

Christmas, Apparently...

A holiday play by Butch Maxwell

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

HOLLY HARTWELL — The family's host. She does not sit.

NICK HARTWELL — Holly's husband.

CHIP HARTWELL — Their adult son.

NOELLE HARTWELL — Their adult daughter.

DESTINY PARKER — Chip's girlfriend.

HEATHER — Holly's sister.

JASON — Noelle's ex-husband.

DOUG — An electrician.

GARY KRINGLE — A professional Santa.

ALEX — A delivery driver.

CHERYL — Community Outreach Coordinator, Oak Street Community Carolers.

BARRETT — A caroler.

EVELYN — A caroler.

MADISON — A caroler completing community service hours.

OWEN — A child of about nine.

SETTING

The Hartwell home, 114 Oak Street. A single interior: main entrance with practical front door, a staircase with landing, a kitchen entrance, a dining table set for a family Christmas dinner, a side table, and a clearly defined area stage right that serves as a bar or drink station. A Christmas tree is implied by the glow it casts from offstage left. A Christmas village is arranged near the side table, plugged into a visible outlet. The garland on the mantle is intentionally slightly crooked.

TIME

Christmas Eve, morning through evening.

ACT ONE

Scene 1: Christmas Eve, 9:47 a.m.

The Hartwell home, 114 Oak Street. Christmas Eve, morning — just before ten o'clock. The house is fully decorated with the precision of someone who has been planning since October: garland on the mantle, a wreath near the entrance, Christmas lights strung along the windows, a tree just offstage left whose presence is implied by the glow it casts into the room. The garland is intentionally slightly crooked. The tree is in the correct location — Holly moved it three years ago and certain people still notice.

The set is a single interior: main entrance with practical front door, a staircase with landing, a kitchen entrance, a dining table set for a family Christmas dinner, a side table that currently holds a three-ring binder and will eventually hold other things, and a clearly defined area stage right that serves as a bar or drink station. A Christmas village is arranged on or immediately adjacent to the side table — the small illuminated houses, the skating rink, the church — plugged into the outlet nearest the table. Practical outlets are visible. Their locations will become important later.

At rise: NICK HARTWELL sits at the head of the dining table, phone propped against a water glass, a football game faintly audible. He has a plate, a fork, and a fruitcake. He is completely content. He may be the most content man alive.

HOLLY HARTWELL enters from the kitchen carrying an enormous three-ring binder with color-coded laminated tabs. She is dressed for a magazine photo shoot titled “Christmas: Executed.” She does not sit. She may never sit.

HOLLY

Okay.

(Opening the binder.)

It is nine forty-seven. The younger Hartwells arrive at three. That gives us five hours and thirteen minutes, plus a forty-five-minute buffer for what the binder calls unclassified contingencies.

NICK

(To his phone.)

Go, go, go —

HOLLY

Nick.

NICK

He had it. He had it the whole time.

HOLLY

Nicholas.

NICK

(Looking up, genuinely pleasant.)

Hey, hon.

HOLLY

Did you hear what I said?

NICK

Five hours, something, contingencies.

HOLLY

Five hours and thirteen minutes.

NICK

Right.

HOLLY

The thirteen matters.

NICK

Sure.

HOLLY

(Making a note in the binder.)

I'm logging that you acknowledged the timeline.

NICK

What's with the binder?

HOLLY

The binder is the evening's operational framework.

NICK

It's a binder.

HOLLY

It is a load-bearing document.

NICK

And you're logging —

HOLLY

Tab Seven. Verbal Confirmations.

NICK

Who's apologizing in advance?

HOLLY

Everyone.

NICK

There's a tab for —

HOLLY

There are forty-nine tabs, Nick.

NICK

Forty-nine?

HOLLY

Forty-eight were insufficient. Forty-nine. Including the seasonal annex.

NICK

There's an annex?

HOLLY

Christmas runs long.

NICK

Is there a tab for when something goes wrong?

HOLLY

Tab Fourteen. Incidents — Preventable.

NICK

(A beat.)

Already? That feels like we skipped optimism.

HOLLY

Unscheduled deviations.

NICK

No, that sounds optimistic.

HOLLY

Most deviations are.

(Flipping to a tab.)

