

NOT WHAT I EXPECTED

by Colleen Ison Scheid



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Not What I Expected

The myth of the perfect Christmas

by Colleen Ison Scheid

INTRODUCTION

This one-act for two adults is the telling of a personal story, so performers need to be natural and real.

They should appear a little nervous and self-conscious at the beginning, then grow in confidence after they get a few laughs.

CHARACTERS

Laura: A charming, expressive person. The play relies on her vivacity and movement for visual interest.

John: A steady, matter-of-fact person, with a dry sense of humor.

Audience Members: Five different audience members need to be cued to bring up carvings for a nativity scene at five different times.

COSTUMES

Laura and John are dressed for church; whatever that is expected to be in your setting.

PROPS

Five carved wooden Nativity pieces, the larger the better — Mary, Joseph, a shepherd, a wise man, and a baby Jesus in a manger. They should be placed in gift bags. They will be placed on a table at Upstage Center. You might consider using PowerPoint to project photographs of each piece when the Audience Member hands them to John or Laura, particularly if your sanctuary is very large.

SET

John and Laura may simply read at the podium unless you want to have a living room set with chairs for the actors to sit on when the focus is off of them.

1 (*LAURA and JOHN enter together, look a little nervously at one*
2 *another, and begin.*)

3 **LAURA:** Hi, I'm Laura.

4 **JOHN:** I'm John. We've got some Christmas stories for you —
5 "The First Five Christmases of Laura and John." Go
6 ahead, Laura.

7 **LAURA:** (*Steps forward.*) I have a strong memory of our first
8 Christmas. We'd only been married a few months. We had
9 decided to take turns spending Christmas with each
10 other's families.

11 **JOHN:** We flipped a coin to see whose family we'd visit the
12 first year.

13 **LAURA:** His family got it. I hated being away from my family
14 on Christmas.

15 **JOHN:** (*Rolling his eyes*) Yeah, she did. (*He walks a few steps*
16 *Upstage to give focus to Laura.*)

17 **LAURA:** Christmas at home was always the best time of year
18 for me — this magical, quiet, holy time. My mother made
19 the house look gorgeous, and I would lie in front of the
20 fire reading her big Christmas books and gazing at the
21 perfect tree and eating yummy little shortbreads
22 wrapped around maraschino cherries and ... well,
23 anyway, we got to John's parents' on Christmas morning,
24 and the place was so packed and noisy that it took a long
25 time for anyone to notice we were there.

26 **JOHN:** The family room floor was covered wall-to-wall with
27 bicycle parts, and my brother was cussing because he'd
28 mixed up all the parts to three different bikes.

29 **LAURA:** By the time the meal was served, it was stone cold.
30 John noticed me looking down at my congealed gravy,
31 kind of quiet and pouty, and he got ticked off because I
32 wasn't being cheerful with his family. Then, when we
33 finally got two minutes alone to exchange presents — in
34 the bathroom — he just tossed the present by the sink
35 and said, "Here!"

1 **JOHN:** And it was only one present. Big mistake.

2 **LAURA:** I actually burst into tears at that point. It just wasn't
 3 what I expected. (*Moves closer to the audience.*) But that
 4 night, when the place had finally calmed down, I opened
 5 my Bible and read the passage in Luke where Mary sees
 6 Elizabeth and bursts into this gorgeous song of praise:
 7 “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God
 8 my Savior ... ” and I thought, “Wow. She didn't expect to
 9 get pregnant while she was still single, and she didn't
 10 expect to be alienated from her family, but she was OK
 11 with it.” Her soul rejoiced in the reality of God. And then
 12 I realized, “That is Christmas. Finding out that all you
 13 really need is God.” (*Pauses, turns to JOHN, and moves back*
 14 *toward him.*) Your turn.

15 **JOHN:** (*Gestures to someone in the front row.*) Just a second.
 16 Before I go on, I figured that since we're going over old
 17 ground, I would get you another present to make up for
 18 that first Christmas.

19 **LAURA:** What?

20 **JOHN:** Well, better late than never. (*An AUDIENCE MEMBER*
 21 *from the front row hands him a wooden carving of Mary in a*
 22 *gift bag. He hands it to Laura.*)

23 **LAURA:** Are you serious? (*To the audience*) I didn't know about
 24 this part.

25 **JOHN:** Are you gonna open it?

26 **LAURA:** (*She opens it and smiles, very pleased. The audience*
 27 *member takes the bag and returns to his/her seat.*) Oh! You
 28 remembered me raving about it in the store last year! (*He*
 29 *nods, takes it from her, and places it on the table, then returns*
 30 *to stand near LAURA.*)

31 **JOHN:** On our second Christmas it was her family's turn, and
 32 we stayed in town. We planned to be at her parents'
 33 house by three p.m. for dinner. Her family is never late.

