

Armstrong/Vacuum

VACUUM

by

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Armstrong/*Vacuum*

THE PLAYERS

BELLE

Mother. 50's.

Bustling; preoccupied. Flighty, unfocused energy. Oblivious to the world outside of her thoughts.

ANNA

Daughter. Late teens / early 20's.

Cynical, sarcastic.

MINNIE

Daughter. A year or so younger than ANNA.

Absorbed in problems of the world outside of her own, especially those involving death. Gullible.

FRASER

Father. 50's.

Quiet. An astronomer. Apparently-unresponsive to human events.

BAILEY

Son. 9.

A healthy, curious, thoughtful kid.

OFFICER

40's.

Reasonably intelligent, good-natured, concerned.

ROCK

ANNA's boyfriend. Early 20's.

Tired, harmless, stoned out of his mind.

SETTING

A suburban home in New England at the onset of a blizzard

TIME

The present, a few days after New Year's Day. Morning.

Blue = to actors and director: "note this". (But it need not be directly discussed).

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1
THE FAMILY

Scene:

LIGHTS DOWN.

At Rise:

Opening music fades and gives way to sobbing, sniffing. Ten seconds elapse. Distant car-honking joins the sobbing. The person sobbing does not react to car-honking. Ten more seconds elapse. Honking stops.

*LIGHTS UP on kitchen of modestly-decorated suburban home. Downstage: Livingroom. A large window in UL wall opens onto kitchen. Back door to driveway in back kitchen wall. UR: staircase leading to second floor (or door R.) UC: short hallway leading to Front Door, with several coats hanging on pegs next to it. Just R of front door: *a coat closet*, with door opening toward audience. DL: another exit to other rooms of house, including tv room.*

ANNA, hand still on switch, has raised the lights. She wears a t-shirt and shorts, and her hair is in tangles. Evidently she has just woken.

*MINNIE sits at kitchen table, sniffing quietly. On table in front of her is a laptop, which she opens. Begins reading screen and occasionally stirs a cup of tea that she never sips (*none of the family members except BAILEY eat or drink over the course of the play.*) Abruptly stops crying, her attention caught by something on the screen. Reads, sniffing, for a few more seconds. Has not acknowledged ANNA.*

Honking resumes, more adamant. Neither ANNA nor MINNIE react to it.

ANNA

(Does not acknowledge MINNIE. Opens fridge. Looks. Starts rummaging.)
No more orange juice?

MINNIE

I don't know. *(Honking stops.)*

ANNA

Mom got a new quart, like, yesterday. Who had it all?

MINNIE *(Sniff)*

Probably you.

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ANNA *emerges from fridge with carton of some beverage that isn't orange juice.*

BELLE

(Enter back kitchen door, suffusing the space with noisy energy. She carries two packed grocery bags in her arms. Starts talking before she's fully entered.)
For heaven's sake, didn't anybody hear me out there? *(As she unloads bags)* I'm up to my ears, someone could give me a hand. Anna, dear, did Mrs. Philips call about dinner tomorrow night? I'm trying to decide what to bring for dessert and I don't know what will go well until I know what we'll be having. I picked up some gelatin just in case, to make that lime pie again that Bailey enjoys so much. But lime doesn't go with everything, I know; you know? Did anyone call? Dear me, what time is it already? Will you come out to the car and give me a hand?

(On her way back outside without waiting for a reply.)

BAILEY *enters DL during BELLE's monologue. Starts pawing through grocery bags.*

ANNA

(Unmoved by BELLE's frivolous urgency)
No one's called Mom. It's only ten. Did you get more orange juice?

BELLE *(Out the door)*

If it's only ten, then why does the clock say ten after? Tell me that, and come outside, will you, please? *(End of last line may get lost.)*

ANNA

(Sets juice on counter, moves to follow BELLE. To BAILEY)
I come back and that juice is gone, Roland's gonna pay hard for it. *(Exit Back Door.)*
(Silence as BAILEY roots through bags.)

BAILEY *(to MINNIE)*

I didn't want her stupid juice.
(Finds crackers. Opens package, munches.)

MINNIE

112 more people died in the Sudan yesterday.

BAILEY

Where's the Sudan?

MINNIE

It's in Africa. Really far away. Across the ocean.

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BAILEY

If it's so far away, how do you know what happened there?

MINNIE

Bailey, there are reporters there. They tell us.

BAILEY

Maybe they're making it up.

MINNIE

Bailey, this is a newspaper. Reporters don't go around making things up.

BAILEY

Why not?

(No response from MINNIE.)

If I was a reporter in Africa across the ocean, I would make things up. My stories would be a lot better than what really happened.

MINNIE

Real reporters don't do that. They report the truth.

BAILEY

Why?

(No response. Enter BELLE and ANNA Back Door with more groceries.)

BELLE *(In mid sentence)*

.. or the tart would go fine if they're having the chicken again. Do you think they'd serve chicken twice in the same month? To company, I mean? Goodness, the house is a mess. Four days ago I swear to goodness I went over every square inch, and look at it. And the air! As if a mouse had crawled under something and died. It's a shame Marlene took that old cat; it could have actually helped out around here. Cats are such clean animals, aren't they? But good thing we weren't stuck with it, heaven knows I have enough to look after. Goodness, what smell. Does anyone else smell that? Do I even have time to vacuum before lunch? Did anyone call while we were outside, Minnie? Will someone pull out the vacuum later or in a minute or so?

(Moves into livingroom, clicks on light switch by door. LIGHTS UP on livingroom. Modest but tasteful. A long, plush couch in center – upon which sleeps FRASER. Scattered mess of papers lies around him.)

FRASER starts awake when lights come up.

