left over.

Wally: (*Laughing.*) Chester and I still use 'Witch Hazel's Curse' to describe any disagreeable reaction to questionable food.

Hikari: (*Taking Wally's hand in hers.*) Mrs... Hazel, Wally is always telling me stories of the trouble he got into when he was growing up. But I think you raised him very well.

Wally: We had a great childhood. And once a year we get to relive those times on Christmas Day. Chester brings his wife and kid, and we're all one big happy family, together again.

Hikari: You are lucky to have such a fine family. My parents and all of my brothers and sisters are still in Japan. I miss them so much.

Hazel: It will be wonderful to have you with us this Christmas.

Hikari: Thank you. You are very kind.

Hazel: Aunt Coco wants to come for the day too.

Wally: Great. She'll keep us on our toes. And Hikari, I like to stay overnight on Christmas Eve, to be with Mom first thing for breakfast, and then we open presents afterwards. So this year, you and I can both sleep over, which will make Christmas morning perfect.

Hazel: (*Becoming alarmed.*) But there's only one extra bed.

Wally: That's OK. (*Giving Hikari a squeeze.*) It's big enough for two.

Hazel: But you're not married.

Wally: Don't worry Mom, we'll bring our jammies. After all, we've got to behave ourselves. For Santa's sake. (*Winking at Hikari.*) It's Christmas Eve.

Hazel: Still... My home would be like a... brothel!

Wally: Hmmm. Then we'll act like... brother and sister.

Hazel: You mean INCEST? Wally! That would be far worse!

Wally: Seriously, Mom, we're both over thirty and we don't need a piece of paper to make us respectable. What could you possibly be worried about?

Hazel: (*Sighing.*) It's just not the way I was brought up.

Wally: Never mind. We've got a month until Christmas to figure out a plan. *(He folds up the newspaper and he and Hikari stand to leave.)*

Hazel: I'll pack you some cookies. *(She hurries to the kitchen.)*

Scene V - Immediately Later

Wally and Hikari are in their car driving home. Wally has Hazel's bag of cookies beside him. He is eating as he drives.

Hikari: Mothers! I thought I'd left mine half way around the world, but now I find everywhere they are all the same.

Wally: I can't understand why she was carrying on like that. She's usually so easy-going.

Hikari: That is because you have never been a mother. Until you get married, your mother will always think that you are still her little baby boy. So when you want to bring your girlfriend to sleep over at her house, what do you expect? She freaks out!

Wally: She still knits socks for me and Chester every Christmas, you know. *(He digs into the biscuit bag.)* She's been making them since we were kids. Horrible itchy things. I've always hated them, and I haven't worn them in years. But I know she'd be devastated if I told her to stop.

Hikari: In Japan we have a saying. 'Rewards grow on the tree of persistence'.

Wally: You just made that up! *(He feeds her a cookie.)*

Hikari: Maybe I did. But children grow up while parents grow old. So the younger generation must somehow keep smashing their ancestors' worn out traditions, without breaking their hearts.

Wally: We could tell my mother we went to City Hall and got married. That's all she wants to hear.

Hikari: *(Waving her finger.)* No! No! No! Then I would become the daughter she never had and she would start knitting a... trousseau for me. Ugh. And she would want us to come and stay with her all the time. No. Everything will be much better as long as she keeps her make-believe brothel in her mind.

Wally: So I guess you're not going there for Christmas.

Hikari: *(Smiling.)* Like you said. We've got a month until then to figure out a plan.

Wally reaches once more into the package of cookies, only to find they are all gone. He picks up the paper bag, crumples it into a ball and tosses it over his shoulder onto the back seat.

Scene VI - One Week Before Christmas

Hazel is sitting by the Christmas tree in her living room, applying a fringe to a vivid pink scarf. The evening news is playing on the television in the background.

