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Dramatic Publishing

DAD'S CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

**A Comedy
by
PAT COOK**



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(DAD'S CHRISTMAS MIRACLE)

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DAD'S CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

A Comedy in Two Acts
For Five Men and Five Women

CHARACTERS

CONNER MURPHY a 12-year-old boy
MISS McLAUGHLIN a teacher
NEIL GARNER a 12-year-old boy
TATER TAGGART a 12-year-old boy
DAD the perennial father
MOTHER his wife
FRANK MURPHY Conner's 17-year-old brother
JESSICA MURPHY Conner's 14-year-old sister
MADELYN Jessica's classmate and best friend
HARRIET a neighbor and family friend

TIME: The 1950s.

PLACE: The living room of the Murphy household.

for Gotch and Boss

ACT ONE

SCENE: *The living room of the Murphy household. The lights are down.*

AT RISE: *Lights come up, DR, and CONNER enters, dressed in heavy winter clothes. He shades his eyes with his hand and looks out at the audience.*

CONNER. Uhm...I'm Conner Murphy and the reason I'm out here looking like this is, well, the thing is, this is how I looked, or at least how I *remember* I looked, back then. *(He scratches his back.)* See, this is, like, a memory, uhm...long time ago. Back when I was in the sixth grade. I know I look older than a sixth grader but we *all* did, back then. Or maybe I don't remember exactly how we looked.

(MISS McLAUGHLIN enters R and stands next to CONNER, tapping her foot.)

CONNER. Oh, I'm nothing like this now, only back then, see, things were different. A lot easier, you know...

MISS McLAUGHLIN *(very stern)*. Conner! Stop scratching yourself and make an impression on your audience.

CONNER. Yes ma'am, Miss McLaughlin.

MISS McLAUGHLIN. Stand up straight.

CONNER *(rigid)*. Yes ma'am.

MISS McLAUGHLIN. That's better. *(She exits.)*

CONNER. To this day, I cannot slump without hearing Miss McLaughlin in the back of my mind. (*Ominously.*) You never know what you're going to remember from being a kid. She taught me in the sixth grade and I'm stuck with her for the rest of my life! I'm telling you, you never know! Ga-AH! One year I spent with that woman and now, every time I think back to her, I still have that fire-breathing...

(*MISS MCLAUGHLIN enters again and glares down at CONNER.*)

CONNER. ...over-weight old she-dragon flaring her nostrils and giving me this zombie stare of death and...(Sees her tapping her foot again. He grows quiet.) Yes, Miss McLaughlin.

MISS MCLAUGHLIN. You want me to get the board?

CONNER. No, Miss McLaughlin.

MISS MCLAUGHLIN. Tell your story and stick to the facts. I've got my eye on you, young man! (*She exits.*)

CONNER. Stick to your facts, that one I remember, too. Oh, I'm a newspaper editor now. Can you stand it? (*He snorts a boyish laugh.*) Well, I need to get on with this thing, I guess. (*He crosses to the chairs, which are now arranged as school desks, running parallel with sight lines.*) Only, sometimes, you know, you get into something that happened when you were a kid and some things just sort of connect up. See? (*He sits in the middle chair, facing L.*) One thing always leads to another. Oh yeah! This is where I sat in class. Neil Garner was my best friend.

(*NEIL enters L and sits behind CONNER.*)

CONNER. He sat behind me. He was just about the smartest guy I ever knew. Graduated from M.I.T.! Well, that's later, of course. And Tater Taggart sat in front of me.

(TATER enters and sits in front of CONNER.)

CONNER. His real name was Terry Lee. Tater, hah, he was another case altogether. I remember once during a history exam...

TATER *(whispers to CONNER)*. Conner! What's the answer to number nine?

CONNER *(also whispering)*. Nine?

TATER. Yeah. Who was Livingstone?

CONNER. Oh, that ain't a who.

TATER. It ain't?

CONNER. Naw. That's this rock in Africa. Plants grow out of it and nobody knows why.