BELLE

You're still sleeping, Fraser? Goodness, it's nearly 10 o'clock. Well, all right, would you mind moving onto the bed? I'd like to get the room tidied up.

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(The room is spotless. BELLE pops back into kitchen.)

FRASER *rubs eyes, gradually moves to sitting position. Starts gathering papers. Picks one up, reads. Grabs pencil. Reads/marks with pencil.*

ANNA

(Looking out kitchen window)

It's so dark out there. You should see the clouds. This'll be an awesome storm.

MINNIE

It's a blizzard. It's west of us right now; it should hit sometime around noon.

BELLE

That soon, dear?

BAILEY

It was on the news too. We're gonna get 12 feet!

ANNA

12 *inches*, Hon.

BELLE

Oh dear, is that right. Now what will that mean for the party tomorrow, then, do you think? How long is it supposed to last, Anna?

MINNIE

For the rest of the day, at least.

BAILEY

12 whole inches of snow?

BELLE

Dear. For the rest of the day? *(Looks to ANNA for confirmation. ANNA shrugs.)* Then perhaps I should head over to Ruth's now so we can discuss the dinner. Anna, are you going to run over to the library today? To ... study?

(She thinks that's the proper term but doesn't feel certain of its meaning.)

ANNA

Yes Mom, that's exactly what I was planning on. Remember *last* vacation I spent it all sitting on my ass in front of the TV – lemme tell you how much that sucked.

BELLE

Anna, please don't swear in front of your brother.

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BAILEY

I know how to swear. I know *all* the swears.

BELLE

Well, know them if you like, but keep them out of this house.

BAILEY

Suck doesn't even count. Suck isn't a swear.

ANNA

Yeah, seriously.

BELLE

Anna! That's enough.

MINNIE (*Reading laptop*)

This blizzard's already killed two people in New Jersey.

ANNA

Who? Two 80-year-olds out shoveling their driveways?

MINNIE

What does it matter who? Two people *died*.

ANNA

Two dumbasses died, maybe. It's snow. It's not a masked gunman.

MINNIE

There is something seriously wrong with you.

ANNA

Minnie. It's *snow*. But if you go turn 80 years old and head outside with a shovel that weighs 20 pounds, what do you think's gonna happen?

MINNIE

You know, some day you're going to die too. We're all going to die. We'll all be lifeless rotting shells seeping into the dirt. Then you'll be sorry.

ANNA

When? When I'm seeping into the dirt?

(No response.)

How am I going to be sorry if I'm seeping into the dirt? Won't it be a little late for regrets at that point?

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BELLE

All right. So if Anna isn't going to the library, then no one else needs my car for the rest of the day, right? (*Doesn't wait for confirmation.*) In that case I'll put it in the garage so we don't have to shovel it out in the morning.

MINNIE (*gasps*)

Oh my god, there's another guy in the hospital. (*Reads*) He got buried in the snow and his cat found him four hours later, and they took him to the hospital.

ANNA

His cat took him to the hospital?

MINNIE (*Reading*)

"62-year-old Arlo McKenna recounts that he was scraping ice off the drainage pipe in the back of his house when he accidentally dislodged the pipe, sending several feet of snow tumbling down upon him." ... Skipping ... "Authorities attribute his survival to his pet house cat, who witnessed the event from the dining room bay window and signaled for emergency assistance via a 911 button he wore on his collar."

ANNA (*Amused*)

Arlo McKenna?

MINNIE

"The Cat, 'Mittens', and his grateful owner, are expected to be home for the holidays."

ANNA

What-in-God's-name paper are you reading?

MINNIE

Well that's a good ending for them, at least.

ANNA

How do they know the cat was in the dining room? Did the cat happen to mention that on his official statement? That he was in the approximate vicinity of the dining room at the time of the accident?

MINNIE

You're evil, you know that? You're pure evil.

BAILEY

How could a cat talk about a dining room?

ANNA

Yes, Minnie, how *could* a cat talk about a dining room?

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MINNIE (*To ANNA*)

Did it occur to you that the dining room bay window may be the only place in the house with an unobstructed view of the back yard drainage pipe? Huh? So that the police inferred that that's where the cat must have been? No, I guess your pathological urge to bleed continuous sarcasm would inhibit you from making so insightful a deduction.

ANNA

You know, now that I'm thinking about it ... I mean, don't you think it's kind of a coincidence that the cat just happened to be so ideally positioned? Off he goes and stares out the dining room window for no apparent reason, and then a few minutes later – oops! There's poor old Arlo McKenna, shivering there underneath 3 feet of snow right outside. Sounds a bit suspect, the more I think about it.

MINNIE

Then why would the cat have called the police?

ANNA (*Thinks*)

Last-minute regret? Or maybe it was a ploy to throw the cops off his trail. Maybe he was betting they wouldn't get there in time. No, this whole thing doesn't smell right. The cat's in on it, if you ask me.

MINNIE

In on *what*?

FRASER (*Pops head into kitchen*)

I'm heading to the office for a few hours.

ANNA

Oh Dad, don't go – there's a blizzard starting up in like an hour.

FRASER (*Feigning interest*)

Is there?

BELLE

Perhaps you should work from home today.

FRASER

Well, I'll head in, but I'll keep the news on. If things get worse, I'll come back.

BELLE

Well Fraser Dear, be careful.

BAILEY

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Bye Dad.

FRASER

Good-bye.

(Conversation continues. FRASER goes to Coat Closet. Audience cannot see inside. FRASER opens door, looks for something; apparently can't see it. Shuts door, puzzled. Exits DL.)

BAILEY *(To ANNA)*

I don't think the cat's in on it.

ANNA

No?

BAILEY

I think he's just a really smart cat. That's all. Like Snickers.

