

Close to Home

a One-Act Play
by Eric G. Westerlund

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INT. APARTMENT LIVING SPACE -- EVENING

Living/dining/kitchen. Door to the outside, hallway to the bath and bedrooms offstage. Nicely decorated, Pier 1 Imports style. Against one wall a large antique rolltop desk.

The place is a mess. Clothes strewn on the couch, the floor. Shoes. Piles of paper and files. Unopened mail.

On the dining table is a large gift basket of bath and beauty products, still cellophane wrapped, topped by an oversized card reading “GOOD LUCK CHERYL! We’ll miss you. Love, the entire office.”

CHERYL can be heard on the phone before she bustles in from the hallway. She is 29 and professionally dressed. As she talks she tidies rapidly, with the energy of a squirrel stowing nuts for the winter. During the call Cheryl sometimes walks offstage with clothes and shoes, re-entering empty handed. The pile on the desk grows as she tidies.

She looks worried by the content of the phone call.

CHERYL

Missing? Have you looked in the top drawer. The other top drawer? You’re sure. Which ones? From Grandma? Oh...Mother don’t worry I have them. No, I have them. I borrowed them. A dinner. Mom, I’m bringing them back. Well, it wasn’t her, it was me. So you can... Mother...Mother it wasn’t Marcy...That’s right. No she’s fine, I talked to her yesterday. You are not supposed to be worrying so much.

She takes a plain white piece of paper and a marker, sits at the dining room table and makes a sign.

CHERYL (CONT’D)

Did you take your medicine? Good. Go for your walk?
(exasperated)

Mom...we’re all busy. You need to listen to Dr. Cooper. Okay, then listen to *me*. I don’t ever want to be that scared again. Okay. See you soon. Bye...Wait MOM! Don’t run any lights, okay? Even if you are late. Bye.

Cheryl hangs up, momentarily looking concerned. She untapes the cellophane on the gift basket, extracts the GOOD LUCK sign and replaces it with one she just lettered, which reads, “HAPPY 50th BIRTHDAY, MOTHER. We love you. Cheryl and Marcy.” Cheryl picks up the “Good Luck” card. There is the SOUND of a key in the door. Cheryl looks for a place to stash the office card, then simply conceals it as she dashes to the door. As Cheryl approaches the doorknob RATTLES but does not turn.

MARCY (O.S.)

Cheryl it’s me, open up, my key’s not working.

Cheryl opens the door to reveal MARCY, 24. Hot pink hair, spiked. Her boots are her only unripped garment.

MARCY (CONT’D)

Have you lost weight?

She jangles as she enters, carrying a large plastic bag from Below a Buck, which she sets on the dining table. Cheryl stashes the card in the desk and shuts it.

CHERYL (suspicious)
Not that I know of.

MARCY
Well, you look good. And the place looks great. (of the basket) Nice!

CHERYL
You look like a troll.

MARCY
I got some stuff too. (showing each) One of these egg-beaty things, Electro-Proof Toast Tongs and...raisins! (off Cheryl's look.) I know, but Mom loves raisins. What?

CHERYL
I told you I'd take care of the gift.

MARCY
I even got you...

She pulls out a wind-up tin toy.

MARCY (CONT'D)
Duck-on-Bike! With wind-up funny action!

She holds out the gift. Cheryl makes no move to take it from her. Marcy shrugs and sets the Duck-on-Bike on the table. She starts to wind it up.

CHERYL
Marcy, Mom said she was missing a necklace, ring and earrings that were Grandma's. It wasn't me, and she wasn't robbed.

Marcy releases the Duck-on-Bike which pedals in a circle on the table.

MARCY
I love that. Wind-up funny action.

CHERYL
It'll be funny later. Now, I need you to go back and get the jewelry.

Marcy goes to the closet and starts to empty boxes and outerwear onto the floor. Cheryl follows.

CHERYL (CONT'D)
I just got the place presentable. Marcy, go back and get Mom's jewelry.

Marcy ignores her and gets wrapping paper out. Cheryl repacks the closet. Marcy sets the paper on the table and continues into the kitchen. Cheryl follows.

CHERYL (CONT'D) (emphatic)

I'll wrap them. Just go get the stuff.

Marcy gets scotch tape and scissors from the drawer and turns to find Cheryl in her face. Cheryl grabs the scissors out of her hand.

MARCY

Jeez. You'll put an eye out.

