

OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS

ACT ONE

A spot on Nick, downstage.

- A -
NICK
Monologue

NICK. (*To audience.*) It was always hot in my grandparents' house. And I'm not talking "I should've worn short sleeves" hot. No, it was more like "it's August in Ethiopia" hot. Growing up, I remember sitting in their living room, sweating, and trying to figure out my relation to these people who not only didn't seem to share my same environmental needs, but who also had reached an age I could barely comprehend. But my grandparents firmly believed in the three "f's" of life: family, faith and food. So every Sunday for twenty-nine years, I bore the heat and religiously showed up for dinner. (*Lights up on the living room. Frank seated in his usual chair.*)

- B -
FRANK
Monologue

FRANK. (*To audience.*) The very day I turned fourteen, my father put me on a boat. In my pocket, he stuffed two hundred lira and the address of a cousin in a place called Hoboken, New Jersey. The only advice my father gave me — "*Tengo famiglia.*" If you just said that in English, it would be "I support a family." But in Italian, it means more, much more — "I am a man, I am doing well for my woman and my children, I have a reason for being alive."

NICK. *Tengo famiglia.*

FRANK. (*To audience.*) I arrived to learn my cousin had left Hoboken for a faraway land called Brooklyn. So for six weeks, I lived underneath a pier off the Hudson River — every minute of every day trying to figure out a way to earn enough money to get back home.

- C -
AIDA
Monologue

~~back home (Aida enters.)~~

AIDA. (To audience.) I was the middle sister of seven girls, and Frank was the first man — no, the first person — to ever notice me. He was making a dollar a day as a carpenter's apprentice, and I thought that was a fortune. He promised that if I married him, he'd become a fine carpenter and he'd build for me — me! — an entire house. And he did. He became a wonderful carpenter, and he built, for me, this beautiful home.

- D -
NICK
Monologue

NICK. (To audience.) My grandmother Aida never made it through grammar school, never even learned how to drive a car, but lock her in a kitchen with a tomato, pasta dough and garlic, and the woman was Einstein. (Aida exits.) By my twenty-ninth birthday, my parents had moved to Florida, and my sister, Melissa, to San Diego. Before she left, Melissa told me that the best thing about being an American is you could stay in the country and still move two thousand miles away from your family. I stayed near my grandparents. Each Sunday, I rode a bus in from the city. But one Thursday, something happened to me — something important — and what I had to tell them couldn't wait. (Nick enters the living room.) Hey, Gramps. Hi, Nanny!

- AA -

NICK
FRANK
AIDA

FRANK. Nick, your grandmother is going to tell you to do something for her. Refuse! (Aida enters, giving Nick a hug.)

AIDA. Nicholas! You have to do something for me. (Frank motions "no.") First, you hungry?

NICK. No Nan, I just ate and I can't stay long. Like I said on the phone, I just have to make this announcement.

FRANK. He has no time to do you any favors, Aida.

AIDA. What did you have for dinner?

NICK. Chinese food.

AIDA. Chinese?

NICK. Nan —

AIDA. You're telling me that's food?

NICK. Well, everyone eating it seemed to think so, yes.

AIDA. Thirty years ago, I had dinner at a Chinese restaurant. To this day, I have no idea what I ate. I'll make you food!

NICK. Nan, I'm full!

AIDA. Fine, I'll make you a sandwich.

NICK. Nan!

AIDA. You look hungry!
NICK. How? Tell me exactly how do I look hungry?!
AIDA. You're breaking my heart, Nicholas.
NICK. All right, all right! A small sandwich.
AIDA. What do you want on it?
NICK. I don't care!
AIDA. How about provolone and ham?
NICK. Perfect!
AIDA. Good. Nicholas, I'll make a provolone and ham sandwich, you tell your grandfather he can't drive no more.
NICK. What?! FRANK. Don't listen to her, Nick!
AIDA. Two days ago in the Grand Union parking lot, he puts the car in reverse and goes forward —
FRANK. I thought it was reverse, I put it in second —
AIDA. Right into a Japanese car. Thank God no one was killed.
FRANK. I barely dented the fender.
AIDA. Two weeks ago at the 7-Eleven, he means to step on the brake, he steps on the gas pedal —
FRANK. We go very fast for about two feet —
AIDA. Right into a Japanese car. Thank God no one was killed.
NICK. Gramps, we've talked about this. You shouldn't be driving anymore.
FRANK. You? You're telling me what to do? I used to change your diapers!
NICK. You've told me, I appreciate it.
AIDA. He never changed your diapers.
NICK. Look Gramps, it's too dangerous with you behind the wheel.
AIDA. I get in the car with him, I scream the entire way.
FRANK. She's a real pleasure to drive with.
NICK. All right, all right — Nan, why don't you make the sandwich? I'll talk to him. And could you turn on the air conditioner. It's sweltering in here.
FRANK. That's crazy! It's only June!
NICK. But it's hot!
FRANK. The air conditioner doesn't go on until the Fourth of July!
AIDA. I'll open a window. You listen to your grandson! (*Aida opens a window, barely a crack, and exits.*)
~~NICK. Gramps, come on. You know something terrible could~~