ANNA

That's sweet of you, Bailey. Snickers was a pretty sharp cat, you're right. Not as smart as Roland, though.

BAILEY *(Laughs)*

Roland's not a cat!

ANNA

I know.

MINNIE *(Standing)*

I'm going upstairs to write.

BELLE

Minnie, when you come down can you bring down anything dirty?

MINNIE

Yes.

ANNA *(To MINNIE)*

I wonder what the cat was hiding up there, that he didn't want Arlo to know about.

MINNIE *(Stops)*

You think the cat was hiding something under the snow on the roof?

ANNA

Possible. Cats are pretty agile. He coulda climbed up there.

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MINNIE

What was he hiding?

ANNA (*Pause*)

Diamonds?

MINNIE (*Unhappy, tired*)

Diamonds.

ANNA

Hey, *you* ought to know the black market diamond trade is big bucks. Weren't you just lecturing us last night about the working conditions in the mines? In Zambia or wherever?

BAILEY

Sierra Leone.

MINNIE

Okay. (*Deep sigh.*) The cat was hiding blood diamonds on the roof of a 2-story house in suburban New Hampshire, and stood lookout from the dining room bay window while his owner got buried under four feet of snow, and then felt guilty and called the cops.

ANNA

Hey, you'd believe it if it was in print.

(MINNIE *starts to leave Upstairs.*)

You gonna write poetry?

MINNIE

Maybe.

ANNA

You gonna write an ode to Arlo McKenna?

(MINNIE *exits.*)

ANNA (*Yelling after her*)

Better make it a eulogy. Next time the cat gets some smart idea, Arlo might not make out so lucky. (*Under her breath*) Jesus.

BELLE

Oh, Anna, let her enjoy herself.

ANNA

What?

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BELLE

You know how sensitive she is about her news.

ANNA

Her news? *Her* news?!

BELLE

It's not as though it hurts anybody.

ANNA

It hurts my ears to hear it, doesn't that count? It hurts our culture that there exist people who'll believe any goddamn thing they read.

BELLE (*Pause*)

Did you put away the olives or did I?

ANNA (*Under her breath*)

Fucking cat.

BELLE (*Reacting to the swear*)

Anna!

ANNA

What.

BELLE

Maybe they're in the car. Did you see a can of black olives in the car?

ANNA

No.

BELLE

(Re-donning coat. No hat – her hair is perfect.)

I'm going out to move the car and see if I can find the olives. I don't want to hear any more swearing in this house. If Ruth calls, let her know I'm wondering about tomorrow? Ask her if a lime pie would go all right with dinner? I'll be right back.

(Exits via kitchen door.)

ANNA and BAILEY are by now seated at the kitchen table. BAILEY munches dry cereal with his fingers. ANNA looks at a section of the paper. Long silence. Unless specified, ANNA does not look at BAILEY during this conversation.

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BAILEY

Why is Mom making that gross lime pie again?

ANNA

I don't know.

(Pause)

BAILEY

Limes are sour. She should make a grape pie.

(Pause)

Or a grape sugar pie. Or just sugar. A sugar pie.

ANNA

A sugar pie?

BAILEY

Yeah. A pie with a heap of sugar inside it.

ANNA

Bailey, that sounds awful.

BAILEY

No, it would be good. It would be really sweet.

ANNA

Just a heap of sugar? How would you eat it? It would just be a powdery mess.

BAILEY

You wouldn't *only* have sugar. You'd have other stuff to hold it together.

ANNA

Like eggs?

BAILEY

No, eggs are gross. *(Thinks.)* You could use glue.

ANNA

Glue?

BAILEY

Yeah. The kind Mrs. Kline uses for the poster boards. You could dye it a different color from white, to make it look better.

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ANNA

Bailey, don't you think glue would taste kind of bad? That might be even worse than eggs.

BAILEY (*Considers*)

No, it must taste good. It smells like fruit.

(*Pause.*)

ANNA

Glue smells like fruit?

BAILEY

Yeah, and it makes you all silly and dizzy.

(*Pause.*)

ANNA

(*Looks closely at BAILEY for a moment, then back to what she's reading.*)
You shouldn't smell glue, Bailey.

BAILEY

Why not?

ANNA

It's not good for you.

BELLE

(*Enters through Back Door with can of olives.*)
Did Ruth call?

ANNA

No, Mom, Ruth did not call during the 45 seconds you were outside.

BAILEY *exits SL.*

FRASER *enters DL, wearing an old, worn coat, carrying hat and keys.*)

2

THE OFFICER

FRASER *has hand nearly on front door knob, about to leave.*

DOORBELL!

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FRASER *opens Front Door. A police OFFICER stands there.*

OFFICER *(Removes hat)*

Good morning Sir. I'm responding to the distress call we received a few minutes ago.
(Pause.)

FRASER

A telephone call?

OFFICER

Yes, Sir.

BELLE

(Entering livingroom from kitchen; has overheard OFFICER)
What ...? You received a phone call about our house?

OFFICER

Yes, Ma'am.
(ANNA follows BELLE into livingroom.)

BELLE

What on Earth about?

OFFICER

The caller said there was a problem and that we should send someone down to check up on things. ... I take it this surprises you?

BELLE

Well, if this isn't the strangest. What kind of a problem?

OFFICER

I'm not sure that it was terribly specific, Ma'am. But I'm not the one who took the call.
(Pause.)

BELLE

(Looking for something to say)
Anna? Is this you?

ANNA

No Mom!

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BELLE

Well goodness Heavens ... has anyone here placed a call to the police?

FRASER

No.

BELLE

Where's Minnie? (*Calling up the stairs*) Minnie! Can you come down here at once, please!

(*Confounded silence.*)

You must be mistaken, Officer, no one has called for help from this house.