TATER. Thanks. *(He writes it down.)*

CONNER *(to audience)*. You get the idea? He was kinda like Eddie Haskell on "Leave It To Beaver." Whenever he came over to my house, he'd say, "How are you, Mrs. Murphy? You certainly look nice today, Mrs. Murphy. This sure tastes good, Mrs. Murphy." Then we'd go outside and he'd say, "You want to hang a cat?"

MISS MCLAUGHLIN *(offstage)*. Who's talking back there? *(The boys all look down diligently at their tests. Then, NEIL looks up, smiles and draws back and belts CONNER in the back with his fist.)*

CONNER. Huuuuaargh!

(MISS MCLAUGHLIN enters.)

MISS McLAUGHLIN. All right, Conner Leonard Murphy, you want to march yourself to the principal's office right this minute?!

CONNER. I was just coughing, Miss McLaughlin!

MISS McLAUGHLIN. You weren't trying to copy Terry Lee's test?

CONNER (*aghast*). Terry Lee's test?

MISS McLAUGHLIN (*thinking*). Oh. (*After a pause.*) Well, try to be quiet. (*She exits. CONNER gets up and walks R. Lights fade L.*)

CONNER. I especially didn't ever want to get sent down to the principal's office. See, he's my uncle. He'd whip me, give me a speech and then tell Mother. Then she'd give me a speech and tell Dad when he got home and then he'd whip me. I sometimes wonder why I missed these days so much. Only, it made you feel secure, somehow. Back to Neil, he was pro'bly the best friend I ever had. Ga-AH, this guy, let me tell you! This guy was a genius. Like, say if I ever wanted to spend the night with him? (*NEIL walks over carrying a cardboard box.*)

NEIL. I got a puppy.

CONNER. Puppy? Where'd you get it?

NEIL. Henderson's.

CONNER. What's this got to do with me staying over?

NEIL. Easy. We take this home, you know Mom's not going to let me keep it. I raise all hell but she makes me take it back, right? Then, she'll feel sorry for me...

CONNER. And lets me spend the night!

NEIL. I think I'm going to be a psychologist. (*He exits R.*)

CONNER (*to audience*). Neil went into politics. Anyway, this was the way things were, then. We didn't know anything about functional families or group dynamics or none of that. We just...did things, you know?

(Lights come up on the living room. DAD is lying asleep on the couch. The TV is on, playing softly.)

CONNER. Oh, this was our living room. And this...*(He crosses behind the couch.)* is Dad. He's taller when he's standing up.

(MOTHER enters from the kitchen.)

MOTHER. Conner, don't wake up your father. He had a long day at the store.

CONNER. Well, when're we going to go get the tree?

MOTHER. Saturday. He'll take some time off and we'll go.

CONNER. He spends an awful lot of time at that stupid store.

MOTHER. Don't be disrespectful, he has to work hard to provide for us. I don't hear you complaining when it's dinner time. *(She crosses and turns off the TV set.)*

CONNER. No ma'am. *(DAD immediately wakes up.)*

DAD. Who turned off the television? I was watching that.

MOTHER. You were asleep.

CONNER. You were snoring, too.

DAD. I wasn't asleep. I was watching the news. *(He sits up and yawns.)*

MOTHER. The news was over a half-hour ago. *(She exits into the kitchen.)*

DAD *(calling after her)*. I wasn't asleep. *(He pauses and looks over at CONNER.)*

CONNER. You were snoring. There was a whole flock of cats when you started. You don't see cat one now, do ye?

DAD. Scared them off, huh?

CONNER. Blew them away. *(He sits next to DAD.)*

DAD. Yeah, well, I hate cats.

CONNER. That's funny. They say the nicest things about you.

DAD. Yeah, but they don't mean it. That's another reason I hate them. They're so hypocritical. *(He looks at CONNER.)*

You know what that means, hypocritical?

CONNER *(guesses)*. Something that makes you itch?

DAD *(after a slight pause)*. Yeah. *(He scratches his neck.)*

CONNER. Miss McLaughlin says you shouldn't scratch yourself like that.