way I got the job, see, was I told them I was Irish. I had to! 'Cause those days, the most famous Italians in America were the Pope, and Sacco and Vanzetti! And did they look at us and think Pope? No! Sacco and Vanzetti!

- BB -

NICK
NUNZIO
EMMA

NICK. (*To audience.*) My father's folks, Nunzio and Emma, lived two doors down, and every Sunday, they'd also visit and share dinner. Both children of hard-working but destitute immigrants, they married at seventeen and had two sons — my dad, and his brother Nick, who was killed in Korea.

EMMA. (*To audience.*) The day I married Nunz, my mother sat me down and told me something amazing — she said, "Emma, just because you're his wife, it doesn't mean you're not as important as him. Speak up! Say how you feel! Don't become one of those women who gets lost behind their family." Ha!

NUNZIO. (*To audience.*) So I told Ford's my name was Ian Sean O'Malley O'Brien O'Sullivan — and they gave me the job!

EMMA. (*To audience.*) So while Nunz went to work, I made us a beautiful life at home.

NUNZIO. (*To audience.*) I stood on an assembly line and put this nut in that bolt for twenty-seven years to give my wife and my sons the life they deserve!

EMMA. (*To audience.*) We struggled and made our way 'cause we were a family! *Tengo famiglia!*

NUNZIO. (*To audience.*) *Tengo famiglia!*

NUNZIO and EMMA. *Tengo famiglia!!*

NICK. (*To audience.*) They were the loudest people I ever met. (*Nunzio and Emma enter the living room.*)

NUNZIO. Hey Nicky!!

EMMA. Yoo hoo!

NICK. Hi, Nanny. Hi, Gramps.

NUNZIO. What a pleasure to see you on a Thursday!

NICK. I'm glad you came. I have something to tell you.

NUNZIO. Wait Nicky, first I wanna take a picture.

NICK. Of what?

NUNZIO. Of you.

NICK. Why?

NUNZIO. I got two pictures left on this roll since last Easter. Stand by your grandmother and smile.

NICK. Gramps, I got this announcement ...
NUNZIO. It's one picture —
NICK. Gramps!
NUNZIO. One picture!
NICK. All right, all right ...
EMMA. (*Going for his hair.*) Fix your hair nice first.
NICK. Nan, stop! All right, Gramps — shoot.
NUNZIO. But you don't look happy.
NICK. I'm not happy!
NUNZIO. Why would I take a picture if you don't look happy!
(*Nick forces on a smile as Nunzio snaps away.*)
FRANK. Nunz, make me a copy, I'll pay ya for it.
NUNZIO. Okay, I got one more.
NICK. No! Enough with the pictures. (*Calling toward kitchen.*)
Nan, could you get back in here, please!
EMMA. Nicky, that present you bought for us. The one we don't
know how to use —
NICK. The answering machine?
EMMA. The other one. The CPU —
NICK. VCR —
EMMA. Right. We need the receipt.
NICK. It broke?
NUNZIO. No, we just hate it.
EMMA. We don't hate it! It's just too expensive, we can't enjoy it.
NICK. Why you worried about the expense? I bought it for you.
EMMA. Give us the receipt, we'll give you back the money.
NICK. I don't want the money!
NUNZIO. It's too much to spend on us for a BCP!
NICK. It's your sixtieth anniversary present!
EMMA. Fine, we'll keep ten dollars!
NICK. Look, we'll talk more about this later. I've got something
much more important to ...
NUNZIO. So Nicky, guess where your grandmother wants to
drag me — again! — next Tuesday!
EMMA. I'm sorry if I like to go places and do things. I'm a do-er!
NUNZIO. Atlantic City! With the senior citizens from St. Anne's!
NICK. Gramps, what I have to say is real important. Can we talk
about ...

