

PROCEED TO HIGHLIGHTED ROUTE
by Erica Mann
(Writing sample)

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8) Downstairs. The next morning.

Running water and clanging pots can be heard from off in the kitchen, as well as the animated "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas."

Annabelle and Jack descend the stairs in their pajamas.

ELEANOR

(Off, re: the song You're A Mean One, Mr. Grinch)

I can't understand what he's saying.

Bad banana wizzer?! Greasy black eel?!

Jack grabs Annabelle's arm, trying to stifle his laughter. Annabelle shrinks from his touch.

For the life of me, I cannot understand this Thurl Ravenscroft fellow! His enunciation is poor. What was that Thurl? Three decker toadstool sandwich with argyle socks?!

Jack almost falls over laughing. Annabelle is over it.

ANNABELLE

It's arsenic sauce!

ELEANOR

(Off)

Oh! You're up!

The TV volume immediately goes down. A moment later, Eleanor appears. She still in her PJ's and wears a Santa hat.

ANNABELLE

Oh, wow.

JACK

I love the hat, Eleanor.

ELEANOR

Why, thank you.

Eleanor strikes a saucy pose. Normally this would elicit an eye roll from Annabelle, but in the spirit of the Christmas, she restrains herself.

ANNABELLE

Merry Christmas, Mom.

ELEANOR

Merry Christmas!

She puts her arms around Jack and Annabelle.

Milo's here too.

MILOBOT
Merry Christmas, guys!

ELEANOR
There are pancakes, eggs, bacon and fruit salad in the kitchen. And I need to put the roast in for tonight if I could just find your father...

ANNABELLE
Yeah, where is Dad?

JACK
I'll grab him.

ELEANOR
Bless you.

Jack exits. A slight pause.

ANNABELLE
I can help with the roast if you want—

ELEANOR
Oh, no, thank you. I'll just...

Eleanor runs off to the kitchen. Milobot laughs.

ANNABELLE
Look, I don't know where this...mythos about me being such a terrible cook came from, but...

MILOBOT
(Almost laughing too hard to get this out)
Hasbro thought they were going to have recall the Easy Bake Oven...after you set yours on fire!

ANNABELLE
Shit. I totally forgot about that.

Milobot is now in hysterics. Annabelle can't help laughing a bit, too.

Take it easy. You don't want to short yourself out.

Jack enters, looking concerned.

ANNABELLE
Where's Dad?

JACK
So...I couldn't find him.
And his car was gone...

MILOBOT

Mom said he went out last night. Did he ever come back?

Everyone silently tries not to panic.

KITCHEN TV

(Off)

Well, in Whoville they say that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day...

ELEANOR

(Off)

Oh, I just love that part.

A slight pause.

ANNABELLE

Hey...Mom?

ELEANOR

(Off)

What is it, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE

Can you come here for a second?

The TV volume goes down. Eleanor appears with oven mitts on. After a moment she picks up on the silent panic pervading the room.

ELEANOR

What's the matter?

A slight pause.

ANNABELLE

Do you know when Dad got in last night?

ELEANOR

No, I was asleep. I assumed he slept down here because he usually does—*sometimes*—so I thought...
But *I* slept down here last night...

A slight pause.

Oh my God, where is Richard?

ANNABELLE

Mom, stay calm—

ELEANOR

Oh my God! I don't think he came home last night!

JACK
He might've just run out to get something—

ELEANOR
On Christmas morning?!
Oh.
My.
God.
Richard! Richard!

Part of her is waiting for a response.

We have to call the police!

ANNABELLE
We can't call the police, Mom.

MILOBOT
The person has to be missing for forty-eight hours.

JACK
Yeah, that's right. I've seen that on TV a couple times.

ELEANOR
Forty-eight hours?! Fuck!

ANNABELLE
Mom! Just—

ELEANOR
I have to go find him! I have to...

Eleanor flutters around, grabbing her coat, looking for her keys, etc.

ANNABELLE
Mom, you're going to stay here. I'll go look for him.

JACK
I'll come with you.

ANNABELLE
No, you're going to stay too.

ELEANOR
And I'm in my damn pajamas! Oh, who cares—I'll go out in my pajamas!

JACK
I really think I should come with you.

ANNABELLE
I'll be fine.

ELEANOR
Where the hell are my keys? Where the hell is anything?!

JACK
You shouldn't go alone.

ANNABELLE
I won't.
I'll take the...Brobot.

MILOBOT
Sure, Annie. I'll come with you.

A slight pause. It's apparent Jack doesn't like this arrangement.

ANNABELLE
Someone needs to stay with Mom. Keep her calm. Help her put in the roast.

ELEANOR
WHO CARES ABOUT THE FUCKING ROAST!

JACK
BroBot can keep your Mom calm. That's like, his whole function.

ANNABELLE
Brobot's coming with me and you're staying here.

ELEANOR
Damn you, Richard. Damn you!

JACK
Why won't you let me come with—

ANNABELLE
(Sharp)
Because I don't want you, I want Milo.

The tinkling audio cue sounds again.

Jack and Annabelle stare at each other. Something significant has transpired but neither of them can name it yet.

Eleanor is now audibly suffering.

MILOBOT
Mom, try to calm down—

ELEANOR
But what if he's hurt?! Or—

MILOBOT
Try to breathe—

ELEANOR
I can't breathe! Not when he's out there, possibly lying in a ditch or—

MILOBOT
Mom, listen to me. I'm sure he's just fine—

ELEANOR
Why can't I fucking hold you?!