Television: *In London tonight, suicide bombers descended upon a Prayer-for-Peace candlelight vigil held in Trafalgar Square. There were several blasts with widespread casualties, and the death toll is still mounting. No organization has yet claimed responsibility...*

Hazel: *(Clutching the finished scarf to her chest.)* That's the last one. I hope Amanda likes it.

The telephone rings. (It has a speaker, which allows the person on the other end to be heard.)

Hazel: Hello?

Amanda: Hi, It's Amanda.

Hazel: Oh hello Amanda, I was just thinking of you...

Amanda: Yes, Hazel... Chester and I have talked it over, and we've decided that we have to change our plans for Christmas this year. Whenever Wally sees Philbert, especially at Christmas time, he nearly always offers him a chocolate bar. And you know that all chocolate bars may contain nuts. It says so on the packaging. And of course quite a lot of them actually do. I've spoken to Wally time and again and he just doesn't appreciate how serious a threat nuts can be. And Philbert is getting to an age when even if he does know better, he doesn't always do what's right for himself. Which means it's up to Chester and me to protect him from the dangers of chocolate bars in general and nuts in particular. So unfortunately we won't be coming for Christmas. For Philbert's sake we're going to be where it's safe.

Amanda: Well, I hope something happens to change your mind. It won't feel like Christmas without you here.

Amanda: I'm sorry, Hazel, but we don't have any other choice.

Hazel: Yes. Well, goodbye Amanda...

Hazel hangs up the phone and leans back on the couch. As she sits, she contemplates to herself.

Hazel: Chester doesn't always bring a chocolate bar... And they don't all contain nuts... And no one even knows if Philbert has a peanut allergy...

While Hazel is thinking out loud, the news on the television continues.

Television: *At a Christian college in the Midwestern United States this afternoon, a resident in his junior year opened fire with a semi-automatic weapon, killing at least three divinity students, a stray beagle and a passing grey nun. Observers claim that when he noticed the dead dog, he turned the rifle on himself. Countless more people suffered injuries, some of them life-threatening. Surviving students who knew the gunman say he was a dropout from the Wicca Club, who had threatened that he was going to turn this winter solstice into one that no one would ever forget – or remember.*

The telephone rings again.

Hazel: Hello?

Wally: Hi Mom.

Hazel: Wally! I'm so glad you called...

Wally: I just wanted to let you know that Hikari and I have made a spur of the moment decision.

Hazel: You're getting married?"

Wally: No. Not that, Mom. But Hikari's really been missing her family lately. So we're going to Japan for the holidays. Too bad we won't be able to see you for Christmas, but trips like this don't come along very often. We'll be thinking about you though.

Hazel: That sounds wonderful for both of you. I'll be looking forward to your pictures when you get back in January.

Wally: *(Caught off guard in his lie.)* Uhh... yeah Mom, I guess we'll have some great shots. So Merry Christmas. And Hikari says hello too...

Hazel: Bye Wally. I love you...

Wally: G'bye!

Hazel puts down the telephone and distractedly switches the television to a different channel.

Television: *At the infirmary of the San Diego Zoo, the last known female copper-headed condor died this morning. It's believed three males still exist in the wild, but no sightings of other females have occurred in over five years. The death of the bird today effectively signifies the extinction of the species, which once scavenged the western deserts from Oregon to Central America.*

Hazel heaves her shoulders and picks up the telephone and dials.

Amanda: *(Answering the phone.)* Hello?

Hazel: Amanda? It's Hazel. I'm just letting you know that Wally won't be coming here for Christmas. He called to say that he and Hikari are going to Japan to visit her family. So the coast will be clear and safe for Philbert after all.

Hazel: Too bad Mom, but... uh...we've already made arrangements to spend the day with friends. If we'd only found out earlier...

Hazel: Of course, dear... Goodbye then.

Amanda: Merry Christmas!

Hazel: I guess...

Hazel lays down the phone and sits dejectedly, her face in her hands as the television continues.