CHERYL

I said I would wrap them! Go!

Marcy doesn't move.

MARCY

Stop yelling at me.

CHERYL

I'm trying to be heard above the loud hair, the chains and all the clay in your skull. I worked hard for tonight and you are not going to ruin it.

Marcy walks to the table and slowly starts collecting her gifts and putting them back in the bag.

CHERYL

Grow up.

MARCY

I try too, you know.

CHERYL

I'm sorry. I...have had a rough day.

Marcy takes the gifts back out of the bag and starts wrapping one of them.

Why does Mom always tell you everything that I do?

CHERYL

She doesn't always.

MARCY

Sure seems that way.

CHERYL

Well, since Dad died, I think she needs someone to talk to. She worries about you.

MARCY

I'm fine. I know she can't imagine it, but a person can find happiness outside of the suburbs.

CHERYL

I told her I had the jewelry.

MARCY

You what?

CHERYL

What was I supposed to say? Can you please just go get them? It's her birthday.

Marcy resumes wrapping.

MARCY

She thinks I stole them, doesn't she.

CHERYL

No, she just asked.

MARCY

I'd hate to let her down. It's hard to live up to her high expectations, but I'm trying. I wonder what I'll steal next?

CHERYL

That's not a very constructive attitude, is it?

MARCY

She breeds it.

CHERYL

I don't want to hear you talk like that about our mother.

MARCY

If you didn't insist on butting in, you wouldn't have to.

Marcy goes back to wrapping. Cheryl watches her for a beat. She can't let it rest.

CHERYL

Was I butting in when I gave you rent money last month?

No answer.

CHERYL

Fine. We'll see how well you manage on your own.

MARCY

Thank you.

Cheryl again waits. Again she cannot let it end there.

CHERYL

Oh, come off it. The next time you have an emergency you'll come running to me like you always do. Marcy, you're brilliant but you have absolutely no common sense. Don't be stupid. I'm willing to help, but I need to you step up to the plate once in a while.

MARCY

Well this time I can't.

CHERYL

It's always this time.

MARCY

No, this time it is. Brett dropped the camera in the middle of the shooting. When you've got a whole crew you can't just stop. I needed the money, Cheryl, you have to believe me. I know my track record sucks, but I never would've done it if I saw any other way.

CHERYL (afraid)

Done what?

Marcy looks at her. The cat's already out of the bag.

MARCY

Brett knows this guy. He helps people out. In a pinch. It's this place on Depot Road.

CHERYL

You did not pawn Grandma's jewelry.

MARCY

I was desperate, I told you. Please. Do you think I would have done a thing like that if I could figure out any other way?

Cheryl just shakes her head.

MARCY (CONT'D)

Don't look at me like that. I feel horrible enough.

CHERYL

Well you should. I can't believe it. We can't replace that stuff.

MARCY

Please. I know.

CHERYL (dripping with disgust)

Oh, Marcy.

Marcy sits there clenched up, fighting back her emotions.

CHERYL (CONT'D)

That's it? You have nothing to say?

MARCY

What can I say, Cheryl? Sometimes I think I'm making progress. I got my credit card paid off. I even managed to save two months in a row. Then... (a helpless shrug)
...stuff comes up. I look in the mirror and there's the same old fucked it up again me.

CHERYL

If you save for two months and then you spend it, you haven't saved.

MARCY

You aren't content until you make me cry, are you?

CHERYL

I'm trying to get you to hear me.

MARCY

I need you to love me. Please.

Cheryl looks away, torn.

MARCY (CONT'D)

You're a better sister than I deserve, Cheryl. I try to not fuck up. I try so hard. Please be patient. You're my anchor. I'd be lost.

CHERYL

I only tell you 'cause I love you.

She smiles reassuringly.

CHERYL

Better?

MARCY

Thank you. (determined) I'm making a budget as soon as we finish shooting. And I'm gonna pay you back for all of it. All of it, I've kept track. I'm gonna get a job. I'm so sick of living this way.

CHERYL

I'll help you. With the budget, I mean. I have a lot of experience.

MARCY

We'd only fight. (smiling playfully) Come on, you know it's true. I gotta do this on my own.

Marcy's smile fades. She takes a deep breath, as if gearing up to say something. Cheryl reads her and reacts instantly.

CHERYL (furious)

Why do you do this? Why do I fall for it?