OFFICER

This is the Frost residence, is it?

(*Pause*)

FRASER

Why, yes.

OFFICER

The caller was a person by the name of Frost. Called themselves Frost.

BELLE

Well, that's odd, now, isn't it?

FRASER

Was it a male or female?

OFFICER

I didn't take the call, Sir.

(*MINNIE enters via Stairs.*)

BELLE

Minnie, did you call the police?

MINNIE

No.

BELLE

Well, I'm sure it was some sort of a prank, Officer. I wonder if it was the new neighbor over there. She doesn't take kindly to my forsythia bushes.

OFFICER

The phone call did come from this house, Ma'am.

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BELLE

Well, no one placed a telephone call from this house. I'm so sorry you went to all this trouble for nothing. Through this storm, even. I hope you have a safe trip back into town.

OFFICER (*Hesitates*)

Is this everyone in the house, Ma'am?

MINNIE (*To OFFICER*)

There was a call from this house?

OFFICER (*To MINNIE*)

That's right, Miss.

BELLE (*To OFFICER*)

Well, we have a son. He's nine. I'm sure he has nothing to do with this.

OFFICER

I don't feel right leaving, Ma'am, until I've spoken with everyone in the house.

ANNA

I'll find him. (*Exits Stage Left.*)
(*Pause.*)

MINNIE (*To OFFICER*)

What did the caller say?

BELLE

(*Realizing that she should play the appropriate role of hostess; uncomfortably*)
Can I get you something to drink, Officer? Or would you like to sit down?

OFFICER

No, Ma'am, I'm fine. But thank you.

MINNIE (*To OFFICER*)

What did the caller say?

OFFICER

Just that there was a problem in –

BAILEY

(*Offstage; pained, indignant*)

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I was almost at level four. I can't get back without the taser gun! I lost all my dragon power.

(Enter ANNA pulling BAILEY.)

BELLE

Bailey, this is Officer – uh .. *(To OFFICER)* I'm sorry, I think I haven't caught your name.

ANNA

Bailey, tell everyone: did you make a phone call to the police? It's okay, no one's going to be mad at you.

(Silence. BAILEY stares at OFFICER.)

BELLE

Just tell us the truth, Bailey. It's all right. Did you call the police?

BAILEY

No.

OFFICER

You didn't call, Son?

BAILEY

No.

BELLE

Are you sure?

BAILEY

Yes.

(Pause.)

BELLE

Well, that's everyone, Officer. Surely you see this must all be a mix-up.

OFFICER

Well, all right, then, if everyone seems to be all right here, I guess there's nothing more I can do. I'm sorry for disturbing you. Guess I'd best be on my way. But I hope you will call if you feel the need?

BELLE

I'm quite sure we will have no need.

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ANNA

Yes, of course we will. Officer, it's a hell of a storm kicking up. Are you sure it's safe driving all the way back to town?

OFFICER

I've got snow tires, I'm sure I'll be fine.

ANNA

Are you sure?

BELLE

He's sure, Anna. He's got snow tires.

ANNA

Because you're welcome to stay and wait it out, if you want.

FRASER

There'll be a long waiting-out of this one, Anna. This one's barely gotten started.

OFFICER

Yes, Miss, I'd better be getting off while it's this mild.

BELLE

That's right, that's sensible. Now, how about that soup. Now that the olives are here I can start a meal. And tomorrow. Whatever *will* I prepare for tomorrow? ..

(BELLE's words trail off as she bustles back into kitchen.)

OFFICER *(To ANNA)*

Thank you for the offer, Miss. Happy New Year to you all.

FRASER

Happy new year.

OFFICER

Have a good day.

FRASER

Good day.

OFFICER *exits via Front Door. Silence.*

BAILEY *has paid close attention to conversation until now. Goes to drawer in livingroom, takes out paper and something to write with. Sits on the floor, drawing.*

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ANNA

That was weird.

FRASER

Most likely a prank caller.

ANNA

But you can't prank call a phone number to the police. They know the address it came from.

FRASER

Well he got the house wrong, I imagine. *(Grabs keys.)* All right, I'm off.

ANNA

Dad, are you sure? It's really getting worse. You can't work from home?

FRASER

I'll go dig out the car; see how it feels out there. Don't worry, Hon, I'll see you in a few hours.

(Dons coat, etc. Exit through kitchen toward Back Door. Encounters BELLE.)

I'm heading to the office. I'll call you later.

BELLE

Goodness Fraser, it's a raging beast out there – it's liable to swallow you up whole. And look at you, you're wearing that old thing. Why don't you put on your new down one, at least?

FRASER

I don't know where it is. Don't worry, I'll turn around if the storm gets worse.

ANNA *(Yelling from livingroom)*

It's gonna get worse!

BELLE

It's just in the coat closet, I'm sure. Did you even check?

FRASER

(Already halfway out Back Door)

I'll see you all in a little while. *(Gone.)*

(Silence, except for BELLE's bustling and pot clanging.)

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ANNA

Yup. I guess Bermuda triangles can't wait for a puny earthly blizzard to blow over.
(Takes out deck of cards – plays Solitaire on table in livingroom. BAILEY is still drawing. A few silent moments pass.)

3

THE DEAD MAN

DOORBELL!

ANNA stops playing cards. Faces door. BAILEY runs to and opens door, still holding his paper. OFFICER stands there.)

OFFICER

Hello, Son, is one of your parents still around?

ANNA (Coming to door)

You're back!

OFFICER

Yes, Miss. I'm sorry to trouble you again, but my engine's dead. Might I get a jump start? From your father? I've got cables in my trunk.

ANNA

Oh, that sucks. Sure. He just went out back to drive to work. Let me see if I can catch him. Come in!

OFFICER

Thanks. Sorry to be a bother to you.

