

THE BEST GIFT OF ALL

Adapted for stage by

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THIRD DRAFT

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(HOUSE LIGHTS dim as voices start singing an original Christmas Carol, "The Best Gift of All", in the BG, and CAROLERS, led by a small, bright, "Christmas Angel", who is BUSY handing out CANDY, walk through the audience to disappear behind the curtain.)

As the lights DIM to dark, more lights brighten on a side stage, where we see a COUCH with a FIREPLACE behind it, a CHRISTMAS tree, and many WRAPPED GIFTS. Two energetic young children, MARK and KERRY, appear across stage in PAJAMAS rubbing sleep from their eyes. They see the PRESENTS and rush across the stage to sit before them, where they both spy the biggest present with the brightest wrapping.)

KERRY

Oh, look! This must be mine.

MARK (reaching for the same gift)

How can you tell, there's no tag on it?

KERRY

(struggling with her brother over the present)

Because it's got a red bow on it--Santa always gives me red bows!

MARK

But I always get the biggest present--give it to me!

KERRY

No!

(The kids struggle over the GIFT as their UNCLE JOHN exits the kitchen door and walks in front of the couch to confront them.)

UNCLE JOHN

What's going on here? Whoa, slow down--hey! Stop fighting.

(UNCLE JOHN grabs the present and stares down at his niece and nephew)

UNCLE JOHN (cont.)

What're you two fighting for, on Christmas day?

KERRY

Uncle John, Mark's trying to take my present away.

MARK

It's not yours, it's mine!

UNCLE JOHN

Wait just a minute here--there's no tag on this present. Maybe it's for someone else, ever think of that? Besides, I don't think either of you deserve it anyway, you don't seem to know a lot about the real meaning of Christmas.

MARK (sensing a lecture)

The real meaning of Christmas, right.

UNCLE JOHN (strongly)

Yeah, and the best gift of all.

KERRY (tiredly)

Yeah, the best gift of all.

UNCLE JOHN

Sit down over here, I've got a story to tell you.

KERRY

I don't want to hear a story.

UNCLE JOHN (sternly)

You'll want to hear this one!

(The KIDS sit down on the couch, after they each grab presents with their names on them. UNCLE JOHN sits between them)

UNCLE JOHN

Now then, Tony was only 19, but he felt like a billionaire . . .

KERRY

Tony who?

MARK

That's Dad's name.

UNCLE JOHN

. . . because this was gonna be his BEST Christmas ever!

KERRY

Why?

UNCLE JOHN

Well, because Tony's kid brother, Joey, was finally getting out of the hospital, and because he had a great job, and because he was in love with a beautiful woman, Simone.

KERRY

That's Mom's name. Was she pretty?

UNCLE JOHN

Pretty? This girl was gorgeous--just like your Mom.

(UNCLE JOHN looks at MARK, who doesn't seem interested)

UNCLE JOHN (cont.)

And last but not least, because Tony had the hottest car in town.

MARK (becoming interested)

What was it?

UNCLE JOHN

It was a 1957 Chevrolet Corvette, with a fuel-injected 283 cubic inch engine, and 300 horsepower.

MARK

Wow!

UNCLE JOHN

And it was beautiful. In fact, 2 weeks before Christmas, Tony drove it to a jewelry store to pick out a diamond

engagement ring he was going to give to Simone.

KERRY

How many diamonds, Uncle John?

UNCLE JOHN

Just one--it was so big, there wasn't room for any more!

KERRY

Nice!

(LIGHTS on the side stage FADE to black as the main stage lights up and we see TONY standing at the COUNTER of a jewelry store, inspecting a DIAMOND RING, with help from a SHOPLADY. TONY flips the RING in the air and, when it finally comes back down, catches it confidently)

SHOPLADY

She's a very luck girl, want to take it now?

TONY

Nope, I get paid Friday--I can pay in full then.

Stage lights FADE to BLACK, before they come up again, we hear conversation in the darkness from the direction of the side stage)

KERRY

Where did Tony get the money for the ring?

UNCLE JOHN

The old fashioned way--he earned it. He had a great job at the Chevrolet dealership in town.

MARK

Where he worked on the Corvette?

UNCLE JOHN

That's right, the car came first. It brought him everything he had. When his uncle gave it to Tony, it looked like a piece of junk. But Tony was in advanced auto shop in high school, and a very hard worker, too. In three years he had it looking like new. The car got him his job with the dealership, and Tony would work on his car late into the night, after he got off work, when there was no one else around except the shop manager, Curt.

