

Excerpt from

LIGHT THROUGH THE CELLAR DOOR

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

- AGNES DITWORTH: Mother of MAURA, in her mid 60's. Recently widowed, born in Ireland, but raised in Missouri since age 5.
- MAURA DITWORTH: 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 ACKERMAN: Daughter of MAURA & NICK, age fifteen struggling with her parents separation.
- NICK ACKERMAN: Husband to MAURA, in his mid/late 40's currently working as an aeronautical 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 access and services for women's reproductive health.

A ONE ACT IN THREE SCENES

SETTING: We are looking at the following sets: 1) down right, an old bench underneath a large Pecan 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. On the ground, to the right of the stairs is a wooden compost bin.

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 Pecan 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 January 1919 -
Died March, 1988
Age - 69 years old*

(MAURA enters from SL returning from her errand in town; she moves towards her daughter who is seated on the cellar door.)

MAURA

May I join you?

(PHOEBE sees MAURA, moves over making room for her mom on the cellar door. MAURA sits silently next to her daughter)

PHOEBE

Thought you had to finish a report for work? Is that where you went? On a Saturday morning?

MAURA

No, I had --- something else to do. (PHOEBE looks unconvinced) No more work this weekend, promise! Just us hanging out together with Nana!

(MAURA watches PHOEBE lying still next to her.)

MAURA

Do you want to take a nap? Or, if not, would you like me to braid your hair?

(PHOEBE shrugs a bit, takes off her walkman then reluctantly allows MAURA to braid her hair. There's a brief moment of silence between them.)

PHOEBE

Are you and dad getting a divorce?

(MAURA stops braiding PHOEBE's hair for a beat and pauses to look intently at her.)

MAURA

I've been planning to talk to your dad-

PHOEBE

Mom, it's great that you want to change the world. But what about us?

MAURA

Phoebe, I'm trying to manage a full time job plus make sure you're safe, fed...and cared for. (pause) I'd like to believe that your father could be trusted to-

PHOEBE

Dad? Why are you always blaming him? Ever since you started traveling more with your work, that's when things started to fall apart-

MAURA

Phoebe, that's not fair. You are much more important to me than my job... (Pause) I hate how little time it leaves me with you.

PHOEBE

Then why do you work so much?

MAURA

I have a big appeal case next week to fund the Women's Clinic.

PHOEBE

And what about dad? Have you asked him what he wants?

MAURA

Phoebe, first I need to figure out what I want, plus your dad and I haven't had any time to talk lately.

PHOEBE

Well, whose fault is that?

MAURA

So, you blame me for the separation?

PHOEBE

What if you BOTH screwed up?

MAURA

(deflecting) How's Carol these days?

(MAURA resumes braiding PHOEBE'S hair)

PHOEBE

She's fine.

MAURA

What do you two do together?

PHOEBE

We just hang out.

MAURA

So are there any boys you like?

PHOEBE

Why would I be looking for a boy to date when I'm with Jason?

MAURA

So, you're "with" Jason? Meaning he's now a "boyfriend"?

PHOEBE

Sort of...but mainly we're just friends. We've known each other since sixth grade so we're pretty comfortable together.

MAURA

I see. What do you two enjoy doing together?

PHOEBE

We argue about which video game we want to play. I like Zelda II and he likes Super Mario Brothers.

MAURA

Are you both just staring at your game boy the entire time you're together? What do you talk about?

PHOEBE

...We talk about how to increase our magic proficiency for our Final Fantasy characters.

MAURA

Magic? As in a spell or supernatural power?

(PHOEBE looks at her mom puzzled)

PHOEBE

Sort of...Mom, why don't you like Jason?

MAURA

I never said I didn't like him.

PHOEBE

Why do you freak out when he comes over?

MAURA

I don't freak out. Do I?

PHOEBE

Jason's the only one who understands me.

(MAURA stops braiding PHOEBE's hair. PHOEBE gets up abruptly, drops the shawl and bends forward to pick up her walkman and begins listening to her music. MAURA sees the top of what looks like a tattoo on PHOEBE's lower back.)

(MAURA reaches to try to lift PHOEBE's shirt but PHOEBE resists her mother's reach.)

MAURA

Phoebe, what's on your lower back?

PHOEBE

Mom, it's nothing!

MAURA

Is it a tattoo? What?! When did you get...Well what does it look like? I can't believe this!...Oh my god...Phoebe!

(AGNES enters from the porch. She stops and observes the following.)

PHOEBE

It's not a big deal mom! Dad was all for it when I asked him about getting it.

MAURA

Nick? Unbelievable...what a screw up! It's illegal for a minor to get a tattoo, Phoebe! Your dad should have known-

PHOEBE

Dad didn't screw up! I chose to do it and dad approved. It's my body and my choice! You are always telling me women get to decide about their own bodies!

(AGNES steps towards them,
interrupting them.)

AGNES

I'm going to need to get some canned tomatoes from the cellar for dinner. Did I interrupt something?

(MAURA stands up while PHOEBE walks
towards the bench DR. MAURA follows
PHOEBE DR.)

MAURA

Just your grand daughter's display of her tattoo on her behind.

AGNES

Body painting was popular when I was her age - we used finger paints then decorated our cheeks and arms with daises.

(AGNES enters the cellar to get
jars of canned tomatoes.)

MAURA

Mom, you're not helping! Phoebe, because you are under 18 you need a parent's consent to get a tattoo.

PHOEBE

Well, dad gave me his consent!

(AGNES exits cellar and starts to
cross towards porch.)