Television: *In Eastern Europe, the world-famous Cathedral of Saint Sebastian which dates back to the middle ages has been destroyed by fire. The blaze, which left the building along with its contents of priceless medieval artworks a charred ruin, is presumed to have resulted from a mishap with a votive candle, which caused flames to spread rapidly through the ancient tapestries on the walls.*

Two priests who re-entered the burning building to rescue the historic arrow relics of Saint Sebastian were killed in the disaster. Miraculously the arrows survived intact.

Hazel turns off the television and hauls out a large cardboard box. She pulls out a dozen skeins of sturdy battleship grey yarn and a couple of large needles. Then with a sigh she starts casting on stitches.

Scene VII - A Few Days Later

Hazel and Aunt Coco are in Aunt Coco's apartment. Aunt Coco has a book in her hand. Hazel is knitting away at a bulky grey woollen mass.

Aunt Coco: (*Thumping her book.*) The little brats! And to think I was going to give them all my money!

Hazel: I suppose you can't blame Hikari for wanting to see her family.

Aunt Coco: Of course you can if she wrecks your plans. Hazel, you're always too nice.

Hazel: I can't imagine what I'll do for Christmas now. I've had the same routine for nearly forty years.

Aunt Coco: Then you and I will go out for dinner together. Somewhere completely different. We'll find a place where it doesn't seem like Christmas at all. At my euchre club I heard that the Pearl Gate Restaurant down the block is having a Chinese buffet. And it's got wheelchair access. So we'll go there. (*Looking smug.*) Now that's decided I want to get back to my book."

Hazel: What are you reading?

Aunt Coco: (*Waving her book in the air.*) The Diary of Anne Frank. I'm fed up with TV at this time of year. Except for 'The Price is Right'. The rest of the shows are sappy Christmas specials and smarmy movies and I can't stand them. I needed tragic relief, so I chose something that couldn't possibly have a happy ending.

Hazel: I always cry when Ingrid Bergman says good-bye in 'The Bells of St. Mary's'.

Aunt Coco: (*Gives her an exasperated look. Then she adjusts her glasses and peers more closely.*) Tell me, Hazel. What exactly is that god-awful grey mess you're knitting? It looks like there's a thundercloud billowing in your lap.

Hazel: It's the sweater you wanted, seeing as though the family's not doing Christmas. I knew you'd be disappointed, so making this sweater was the least I could do.

Aunt Coco: Hazel, just because you always mean what you say doesn't mean that everybody else does. I need another sweater like you need another hole in your head. Now rip it all out and mix it with some steel wool and turn it into a Volkswagen.

Hazel: (*Holding up her knitting.*) Maybe I could wear it instead?

Aunt Coco: I forbid it. You'd look like you were dressed in a trash can. If you've got to keep yourself busy, go and make some tea while I read. I'm just coming to the sexy part.

Scene VIII - Christmas Day

Hazel and Aunt Coco are in Aunt Coco's apartment, getting ready to go to Christmas Dinner.

Hazel: *(On the telephone.)* Yes, I'm just confirming my reservation for dinner today. Hazel. H-A-Z-E-L. That's right, for two. Fine. We'll be right there.

Aunt Coco: *(Groping around.)* Somebody's taken my choppers! It must have been those Silver Suites snoops. They come in here day and night and things go missing. Now it's my teeth that are gone! How am I supposed to go to Christmas dinner without my teeth?

Hazel: *(Opening the lid of the sugar bowl.)* Here they are.

Aunt Coco: *(Stuffing her dentures into her mouth.)* Ummphh, well then... Help me with my coat, and then we can go. But leave the radio on – loud - so they'll think I'm still here and won't barge in and take anything else.

Hazel turns the radio on and gets Aunt Coco's coat. As she helps Aunt Coco get dressed, the radio news is playing.

Radio: *Unfortunately at this joyous time of year, it's believed that the notorious pink ribbon bomber has struck again. An Illinois widow in Peoria received a package decorated like a Christmas gift through the mail. When she opened the box it exploded, killing her instantly. Police are searching through the remnants of the blast to establish the location where the package was mailed, and to find any possible clues leading to the perpetrator of the crime. No other motive except the random act of the pink ribbon bomber has been determined at this point. Stay tuned for further developments.*

As the news item finishes, Hazel wheels Aunt Coco out of the apartment.