ANNA (Dashing to coat closet)

It's no bother. I'll just grab a hat.

(Opens door. Peers in. Squints eyes, peers harder. Confused. Closes door. Dashes through kitchen out Back Door.)

BELLE

(Peeks in from kitchen; sees OFFICER.)

Oh. Is there more trouble?

OFFICER

It's my own trouble this time, Ma'am. My car battery is dead. Your daughter is asking your husband for help getting it started.

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BELLE

Oh. Well. Let me take your coat.

OFFICER

Thank you, Ma'am, but I'll just run back outside with your husband.

BELLE

Well, in case he's left already.

(OFFICER hands her coat, which she absently hangs on peg by Front Door.)

OFFICER

Thank you.

BELLE

Make yourself at home. I'll bring you something to eat. *(Enters kitchen.)*

OFFICER

Oh. Thank you, Ma'am.

BAILEY

(Follows BELLE into kitchen, sits at table.)

Mom, can I go out and play in the snow?

BELLE

It's a blizzard out there Bailey, it's dangerous. Wait until the wind and snow stop.

BAILEY

But I like the wind and snow.

BELLE

Well I was just out in the driveway and the wind nearly killed me.

BAILEY

How?

(OFFICER walks around livingroom.)

BELLE

(Picks up wall phone in kitchen. Dials. Waits.)

Hello, Ruth? Hello Dear, I'm just checking in that you're still up for the drive. ... Have you checked - Yes. Yes, I know it's monstrous out there. ... Well, it's up to you. Of course, I have plenty prepared here for all of us, it would be a shame for it all to go to waste, but you know. Safety first. ... Yes. ... All right, that's wonderful.

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ANNA (*Enter via back door*)

Dad's going around to get the car up.

BELLE (*Into phone*)

Yes, we all eat meat. Oh. Well, except for Minnie, I think, she might not, it's hard to tell these days. But the side dishes should be fine ... All right, good, Dear, we'll see you soon .. Right? ... Ruth? ... Ruth? .. Are you there, Ruth? ... Well, that's funny. (*Hangs up. Pause.*) Fraser! Can you come in here for a moment? (*Waits*) Fraser?

ANNA

He's out with the cars, Mom.

BELLE

Oh, yes, the car.

(*Starts preparing a plate of cheese and crackers.*)
I hope it doesn't take long; he'll catch his death out there.

ANNA

Mom, have you seen my wool hat? The blue one?

BELLE

It should be with the other winter things.

ANNA

I couldn't see a thing in there.

(*A dull thump comes from upstairs, which only ANNA notes. She exits Upstairs.*)

BAILEY

Mom, can Roland have a snack? He's hungry.

BELLE

You know better than that, Bailey. We're having lunch soon.

BAILEY

Roland's incredibly hungry. He can't wait.

BELLE

He can wait an hour, Dear.

BAILEY

He can't. He missed breakfast.

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BELLE

All right, he can have a few carrots and celery sticks if he really needs to. But no more. They're in the veggie drawer.

BAILEY goes to fridge, finds carrots. Grabs a bunch, sticks them in his pocket. Enters livingroom. Sits on floor at coffee table; continues drawing.

OFFICER (*To BAILEY*)

What are you up to over here?

BAILEY

Drawing.

OFFICER (*Looks*)

Ah – stars. You've got the whole night sky there, practically!

BAILEY

Almost.

(Silence.)

OFFICER

So your dad's a busy man, is he? Driving into work on a holiday?

BAILEY

Yeah. He studies things.

OFFICER

Oh, yes? What does he study?

BAILEY

Stars.

OFFICER

He's an astronomer?

BAILEY

Yeah.

OFFICER

That's interesting! So he studies what you're drawing.

BAILEY

No. He doesn't study normal stars. He studies dead ones.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

OFFICER

Dead stars?

BAILEY

Yup. They don't shine so you can't see them. They're just black.

OFFICER

If you can't see them, how do you know they're there?

BAILEY

(Appears confused for a moment. Then recalls something he's heard.)
You feel them.

OFFICER

You feel them? You feel the stars?

BAILEY

Yeah. *(Pause.)* It's complicated.

OFFICER

Ah.

BELLE

(Enter livingroom with plate of cheese and crackers.)
This will go fine, won't it? Would you like a drink?

OFFICER

No thank you, Ma'am. These look great.
(BAILEY grabs a handful of crackers.)

BELLE

Bailey. You just had a snack.

BAILEY

No, it was for Roland.

BELLE

No games now, Bailey. Give me the crackers, please.

BAILEY

Who are they for, then?

BELLE

They're for people who haven't already had a snack. Hand them to me, please.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

(BAILEY gives BELLE the crackers.)

BELLE

Thank you. (*Returns to kitchen.*)

(BAILEY grabs another handful of crackers. Eats as he draws.)

MINNIE

(*Enter SL with a notebook and pen. Sees OFFICER.*)

Oh. Hello.

OFFICER

Hello, Miss. My car battery's dead. I'm waiting to see if your father can help.

MINNIE

Oh. Okay.

(MINNIE sits, begins to write in notebook. Silence.)

ANNA (*Enter from Upstairs*)

Officer, sorry, I forgot to tell you – my dad's outside with your car.

OFFICER

Oh, fantastic, thank you. I'll head out.

(*Rises. Suddenly stops cold as he glimpses something behind the couch.*)

What – what is that?

(*Rushes over, pulls back the couch slightly.*)

What in God's name --?

ANNA (*Looks*)

Oh my God.

BELLE (*From kitchen*)

What is it, dear?

MINNIE

There's a ... man ... here on the floor.

(*It is the director's discretion whether Audience can see the body.*)

BELLE

What's that?