DAD. Me personally?

CONNER. Well, me mostly but I guess anybody.

DAD. What does *she* do?

CONNER. I don't know. Neil has a theory.

DAD. Neil *always* has a theory. *(Slight pause.)* Okay, why does Neil say Miss McLaughlin doesn't scratch herself?

CONNER. He says 'cause scales don't itch.

DAD *(stern)*. That's terrible! *(He turns his head and stifles a laugh.)*

MOTHER *(offstage)*. Supper's ready.

DAD. Go wash your hands.

CONNER. They're clean.

DAD. Go wash your hands.

CONNER. They're clean!

DAD. Go wash your hands.

CONNER. Ohp!

DAD *(surprised)*. Ohp? *(CONNER exits through hall door.)*

(MOTHER enters from the kitchen door.)

MOTHER. Supper's ready. You hungry?

DAD *(rising)*. Pretty near.

MOTHER. You wash your hands?

DAD. They're clean. *(MOTHER glares at him. He holds out his hands for her inspection.)*

MOTHER. Look at that. What is that, ink stains?

DAD. Oh, I spilt a bottle of ink when I was writing out the price tags on a new batch of ties that came in.

MOTHER. You didn't spill any on one of the ties, did you?

DAD. One of them got kinda spotty.

MOTHER. Did you have to throw it out?

DAD. No! I waited for it to dry and then stuck it in with the rest of the ties. (*MOTHER glares at him again.*) Maybe somebody will think it's one of them artist ties or something.

MOTHER. That's *not* the Christian thing to do.

DAD. It is, so long as they don't wear it to church. (*They cross to the kitchen.*) Oh, I priced new wheelchairs today.

MOTHER (*stops*). Aunt Jesse sure needs one. That old wooden one is so rickety. It's a wonder that it doesn't collapse under her and then where would she be?

DAD. Well, they're awfully high right now.

MOTHER. We'll manage somehow. (*She kisses DAD on the cheek.*) You'll figure a way. (*She exits into the kitchen.*)

DAD. Oh yeah. And I was worried...(*He exits after her.*)

(Lights fade on living room. Solitary light comes up R. CONNER walks into the light from offstage.)

CONNER. Aunt Jesse, Mother's aunt Jesse, my great-aunt Jesse had been in a wheelchair as long as I could remember. And, for a long time, I thought her last name was Bless Her Heart. Mother would always say, "Aunt Jesse Bless Her Heart" whenever they talked about her. Odd how you hear something and think it's something else, ain't it? In the song, "Jingle Bells" when they got to the part about a "one horse open sleigh," I always thought they were saying "one horse, soap and sleigh." I somehow thought you take a sleigh ride and then a bath. (*Suddenly excited.*) Oh,

what I want for Christmas! Well, this was the first year I gave up on getting a pony. This year I wanted some wheels. A go-cart, you know. Tater and I had thought about building one...

(TATER joins CONNER on stage.)

TATER. Hey, I think we can find some wood over at the old cotton gin. Nails ain't no problem. We can whack it together in no time and then ain't nobody in town that will have anything like it.

(NEIL enters L, holding several long rolls of blueprints, and is figuring something on a pad.)

CONNER. Yeah, this'll really be great. How much trouble would it be to build one. It wouldn't take...*(NEIL enters the light, looks over at CONNER and TATER and smiles, and continues until he exits R. TATER looks back at CONNER mournfully, shrugs and exits R.)* We didn't build it. We figured we couldn't come up with anything that could compete with Neil's, which would probably be jet-propelled and could sleep four.

(MISS McLAUGHLIN enters R.)

CONNER. That was the trouble with Neil. He could be intimidating if you thought on him a lot, so what I did...