Tab Twelve is Dietary Restrictions — Confirmed. Tab Seventeen is Suspected. Tab Fifteen is Emotionally Motivated.

NICK

Who's on Fifteen?

HOLLY

(Not looking up.)

Chip. Possibly. He mentioned something about oats in September and I'm not taking chances.

NICK

Chip eats anything.

HOLLY

Chip ate anything. Chip is now twenty-eight and finding himself, which apparently involves oats.

(Making a note.)

I'm flagging the stuffing.

She moves along the table, adjusting things that are already perfectly adjusted. She stops at the fruitcake.

HOLLY

(Carefully.)

The fruitcake is on the table.

NICK

(Brightening.)

I made it Tuesday. Aged it three days.

(A beat.)

It's gonna be tremendous.

HOLLY

It's currently occupying the center of the table, which per the binder —

(Flips.)

Tab Thirty-One. Table Configuration. Subsection C — is reserved for the centerpiece arrangement.

NICK

I moved the centerpiece.

HOLLY

You —

NICK

Over there.

(Gesturing vaguely.)

It's fine.

HOLLY

(Locating the displaced centerpiece.)

You put it on the floor.

NICK

It was in the way.

HOLLY

(Picking it up.)

It's a centerpiece, Nick. Being in the center is the job. The fruitcake cannot be the centerpiece.

NICK

It's centered. It's a piece.

(Reasonably.)

Seems to qualify.

Holly stares at him. She takes a breath. She opens the binder and writes something.

NICK

Are you updating the binder right now?

HOLLY

I'm creating a new subsection. Centerpiece Disputes.

(It occurs to her, still writing.)

Silences — Intentional vs. Concerning.

(A quick glance at Nick.)

We're fine.

NICK

(To his phone.)

That's holding, that's obviously holding —

HOLLY

Can you —

(Gesturing at the phone.)

NICK

It's the third quarter.

HOLLY

It will still be the third quarter after I go over the arrival sequence.

NICK

Will it, though?

A beat. Holly decides to proceed as if Nick is fully engaged. She is practiced at this.

HOLLY

Chip and —

(Checking binder.)

— his guest arrive at three. I've noted "guest" because we don't know enough about her to assign a dietary tab yet, which frankly should have been addressed weeks ago —

(Pointed look at Nick.)

— if certain people had asked certain follow-up questions when Chip mentioned he was bringing someone.

NICK

I asked if she was nice.

HOLLY

And?

NICK

He said yeah.

HOLLY

(Writing.)

Temperament: Reportedly Agreeable. Unverified.

(Closing that tab, opening another.)

Noelle arrives at three-thirty. She'll want to help.

NICK

Good.

HOLLY

It is not good, Nick. When Noelle helps, she reorganizes. Then I lose the sequence.

Holly holds up the binder.

NICK

The binder suffers.

HOLLY

Everything suffers. Which is why I've drafted a Noelle Help Containment Protocol. She can be in charge of drinks.

NICK

She'll reorganize the drinks.

HOLLY

The drinks can be reorganized. The drinks are not load-bearing.

NICK

(Nodding slowly.)

Emotionally, they might be. What **is** load-bearing?

HOLLY

Everything else.

(Satisfied.)

Now. Dinner is at six. I'm making the turkey, the potatoes, the green beans, the rolls, and the cranberry status —

NICK

A cranberry what?

HOLLY

I'm trying something new.

NICK

I don't like the sound of —

HOLLY

It will be fine.

NICK

Last year you tried something new with the —

HOLLY

That was a miscalculation with the glaze, and it's in the binder under Do Not Repeat.

(Moving on.)

The fruitcake —

(Pointed pause.)

— your fruitcake —

NICK

(Warmly.)

Aged three days, hon.

HOLLY

— will be served after dinner. As dessert. At the end of the meal. In the traditional dessert position, which is after the meal, not during it, and definitely not as a —

(Gesturing at current situation.)

— centerpiece.

NICK

I might have a slice now, actually.

HOLLY

Nick — no.

NICK

Just a sliver.

He casually shifts the fruitcake closer to his place setting.

NICK

I'm gonna keep this over here so I don't forget about it later.

HOLLY

Dessert is at six-twenty-five.

