

JOYOUS NOEL

Screenplay by

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INT. ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH, CLASSROOM -- NIGHT

We float through the classroom, abundant with hand-made Christmas decorations. Fourth and fifth grade kids work around tables, making even more decorations, signing along to an overly-produced version of *The Little Drummer Boy*. NOEL sits alone in the corner. He is a dark-haired boy who seems content to sit by himself in the time-out box that has been decorated as a giant Christmas present. He stares intently upwards, to the falling snow outside.

We pan past Noel as the sound of a phantom heartbeat falls in rhythm with the music. The shot moves through the window pane, remaining fixed on Noel's gaze, and begins to rise higher and higher into the sky as the sounds of the classroom fade and the wind grows along with the phantom heartbeat.

Suddenly, NICHOLAS, a twenty-something teacher brings Noel back into the classroom.

NICHOLAS

Noel?

NOEL

(startled)

Huh?

NICHOLAS

Well aren't you lost in thought?
What are you thinking about?

Noel turns his gaze back outside, speaking in a drifting hush.

NOEL

What would it be like to fall up?

NICHOLAS

Fall up?

NOEL

To fall higher and higher. To where snow becomes snow. To where you don't get dizzy watching it. Maybe it hasn't even fallen yet. Just kind of hangs there before letting go.

(back inside)

Or is that just stupid?

Nicholas crouches down and looks deep into Noel's eyes.

NICHOLAS

You...are an amazing kid. No thought you could ever have can be stupid.

(MORE)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

(a beat, then)

Calling Sister Helen a penguin,
however, might not have been so smart.

NOEL

She waddles...everyone calls her
that.

NICHOLAS

To her face?

NOEL

She hit me.

NICHOLAS

She spanked you.

NOEL

I'm too old for spankings. She hit
me.

NICHOLAS

Still...don't you think an apology
is in order?

NOEL

You think I should apologize to her?

NICHOLAS

I am asking you what you think.

NOEL

(a beat)

Fine...I'll apologize.

INT. FACTORY - NIGHT

Men work inside the dark, dingy, and loud factory. A DEEP
VOICE BOOMS over the loudspeaker.

MR. ACROMNY (O.S.)

Jeremy Connell to my office!

The MEN playfully mock sheepishness as they look to JEREMY,
a tall and lanky man who supervises them. Jeremy stops work
and heads to the office.

INT. FACTORY, OFFICE -- MOMENTS LATER

The huge office is largely empty, but filled with tons of
random stuff...more than enough to point out that it simply
isn't enough to fill the wide space. MR. ACROMNY, an
overweight older man, sits in his chair, facing away from
the door and looking out the wide window that overlooks the
employee parking lot.

Jeremy enters with a knock. Mr. Acromny doesn't turn around.

JEREMY

Sir?

MR. ACROMNY

Your son's school called.

JEREMY

Again? I'm so sorry. Did they say-

MR. ACROMNY

They want to speak with you.

JEREMY

Of course. Um...I'll make sure the night shift is in order before I take off.

MR. ACROMNY

How many times has it been this month?

Jeremy sighs.

MR. ACROMNY (CONT'D)

With all the times you get called out, you'd think you weren't needed here.

JEREMY

Sir?

MR. ACROMNY

We have deadlines to meet, Jer.

JEREMY

And we'll stick 'em. We'll be fine.

MR. ACROMNY

So you say.

He swivels his chair around and points to some papers on his desk.

MR. ACROMNY (CONT'D)

Have you seen our production counts? We'll never make the Kingston account.

JEREMY

The men are a bit tired.

MR. ACROMNY

They love the overtime.

JEREMY

They love the paychecks that come with the overtime.

MR. ACROMNY

That's what I said.

Jeremy looks absently at his boss and then dismisses himself.

EXT. BADLANDS, BADWILL BOX -- LATER

The wind blows. It is dark. Noel "shops" for items around a graffiti-covered dumpster used for dropping off charitable items. He seems really pleased with finding a tall floor lamp buried in the snow.