(The LIGHTS come back up and we see a fully equipped auto shop with a bright red corvette in front of the tool bench.

(TONY is working on his car helped by the shop manager, CURT. We hear sound effects of a powerful V-8 engine being tuned up.

TONY

Thanks Boss, for letting me work on my car after closing time.

CURT

Tony, you got a beauty here, I'd let you work on this car all night long if you wanted to. You've been doin' a great job, too. Thanks.

TONY

You kidding me, Curt? I've got the best job in town, and a great Boss too. . .

(CURT shakes his head embarrassedly)

TONY (cont.)

. . . and the best car, and . . .

(TONY stares off into space)

. . . the best girl.

CURT

How are you and Simone getting along?

TONY

Just fine, in fact—and you're the first one I've told this to—I'm gonna marry her.

CURT

Congratulations! . . . You ask her yet?

TONY

I'm gonna give her the ring on Christmas day.

(The lights fade up on SIMONE at the side of the stage where She's primping in a mirror and singing an original, romantic, CHRISTMAS CAROL. When the song ends we go back to the COUCH.

KERRY

They're getting married? How'd they meet, Uncle John?

MARK

I bet she liked him for his car.

UNCLE JOHN (looking at MARK)

That, too! It was a late Spring day at the beach when he cruised up to her crowd in the parking lot in the shiny red Chevy.

(FADE couch LIGHTS to main stage, where we see TONY and his friend TOM sitting in the Corvette as a beautiful girl, SIMONE, dressed in shorts and sandals, walks around the car, stroking her hands on the fenders, to stand in front of the driver's door)

SIMONE (LOOKING at TONY)

Hi . . .

(SIMONE'S attention is distracted from an offstage VOICE calling her name, and as she walks to the side of the stage, TONY looks over at his friend, wide-eyed)

TONY (to TOM)

Who's the fox!?!

TOM

Her name's Simone, and you better have something good going for you if you want to make time with that girl. Her family treats her like a princess, she can have anything she wants, just by asking.

TONY

Except for me!

(SIMONE watches from the side of the stage as TONY puts the car

in gear and we hear tires screeching and sudden acceleration as the lights fade back to couch)

UNCLE JOHN

They went out right after that, and, as they say, the rest is history.

KERRY

It looks like Tony had everything he wanted.

MARK

Yeah, what a great car!

UNCLE JOHN

He sure thought he did, he thought he had it all.

(couch lights fade out and stage lights fade up on the highest set, where we see JOEY in a hospital bed. TONY walks into the room with a present hidden behind his back)

TONY

Joey, you little elf, how the heck are ya?

JOEY

Tony! You got me something?

(TONY pulls the package from behind his back)

TONY

Santa said I could give this to you early.

JOEY

Santa! What is it!?!

(JOEY excitedly unwraps the present and finds a beautiful model hot-rod)

JOEY

Wow! It's just like your car. Santa told you to give me this?

TONY

Yeah, and he says he's sending you home for Christmas.

(JOEY takes a long time before speaking)

JOEY

It's all right if I don't though. You can come and see me here on Christmas morning.

TONY

But it's true, Joey.

(TONY sits on the edge of the bed)

TONY (cont.)

Santa says you're getting a dialysis machine, so you don't have to wait for a kidney doner to come home. He promises you'll be home for Christmas.

JOEY (brightening)

Then I could help mom make cookies.

TONY

That's right kiddo. We need your help.

(TONY kisses JOEY on the forehead)

TONY (cont.)

We'll all be together this Christmas, finally. (SMILES) Well, I'm late to work--'bye kiddo.

JOEY (GLOWING)

'Bye Tony.

(TONY exits looking back over his shoulder. The spot fades to couch)

UNCLE JOHN

Well, Tony knew what he had, he had the world by the tail.
And he was a good enough man that he took the time to thank
the one responsible.

(The stage lights fade up and we see TONY kneeling by the side of
his bed, praying)

TONY

Lord, thank you--for Joey, my car, and my job, and my family
and friends, and especially for Simone. Oh, for Christmas,
could I please have a new tool set? Thanks.

(Tony gets into bed, lights fade to couch)

MARK

And the tool set was the best gift of all?

KERRY

Really?

UNCLE JOHN

Tony didn't get the tool set, he got something better.
Something he didn't plan on . . .

MARK

What was that?

UNCLE JOHN

. . . but first some terrible things had to happen.

KERRY

What things?

UNCLE JOHN

You'll see.