- E -

CAITLIN
Monologue

how about you let me take you to dinner this week. We can go to a nice vegetarian restaurant and no one will ask if you're in therapy.

CAITLIN. Nick, I thought you didn't like blind setups.

NICK. No, um, no, I don't. But I, uh, I like you. (*A beat.*) And let me just say, I am really, really normal away from my family. That's right, I'm actually intelligent and somewhat charming, and I'm sensitive — but of course in a very macho sort of way. (*They share a smile.*) So you falling for any of this?

CAITLIN. Uh — maybe.

NICK. Okay, "maybe's" not bad, not bad at all. My grandmother was right. She did good. (*A beat.*)

CAITLIN. Nick, I have a confession to make.

NICK. Oh-oh. You've got a boyfriend, you've got a girlfriend, you're really a man, what?

CAITLIN. Nick, I knew you'd be here today. That's the real reason I came. I've just been, I don't know, feeling a little lonely, maybe even a little desperate — oh my God, I said that word out loud. But yeah, maybe even a little desperate, and I figured — well, since I liked your grandmother so much, maybe she's got a grandson who — well ... oh, God —

NICK. Hm. Interesting. Well then, if I may be so bold — what *did* you think of Emma's grandson?

CAITLIN. Well that's the thing. I mean, seeing you with all four of your grandparents, well I was thinking of mine and —

NICK. Right, you said they were all gone.

CAITLIN. I did know my mom's mom, but, what I'm saying is — well — you spent the whole evening yelling at them.

NICK. Oh, that. Well, ya know, family. It's just the way we speak to each other. I take it you and your grandmother didn't speak so ...

CAITLIN. No, we never yelled. We used to — talk.

NICK. Talk? I'll have to try that with them sometime.

CAITLIN. Actually, my grandmother used to read to me. But not children's stories, no. You see, after my grandfather died, she started to read these books, these wonderful books, as a way to get through the day without him. When I was about nine years old, she read me *Great Expectations*.

NICK. Wait. She read you Dickens? In its entirety?

CAITLIN. It took six months. And you know how people read

- F -

EMMA Monologue

FRANK. That's right!

NICK. (*Laughing.*) That was the most amazing thing —

EMMA. Hey, Nicky! You're laughing!

NICK. Yeah?

EMMA. You've been so worried lately, I don't remember the last time I saw you laugh.

NICK. C'mon!

FRANK. She's right, Nick.

AIDA. Wonderful, Nicholas.

EMMA. When we were your age, Nicky, we always laughed all the time. We didn't have much of anything, but we were always laughing. We always had fun. You take things too hard, Nicky.

NUNZIO. Leave the boy alone, Emma.

EMMA. No. We've all been quiet, saying nothing, 'cause we don't want to upset him. But I'm his Nanny and I want to tell him something.

~~NUNZIO. She's gonna give him another attack —~~

→ EMMA. Shush! Nicky, I think you expect too much. You go looking for the perfect girl, so you find no one. You spend so much time worrying about so much — your job, where you live, what it means — you just expect too much.

FRANK. Listen to your grandmother, Nick.

EMMA. That's right. Because we never expected like you expected, Nicky. We were told a good life is when you find a husband and have kids and you put food on the table and send your kids to school and you don't die doing it — that's a good life. Then we went ahead and told our kids that they can have so much more — they can go to any school they want, have any job they want, meet wonderful people. And maybe that's the way it should be. And you already have much more than we ever had and we are so proud. But then you gotta go to a head doctor and the whole family moves away from each other. And we never had to do that. So did we make a better life for you? It's not a worse life. But better? Just different, maybe. (*A beat.*) See, he didn't have an attack.

~~AIDA. Enough with the game. Who's hungry?~~

~~FRANK. I need some danish.~~

~~NUNZIO. Wait. I want to tell a story.~~

~~AIDA. Okay, let me just get the danish —~~

- G -
FRANK

NICK. Hey Gramps, how about another story?

