

Light Through the Cellar Door

Excerpt from Scene One

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### CAST OF CHARACTERS

- AGNES: Mother of MAURA, in her mid 60's. Recently widowed, born in Ireland, but raised in Missouri since age 5.
- MAURA: Daughter of AGNES, in her early 40's. Lawyer for Women's Clinic in St. Louis for the past ten years. She separated from her husband about six months ago.
- PHOEBE: Daughter of MAURA & NICK, age fifteen struggling with her parents separation.
- NICK: Husband to MAURA, in his mid/late 40's currently working as a freelance mechanical engineer.

### Setting

The scene takes place in the backyard of the Ditworth residence in St. Louis county in the state of Missouri. The rural home is surrounded by a large field, with a backyard facing the western horizon on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River.

### Time

The time is March in the year 1989 just prior to the US Supreme Court ruling in July 1989 which upheld a Missouri law that imposed restrictions on the use of state funds for facilities and employees performing or assisting in abortions or reproductive counseling. The state continues to chip away at Roe v. Wade, de-funding Women's Clinics across the state reducing the number of clinics dramatically.

A ONE ACT IN THREE SCENES

*SETTING:* We are looking at the following sets: 1) down right, an old bench underneath a large Oak tree, 2) stage left, a raked mound with a cellar door on top of the mound. The interior stairs lead down to a small cellar not seen by the audience; inside are gardening tools and canned jars of vegetables. Set on a shelf is an icon of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, surrounded by candles and rosaries.

3) Angled up right is the exterior of AGNES' back porch with a back door, a rocking chair, benches, knitting and/or baskets and an assortment of gardening tools.

*AT RISE:* AGNES is entering from the back porch with a large ceramic container holding her husband's ashes. She is wearing her husband's hat, sweater & overalls. She crosses DR to the Oak tree, kneels then places the urn on the ground next to the small flower bed below the tree. She proceeds to weed and mulch the small flower bed while humming a familiar Irish melody. There is a bronze plaque on the tree with the words:

*In memory of Harry Ditworth  
Born 1919 - Died 1988  
Age - 69 years old*

AGNES

There's my dearest granddaughter. How's darling Phoebe doing today?

(MAURA crosses over to PHOEBE to hug her; PHOEBE reluctantly hugs mom then crosses to AGNES, gives her a hug then PHOEBE takes a seat in the rocker on the porch.)

AGNES

Look at you now! I think you've grown some since I last saw you!

(No response from PHOEBE. AGNES speaks softly to MAURA so PHOEBE doesn't hear.)

AGNES

Tell me, is her 'aunt lo visitin' yet? (MAURA looks at her clueless) I mean (looks over at PHOEBE) have the 'painters' shown up yet? (aside) I can't imagine her father being much help with her female changes.

(MAURA shows frustration with AGNES while putting her report away.)

MAURA

Phoebe's fifteen. She's well aware of how to deal with menstruation. She's a young woman.

(PHOEBE takes off her headphones for a moment and starts to enter the kitchen.)

PHOEBE

Nana, may I have a snack?

(AGNES starts to get up then sits back down.)

AGNES

There's some corn soup on the stove and fresh bread - help yourself dear!

(AGNES leans in to speak softly to MAURA)

AGNES

How's she coping with the separation?

MAURA

I'm doing all I can, Mom!! (pauses) It's been difficult for the two of us to talk lately; (pause) I'm hoping to get some time with her today and tomorrow...just the two of us.

AGNES

Well, maybe she feels a bit embarrassed to share her feelings. I know I was with my mother.

MAURA

I'm trying to do for Phoebe what you didn't do for me. (pause) At her age my biggest fear was SEX and PREGNANCY! Now there's AIDS to worry about, too!

(AGNES pauses to look at MAURA intently as MAURA puts away her papers.)

AGNES

But the separation, dear. How's she doing with it?

MAURA

I don't want to discuss my marriage with you, Ok?

AGNES

Ok. (pregnant silence) I know I didn't do such a great job telling you about a woman's changes. I relied on the nuns to share the basics; sex wasn't mentioned in our household.

MAURA

Relying on a nun to teach you about sex is like asking Reagan to say the word AIDS out loud!

(AGNES is not really listening; she continues with her story)

AGNES

...when you were going through puberty, I gave you a basket of feminine napkins with a lace ribbon wrapped around them and a card with the words 'for your special time each month.'-

MAURA

Oh I remember it well. Your sex education was more like a scavenger hunt.

AGNES

I didn't want you to stand in line with a box of cotton penises! (alarmed)

MAURA

A tampon??!! . . . I can't believe you see a tampon as a sex toy (disgusted-disbelieving)

(PHOEBE leans into the kitchen window and shouts back at the two women)

PHOEBE

Are periods and tampons all you two talk about? Geez. . .

(AGNES crosses to the porch to get a bowl of peas and potatoes. AGNES carries both bowls to the bench down right. AGNES begins snapping beans while MAURA crosses to get an apple from the basket on the porch and then joins AGNES on the bench, sees the bowl of potatoes, sits and begins to peel them while alternating eating the apple.)