(lights fade to shop. TONY enters from the side and crosses in front of
CURT to punch a time clock and start to work on a car. CURT has a worried
expression on his face)

TONY

'Morning Curt.

CURT

'Morning Tony. Ah . . . before you get started Tony, we need to talk.

TONY

Sure Curt, what's up?

CURT

Sit down, Tony.

(Tony sits on the end of the workbench)

CURT (cont.)

Ah . . . Ah . . . I've got some bad news, Tony, I got to lay ya off.

TONY

What!?!

CHRISTMAS CAROLES turn DARK and OMINOUS

CURT

I know I told ya in the spring that you had something permanent here, and I gotta say you've done everything to earn it. But business has taken a dive. I have to lay off two Journeymen in January, men with families--they'll be hurt harder than you.

(TONY doesn't answer, but just looks at CURT with a shocked look on his face)

CURT (cont.)

If I'd had more notice, I woulda told ya sooner. Sorry, kid, you know I didn't want to do this.

(CURT takes a check from his shirt pocket and hands it to TONY)

CURT (cont.)

This isn't much, but it's the best I could do. I'm planning to hire everybody back in the spring. Maybe things will be better then.

(TONY takes the check and a few moments to answer)

TONY

I know, boss. Thanks for everything you've done for me. I guess I'll check back in March or April, if I don't find something else first. 'Bye Curt

(CURT puts his hand on TONY'S shoulder)

CURT

Stay in touch, kid.

(TONY shakes CURT'S hand and leaves. lights fade to side stage)

KERRY

He got fired! That's not a very good present?!

UNCLE JOHN

Sometimes it's not what you get in life, Kerry, it's what you make out of what you get. In a way, Tony was being tested.

MARK

By God?

(UNCLE JOHN reaches over on the couch and rubs MARK'S head affectionately)

MARK (cont.)

Did things get better then?

UNCLE JOHN

No. Things got a lot worse!

KERRY

That must've been some test!

(UNCLE JOHN puts his other arm around KERRY'S shoulder)

UNCLE JOHN

It was just beginning. And Tony had a lot of thinking to do—especially about Simone. How was he gonna ask her to marry him, when he didn't even have a job?

KERRY

She'll understand.

UNCLE JOHN (chuckles)

Well, Tony drove home lost in thought. There were Christmas carolers on the streets, but Tony could hardly hear them.

(fade side stage to center stage where we see TONY in his car surrounded by the "Christmas Angel" and dancing carolers singing ORIGINAL CHRISTMAS CAROLES)

(fade center stage back to side stage at end of song)

KERRY

Did Tony figure out what to do?

MARK

Of course he did, Kerry.

UNCLE JOHN

Yeah, he did. By the time he got home he had everything figured out. He stepped into his family's comfortable house brimming with confidence, and found his mother crying in her bedroom.

(lights fade to Tony's mother sitting on her bed, crying. Tony walks into the room, surprised, and sits down next to her while he puts his arm on her shoulders)

TONY

Momma, what's wrong, what's happened?

TONY'S MOM

Oh, Tony, it's terrible.

TONY

What's terrible, Mom?

TONY'S MOM

It's Joey, he can't come home for Christmas!

TONY

But I thought it was all arranged?

TONY'S MOM

It fell through! The finance company turned us down, so there's no matching funds, and the foundation won't get the dialysis machine.

TONY

Joey'll die if he doesn't get out of that hospital, Mom. He's at the end of his rope, he just seems brave. Two years waiting for a donor, and I told him Santa would get the machine. I just, I just don't want Joey to find out there is no Santa. Mom, how much money do we need?

TONY'S MOM

Too much, Tony. I guess Dad and I should have told you sooner, we were hoping we could make it without, without asking for help, and now it's too late! Your Dad's out trying to get a loan, but we'll never find all that money in time for Christmas!

TONY

Momma, Momma, don't cry, everything will be all right, remember, you told me if you really want something, never give up. Come on, stop crying, expect a miracle!

TONY'S MOM

Tony, you have to make your own miracles sometimes, and I just don't know how this time.

(suddenly the telephone rings in an adjoining room)

TONY

I'm gonna answer the phone, Mom.

(TONY walks to another area of the stage where the lights fade up on a telephone on a table. At another part of the stage we see the lights fade up on SIMONE who is on another telephone)

TONY

(picking up his phone)

Hello?

SIMONE

Tony, can we talk?

TONY

Not right now, Simone, I've got things to do . . .