FRANK. Ah, I can't tell stories like Nunz —

NICK. No, I mean one that's all true. Tell me — tell me what was it was like to leave your family.

FRANK. Why do you want to know that, Nick?

NICK. He was a fisherman, right? *(Frank nods.)* Why did he make you leave?

FRANK. You know the problem with old stories, Nick? You tell them and you realize that people don't change, people do the same things over and over again. When I was a little boy, every Christmas morning, on the cobblestones in town, there would appear this — this sea of vendors — their carts covered with toys — and what I remember most, is the colors — bright reds and blues and oranges — like a rainbow of toys. And my father would carry me in his arms and take me to the first cart, and he'd point to some tiny, dark toy, while I'd point to the biggest and most colorful, but my father would shake his head "no" and we'd move on to the next. And I'd point to another beautiful toy, and he'd shake his head again, and we'd move on. And we'd do that again and again until we had gone to each cart. And then he'd buy me some little gray toy I barely wanted, and I'd start crying, and he'd carry me back into our house. I always resented him for that — hated him for that. And when I was fourteen, my father put me on a boat to America and said "good-bye, that's where you're gonna live." I was fourteen. I hated him for that, too. Not long after that, he got tangled in a fishing net that was being thrown in the water, and his head hit the side of the boat and they never found him. Eight years from the day he sent me away, I returned to my hometown so my mother and sisters could meet my new family. It was during the holidays, and on Christmas morning, I took your mother in my arms and carried her outside and there they were — all the vendors, like they never left — with all their blue and red and beautiful toys. And your mother pointed to the brightest and prettiest, and any one she'd point at, I bought for her. And when we came back in, our arms full with this — this rainbow of toys, my mother took one look and said: "That's what your father wished he could do! But we barely had enough to buy food on Christmas. That's why he had to send

AIDA. What a wonderful surprise! You look hungry.
 NICK. She has this remarkable sense —
 AIDA. Let me fix you something ...
 CAITLIN. Oh no, no, thank you, Aida, I just came by to see how Nick was doing.
 AIDA. Oh, he's much better. He just gets nervous.
 NICK. I used to chew on my rattle.
 AIDA. I'll just fix you a little something ...
 CAITLIN. No really, Ai —
 AIDA. *(Exiting.)* No trouble, no trouble ...
 NICK. You have three minutes before she comes back with a fully ~~larded twelve-pound butterball turkey.~~
 CAITLIN. I am sorry about the other day, Nick. You didn't deserve what I said. It's just that well — you see, Nick, when I was thirteen and my grandmother was in the midst of reading me *The Old Man and the Sea* — well, some days I'd visit and she'd read with such excitement and joy and other days she wouldn't let me in the door because she didn't think she knew me. She would stand there in a panic, screaming at me to leave her alone, her eyes darting back and forth —
 NICK. I'm sorry —
 CAITLIN. That look in her eyes still haunts me and — I'm sorry, too, Nick. I should've told you that the other day. *(A spot on Nick.)*
 NICK. *(To audience.)* I don't know what it was — maybe the way the light was hitting her face or the way she was standing or maybe it was because a woman who had rejected me came back to apologize. I don't know. But at that moment, she struck me as the most intelligent and beautiful woman on the planet, and I wanted her to like me so much. And for a second I had a horrible thought: Could my grandmother actually be right? Do I not really want to move? Could all I need to be happy is the right woman? Oh my God —
 CAITLIN. So Emma said you might move to Seattle soon. She said you have a job offer —
 NICK. A promotion, actually. A terrific one.
 CAITLIN. Great. You know anyone there?
 NICK. No. Just the promotion.
 CAITLIN. Well, then — *(A beat.)*

- CC -

CAITLIN
 NICK

NICK. Yeah — (*A beat.*)

CAITLIN. Well, I'm glad you're okay, Nick. I have to go, I'm on shift in half an hour and I can't be late. There are sick animals who need nursing, so —

NICK. Caitlin —

CAITLIN. Yes?

NICK. I'd still like to — I know you already said "no" but — I'd still like to take you out. You know, a real date. No relatives.

CAITLIN. But — you're leaving? For Seattle?

NICK. I've been thinking about not going. I maybe should stay — I don't know.

CAITLIN. Well, what happens if we go out, and we find out we like each other, and you decide to move?