AGNES

I was just as stymied by my mother's warnings as you seem to have been by my ignorance.

MAURA

The unspoken fear of periods...sex...pregnancy...Catholic mothers for generations inherited a fear of their bodies - It's like their body belonged to the church!

AGNES

When I was going through puberty, saying 'birth control' out loud was considered "obscene"...even blasphemy.

MAURA

That's exactly my point, mother!

AGNES

Abstinence was the ONLY option. My mother never uttered a word about the female urges - just used her silent glare which we interpreted to mean 'You best not try any risky shenanigans with boys.' (pause) Instilling the fear of sex was my sex education.

MAURA

Did you risk any shenanigans with boys?

AGNES

Oh, I don't remember. . . there was one boy before your father...But it was short lived. Nothing serious.

MAURA

You've never spoken about this 'other boy' before...Did you love him?

AGNES

That's a good question. When you're fifteen, do you really know what love is? Heated passion can feel like the same thing at that age. (pause) He was a first flame for me (pause) but it died out quickly.

MAURA

You never mentioned you had a boyfriend before.

AGNES

Not when you're father was alive. (pause) Let's move on.

MAURA

I had to figure out dating on my own. The uncomfortable silence between us...you made me feel ashamed of my sex drive (pause) like it wasn't normal.



(PHOEBE enters from the kitchen eating a muffin. She sits on the porch step listening to AGNES and MAURA's conversation.)

AGNES

I never even thought about my sex drive! The urge just appeared unexpected and unannounced!

PHOEBE

Nana, are you talking about sex?

MAURA

What about BIRTH CONTROL? You never mentioned the word!

PHOEBE

Mom, really?

AGNES

Well, back then, they didn't exist.

MAURA

What do you mean? Contraceptives have been around since ancient times.

AGNES

That's awfully hard to believe given my experience with the church. (continues to snap beans)

MAURA

I read in college that during the Middle Ages, there was a Pope who offered advice on birth control and how to cause menstruation using herbs.

(AGNES looks shocked, unbelieving. PHOEBE continues to eat her muffin quietly while AGNES becomes more agitated by the story.)

AGNES

That's hard to believe...Pope's were clueless of the female anatomy!

MAURA

Hardly, 'cause eventually, church authorities got wind of these treatments and charged any women providing herbs to other women with 'witchcraft' - sending them to the gallows.

PHOEBE

Thanks for the history lesson, mom.

(PHOEBE gets up and crosses to the cellar door listening to her walkman eating her snack.)

AGNES

It's obvious you know more about the history of contraception than the Sisters at Sacred Heart! (pause) But the bible was pretty clear on premarital sex.

MAURA

The bible shamed women into obedience, instilling fear from having any hint of a carnal thought whether you understood the urge or not!

(AGNES and MAURA appear not to listen to the other and get more heated in their explanations.)

AGNES

My mother's warnings against pregnancy was to tell me the story about Eve eating the apple - making the sin of premarital sex the woman's fault.

(AGNES pauses and looks at MAURA eating her apple. Then, AGNES stands, upset and confused, approaches the Oak Tree leaving the beans on the bench while mixing the snapped ends of the beans into a compost pile next to the house.)

AGNES

I always doubted my abilities and relied on everyone else's opinions of me - (emphasizing) except my OWN! Made sure I didn't offend anyone; if I thought I did, I just defaulted to my Catholic guilt - the Friday confessional 'Bless me father for I have sinned' even though I couldn't actually think of a sin during confession; so I made up a sin so I wouldn't feel guilty not having any!

PHOEBE

That's intense, Nana.

AGNES

Well, standing up for myself when I was fifteen wasn't easy!

(MAURA motions to PHOEBE to exit with her to the kitchen.)

MAURA

Time to make the salad, Phoeb

PHOEBE

I'll be right there.

(AGNES rummages through some canning jars and baskets on her porch while PHOEBE sits on the step next to AGNES.)

PHOEBE

Nana, didn't your mom ever talk about sex?

AGNES

Saying the "S" word was a struggle for her.

PHOEBE

That's a bummer...Mom knows how to talk about sex, maybe too much sometimes.

AGNES

I'm sure she's doing a better job than I did explaining the female functions.

(PHOEBE reacts to AGNES' choice of words here.)

PHOEBE

Nana, you're the best grandma ever!

(PHOEBE reaches out to AGNES with a hug. AGNES wraps her arms around PHOEBE. PHOEBE exits through the porch door to the kitchen to help with dinner. AGNES crosses from the porch to the Oak Tree DR holding her jars in a basket.)

AGNES

Oh Harry, I wish you were here...I felt that pain again.  
(pause) I'm not sure how to help our daughter. Remember all  
the times I tried to help Lily...then we lost her! (pause)  
I fear I may be losing Maura (pause) God in heaven, help me  
understand where I have failed my daughter.

(AGNES takes off her husband's hat  
and places it on his urn. Then  
exits to the kitchen to finish  
preparing dinner.)