

CONEY ISLAND CHRISTMAS

As houselights dim we hear a song like Justin Bieber's cover of "Drummer Boy."^{}*

Lights up. [Southern California. The present. Blue skies. Palm trees. Cacti. A comfortably middle-class suburb, perhaps somewhere in the San Fernando Valley.]

A bedroom, decorated in vivid colors, with the posters and accoutrements of a modern pre-teen girlhood. An unlit electric menorah is on the windowsill.

Sunshine spills across the frilly, stuffed animal-laden bed in which Clara, twelve years old, is listening to the music through her iPhone earbuds while texting.

Her great-grandmother, Shirley Abramowitz, a petite yet sturdy nonagenarian with an indelible presence and a voice to match, pops her head in the doorway.

SHIRLEY. *(Brightly.)* Hello-o-o? *(Clara can't hear her.)* HEY!

CLARA. Oh, hi, Gramma.

SHIRLEY. How's my great-granddaughter? Hm? How's my little Clara?

CLARA. Not so good.

SHIRLEY. How's that throat of yours? Still sore?

CLARA. Yeah. *(Shirley takes out her knitting.)*

[SHIRLEY. What do you think of the scarf I'm making you?

CLARA. What do I need a scarf for?

^{*} See Special Note on Songs and Recordings on copyright page.

SHIRLEY. To wrap around your throat, keep it nice and warm! Nice, huh?

CLARA. Yeah, but this is California, Gramma.

SHIRLEY. So?

CLARA. It never gets that cold here.

SHIRLEY. What, it's a crime to wear a scarf in California? Please. Thirty years since I left New York, and *still* this place makes no sense. Eighty degrees at Christmas? It's *mishugeb.* (*Clara gets a text and responds.*) Who's that?

CLARA. My friend Rachel. Telling me what happened at school today.

SHIRLEY. What happened?

CLARA. Nothing.

SHIRLEY. I hear you're missing some big to-do tomorrow, on accounta you're sick.

CLARA. Yeah, the stupid Christmas play.

SHIRLEY. Why is it stupid?

CLARA. They made us learn all these songs, like for Kwanzaa.

SHIRLEY. What's wrong with learning a song for Kwanzaa? I think it's great they teach you about all kinds of cultures.

CLARA. Yeah, but it's like so obviously a rip-off of Chanukah. Seven candles, instead of the menorah it's the kinara ...

SHIRLEY. I think that's interesting. We're all related. (*Pause. She knits. Clara texts.*) You know, I was in a Christmas play once.

CLARA. You were?

SHIRLEY. Is that so hard to believe? Once upon a time, I was young, too, you know, with rosy, smooth skin just like you, none of this crinkly, wrinkly stuff. The girl inside me never got old. Only the wrapping paper.

CLARA. What was it like?

SHIRLEY. The Christmas play? Oh, you don't want to hear about it ...

CLARA. Yes I do.

SHIRLEY. That was my favorite Christmas. The one that stands out from all the others. And when you're as old as I am, that's a lotta Christmases.

CLARA. Do you remember?

SHIRLEY. Do I remember! Of course, I remember. I remember 1935 better than I remember two minutes ago.

CLARA. Well, then, tell me.

SHIRLEY. I'm not telling you anything until you put away your little gizmo. 'Cause if you're gonna sit there ... (*She mockingly mimes texting.*)

CLARA. (*Surrenders her device, petulantly.*) Okay!

SHIRLEY. Thank you. Now: Close your eyes.

CLARA. Do I have to?

SHIRLEY. Yes! Close 'em! Imagine we're floating. Out the window, up to the clouds ...!

CLARA. Is this gonna take long?

SHIRLEY. Shhh! There is a certain place ... Far from sore throats and all the noise and *dreck* we call the Here and Now, a place where everything is the way it *was*, the color of faded old pictures. And the smells are ... (*Inhales.*) potato latkes, gefilte fish, and sour pickles.

CLARA. What is this place?

SHIRLEY. It's a place called ... Brooklyn! (*The room opens up and she takes Clara into her past. Manhattan skyline. Brooklyn Bridge. 1935.*) Now: Way down in *southern* Brooklyn, as far as you can go without falling into the ocean, there's *another* certain place. Coney Island! A long stretch of beach and boardwalk. Fun-houses, spook-houses, penny arcades. There are roller-coasters there. Ferris wheels. Carousels. (*Sound montage. Waves. Calliope music.*)

HAWKERS. (*Echoing off.*) — Caramel popcorn! — Peanuts! Get your hot roasted peanuts! — Salt water taffy!

SHIRLEY. Gypsy fortune tellers, sideshows with bearded ladies and men seven feet tall.

HAWKER. (*Off.*) Step right up! See Matilda, the bearded lady! Siamese twins! (*Etc.*)

SHIRLEY. In this certain place called Coney Island, dumb-waiters boom, doors slam, dishes crash; where every window is a mother's mouth bidding the street ... *Shut up!* (*She yells along with the echoes of faraway voices.*) — *Quiet down there!* — *Go play somewhere else!* — *You know what time it is?*

VARIOUS. (*Overlap.*) — Quiet down there! — Go play somewhere else! — You know what time it is?

SHIRLEY. My voice is the loudest. (*Young Shirley, twelve years old, carrying schoolbooks, argues with Evie Slotnick.*)

YOUNG SHIRLEY. Evie Slotnick, I can't believe you told Jackie Sauerfeld I want to marry him!

CLARA. Gramma, is that supposed to be *you*?