NICK. I — I don't know. I, um ... (*A beat.*)

CAITLIN. I really have to go, Nick. The date offer was nice, but, oh, I don't know, I'd just sit there the whole time hoping I didn't like you. That's just too weird. Okay, take care of yourself. (*Caitlin begins to exit.*)

NICK. (*Sings.*) "Yes sir, that's my baby —" (*Caitlin stops. A beat.*) "No sir, I don't mean maybe. Yes sir, that's my baby now."

CAITLIN. Excuse me?

NICK. If that song worked, it's golden.

CAITLIN. Wow. All right, all right, Nick, if you decide not to go to Seattle — all right, call me, and a date with no relatives, you're on. But if you decide to go — then go. Start over. Sometimes you just have to be a little selfish. (*She kisses him on the cheek.*) You know something — just now, when I didn't immediately agree to go out with you — that was probably one of the most mature things I've ever done. (*She exits. Aida enters carrying a huge antipasto.*)

AIDA. Here we are! (*A spot on Emma, D.*)

EMMA. (*To audience.*) Nunzio and I have been together for fifty-five years. Close your eyes and imagine that — fifty-five years. That's what Nicky doesn't understand — by trying to plan out his life so much, by staying away from marriage — he missed that. He'll never know what that's like — how love can deepen to places you've never imagined. Fifty-five years. (*Lights up on the living room. Emma and Aida set the table as Nunzio reads the paper and*

- DD -

FRANK
NUNZIO
NICK

NICK. It won't be so bad, you know. It's not a terrible plane ride. You can all come visit all you want. The promotion — it's too good, I've worked so hard for it. It could be the start of something so exciting for ... *(He stops.)* I — I just would appreciate if you could all understand. *(A beat.)*

AIDA. No. No, I don't understand, Nicholas. I don't —

NICK. Nan —

AIDA. How can you, Nicholas? We're here, Nicholas. Everything is here. How can you just leave your family like that? Why does everyone get so afraid? How can you, Nicholas? Aren't we worth staying for? How can you leave? How can you just leave? How can you ... *(Aida runs off into the kitchen.)*

NICK. Nan! Gramps, you know the last thing I'd ever want to do is hurt Nan or you or ...

FRANK. What do you want me to say now, Nick?! Huh?! Stay, please don't leave us! Go, you have my blessing! I can't say any of that, Nick. I can't!

NICK. Gramps, please ...

FRANK. Because no matter what I say, what anyone says, you're going to leave us. Everybody goes! I wish I could be more like my father. I wish I could just stand on the shore and watch you sail away and know it's for the best. But I'm sorry, Nick, I can't! I worked all my life so my family ... my family ... I'm not good with saying things, Nick. I just don't want you to go. *(A beat.)* Nunz? *(Nunz looks up at Frank, then turns his head away.)* Your grandmothers made for us a beautiful meal. *Mangiamo. (Frank exits into the kitchen. A beat.)*

EMMA. Nicky, your grandfather has something he has to tell you —

NUNZIO. Emma!

EMMA. He has to tell you this, Nicky —

NICK. What, Gramps, what is it? Is something ... *(Nunzio motions for Nick to go to the porch. Nunzio and Emma exchange a look, then Nunzio follows Nick out.)* What is it, Gramps? Is something wrong?

NUNZIO. Nicky, what I have to tell you — I have to ... *(A beat.)*

Nicky, remember when I told you I've been thinking about your Uncle Nicky lately.

NICK. Yeah.

NUNZIO. Well, I been thinking about him 'cause — well I been thinking about when we had to say good-bye. Strange, you know, he would've been in his fifties now, but I can only think of him as young. I always think I should be able to picture him as older, having lived the life he should've lived. But no, all I can see is this young, perfect man, waving good-bye in his uniform. And I knew how dangerous Korea was, oh I knew that. Still I just stood there and waved back, but inside, inside I was wishing so hard that there was something I could say or do, anything, anything, anything at all, that would make him stay. But there was nothing, Nicky, nothing. But now you're leaving, Nicky, and ... (*A beat.*) Nicky, let me ask you something first. And tell me the truth, Nicky. Tell me the truth.

NICK. I will.