MARCY

It's just five hundred. I can pay you back as soon as Brett gets his check. Honest Abel. Swear to God. Cheryl, we can't rent lights we can't shoot, and everything I've done will be wasted. Please please please please, I heard everything you said. I swear to God this is the last time I know I...

Cheryl walks away from her sadly.

MARCY (CONT'D)

Don't walk away. You have to believe me. This time I hear you. I know I always say that but this time you have to believe me. Cheryl, I need you. Families stick together. You always tell me that.

CHERYL (sadly)

Yeah, they do.

Marcy looks at her sister with curiosity, as if she's never seen her before. Cheryl looks away.

MARCY (scared)

What's wrong?

CHERYL

I'm no anchor.

MARCY

You're too hard on yourself. You always were. Come on, smile. You drafted a suicide note over a B+.

CHERYL

It was a B. Regular B. And Timmy Martindale showed the whole class.

Cheryl finally looks at her.

CHERYL (CONT'D)

I can't help you this time.

Marcy's face hardens.

MARCY

Can't? Or won't?

Cheryl says nothing.

MARCY

Well you know how to pick your moment. Do you enjoy humiliating me? Do you think you're teaching me a lesson? I get the lesson alright. All my sister's talk about unconditional love is a load of wet shit. Brett warned me, but I defended you. I cut you so much slack...

(she starts packing up her gifts)

Have a great time with Mom tonight. Have a great time gloating over the important life lessons I'm learning the hard way.

Cheryl grabs the bag of gifts and flings it down on the couch.

CHERYL

I lost my job. I have no income. I don't know where my rent is coming from let alone yours. She picks up the bag now and sets it on the table. Fierce and determined, she wraps presents as if for a military inspection.

CHERYL

And you are not running away like you always do. You are going to give Mother these gifts and have a Vanna White smile on your face. You owe me at least that much. You owe her. You call yourself an actress; well, it's time to act. Because whatever shit is going on in my life and in yours I don't want her knowing about it. Okay? One heart failure is enough.

Marcy stares, agape.

CHERYL (cont'd)

OKAY??

Cheryl looks down at the end of the first package that has come out all wrong, emits a clenched-teeth scream and tears the paper back off.

MARCY (pure compassion)

Oh, Cheryl.

CHERYL

Don't oh Cheryl me.

MARCY

Oh, Cheryl.

Cheryl makes a second attempt at wrapping the gift.

MARCY

You need a hug.

CHERYL

A hug is not gonna fix it.

MARCY

No. But you need one.

She watches helplessly. Cheryl goes on wrapping, almost mechanically.

CHERYL

You didn't see her, lying on the bathroom floor. Her hands were clutching, like a baby's. She was helpless. As we waited for the ambulance all I could do was pray, God please forgive me, please forgive me, how could I not see this coming.

Cheryl sets the first gift aside and picks up the raisins. Marcy gently takes the gift.

MARCY

Let me.

She slaps a bow on top of the box and sets it down perfunctorily.

MARCY (CONT'D)

Mom had a heart attack because she's overweight and eats poorly. She worked too much and never exercised. She still doesn't do what the doctor says and you can't make her. Cheryl, it's not your fault.

CHERYL

It's like a vice around my heart. There was always Mom. Now every day I wonder.

MARCY

I know. But sometimes the tighter you hold on, the more slips through your fingers.

CHERYL

Don't tell her about my job.

MARCY

Maybe she'd be relieved to hear the truth.

CHERYL

I don't think so. Shoot, the time. I have to fix my makeup.

MARCY

What are we going to say about the jewelry?

CHERYL

I'll say I left it at work.

Marcy shakes her head.

MARCY

I thought you already told her you had it.

Cheryl shrugs, rises and starts toward the hall. Marcy continues to shake her head with increasing conviction. She jumps up and blocks her sister's path.

MARCY (CONT'D)

Cheryl, when I bullshit you does it put your mind at ease, or make you more upset?

CHERYL

No games. I'm too tired.

MARCY

Answer me. Do you get reassured, or more worried?

CHERYL

You know the answer to that.

MARCY

So what do you think we're doing to Mom?

Cheryl looks at her, wavering. Marcy holds her gaze firmly. Cheryl nods, then she goes to the desk. She takes out the “Good Luck, Cheryl” sign and sets it out on the table.

There are HIGH-HEELED FOOTSTEPS outside the door, followed by a DAINTY KNOCK at the door. Both girls turn, preparing.

BLACKOUT.