(*Comes into livingroom. Looks.*)

Well, heavens. I wonder who that could be.

OFFICER (*Stoops to take pulse*)

He's dead.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

BELLE

Oh, and on my good rug. It's an Oriental rug, you know. Might we move him?

ANNA

Who is he?

BELLE

And blood. Goodness, is there much blood?

OFFICER

There's no blood.

(Takes out cell phone, starts to dial.)

BELLE

Well that's a relief, at least. Blood leaves the most dreadful stains. But we must move him.

MINNIE

To where?

ANNA

We could put him in the kitchen. The tiles are easier to wash than carpet.

OFFICER

No one is moving anything anywhere. Who is this man? How did he get here?

(Tries to dial again.)

BELLE

Well, I certainly don't know how he got here. I've been out with the car all morning.

MINNIE

He looks sad. Doesn't he?

BAILEY

If I were dead, I'd be sad.

OFFICER

(Realizes he has no reception. Loses his cool momentarily.)

Damn!

(To BELLE)

OFFICER *(cont'd)*

Ma'am, I need to use your house phone. I have no reception.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

BELLE

It's on the wall in the kitchen.

OFFICER (*Starts to go*)

I mean it: no one is to *touch* that body.

(*Goes to kitchen. During following conversation, he picks up phone, listens, bangs buttons, replaces receiver. Tries again; no luck.*)

BELLE

(*Hushed, so OFFICER won't hear*)

We can't put him in the kitchen, Anna. Where am I going to prepare lunch, then?

MINNIE

I'm not hungry anyway.

BELLE

You'd better be hungry, young lady, after all the work I put in this morning.

MINNIE

What about the garage? It's cooler in there; the smell wouldn't get bad so fast.

ANNA

He looks familiar, doesn't he?

MINNIE

No he doesn't.

BELLE

He might; it's hard to say to be sure. Perhaps he's the mailman? I haven't seen him yet today. What does our mailman look like?

BAILEY

Our mailman is a woman.

BELLE

Well. That settles that.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

4
QUESTIONS

OFFICER

(Hurrying back into livingroom)
Your phone line's dead.

MINNIE

That's weird.

OFFICER

It's probably the storm. Do any of you have a cell phone I could borrow?
(Trying his again.)

ANNA

I've got one. Hold on.

OFFICER

(At a loss for how to control the situation)
You'll come right back?

ANNA

Of course. *(Exits Upstairs.)*

OFFICER

All right, enough. I want everyone sitting down. Is everyone in the house down here?

BELLE

Oh dear, the soup. *(Gets up to rush into kitchen.)*

OFFICER

Please stay where you are, Madam.

BELLE

But the soup needs to simmer for exactly 10 minutes. If it goes over, it has a tendency to thicken --

OFFICER

Madam. Do not leave this room.
(BELLE is not used to being ordered. Stands still, unhappy.)

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

ANNA

(Re-enters down Stairs with cell phone.)
Here you go, Officer.

OFFICER

(Takes phone, presses buttons. Frustrated)
You have no reception, either.

ANNA

Really? Strange. I guess it's the storm? *(Peers closely at corpse.)* Hey, is he maybe the guy who mows the Reilley lawn?

MINNIE has gone back to her poetry book in the overstuffed lounge chair.
FRASER enters center through Front Door during BELLE's following line. Removes coat, hangs it on peg. Joins the group in livingroom.

BELLE

We really ought to move him, Officer. I don't want the stench to seep into the furniture. We had the sofa re-upholstered just last June with this pretty little flower-and-paisley pattern. Isn't it lovely? I wanted a plain blue background, but the sales clerk – such a nice girl – she suggested paisley, and I got home and thought, well my, you know, she was absolutely right.

FRASER

Car's up and running, Officer.

OFFICER

We have a more pressing matter to deal with, Mr. Frost.

BELLE

Doctor, Officer. My husband has his PhD.

MINNIE

That's not true, Mom, *I* was the one who picked out the paisley –

OFFICER

Please! Everybody, can we all stay calm and quiet? *(To FRASER)* There is a dead man behind your couch.

FRASER

That so? Well.

(Goes to couch, peers at the man.)
So there is. How about that. Fascinating.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

OFFICER (*To FRASER*)

Have you seen him before?

FRASER

Can't say that I have.

OFFICER

You don't know how he got here?

FRASER

No. Not in the slightest. Well, everyone, I'm off (*starts to leave.*)

OFFICER

(*Frantic/confused/forceful*)

Sir, I cannot allow you to leave this house. I need to find out exactly what you all know about this.

(*FRASER looks tired and piqued, but cooperates. He isn't willing to expend energy for the sake of a discussion.*)

Someone named Frost calls our station today saying people are in trouble. I come here and no one knows what I'm talking about. Then I find a dead body behind your couch, which you also say you know nothing about.

BELLE

Be careful of your words, Officer. Are you suggesting that there's something sinister going on in our home?

OFFICER (*Aghast*)

I'm trying to account for everyone's whereabouts today.

BELLE

Well, it's ridiculous for you to think so. I've been in the kitchen cooking ever since I walked in the door. How on Earth would I have had time to kill a man and move him behind a couch? With my bad knees, even.

MINNIE

I couldn't have done it either, Officer. I am a strict pacifist and I regularly attend religious services.

ANNA

No, Minnie's definitely not the type.

MINNIE

What are you saying? Are you saying I couldn't do it if I wanted to?

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

ANNA

You just don't have it in you.

MINNIE

You mean you think I'm spiritless?

ANNA

Not spiritless. Just – just mellow.

MINNIE

Oh yes? Read this book and tell me if I'm mellow! (*referring to notebook*).

ANNA

I'll bet there's some scary shit in that book.