NUNZIO. Okay. Right before you had your attack that day, when you were yelling, you said something — it had to do with you wanting to find out what you were about or something —

NICK. I was upset then, Gramps, I didn't mean what I was saying —

NUNZIO. No Nicky, one thing I've learned, when people get upset, that's when they mean what they say. What did you mean by that? (*A beat.*) Tell me, Nicholas.

NICK. I'm not sure, Gramps. I guess — I've grown up here, my whole life has been spent here, with you. And — and it's wonderful. It's all so wonderful and I'm so grateful. But I — I just don't need it anymore. I'm sorry if that sounds awful but — I just don't. I need to make my life something of my own doing. There's an opportunity for me in Seattle — a chance to give myself more. God, I'm sorry if that sounds selfish or ungrateful or ...

NUNZIO. So Seattle, then. This is not just about a job — it's something you feel you have to do. To make your life. To be happy.

NICK. Yes. Yes. I'm sorry, I ...

NUNZIO. And you know this. You know this as much as you know anything.

NICK. Yes, Gramps, absolutely. I'm sor —

NUNZIO. Okay, then. Okay, then. (*Nunzio begins to cross back to the living room.*)

- H -

AIDA Monologue

~~no question — I would've stayed.~~

AIDA. *(To audience.)* A couple of years after Nicholas left, my Frank — my baby — passed on. Emma and I shared dinner together every day for nearly a year after that, until she, too, suffered a severe stroke. God rest them. I still cook two meals a day for myself, and I make something a little special on Sunday. And I still see my Nicholas. Because of his job, he flies to New York often, and he always pays his grandmother a visit. *(Nick enters the living room.)*

~~NICK. Nan, it's me!~~

AIDA. Nicholas!

NICK. How are ya, Nan! God, it's hot in here!

AIDA. Oh, you look hungry. Let me put the ravioli in the water.

NICK. Nan, I'm so sorry, the conference ran long, I can only stay a few minutes, I have to catch this flight —

AIDA. The water's boiling, it'll just take a —

NICK. No Nan, let's not eat. Let's just sit and talk — I have something to tell you.

AIDA. The ravioli looks beautiful.

NICK. Nan, I'm moving.

AIDA. Oh, Nicholas. Back home?

NICK. To Portland. I got another job — a vice president — a wonderful promotion.

AIDA. Theresa's going with you?

NICK. No, she's got to stay in Seattle for now.

AIDA. But you're engaged?

NICK. Right. Well, we'll fly back and forth on weekends, Nan. It's called a commuter relationship. It's very modern, very annoying. Nan, I had this idea — move with me to Portland. It's actually a beautiful city.

AIDA. Nicholas?

NICK. Your whole life you've lived here, Nan. Taking care of Grandpa all the time. Come to Portland. You won't have to take care of anybody. If you want, I'll take you out to eat every night. I'd love to give that to you, Nan. ~~There's no one here for you anymore.~~

AIDA. Nicholas, do you know where I always wanted to go for years and years? Atlantic City. That's right, Nunz and Emma always came back with such stories, but your grandfather, he

would have no part of such a fancy place. But one day, I left him a plate in the icebox and I went. And you know what? I didn't like it. No, the whole time I was there, I was wishing I was back home, taking care of your grandfather. I had to take care of him, Nicholas. He needed me to — so much. How many people can get to be my age and can say that — that there was someone who needed them that much. I can say that, Nicholas. I can't go. Not from here. Your grandfather built this house for me. How can I go? Stay for dinner. Please.]

NICK. Okay. Okay. (*Aida exits into the kitchen.*) Not long after, I achieved what my grandparents considered the greatest accomplishment known to man: I married. *Tengo famiglia*. And now, when Theresa and I sit home in Portland, awaiting the birth of our first child, my mind often wanders back to those few final days spent with my grandparents. And I wish I could neatly sum up who they were and what they meant to me and how they fit into the puzzle of my life. But instead, what is most clear to me, is that my grandparents worked every day of their lives to ensure that their family would be more educated and successful than them. (*Aida enters, setting the table.*) But what they didn't foresee was that they would elevate me to a life so far removed from their own that they could never quite comprehend who I had become or how I would continue their legacy. And when I looked back at them, I, too, saw only a vague reflection of myself. Still, they let me go — they got me to laugh — and to this day, I get great food in the mail.

AIDA. Everything came beautiful — didn't it, Nicholas?

END OF PLAY