EXT. FACTORY, PARKING LOT -- LATER

Jeremy walks through the parking lot to his car. As he puts the key in to unlock the door, he notices Mr. Acromny sitting in his chair, looking out through his window. He waves to his boss, but gets no response.

EXT. EDDIE'S PUB, OVERPASS -- NIGHT

On the underside of an overpass, just where the cement slope meets the underside of the bridge, there are tiny spaces where the homeless store their things. SADIE, a twenty-something homeless girl with long and wiry reddish hair, who looks much, much older than she should, pushes buttons on a dead cell phone.

She looks at it in frustration, puts the phone in a cigar box, ties the box shut with a ribbon, and then puts the box in a hole under the bridge. She shivers and turns towards the street below. She turns and looks to one side--a bunch of vacant and abandoned factory buildings on streets filled with garbage--the start of an area call the "Badlands" that calls home to the homeless, gangs, and violence.

She turns the other direction to see the end of "Mag Mile," a series of upscale shops and department stores. Shoppers come and go, arms full of bags, criss-crossing the brick-paved street.

Sadie navigates her way down the slope and heads toward Eddie's Pub across the street.

INT. ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH, OFFICE -- LATER

The office is tiny and dirty and crammed with all sorts of books about archaeology. FATHER WILKES is an old and thin man with white hair and thick glasses. Jeremy sits across the desk from him. Wilkes is showing him some flyer.

WILKES

I'm not saying that Noel isn't welcome here...I'm just saying that Luke's might be more practical.

JEREMY
(sarcastic)
Practical.

WILKES
They're closer to your home.
AND...They also have later after-
care programs.

JEREMY
With a price tag.

WILKES
I can talk to them. I'm sure I can
convince them to-

JEREMY
I certainly don't need your help.

Wilkes sits back in his chair and sighs, exasperated, shaking his head.

WILKES
You've never forgiven me, have you?
Goodness knows I tried to do right
by you. With all of you.
(sighs)
It just wasn't-

JEREMY
Practical. I know. Are we done
here?

WILKES
Will we be seeing you on Sunday?

Jeremy just looks at him.

WILKES (CONT'D)
It might do you some good, you know.
You haven't come since...well, since
Jeannie died.

Jeremy stands and heads for the door, but then pauses.

JEREMY
She always thought of this place as
home.

Nicholas opens the door.

NICHOLAS
Ah...I can't find Noel. Probably
gone already.
(MORE)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

(a beat)

When you see him tonight will you please, please remind him he needs to check out with me if he leaves school?

Jeremy puts his hand on Nicholas' shoulder and smiles.

JEREMY

That kid...so much like his mother.

Jeremy exits. Wilkes calls Nicholas in. Nicholas shuts the door behind him, and to Wilkes's annoyance, pulls the guest chair closer to his desk so as to make the space more intimate.

WILKES

That kid...is so much like his father. Stubborn and bitter.

NICHOLAS

Only to you.

(seeing his reaction)

Sir. I mean...Mr. Connell is that way only to you.

(a beat)

Why is that?

WILKES

Ancient history, really. Take a look at this.

He hands him a drawing. Nicholas chuckles at the psychedelic colored-pencil sketch of an old man with long hair, braids, and drug paraphernalia.

WILKES (CONT'D)

You find this amusing? Really?

NICHOLAS

Oh, come on. It's harmless. I asked the older kids to draw pictures of whatever they think God looks like. Artistically, it's actually quite good.

WILKES

God is not some dope-smoking hippie.

NICHOLAS

(chuckling even more)

You seem pretty sure of that.

WILKES

It's disrespectful.

NICHOLAS

It's harmless.

WILKES

Harmless?

(looking it over)

Actually, it kind of reminds me of
Jeremy.

NICHOLAS

Mr. Connell?

WILKES

Before he went into the military.

NICHOLAS

(surprised)

Mr. Connell? Looked like this?

WILKES

No...the attitude looked like this.
When he was 16, his parents decided
that his rebelliousness wasn't very
helpful around the farm, so they
sent him to the army. Lied about
his age. Probably forged some
documents.