BELLE

Anna! Don't swear in this house!

As the following lively discussion ensues, ROCK, a young man in his late teens / early 20's enters from Staircase holding a giant bag of frosted animal crackers. His eyes are glassy and bloodshot; he is clearly stoned. Sees police OFFICER; tries to continue down staircase unseen.

OFFICER

All right, all right, I need you all to control yourselves.

MINNIE (*To ANNA*)

Too scary for *you* to handle, maybe.

BELLE (*Nearly screaming*)

Goodness, will people stop raising their voices in this house!! (*To OFFICER*) And you, Sir, you have a lot of nerve barging in on us, accusing us all of murder and interrupting our lunch.

OFFICER

There is a dead man here! I intend to find out how he died!

BELLE

And a lot *he* must care about how he died.

FRASER

Most men who get wrapped up in nasty business probably have it coming, at any rate.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

BAILEY

Mommy, Roland and I are hungry.

OFFICER

Who is Roland? Are we still missing people?

(Sees ROCK at foot of Stairs attempting to get away through the kitchen. Draws gun.)

You! Stop where you are!

ANNA *(Horried)*

No!

ROCK *(Freezes)*

No! No, I swear! I swear all I got left is animal crackers!

OFFICER

Put your hands over your head where I can see them. Come down here. Slowly.

ANNA

Don't shoot him! Sweetie!

OFFICER

(Sharp look at ANNA)

Do you know him?

ANNA

He's my boyfriend. Please don't hurt him.

OFFICER *(Lowers gun)*

Come in here and take a seat, Roland.

ANNA

This isn't Roland – this is Rock.

OFFICER

Rock?

(Looks around at faces.)

Who is Roland?

BELLE

Roland is Bailey's imaginary friend.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

BAILEY

He's not imaginary! He's real, he just lives on the other side. Imaginary people don't get hungry.

ANNA

(Relieved that ROCK is okay but glares at him. Quietly to him)
Basement door, you loon?

ROCK

It wouldn't open.

BELLE

What is this young gentleman doing here, Anna?

ANNA

He came to study with me. We have an e&m midterm tomorrow.

BAILEY

They didn't *sound* like they were studying.

BELLE

Young lady, you are expressly forbidden from having your boyfriends eating junk food in your bedroom.

ANNA

You know, I am sick and tired of being treated like a kid around here.

BELLE

In this house you *are* the kid, and I am the mother, and what I say goes. Besides, boys in your room after dark and who knows what can happen?

ANNA

Did it ever occur to you, Mom, that if I want to have sex I can do it during the day?
(Shocked silence.)

OFFICER *(Gulp)*

All right. *Now* do we have everyone in the house?
(Everyone looks to ANNA.)

ANNA

Yes.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

ROCK

(Has not yet noticed the body)
Jesus I can't believe this.

OFFICER

(Interpreting ROCK's sudden alarm as his reaction to seeing the body)
It's all right, Son, the family's okay. I just want to ask you a few questions.

ROCK

I ... don't think I can answer them.

OFFICER

I know this is a shock, but it'll be all right. What is your full name?

ROCK *(Hesitant)*

Lionel.

OFFICER

Lionel ... ?

ROCK

Lewis.

BAILEY *(Giggling)*

Lionel!

ROCK

Uh. God ... How did you know?

OFFICER

Ah, well, I didn't. I just found out when I got here.

ROCK

Uh huh ...

BELLE

Rock, you look pale. Dear, are you all right?

ROCK

Jeez, I'm not gonna be all right if I'm getting hauled off to jail.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

OFFICER

Are you implying that you're some way responsible for this?

ROCK

Responsible?

BELLE

Rock, you ... you must be doused in perfume. Did you spill my L'Oreale perfume?

ROCK

Uh ...

OFFICER

Please let Mr. Lewis answer my question. (*To ROCK*) Now, I'll ask you again, whether you are in any way responsible for the dead man.

BELLE

... And my mouthwash?

ROCK

I - ... (*Registering the words*) Dead man?

OFFICER

Yes. Do you know who he is or how he got here?
(*ROCK stammers.*)

BELLE (*Impatient*)

The corpse behind the couch, Rock. Are you paying attention?

ROCK

(*Relief beginning to creep over him*)
There's a corpse?

ANNA

Right there.

ROCK (*Goes to look*)

Oh. (*To OFFICER*) You're here about a corpse? (*Exhales relief*) Thank God.

MINNIE

Thank God?

OFFICER

Have you seen the man before?

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

ROCK

No ... no, I don't think.

OFFICER

You don't think?

ROCK

I don't *remember* seeing him before.

OFFICER

Do you have any idea how he got here or who he is?

ROCK (*Struggles to think*)

Aw, no, I've got no clue.

5

OUT INTO THE VACUUM

OFFICER

All right, now that we have everybody. I would like an account of what went on here today. From each of you.

BELLE

I came home at 10 loaded with groceries that no one bothered to help me with, and I was cooking when you knocked on the door. Minnie, Anna, and Bailey were in the kitchen.

MINNIE

I was reading.

ANNA

You were not. You were bawling like a little baby.

MINNIE (*Surprised*)

You – noticed?

ANNA

How could anyone not notice? You woke me up. I'll bet the neighbors could hear you.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

BELLE

(Barreling deafly through this admission of emotion)

Well, by the time I came in, she was reading. Fraser was on the couch asleep.

OFFICER

You didn't notice the body then?

FRASER

I'm sure it wasn't there then. I picked up things from the floor and didn't see it.

OFFICER

Uh huh.

FRASER

I got ready to go to work, and then you rang the bell. That's all.

BELLE

And I unpacked things from the car, and Anna helped me put them away.

OFFICER

Who was in the livingroom?