NICK

This is a preview.

HOLLY

There are no previews. There is sequence.

NICK

(A beat, considering — then cutting anyway.)

I respect the sequence.

HOLLY

Nick —

NICK

Just to make sure it's good. Quality control.

He begins cutting a sliver. It is not a sliver.

HOLLY

That is not a sliver.

NICK

It's a generous sliver.

HOLLY

That's a slab, Nick.

She reaches for the fruitcake. He good-naturedly holds it slightly away.

NICK

(Cheerfully.)

I made it with the good dried cherries this year. And no Brazil nuts — you made me swear off Brazil nuts three years ago.

HOLLY

(Dismissively.)

Because you'd be dead in twenty minutes if I didn't.

(Back to binder.)

Tab Twenty-Two. Medical Considerations. You're under Allergies — Severe.

NICK

Dead in twenty minutes from a fruitcake. That'd be something.

HOLLY

Brazil nuts, cross-referenced with the dessert section. See also Tab Thirty-Eight, Emergency Contacts, and Tab Thirty-Nine, Scenarios We Do Not Discuss at Christmas.

Nick has taken a bite of the fruitcake. His expression is transcendent.

NICK

Oh, that's good.

HOLLY

(Not listening.)

The emergency contact for Nick is Dr. Marx, though ideally we will not need —

(Looking up.)

Are you eating that?

NICK

Quality control. I put up the apple butter in October. It's on the side table — I'll put it out with the rolls.

HOLLY

(Not looking up.)

Tab Thirty-One, Subsection D. Condiments — Homemade.

NICK

It's good this year. Better than last year.

HOLLY

You say that every year.

NICK

Every year I'm right.

HOLLY

I just said —

NICK

Tab Quality Control, hon. It's important.

(Another bite.)

Very important this year.

Holly looks at her husband. She looks at the fruitcake. She looks at her binder. She makes a note.

HOLLY

Centerpiece compromised at nine fifty-two. Nick.

(A beat, writing more.)

Fruitcake integrity: reduced.

She snaps the binder shut. She surveys the table. She opens it again.

HOLLY

You know what, I should just tell you the whole plan. From the top. So you have full situational awareness.

NICK

Sure, hon.

HOLLY

You're going to listen this time?

NICK

Absolutely.

Nick glances at his phone. Third quarter, still ongoing.

HOLLY

Nick.

NICK

(Turning from the phone.)

I'm listening.

HOLLY

The turkey has a forty-minute window.

NICK

The turkey's fine.

HOLLY

I've annotated the window. It has its own tab.

NICK

How many tabs does the binder have?

HOLLY

That's Tab Thirty-Seven. The index is Tab One.

NICK

There's a tab for the index.

HOLLY

The index is load-bearing.

NICK

Of course it is.

A beat. Nick reaches for the fruitcake again. Holly watches him without turning her head. This is a skill she has developed over many years of marriage.

HOLLY

Nick.

NICK

Still warm.

HOLLY

It's room temperature. It's been room temperature since Tuesday.

NICK

Room temperature is a kind of warm.

Holly writes something. Nick eats. A not-unpleasant silence.

NICK

You want some?

HOLLY

I want the fruitcake to be where it's supposed to be at six-twenty-five.

NICK

There'll be plenty left.

HOLLY

That is not the point.

NICK

What is the point?

HOLLY

(A genuine pause. She almost says something real. Then:)
The point is Tab Thirty-One, Subsection C.

NICK

(Nodding, eating.)

Right.

Another beat. Comfortable. These two people have been doing this for a long time.

NICK

What time's Heather getting here?

HOLLY

(A slight pause before answering.)

Four. Ish.

NICK

The ish is new.

HOLLY

Heather doesn't do specific times. She does approximate windows. It's in the binder.

NICK

What tab?

HOLLY

Tab Forty-Six. Extended Family — Known Variables.

NICK

Is there a tab for Unknown Variables?

HOLLY

Tab Forty-Seven.

NICK

What's in it?

HOLLY

(A beat.)

Chip's guest.

NICK

(Nodding.)

Fair enough.

(Another bite.)
She's gonna be great, though.

HOLLY
You don't know that.

NICK
I know Chip.