Scene IX - Immediately After

Hazel maneuvers Aunt Coco in her wheelchair through the doors of the Pearl Gate Restaurant.

Aunt Coco: I want to sit close to the food!

Hazel: *(Looking around.)* Wait a minute. It can't be! But it looks like Chester, with Amanda and Philbert sitting in that corner. *(She wheels Aunt Coco over just to make sure.)*

Chester: Uh... oh... Hi Mom! And Aunt Coco too! Uh... Nice to see you. Right Philbert? Say Merry Christmas to your Grandma and Aunt Coco, Son.

Amanda: Dinner with our friends... got cancelled at short notice. So we ended up here. Whodda thought we'd run into each other! ...Great that we did! This was the only place I called that guaranteed its food was uncontaminated with nuts, unless the dish specifically said so.

Aunt Coco: That's because no one here is paid enough to care about what they promise.

While the tables are being repositioned to accommodate Aunt Coco's wheelchair, Wally and Hikari enter the restaurant.

Hazel: My Goodness! That's Wally and Hikari! *(Hazel runs to them, and leads them to the family corner, where hugs ensue all around.)*

Wally: Hi folks. Uuhhh... Last minute airfares were too expensive over the holidays. We just couldn't afford to go to Japan right now... And Hikari didn't feel like cooking. And Warner's Corners doesn't have many places serving Asian food that are open today. So here we are! Merry Christmas everyone! Aunt Coco – so good you could come! Have you met Hikari?

Aunt Coco: I need a drink. What kind of wine goes with crap?

While the seating is again being rearranged, Hazel goes to the buffet and returns with a platter laden with chicken balls dripping with sweet and sour sauce. She carries it aloft, as if it were a Dickensian turkey with all the trimmings. Then she passes the plate around. Everyone uses a chopstick to stab at the chicken chunks until each one has a big blob of chicken on the end of their chopstick.

Hazel: There are chicken balls for everyone!

All together: Merry Christmas! *(They raise their skewered chicken balls in the air as if in a toast, and then they all eat the chicken together.)*

Amanda: Come Philbert. I'll help you choose your dinner at the buffet.

Aunt Coco: Hazel, bring me a big plate of chicken balls like we just ate. And egg foo young with shrimp. No rice or chop suey. Just lots of shrimp.

Everyone heads to the buffet to fill their plates. While Amanda is sniffing out Philbert's food to save him from the evils of nuts, Wally tosses a Snickers Bar at Philbert.

Wally: Hey, Kid. Here's some dessert.

Immediately Amanda snatches the chocolate bar from Philbert's fingers and faces Wally, ashen faced.

Amanda: *(Shrieking.)* Are you trying to kill my son? You're fully aware this bar has peanuts in it!

Before Wally can reply, Chester grabs the Snickers Bar from his wife, tears off the wrapper and shoves it into Philbert's gaping mouth. In a flash, Philbert devours it whole, a smile lighting up his cheeks and gobs of melted chocolate mixed with drool rolling down his chin. Amanda lunges at Chester like a cornered mother bear.

Amanda: *(Beating on Chester's chest.)* You're trying to murder your own flesh and blood! How dare you! Do you hate him as much as you hate me?

Chester: *(Fending her off.)* I'm just letting him be normal for once! You're so scared about him being allergic to nuts - you won't even have him tested!

Amanda: *(Reaching for Chester's throat.)* My son's life is too precious to allow it to be risked for peanuts! But obviously you have no respect for his safety or my devotion to him. Murderer!

Chester: *(Twisting out of her hold.)* You've never let him live in the real world. I just couldn't sit by and watch any longer! I've had enough of your crazy control! He's my son too!