SIMONE

But this will only take a second. I just wanted to tell you that . . . I won't be home for Christmas.

TONY

What . . . why?!

SIMONE

I, well, I've been thinking a lot about you and me, Tony, and you know how I feel. I think that we've been going a little too fast. I like you so much, Tony, and I don't want to hurt you, but . . . I've been invited to the Islands for the holiday, by Darryl, and I think I need the time to think things out.

TONY

Darryl? . . . Darryl?!

SIMONE

It's nothing serious, just a little vacation.

TONY

What about me?

SIMONE

I'll see you when I get back.

(TONY pauses a long time before he answers)

TONY

OK.

SIMONE

Tony, are you all right?

TONY

Yeah, I've got things to do. Goodbye.

(TONY hangs up the phone. SIMONE looks concerned)

(lights fade to side stage)

KERRY

Wow! That's not a test--that's a tragedy!

UNCLE JOHN

Well, God works in mysterious ways--so does Santa Claus.

MARK

Then there is a Santa Claus?

UNCLE JOHN

Of course there is.

KERRY

I guess things were as bad as they could get.

UNCLE JOHN

Not yet. Tony still had something left to lose.

MARK

He wrecked his car!?!

UNCLE JOHN

No, he didn't wreck it . . .

KERRY

He sold it--to get money for his brother's kidney machine!

UNCLE JOHN

Yep. See, Tony was learning alot about the meaning of love.

(MARK and KERRY slowly lean out from the couch to look around UNCLE JOHN at each other, lock EYES, then quickly return to their positions)

MARK (to UNCLE JOHN)

Did he get enough money for the corvette?

UNCLE JOHN

Yeah, from the car and from other things.

KERRY

What other things?

UNCLE JOHN

Why don't we take a break before we finish the story. You two want some Christmas cookies?

MARK

Yes! . . . Kerry, maybe I should get you a cookie.

KERRY

Maybe I should get you some milk . . .

(UNCLE JOHN leans back in the couch with a big smile on his face as the kids run into the kitchen and the house lights come up for the BREAK)

BREAK

(after the break, the lights and sound effects fade up on the CORVETTE with TONY in it and then the couch)

KERRY

Uncle John, where did Tony sell his car?

UNCLE JOHN

He went to Sel's used car lot.

(lights fade to an office with TONY and SEL)

TONY

My car's worth 20 grand, Sel! Give me at least 14, or someone else will.

SEL

OK kid, you got it, it's Christmas. But don't come back here, you're gonna drive me broke!

(we hear from the side stage)

KERRY

Where did Tony go next, Uncle John?

UNCLE JOHN

The jewelry store, where he got his deposit back. After all, He wasn't going to need the ring, was he?

(lights fade up in the jewelry store)

SHOPLADY

I can hold the ring until after Christmas.

TONY

No, I won't be needing it now. May I have my deposit back?

SHOPLADY

Sure. Give me a minute.

(the SHOPLADY goes to the SAFE and takes out a number of BIG BILLS and gives TONY his deposit back, wiping a tear out of her eyes as he leaves)

(heard from couch)

UNCLE JOHN

Tony walked home slowly, and he heard himself say, "You're a loser, and you always will be," but when he gave his mother the money from the ring, and the car, and his savings, he brightened, seeing a ray of sunshine break through the clouds.

(We see TONY hand HIS MOTHER some money)

TONY

Take the extra money, Mom, and buy Joey something nice.

(back to side stage)

UNCLE JOHN

Three days later it was Christmas eve, and a little Sunshine--maker was home from the hospital. Tony was sprawled on the living room couch, a guest of honor in his own home.

(fade onto center stage with TONY relaxing on the couch, reading a newspaper. JOEY runs in to see him from the kitchen)

JOEY

Look what I made you, Tony!

(JOEY hands TONY a Christmas cookie in the shape of a car, sprinkled with bright red little candy crinkles)

JOEY (cont.)

It's just like your next car!

TONY

It is, huh? Well, I guess I better look for a car with no windows!

(JOEY runs back into the kitchen as TONY laughs heartily)

(lights fade back to couch)

UNCLE JOHN

And as Tony watched his brother run back into the kitchen, guess what he found out?

(MARK and KERRY look at each other before they answer)

MARK and KERRY

He had the best gift of all.

UNCLE JOHN

Yep. Santa had given Tony and his family their best Christmas present, ever.

(KERRY and MARK look at each other, then down at the presents they are holding, then at each other again)

KERRY (to UNCLE JOHN)

Is that the end of the story?