A slight pause.

Eleanor throws herself into Jack's arms and sobs, disrupting Annabelle and Jack's weird interaction.

After a moment, Eleanor realizes herself. She pulls away.

ELEANOR
I'm sorry, I—

JACK
It's okay. Come here.

Jack puts his arms around Eleanor and she starts sobbing again. He cradles her lovingly, as if she were his own mother.

Annabelle watches, stunned. This is probably the first time she's seen her mother cry over something that isn't inconsequential, like a Hallmark commercial.

Come with me. Let's get you a glass of water.

ELEANOR
Okay...

Jack slowly leads Eleanor toward the kitchen.

JACK
And once you're feeling better, we'll put the roast in.

ELEANOR
Okay...

JACK
And later, Richard is gonna eat the roast. And he's gonna say—*wow*. This roast is so *yummy*.

ELEANOR
You really think so, sweetheart?

JACK
I do.

Jack and Eleanor exit into the kitchen.

Silence.

ANNABELLE
(With a shaky voice)
You still there?

MILO
(Also with a shaky voice)
I'm still here.

ANNABELLE
We should go.

She grabs her keys. Lights fade on the living room.

*Lights come up on the car as Annabelle climbs in.
She drives.*

MILOBOT
It's not showing up.

ANNABELLE
Fuck.

MILOBOT
His iPhone might be off.

ANNABELLE
Find My iPhone doesn't work if the phone is off?!

MILOBOT
Or if it isn't connected to Wireless.

ANNABELLE
So unless disaster strikes in the most ideal circumstances, technology is useless.

MILOBOT
Pretty much.

A slight pause.

ANNABELLE
Sorry, I didn't mean—

MILOBOT
I couldn't hold her, Annie.
That was the one thing she needed. And I couldn't do it.

ANNABELLE

(Trying to minimize the significance)

Well, no shit Sherlock. You kinda don't have a body.

MILOBOT

I've always been able to help her. I was always the one who...

A slight pause.

But now it's like I'm...trapped in time. With these feelings. And memories. But I don't *exist* beyond them. And this...void of what I am and what I'm not just keeps...growing.

ANNABELLE

Look, now is not the time for you to have an existential crisis.

MILOBOT

I'm not Milo.

A slight pause.

I'm a time capsule.

I'm nothing.

ANNABELLE

You're not nothing—

MILOBOT

I'm not your brother, Annie.

A slight pause.

ANNABELLE

Well I need you to be, okay?

I need you to help me find Dad.

Please.

Milo.

Milobot doesn't respond. Annabelle pulls the car over to the side of the road and kills the ignition.

I do remember moving and *Meet Me In St. Louis*.

MILOBOT

But I don't. Not really.

ANNABELLE

You *do* remember. It doesn't matter how.

It was an overcast day. We were in the living room. It smelled like paint.

Mom had us on packing peanuts duty. Padding boxes so nothing would break. She also knew we were obsessed with packing peanuts so it would keep us occupied.

A pause.

MILOBOT

We would throw them into the air and pretend it was snowing. Like we were in a bad indie movie.

ANNABELLE

Yes—we were the original *Garden State*.

They both chuckle.

Mom had *Meet Me in St. Louis* on. Her favorite Christmas movie. She never cared that it bored the hell out of the rest of us.

MILOBOT

Dad would be snoring before the overture even ended.

ANNABELLE

We'd seen Judy Garland sing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" a million times before. Comforting her sister Tootie about their upcoming move away from St. Louis.

MILOBOT

I *hated* Tootie.

ANNABELLE

Everyone hates Tootie. She's such a little shit. And potentially a psychopath.

They chuckle again.

But hearing the song that time was different. Because we were moving too. Like The Smith's in the movie. We both felt it but didn't want to say it out loud.

Milo's voice becomes less disembodied. Like it's coming from nearby.

MILOBOT

We were padding boxes on opposite sides of the room. Silently crying into our packing peanuts.

ANNABELLE

We didn't want the other to see we were crying. Probably because emotions were something our parents always treated as...alien.

And because we wanted to protect each other. We didn't want the other to be in any more pain than they already were.

Annabelle watches as Milo's long shadow spills across the stage.

She gets out of the car and walks toward the shadow.

MILOBOT

But then Tootie ran into the yard and started destroying the snowman family. And you just lost it.

ANNABELLE

I did.

A slight pause.

You came over to me and you took my hand. And you said—

MILOBOT

It's okay, Annie. I got you.

A slight pause.

ANNABELLE

Before that day, I only cried in my closet.

I remember, that moment, thinking—I don't have to any more. I have someone who understands. Who will always understand. I have a brother.

He'll always be there to hold my hand. No matter what.

MILOBOT

I would now if I could.

Annabelle's voice starts to crack.

ANNABELLE

Everyone needs that—you know? To feel like they're not alone.

I think I've been trying to fill that...void.

With someone else.

Annabelle starts to cry.

I think I really fucked up. I have no idea what I'm doing.

MILOBOT

It's okay, Annie. I got you.

*Annabelle allows herself to cry for a moment or two.
Then something occurs to her.*

ANNABELLE

I think I know where Dad is.

Will you come with me?

Lights fade to black.