MISS McLAUGHLIN. You're wandering! Now just tell the story and don't embroider. *(Glares down over her glasses.)*

CONNER *(alibiing)*. Well, I'm telling everything that happened and I haven't left out...*(He suddenly realizes.)* Oh! *(To audience.)* I got a brother and sister! *(MISS MC-*

LAUGHLIN smiles and exits R.) Frank and Jessica. Frank's my brother and Jessica...well, you probably figured that one yourself. This is how they looked in their school pictures.

(Lights up on the folding chairs, which are now facing forward. Sitting in two chairs are FRANK and JESSICA. Both are facing audience through large picture frames. FRANK has a decidedly arrogant expression while JESSICA has a wide-eyed surprise on her face. Both expressions are grotesque. After a slight pause, the lights fade on them.)

CONNER. Scary, ain't it. This is what they were like at home.

(Lights come up on the living room. FRANK and JESSICA are standing in the center of it, arguing ferociously.)

JESSICA. Don't call me stupid!

FRANK. You're stupid!

JESSICA. Don't call me stupid.

FRANK. You're stupid. *(He quickly holds up two fingers.)*

How many fingers do I have up?

JESSICA. What?

FRANK *(takes down his hand)*. See, you're stupid!

JESSICA. You want to know who's stupid, it's Betty Jane.

FRANK. Don't talk about Betty Jane.

JESSICA. *She's* stupid.

FRANK. How you figure that?

JESSICA. She's going out with you!

MOTHER *(offstage)*. You two don't stop fighting I'm going to come in there with a belt in about two minutes!

JESSICA *(whining)*. Mother, Frank's calling me stupid!

FRANK. Shut up!

(MOTHER enters from the kitchen.)

MOTHER. What's going on in here?

FRANK. Nothing.

JESSICA. He called me stupid.

MOTHER. Frank, don't call your sister stupid *ever* again, you hear me?

FRANK. Yes ma'am.

MOTHER. You hear me?!

FRANK. Yes ma'am.

MOTHER. Don't make me come in here again.

FRANK. No ma'am. *(MOTHER exits. JESSICA sticks out her tongue at FRANK. FRANK glares at her, then relaxes and smiles.)*

JESSICA. What're you smiling at?

FRANK. You.

JESSICA. Why?

FRANK. 'Cause you know what you are? *(JESSICA points a threatening finger at him.)* You're incredulous. *(JESSICA's finger wavers as she is unsure what FRANK has just said.)*

JESSICA. Huh?

FRANK. You're unsubstantial.

JESSICA. Hey, I don't like words with "un" in them.

FRANK. What about words with "id" in them?

JESSICA. Huh?

FRANK. Like stupid!

JESSICA. Mother! *(Lights out in the living room.)*

CONNER. You don't want to see what happens next. To be totally fair, Jessica wasn't really stupid. Frank just knew that would always get her goat. And, of course, neither one of us could compete with Frank. He always got straight

A's. He once told me that he never got a "B" in high school. (*Sheepishly.*) Neither did I. Well, I guess we need to get started. The way I remember it, it all began right before we were getting out for Christmas vacation.

(*Lights up on the chairs, arranged as school desks again. TATER and NEIL are in their seats. CONNER walks over to his chair and sits.*)

CONNER. There was a tragedy that happened then and there wasn't anything I could do about it, nothing that would stop it from happening, no matter how much I thought about it. And, I guess, it can be summed up with just two words...

(*MISS McLAUGHLIN enters L carrying several cards.*)

MISS McLAUGHLIN. Report cards. (*She hands one to TATER who looks at it hard and then slumps in his chair with a very pained expression on his face. She hands one to CONNER, who doesn't look at it, and then one to NEIL, who beams as he reads his. She exits L.*)

TATER (*looking back*). Hey, what kind of grades do you have to make to get into the Foreign Legion?

NEIL. Do you know where it is?

TATER. No.

NEIL. Study. (*He taps CONNER.*) What'd you get?

CONNER. I'm afraid to look.

NEIL. Well, put it off as long as you can. That always makes it easier. Wanna see mine?

CONNER. No, I'm sure I'll hear about it from my folks.

(*MISS McLAUGHLIN enters with a literature textbook.*)