AGNES

It's just a lovely portrait of some sort of princess. Right? Doesn't she give you special powers? Like in the pool the other day?

MAURA

Wait, what pool? What happened, Phoebe?

PHOEBE

It's no big deal mom - just a pool party at Carol's the other day.

MAURA

And did your dad know about this pool party?

PHOEBE

He said it was fine if I was there with Carol and her older brother.

MAURA

What happened?

PHOEBE

NOTHING HAPPENED!

AGNES

I thought Medli must be a very special princess to earn a place on your bum!

MAURA

Mother! Please stay out of this!

PHOEBE

You were out of town when Carol invited me! Dad said it was ok!

AGNES

Phoebe's magic princess took care of those two bratty pups! She sounds like a true warrior-

MAURA

What? Who were these bratty pups? You're not helping here, Mom! Go, just, go!

(All three characters just stand there looking at each other.)

PHOEBE

You stay, Nana. I'll go ---

(PHOEBE storms out and exits through the porch door. MAURA sits on the bench distraught as AGNES tries to comfort her.)

AGNES

Why do you freak out whenever Phoebe mentions her dad?

MAURA

Good God...I don't freak out...I just worry about her and whether or not her dad is really looking out for her.

AGNES

She told me you freak out when she's with her friend, Jason.

MAURA

What? No I don't. I just ask her what they've been up to ...she rarely let's me know anything about him.

AGNES

Are you trying to protect her...or shame her?

MAURA

I'm just trying to get her to examine her choices, that's all!

AGNES

I understand how hard it is for a daughter to tell her mother about what she feels is private. It was never easy for me.

MAURA

Wait, are you saying I never talked to you about my decisions?

AGNES

I'm not accusing you, dearest, just sharing with you my own frustrations growing up. Why, all I remember my mother saying to me when I came home late was a warning that I better not have been up to no good.

MAURA

The cycle continues...your mom didn't talk to you so you didn't talk to me...and now I'm-

AGNES

Maura, I tried the best I knew how...I'm sorry if you felt a distance between us...It's just-

(MAURA interrupts her mom abruptly,
stands and crosses to cellar door.)

MAURA

Mom, you don't understand-

AGNES

Oh my dearest, if I could make it up to you now, I would-

MAURA

You don't know who I am! You have no clue what I've been through!

(MAURA stands on one side of the
cellar door; AGNES crosses towards
her standing on the other side of
the cellar.)

AGNES

Why do you say that?

MAURA

You never took any interest in my work...or defended me when dad didn't support my going to law school.

(AGNES approaches MAURA slowly)

AGNES

I never knew how to state my opinions around your dad.

MAURA

Don't you think that's a problem?

AGNES

Yes, I do! I didn't know how to address the problem ... when your dad was alive.

(AGNES sits down on the cellar
door.)

Maura, there are many things I wished I had told you.

MAURA

Like?

AGNES

Like how proud I was of all your accomplishments.

(MAURA sits down on the other side
of the cellar door.)

MAURA

Mom, you always kept me fed, clothed and vaccinated. In that way, I knew you loved me...but you never really asked me what I wanted or what I cared about.

AGNES

Why do you say that, dear?

MAURA

As a young teenager...I didn't know how to talk to you...

AGNES

Oh my dear, that's my fault...I didn't know how to talk to my mother about my feelings, about boys or anything to do with what really mattered to a young woman. (pause)

(MAURA turns towards AGNES.)

MAURA

Like I said, the cycle continues. (Pause) What about that young man you dated before dad?

AGNES

I was fifteen...he seemed to like me (Pause) But I never told my mother that I liked him.

MAURA

Why not? (AGNES shrugs her shoulders.) Did you ever tell dad about him?

AGNES

Your father? Why would I tell him about a flame so long ago? (pauses)

MAURA

I had a relationship with a fellow student the first year of law school!

AGNES

You've never mentioned him before!

MAURA

I guess we both kept secrets from our mothers!

AGNES

Can we maybe start now telling each other what matters?

MAURA

Mom, I haven't been able to talk to Nick 'cause I'm not sure if I love him or if he loves me?

AGNES

(pause) There are things I resented about your father...that I am trying to tell him now...about Lily.

MAURA

Mom, I don't know what the future holds for Nick and me. But I do know I want to do everything I can to be there for Phoebe...To help her through this separation.

AGNES

That's why I shared a moment with Phoebe just now...how I coped with some of my own insecurities as a young woman...hoping to give her some encouragement-

MAURA

Tell me what to do, mom...I feel like I'm losing her.

AGNES

A tattoo may be a way for her to feel confident about herself. (pause) Sometimes it's hard for a young girl to face her mom when she's feeling judged-

MAURA

Judged? How do you suppose I feel? Every time she asks me about Nick, I feel like she's blaming me for the separation!

AGNES

I understand, my love, but the separation has been the hardest on Phoebe.

MAURA

I don't want to lose Phoebe's trust...I don't want to be the one to cause distance between us! (begins to break down)

AGNES

You will never lose Phoebe 'cause I know you will always love her with all your heart, even after your heart stops beating! (pauses)

MAURA

I WANT her to know I love her NOW while she's with me! Not after I'm dead! (pauses) But I just can't seem to reach her.

AGNES

(pause) You mustn't be so hard on her, Maura. Don't leave her feeling shamed. Try to talk to her before dinner.

MAURA

I'm probably the last person she wants to talk to right now.

AGNES

Go to her.

(MAURA and AGNES hug. MAURA and AGNES exit through porch door.)