Amanda: You and your brother are both conspiring to destroy me! I want a divorce! (*Hysterically she looks around the restaurant.*) Is there a lawyer here? I need a lawyer! NOW! (*Bellowing at the top of her lungs.*) I'VE GOT TO GET A DIVORCE!

Hikari: (*Taking Amanda's arm.*) I'm a lawyer. And it's my professional opinion that you should sit down and calm yourself. And if you really are worried about a medical emergency, my further advice is to call for a doctor, not a lawyer.

Philbert: (*His mouth still oozing chocolate.*) Hey Mom, we don't need a doctor. It's no big deal. I've had peanut butter sandwiches at Dougie's place since grade two. He double-dog-dared me to try them. They're really awesome with bananas.

Amanda: WHAT? You've been eating peanuts all these years without telling me? (*Wheeling around and hissing at her son.*) You're as evil as your father. From this moment you're grounded till...till... Easter.

Philbert: How could I tell you about it? I was always too scared. I knew you'd go ballistic and ground me. Like you just did.

Amanda: (*Sobbing.*) This whole family's been against me from the very start. And now I've raised a monster who has turned into one of them.

Hikari guides Amanda to her seat, where she slumps down. Everyone else follows and sits at the table in an awkward silence. Taking advantage of the pause, Aunt Coco takes the floor.

Aunt Coco: Now all of you listen to me. I invited myself to Hazel's for Christmas this year because I had an announcement to make. Plans didn't work out the way your mother and I expected, but by strange coincidence we're all here together for Christmas dinner anyway. I was going to tell you that I was changing my will, to leave my money to Wally and Chester instead of Hazel, who doesn't seem to have much need for it. But after seeing how you've all treated her and behaved to each other, I'm going to give everything to the Humane Society. Wild dogs deserve it more than you do.

Wally: Aunt Coco, do you actually have a big enough nest egg under your mattress to worry about?

Aunt Coco: (*Pointing her finger at Wally.*) I've got enough money to bury me.

Wally: As long as it's not too deep a grave. But really Aunt Coco, the government wouldn't let you live at Silver Suites if you had any savings.

Aunt Coco: (*Straightening up to her full wheelchair height.*) You, young man are a saucebox! But maybe your Hickory-dickory lawyer lady can draw up my new will.

Hikari: I'm not that type of lawyer.

Chester: What kind are you anyway? I never knew.

Hikari: (*Smiling.*) In Japan we put it this way. 'If a person says they can't eat peanuts and no one proves otherwise, they can't eat peanuts. So if a person says they are a lawyer and no one proves otherwise, they are a lawyer'. That means I can be any kind I want to be. Or not.

Chester: Oh.

Amanda: (*Turning upon Hikari with her eyes smouldering.*) So you lied to me about being a lawyer? Is this all just a game to you?

Hikari: Not exactly. I may be a lawyer. I just haven't been tested. Yet.

Amanda: (*With a classic sniff.*) That's ridiculous.

Wally: She sounds like a lawyer to me. Or at least the only kind of lawyer I'd go into partnership with. (*Pulling Hikari to his side.*) You're all invited to our wedding, whenever we decide to go through with it.

Hikari: (*Giving Wally an elbow in the ribs.*) In Kyoto!

Wally: What a plan!

Amanda: Watch out for Plan B.

Hazel: Wherever the wedding is, I'll be there! This calls for a celebration! (*She lifts her knitting satchel onto the table.*) I brought the Christmas gifts I made for everyone so I could show Aunt Coco. (*Eagerly she starts pulling out her prize collection of woollens.*) But now I can just give them to each of you instead!

As Hazel distributes her handiwork, it is received with gracious non-enthusiasm, until Philbert is given his pair of green socks.

Philbert: Yuk. I hate socks. Especially pukey green socks. Grandma, why don't you ever give me good presents? Like candy. Or money.

Hazel clutches her knitting bag to her bosom and looks aghast at her cheeky grandson.

Aunt Coco: Boy, you should be ashamed of yourself. When I was a child I would have been sent to my room for talking to my elders like that. If I had the strength I'd box your ears!