34 **LAURA:** No, we're not. (*Moves out of focus.*)

35 **JOHN:** Well, it just so happened that Christmas morning, our

1 plumbing broke. I turned on the shower, and — nothing.
2 So, naturally, I started fixing it.

3 LAURA: And continued to fix it all day.

4 JOHN: I was determined to fix it, because Laura had said she
5 wanted to take an incredibly long bubble bath,
6 something she never had time to do. So I was fixing it for
7 her, but she got mad at me because I wasn't doing other
8 Christmassy things that she had planned. It turned into
9 this ridiculous conversation where everything I said got
10 taken the wrong way, and by the time we were supposed
11 to leave, we were standing in the hallway, still unwashed,
12 having the worst argument of our marriage. And I can
13 honestly say that it was one of the few arguments where
14 I was really pretty innocent. *(He glances at LAURA.)*

15 LAURA: It's true. Mostly innocent.

16 JOHN: So by the time we patched it up and got to her
17 parents', they'd already started eating. We walked in and
18 they just looked at us. Her eyes were all puffy from
19 crying, and her dad stared at me like I was some kind of
20 ogre for hurting his baby's feelings on Christmas ...

21 LAURA: He did not look at you like you —

22 JOHN: Ah-ah. My turn.

23 LAURA: OK.

24 JOHN: Well, never mind. Suffice to say it was not the kind of
25 day I expected. *(Moves closer to the audience.)* But that
26 night, when we were driving home, that guy with the
27 English accent who reads the Bible was on the radio, and
28 he read the part about Joseph planning to quietly back
29 out of the wedding with Mary, and God tells him to go
30 ahead and marry her because the child is from God. I
31 thought, "Talk about being misunderstood. How many of
32 his buddies were gonna believe *that* story?" Then it
33 occurred to me, "That's Christmas — giving up your
34 reputation so God's will can be done." *(Looks over at*
35 *LAURA and they both move Downstage Center. JOHN keeps*

1 going out into the audience and gets the JOSEPH carving in a
 2 gift bag from an AUDIENCE MEMBER. He removes the
 3 carving, hands the bag to the audience member and gives the
 4 carving to LAURA.)

5 **JOHN:** There he is. Wondering what he got himself in for.

6 **LAURA:** How many of these did you get? (*JOHN shrugs.*

7 *LAURA smiles and places the carving next to Mary on the table*
 8 *as she begins the next story.)*

9 **LAURA:** Well, for our third Christmas, we decided to try
 10 something different — maybe take a break from the
 11 whole family thing just for a year — so we decided to go
 12 on a romantic ski getaway.

13 **JOHN:** Bed and breakfast right near the slopes, jacuzzi in our
 14 room ...

15 **LAURA:** Fireplace, wonderful view. It was perfect.

16 **JOHN:** 'Til we showed up.

17 **LAURA:** Two days before we left, I got this miserable cold,
 18 but I kind of downplayed it because I didn't want
 19 anything to mess up our plans. I remember really
 20 wanting to just crawl into bed the day we got there, but
 21 instead I took a bunch of cold medicine and skied all
 22 day.

23 **JOHN:** When we got back to our room, she stretched out on
 24 the bed and fell asleep in her ski bibs. I sat in the hot
 25 tub by myself and watched _____. (*Insert name*
 26 *of some unromantic popular TV show.)*

27 **LAURA:** Needless to say, there wasn't a lot of romance.

28 **JOHN:** There was none.

29 **LAURA:** Well, John's kind of fanatical about skiing. He was
 30 up before seven the next morning, and he said, "Hey,
 31 you're still wearing your ski suit. Wanna just get out
 32 there?" By now I had a throbbing headache and a deep
 33 cough, but I felt bad for falling asleep on him the night
 34 before, so I dragged myself out again. Good thing I did,
 35 because we were the only ones out on this black slope,