UNCLE JOHN

No, not quite. Santa has a way of taking care of everyone.

(lights fade to center stage. As TONY leans back on the couch with a big smile on his face, the PHONE rings)

TONY'S MOM (picking up phone)

Tony, it's for you, it's Simone.

TONY

Simone?

(TONY walks over to the phone and picks it up cautiously)

TONY (cont.)

Hello?

(We see SIMONE on her phone at the side of the stage)

SIMONE

Hi, Tony, Merry Christmas!

TONY

Merry Christmas. I thought you left?

SIMONE

I got in a fight with Darryl, and decided not to go. Anyway, I think it's better to spend the holidays with your family, don't you?

TONY

Yeah, well, I guess so.

SIMONE

Tony, could you come to dinner at my house tomorrow, about six? I know it's short notice, but I have something to say to you.

TONY

You can say goodbye over the phone.

SIMONE

No, Tony, you don't understand. Please?

TONY

OK. Is that all?

SIMONE

See you tomorrow.

(TONY sets down the receiver, mystified)

(fade to couch)

MARK

What did Simone want?

UNCLE JOHN

Well, Tony didn't know. And that night he slept fitfully, tossing and turning, but not before he remembered to thank 'Santa,' as well as the Lord.

(lights fade up on Tony kneeling by the side of his bed)

TONY

Thank you, Lord, for my best Christmas, ever.

(TONY gets into bed. fade back to side stage)

UNCLE JOHN

That night Tony dreamt of stars, and the moon, and of Simone, turning her back and walking away across the snow. Christmas day finally came, full of cheer in Tony's

household, and after church, and the gifts, and the visitors, Tony dressed for dinner. His mother came in to see him when he was ready to go.

(lights fade back to TONY in bedroom as his mother enters)

TONY'S MOTHER

Merry Christmas, Son. Thanks for everything you've done. And remember, don't give up.

(TONY'S MOTHER straightens TONY'S collar, and kisses him as he leaves)

(back to couch)

UNCLE JOHN

Tony walked the long five miles to Simone's house, arriving a little early. He could have borrowed a car, but the day was clear and crisp, and he knew the walk would settle him down. Simone answered the doorbell.

(TONY rings the doorbell and SIMONE opens the door)

SIMONE

Tony, Merry Christmas!

(SIMONE embraces TONY, who looks surprised)

SIMONE (cont.)

Dinner will be ready soon, let's sit down and have a glass of punch.

TONY

Here, this is for you.

(TONY hands SIMONE a present, she unwraps it and finds a simple, white HANDKERCHIEF)

SIMONE

Oh, Tony, it's beautiful!

(SIMONE embraces TONY again)

SIMONE (cont.)

Want to talk about . . . things?

TONY

No, no let's just sit.

(they sit down at a kitchen table. SIMONE stares at TONY as SIMONE'S mother comes out of the kitchen and starts setting the table)

SIMONE'S MOM

Tony, it's so nice to see you again.

TONY

How are you, Mrs. Johnson?

SIMONE'S MOM

Just fine, sweetheart. (pause) And how's our man of the year?

(TONY stares back at SIMONE'S MOTHER vacantly, not knowing what she's talking about)

SIMONE'S MOM (busy setting table)

Well, I've had a very busy week. Monday I sold trees for the Special Olympics, then on Tuesday there was that darned, rainy, art and garden benefit for the symphony guild, then after that, a big party at Children's Hospital.

(the two women look at TONY as he looks surprised)

SIMONE'S MOM (cont.)

I'll tell you which was the happiest occasion for me, it was the party. You know, a little boy went home for the first time in twenty-two months? He swore to me he knew Santa, and they were very close.

(a look of happiness and recognition appears on TONY'S face. SIMONE is holding TONY'S hand and both women are smiling at TONY. HAPPY CHRISTMAS MUSIC begins)

SIMONE

Tony, can we go downtown after dinner, and look at the Christmas lights, just you and me?

TONY

But we can't, I don't have a ca . . .

SIMONE(interrupting)

I want to walk, with you. It's so beautiful out, and besides, it's Christmas.

TONY

Sure.

(SIMONE kisses TONY, as SIMONE'S mother smiles in the background. A GROUP of CAROLERS starts singing outside the house, AS THE LIGHTS COME UP on a side stage, and we see among them the "Christmas Angel", and they all sing "Joy to the World" as they walk into the audience, shaking hands and giving out candy to children.

End.

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