Wally: (*Holding up Aunt Coco's scarf.*) Seriously, Aunt Coco. Are you ever going to wear this woolly thing around your neck? No fibbing. We've all done too much of that.

Aunt Coco: (*Staring Wally in the eye so she doesn't have to look at Hazel.*) Silver Suites has a lost-and-found bin. Every winter I put my scarf in there. I expect it goes to a worthy cause eventually.

Wally sticks out his tongue at Aunt Coco in triumph, and then turns to his nephew.

Wally: Congratulations, Kid. You did good today. Hope you like this present better than your funky socks. (*Wally throws another Snickers Bar Philbert's way.*) You've just told your grandmother the exact words I should have said when I was your age. If I had done what you did, it would have saved us all a lot of itchy grief.

Philbert: (*Unwrapping his treat.*) Wow, thanks Uncle Wally. You're the best. (*He holds up the chunk of chocolate and looks at it in awe. Before taking a bite he asks...*) Am I still grounded?

Chester: Your mother says no. RIGHT, Amanda?

Amanda: Well, perhaps for those rude remarks you made to your grandmother...

Hazel: Please don't punish Philbert because of me. When I think of all the knitting I no longer have to do, I feel so free! (*With an exhilarated laugh.*) I might... join a pottery class!

Everyone together: NO!

Chester: But we really love you, Mom. (*He gives her a kiss.*)

Wally: Yeah. You may kill us with kindness, but you're the only one who's ever been completely honest all the time. (*He gives her a hug.*)

Spontaneously everyone joins the hugging group. Aunt Coco reaches for Hazel's hand from her wheelchair, making a grimace that shows vestiges of a smile. Hikari moves to Hazel's side and softly squeezes her shoulder. And even Amanda embraces Philbert and grips Chester's arm. From the centre of the circle of love, Hazel looks up at her family.

Hazel: (*With a contented sigh.*) Merry Christmas, everyone. We'll never have another one like this!

Chester: That prediction had better hold true.

Wally: Hey folks, speaking of predictions, let's read our Christmas fortunes! (*He breaks apart a cookie.*) Hikari, listen to what mine says. 'You will go on an unexpected journey.' So we might get to Japan after all!

Hikari: Interesting. All my troubles will soon be over...

Hazel: Aunt Coco, you look tired...

Aunt Coco: This silly paper promises a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Poppycock! All I want right now is a glass of cold water...

Philbert: Mom, it's awfully hot in here...

Hazel: I'm supposed to fulfill all my wishes today and not wait till tomorrow. Oh dear. That seems so rushed. And my only wish at the moment is to crawl into bed...

Amanda: Philbert, come outside with me for some fresh air...

Chester: I'm going to find inner peace. Too bad my stomach feels like a war zone...

Wally: We've all got 'Witch Hazel's Curse'...

Aunt Coco: Hazel, I don't feel right. I want you to take me home this minute! Hazel? Answer me! HAZEL! What's wrong with you?

Everyone: SOMEBODY CALL 911!

In Aunt Coco's empty apartment, the radio is still loudly playing.

Radio: A Christmas catastrophe has struck Warner's Corners. Health Department officials have quarantined a popular Chinese food restaurant located in the downtown area, to investigate an outbreak of acute gastric illness suffered by many of the patrons who ate Christmas dinner there. The source of the disease is thought to be a highly toxic strain of salmonella bacteria, possibly typhoid. The food poisoning was most likely transmitted through infected chicken, which was kept inadequately refrigerated at the Pearl Gate Restaurant over the holiday period, and subsequently served undercooked. The allegedly contaminated poultry has caused multiple fatalities. Particularly tragic to report during this festive season are the deaths of seven members of the same family spanning four generations. Dead are Hazel McNutt, her aunt Coco and her son Wally McNutt and his partner Hikari. Also deceased are her son Chester McNutt, his wife Amanda and their twelve year old son Philbert.

Turning to weather...

Cut to black.