- 1 and John had an accident. He, uh, skied into a tree.
- 2 JOHN: I skied into a tree. You asked me not to ski through
3 the trees — said it was way too risky for someone who
4 only skies once a year to be doing.
- 5 LAURA: Yes. I yelled, “You know you’re going to break at
6 least one bone, don’t you!”
- 7 JOHN: Two ribs.
- 8 LAURA: But we didn’t know that for a while. John insisted
9 that he just needed to rest, and he’d be fine the next day.
- 10 JOHN: I’d bought a three-day lift ticket.
- 11 LAURA: So I helped him back to our room and into bed.
12 There we were, on our romantic weekend getaway. It
13 was Christmas Eve, and we were both laid up in bed,
14 John wincing every time I sneezed. Miserable.
- 15 JOHN: Beyond miserable.
- 16 LAURA: The next morning I didn’t even remember it was
17 Christmas. I just wanted to get John to a doctor. Then I
18 saw this Christmas book sitting on the bedside table. I
19 hadn’t noticed it before. It had gorgeous pictures. There
20 was one of the shepherds and the angels that caught my
21 attention. It was very real — the angels were just this
22 enormous swirl of light filling the sky, and the shepherds
23 were little guys in scruffy clothes, just a few of them
24 scattered on this bare hill. Maybe I was just projecting
25 how I was feeling onto them, but it occurred to me for
26 the first time that they were probably guys on the edge
27 of society, up there above the town with a few witless
28 sheep, left out of the action. So how amazing would it be
29 for them to have all these angels show up and give the
30 most important news in the world to them?! That’s
31 Christmas — God bursting in on a miserable scene and
32 lighting it up with joy.
- 33 JOHN: So where do I fit into the metaphor — am I a scruffy
34 shepherd or a witless sheep?
- 35 LAURA: You never want to push a metaphor too far.

1 (AUDIENCE MEMBER brings up a shepherd carving in a gift
2 bag.)

3 **LAURA:** I think I can guess this one. (She takes the shepherd out
4 of the bag and hands the bag back to the AUDIENCE
5 MEMBER, who leaves.)

6 **JOHN:** I'm not sure if he's scruffy enough for your
7 imagination. (She smiles and places the carving with the
8 others.)

9 **LAURA:** Maybe he spruced up a little after becoming so well-
10 known.

11 **JOHN:** OK. The fourth Christmas we got smarter. We decided
12 to completely give up any hopes of enjoying Christmas,
13 and just do something for other people.

14 **LAURA:** We volunteered to serve Christmas dinner in a soup
15 kitchen at a church downtown.

16 **JOHN:** I can't say I had a really positive attitude about it. I
17 was just being dutiful. You know, tough work but
18 someone's got to do it.

19 **LAURA:** As soon as we got there, I felt self-conscious. I had
20 on this bright red dress, trying to be festive, and as soon
21 as I walked into the room, every single person stared at
22 me. I was the only one who was dressed up, and one of
23 the only women.

24 **JOHN:** She got a lot more attention than I did. I thought I'd
25 be serving food or doing dishes or something. I didn't
26 think that I was going to get anything out of it. When we
27 got there, there were already enough people helping in
28 the kitchen, so the guy in charge asked us to just talk to
29 people. "Make them feel welcome," he said. At first I was
30 really uncomfortable. I was just kind of a bodyguard to
31 the lady in red here. Then this old guy called us over and
32 told us to sit with him. He was wearing a suit with a bow
33 tie, and he had badges all over the lapels.

34 **LAURA:** He said, "Merry Christmas, Visitors. Thank you for
35 comin' down. This place here, it's a portal to the kingdom

1 of heaven.”

2 **JOHN:** Then he starts into some really crazy stuff about
3 angels standing in the corners and demons trying to get
4 in through the windows, but the Light of the Spirit is
5 forcing them back, and on and on. I’m thinking, “Great.
6 I just came to dish out green beans, and now I’m in for
7 hours of weirdness.”

8 **LAURA:** Then he said, “The power of God is so strong here,
9 it’s filling the air with orange and red! He was so excited
10 that I wondered if he was going to do anything violent.
11 But then he pointed to this old lady and said, “See Flossie
12 over there? God grew her two teeth! There was no top
13 ones left to hook her dentures onto, and she couldn’t
14 chew, so we prayed. Next time I saw her, she shows me
15 two teeth!” And he yelled, “Flossie, can you testify?” And
16 she yelled back, “Oh yeah, I can testify!”

17 **JOHN:** I started to get up, but he grabbed my arm. He
18 pointed to the janitor and told me his leg grew more than
19 an inch after they prayed. Then he went into this long
20 story about a guy named Damien. Damien was writhing
21 in the pit of hell, and a ladder came down to rescue
22 him ...

23 **LAURA:** He said when he prayed for Damien, he always got
24 a picture of him in this dark pit. Then one night when he
25 was praying, he saw a ladder coming down and Damien
26 grabbing it and climbing up into the light.

27 **JOHN:** By now he was leaning over the table, and I was about
28 to grab Laura and head for the door, but the director got
29 up front and announced that Damien was going to testify
30 about how God had turned his life around. I couldn’t
31 believe it.

32 **LAURA:** *(Excited)* This Damien guy got up and told about how
33 he’d been a crack addict, and the night his mother finally
34 threw him out of their apartment, he was sitting on a
35 park bench, and he had the same ladder vision the crazy



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