NICHOLAS

And you said nothing?

WILKES

Jeremy...he just wanted to get the
hell out...which reminds me. Noel.

NICHOLAS

He said he was going to apologize.

WILKES

For what?

(a beat)

No wait...I don't want to know.
It's the Christmas pageant...You're
giving him a solo?

NICHOLAS

He'll be fine.

WILKES

He's our biggest trouble-maker.

NICHOLAS

Noel is a good kid. The attention
will do him good.

WILKES

That's just what the boy needs...more attention.

NICHOLAS

He's a good kid. He really is.

WILKES

Good kids don't pull the fire alarms twice in one month when only one of them is for a real fire. Which he started, by the way.

NICHOLAS

That was my fault. I should have been watching him. Who knew that putting glue and glitter pictures in the microwave is a bad way to make them dry faster?

WILKES

And what of the other alarm?

Nicholas sighs.

WILKES (CONT'D)

Nicholas, I'm sorry. I've given you a ton--a ton--of leeway with this year's production, but I've got to put my foot down on this. Noel is too much of a gamble.

Nicholas looks defiant, but doesn't protest. He heads towards the door, but pauses before stepping out.

NICHOLAS

I can't speak about his father, but you're wrong about Noel. He's not bitter. He's just really, really angry.

WILKES

Sorry, Nick. It's not like you need a little drummer boy anyway, you know. It's not like there were Three Wise Men and a little drummer boy.

NICHOLAS

(rolling his eyes)

You ever think you just might be missing something?

After Nicholas leaves, Wilkes gets up and moves his guest chair back to where he likes it to be. He sighs, looking deep into the bookshelf.

WILKES

All the time, son.

EXT. EDDIE'S PUB, ALLEY -- NIGHT

The blue neon sign glows dimly at the end of "Mag Mile." The pub would look completely out of place, except that it sits at the very end of the street, at the bottom of the off-ramp next to the overpass. Across the street there are the bright lights of the brick-paved road; and through the darkness of the overpass a few fires burn in trash cans surrounded by the homeless. Further back are broken fences that lead to abandoned buildings.

Sadie digs through the trash in the alley.

INT. EDDIE'S PUB -- MOMENTS LATER

The pub is dark and smoky; the kind of place that is always full of people, but never crowded. There is a mix of blue collar regulars and families with shopping bags from the stores. EDDIE is older with thin white hair. He stands behind the bar, smoking, and looking quite happy with himself. His much younger and more handsome brother, TOMMY, stands opposite him across the bar. A couple of his cronies are with him.

EDDIE

So how is my baby brother? Are we going to see your family this year for Christmas dinner?

TOMMY

Eddie...

EDDIE

Oh...right, sorry. All these years I keep forgetting I'm supposed to call you Your Highness.

TOMMY'S CRONIES LAUGH.

TOMMY

Eddie...

EDDIE

Sorry, Mr. Mayor. To what do I owe this gracing of your presence?

TOMMY

You know, it's hard enough to command any respect without you treating me like I'm six.

Tommy takes the cigarette out of his older brother's mouth and extinguishes it.

EDDIE

Oh...who are you kidding? This town loves you. And you'll always be a six year old snot to me. Get you a drink?

He doesn't wait for an answer but pours a round for the three men.

EXT. BADLANDS -- NIGHT

It's dark, cold and windy. Noel looks something like a toy soldier, hauling the floor lamp over his head through the snow. A car approaches and Noel tries to hide, but it's too late. The car pulls over and Jeremy rolls down the window.

JEREMY

Hey, Boss!

INT. JEREMY'S CAR -- MOMENT'S LATER

JEREMY

What are you doing out this way...you know I don't like it over here. Too dangerous.

NOEL

It's so cold. Just wanted to take the short cut.

They don't talk as they drive on, listening to the frigid forecast on the radio, until...

JEREMY

So, what's with the lamp?

NOEL

Somebody was throwing it away. I thought we could use a little more light in the living room.