HOLLY
Chip knocked over the wreath twice at Thanksgiving. Twice.
At his own —

NICK
Different wreath. Different door.

HOLLY
Same Chip.

NICK
(Serenely.)
He'll be fine.

HOLLY
Tab Forty-Seven has a subsection.

NICK
What's it called?

HOLLY
Structural Assessments — Door Area.

Nick laughs — genuine, warm. Holly almost smiles.

A low, persistent electrical hum begins. Not dramatic. Forty-five decibels, perhaps. The dining room dimmer switch. Holly hears it immediately. Nick, mid-bite, does not.

HOLLY
Do you hear that?

NICK

Hear what?

HOLLY

That hum.

NICK

(Listening.)

...No.

HOLLY

The dimmer switch. I told you about the dimmer switch.

NICK

You told me about a lot of things.

HOLLY

The dining room dimmer switch hums at approximately sixty decibels during low illumination settings. I've documented it since April.

NICK

April.

HOLLY

Tab Twenty. Electrical — Ongoing.
(Closes binder. Opens it again.)
Doug was supposed to come Tuesday.

NICK

Doug the handyman?

HOLLY

Doug the electrician. He was supposed to replace the switch on Tuesday, which would have given us three days of buffer, and instead he called and rescheduled and I had to move the entire electrical subsection to —

NICK

There's an electrical subsection.

HOLLY

Tab Twenty has four subsections.

NICK

Is Doug coming today?

HOLLY

He said he could come this morning. I said the binder says nine.

NICK

What time is it?

HOLLY

Nine forty-seven.

NICK

So, he's late.

HOLLY

He's not late yet. He's pending.

NICK

(Eating.)

There's a difference.

HOLLY

There is a significant difference.

The hum continues. Holly looks at the dimmer switch. She writes something.

NICK

Hon.

HOLLY

What.

NICK

Come sit down.

HOLLY

I'm not going to sit down.

NICK

Just for a minute.

HOLLY

There are forty-nine tabs, Nick. If I sit down I'll lose the sequence.

NICK

The sequence will keep.

HOLLY

The sequence does not keep. The sequence is only active while I am actively maintaining it. The moment I sit down, something will happen.

NICK

Nothing's going to happen.

The doorbell rings.

Holly looks at Nick. Nick looks at Holly. Nick takes a bite of fruitcake.

NICK

That's probably Doug.

HOLLY

(Already moving toward the door, binder open.)
It is nine forty-nine.

NICK

(Cheerfully, to himself.)
He's pending.

Holly opens the front door. DOUG stands on the porch with a voltage tester in his shirt pocket and the confident expression of a man who has replaced many dimmer switches and expects this one to take approximately five minutes.

HOLLY

The binder says nine.

DOUG

It is nine.

HOLLY

It is nine forty-nine.

DOUG

(A beat.)
I'll be done by ten.

HOLLY

(Writing.)

Tab Twenty — Subsection Five.

DOUG

(Looking around, already professional.)
So... the dimmer switch. Dining room?

HOLLY

Dining room. It hums.

DOUG

At low settings?

HOLLY

Approximately sixty decibels.

DOUG

Yeah, that's a bad triac. Straightforward swap. I'll just shut off the breaker for thirty seconds.

HOLLY

Which breaker?

DOUG

Dining room circuit. Won't affect anything else.

HOLLY

You're certain.

DOUG

(With total confidence.)

I do this every day.

He moves toward the electrical panel. Holly watches him go, then looks at the dining room dimmer switch, then looks at the binder, then writes something under Tab Twenty.

NICK

(From the table.)

Want some fruitcake, Doug?

DOUG

(From offstage.)

I'm good, thanks.

NICK

Aged three days.

DOUG

(A beat.)

Maybe after.

A click from offstage as the breaker shuts off. The Christmas lights along the windows flicker once — a single, brief, inexplicable flicker — and then stabilize. Then, from offstage, Doug's voice. Calm. Professional.

DOUG

(Offstage.)

That shouldn't happen.

Holly stops writing. She and Nick exchange a look — the same look they've been exchanging for thirty years, the one that means: here we go.

Nick takes a bite of fruitcake. Holly opens a new tab.

The Christmas lights flicker again.

Blackout.