(ROCK oozes himself into a small cushioned chair, slumps down and hooks a leg over a side of it, falls asleep instantly.)

FRASER

No one besides me, until you came.

OFFICER

Did anyone hear or see anything, *anything* unusual?

(Silence. Shrugs. Various "No"s.)

ANNA *(To MINNIE)*

Why were you crying?

MINNIE

(Pleasantly startled at being asked)

I woke up confused.

ANNA

Confused?

MINNIE

I woke up and I couldn't breathe.

(Silence. All attention on her.)

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

MINNIE (*cont'd*)

I was thinking I might die. (*Pause*) But I wasn't afraid. I didn't care. (*Pause*) Why would I not care? I don't want to die. Shouldn't I have been afraid? Shouldn't I have felt something? I didn't, I didn't care at all. (*Pained, baffled*) What's wrong with me? (*Silence.*)

BELLE

There's nothing wrong with you, Dear. It's normal to be caught off-guard by one's own thoughts now and then.

(Silence. This is the first time the family has acknowledged one another. They have transiently achieved something. But things will degrade back to the norm from here, once the OFFICER exits.)

OFFICER (*Quietly*)

Mr. Frost, you were planning to go into work on a holiday. Is that usual for you?

FRASER

Yes, quite. I get a lot of work done when few people are around. Holidays are quiet on campus.

MINNIE

Dad studies black bottomless pits out in the middle of nowhere.

OFFICER

Well. (*Pause*) I'm going to walk to your neighbor's house to see if their telephone works. I'm sure you'd like this business taken care of as soon as possible. I have to ask everyone to remain here until I return. Can you tell me, what is the neighbor's name? In the house on your right?

BELLE

Maddie Reilley, Officer.

OFFICER

Reilley. Thank you. And can you tell me where you've put my coat, Mrs. Frost?

BELLE

In the coat closet in the hall, Officer.

OFFICER

Thank you.

(OFFICER rises. Walks to coat closet, forgetting that his coat is hanging on peg by Front Door.)

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

ANNA (*To MINNIE*)

I'm sorry about your dream.

MINNIE

I'm sorry I woke you.

BELLE (*Genuinely wondering*)

Why do you call it a star if no one can see it, that's what I'd like to know.
(*Authoritatively*) Stars twinkle.

OFFICER (*To BELLE*)

I can't see it in here, Ma'am.

BELLE

Oh, just dig around a little. It's there.
(*OFFICER steps into closet.*)

BAILEY

Dad's stars don't. They suck stuff in. They suck in everything and never give it back. And they can be really really tiny. They can be as big as a galaxy but some of them are really small, like a table. Or a marble.

BELLE

(*Brief genuineness is gone; back to being dismissive. It's important to time this change with OFFICER stepping into the closet.*)

Whoever heard of a dead star the size of a marble?

(*Rising from the family circle*)

Well, why don't we all see what we can do with this body before the carpet starts rotting with him?

FRASER

Dear, do you think we should move him before the Officer makes his phone calls? Er – Officer?

(*Pause.*)

ANNA

I guess he left for the neighbor's house.

MINNIE

I didn't hear the door.

ANNA (*Shrug*)

Well, he's gone. I think I'll go too.

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

MINNIE

I don't like being in this house with this thing decaying into the carpet.

ANNA

Yeah, I'll follow the Officer to Mrs. Reilleys'.

MINNIE

I'll come.

BELLE

You know Dear, I think I'll go with you, the wind doesn't look as biting as earlier. She might have more olives I can borrow. I should have gotten another can. She owes me one anyhow for the milk I lent her last week.

ANNA and BELLE and MINNIE grab coats from pegs in hall. ANNA shoves ROCK awake.

ANNA

Come on Babe, we're going to the Reilleys'.

ROCK

Ughnh?

FRASER

I'll follow you out. I could still use some time in the office.

BELLE

Oh the stove, I nearly forgot (*dashes into kitchen to turn things off.*)

As they all move toward Front Door, lines begin to overlap nearly to noise:

ANNA

(Helps ROCK to his feet. ROCK stumbles after her; uses her as a blind man uses his walking stick.)

Dad, I think the officer wants us all to stick around until this is taken care of.

MINNIE (*Checking her coat pockets*)

Where's my hat?

FRASER

I can't imagine my testimony being the least bit helpful.

ANNA (*To FRASER*)

But it's just to keep things official, you know?

Armstrong/*Vacuum*

BELLE

Waste of a perfectly good pot of soup, goodness gracious. Can you believe it?

MINNIE

(Opens coat closet, peers)

Where's my hat?

ANNA *(To MINNIE)*

Come on, let's go. I couldn't find one either.

BELLE

Bailey dear, you'll just look after the house for a couple minutes, won't you? We won't be a moment. Just a little while.

MINNIE

Does anyone have a pair of earmuffs in their pocket or anything?

They are gone: Exit Front Door center.

Sudden silence and calm.

BAILEY

Has been sitting on couch, quietly drawing while this bustle has been going on. Stops. Looks curiously at body. Stands, walks to body, stands over it, examining. Something catches his eye. He stoops, tugs on body, pulls out carrots that were apparently in man's pocket. Looks puzzled but not troubled.

Looks at carrots in his hand. Suddenly looks out at snow falling, his eyes bright and happy with an idea. Sorts through carrots; chooses one particularly large, conical one and places the rest on table. Searches room briefly, until his eyes rest on his own coat on peg by Front Door. Runs to it, takes it down. Pulls two buttons off it, hangs it back up. Holds up the two big black buttons and carrot, smiles gleefully, grabs a scarf, runs to Front Door, opens it, runs out, closes door as:

BLACKOUT

coincides with music onset: "Frosty the Snowman" (no lyrics).

END OF PLAY