JEREMY

Ah...

SILENCE.

JEREMY (CONT'D)

So, I heard you got into some trouble today.

NOEL

At lunch, Betty was saying how her family was buying some new pews for the church for Christmas. Benji said his dad bought a bunch of new computers.

(MORE)

NOEL (CONT'D)

And then Betty was all like "And what are you getting Jesus for his birthday, NO-WOOL?" I just ignored her.

JEREMY

Oh? I thought there was more to the story than that.

NOEL

Well then she goes, "I'm sure he'd be happy with just a box of Spic-n-Span like the Sisters asked for." And all I said was that I didn't know what the hell Jesus would want with a box of Spic-n-Span. And then Sister Helen hit me.

JEREMY

So you called her a penguin?

NOEL

Hell is not a bad word...it's in the Bible.

JEREMY

It's a bad word the way you use it, son. Now, watch your mouth and be mindful of showing respect.

NOEL

Yes, sir.

They pull up in the alley alongside Eddie's Pub.

JEREMY

And I want you to apologize to Sister Helen.

NOEL

I already did.

JEREMY

Then do it again.

NOEL

Yes, sir.

INT. EDDIE'S PUB -- MOMENTS LATER

Eddie and Tommy look over blue prints.

TOMMY

A real Dickens Village...complete with cobblestone streets, gaslit street lamps, and costumed workers.

EDDIE

They already have that...it's called England.

TOMMY

Ah...but we're not in England, brother. It will really clean up that wasteland next store and will wrap up the Mag Mile project.

EDDIE

This supposed to be the pub?

TOMMY

Yeah. I just need you on board.

EDDIE

Your little experiment has been pretty successful without my being on board.

TOMMY

C'mon, Eddie...you're the last hold out from the old town center. The difference now is that you'll no longer be the dump at the end of the street...you'll be the dump right smack dab in the middle of it. Think of it...just a little less pub, a little more restaurant. It will be swanky.

EDDIE

Swanky? Hey, Short Stuff...

Noel comes in. Eddie nods towards the kitchen. Tommy notices how Eddie doesn't seem to care that Noel goes to the register and gives himself change after putting in a twenty.

TOMMY

I've got engineers coming up from Orlando to work on this. Investors are coming by next week to kick off.

Eddie shakes his head. Noel goes into the kitchen then comes out shortly afterwards with dinner-to-go.

Eddie, almost gently, cradles Tommy's face in his palm.

EDDIE

Christmas dinner. We'll talk. Ooh, Short Stuff. Completely slipped my mind. Tell Frankie to use the corned beef from yesterday.

Noel goes back into the kitchen.

INT. JEREMY'S CAR -- LATER

Jeremy is fussing with the radio when he sees Noel emerge from the pub and cross the street. He disappears into the darkness of the overpass.

JEREMY
What the hell?

Moments later, Noel emerges and as he crosses the street, Sadie comes out of the alley way and meets him.

EXT. EDDIE'S PUB, OVERPASS -- CONTINUOUS

Sadie pauses at Noel and smiles.

SADIE
My little angel.

She continues on.

INT. JEREMY'S CAR -- CONTINUOUS

Noel climbs inside the car and Jeremy looks at him bewildered.

JEREMY
What was that all about?

NOEL
Nothing.

JEREMY
Okay...keep your secrets then.

Noel digs into the bag and starts eating his sandwich. He offers the other to his dad.

JEREMY (CONT'D)
Thanks, kiddo.

NOEL
Dad...what's a hobo?

JEREMY
Where'd you hear that word?

NOEL
The mayor. He was talking to Eddie about getting rid of the druggies, gangbangers and hobos.

JEREMY
Well...I guess it's just a not-so-nice word for the homeless.

They listen to the RADIO while they eat, driving home. Noel looks at all the houses decorated with Christmas lights.

NOEL

Are we going to get a tree this year?
For Christmas? Mom would always
have a tree up by now.

They pull up to their home, a small dark house on a row of
other small houses.