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MOTHER. Herod isn't in the play.

LEROY. He's out to kill the baby, and he isn't even in the play?

IMOGENE. Well, somebody better be Herod. (*singles out a victim*) Let Charlie be Herod, and he says, go get me that baby. And they say okay, because he's a king and all . . .

OLLIE. (*warming to this scenario*) But then they don't do it! They go back and get Herod! (*He makes a throttling gesture.*)

CHARLIE. I'm not going to be Herod!

MOTHER. No one is going to be Herod! (*The HERDMANS, caught up in the spirit of things, are ranging over the stage, arguing, shoving other kids out of the way. CHARLIE scrambles over the choir risers, other kids, and his own feet to get to his MOTHER.*)

CLAUDE. No . . . Joseph gets the shepherds together and they go wipe out Herod! (*He makes a machine gun gesture.*)

CHARLIE. See? They're going to put one in, and it's going to be me, and I'll get killed!

MOTHER. (*desperate*) Forget about Herod! There's no Herod!

IMOGENE. And I run away with the baby till the fight's over!

RALPH. (*collaring a stray shepherd by the front of his shirt*) Somebody ought to fix the innkeeper . . . Gladys, you wipe out the innkeeper!

GLADYS. I can't! . . . I'm an angel!

(*Curtain falls. Spotlight on the HERDMANS as they enter from the wings s.l. and gather on and around the set piece. They are arguing about the pageant.*)

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IMOGENE. Well, I wouldn't just hang around out in the barn. I'd go get a room.

CLAUDE. She said there wasn't any room.

IMOGENE. Then I'd throw somebody out. I'd tell them I've got this baby and it's the middle of winter . . . so either get out or move over.

RALPH. I'd go after ol' Herod.

LEROY. I'd send the angel after him. She could just point her electric finger and turn him into a pile of ashes.

GLADYS. (*happily*) Yeh! . . . Zap!

OLLIE. What's the name of this play? She never said.

CLAUDE. Christmas pageant.

OLLIE. That's no name. That's what it is.

GLADYS. I know a name! . . . I know a name! I'd call it . . . Revenge at Bethlehem!

(*Spotlight off HERDMANS: Up on BETH, s.r.*)

BETH. Revenge at Bethlehem! The Herdmans thought the Christmas story came right out of the F.B.I. files! At least they picked out the right villain—it was Herod they wanted to gang up on and not the baby Jesus. But the baby Jesus quit the pageant anyway. It was supposed to be Eugene Slocum, but Mrs. Slocum said she wasn't going to let Imogene Herdman get her hands on him. So we didn't have a baby Jesus, and that bothered my mother. She kept trying to scratch up a baby . . . even at the last rehearsal.

(*Spot off BETH. Curtain up on church scene. Children are assembling for the rehearsal, in a motley assortment of costumes. MOTHER is counting noses, so*

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to speak. BETH and ALICE meet ds. ALICE is writing in a small notebook. They are, by this time, on somewhat testy terms—ALICE constantly on the attack, BETH on the defense.)

BETH. What do you keep writing in that book?

ALICE. It's . . . like a diary.

BETH. (*snatches the book and reads*) It is not. It's all about the Herdmans. (*reads aloud*) Imogene curses and swears all the time. Ralph talks about sexy things. Mrs. Bradley . . . (*gives ALICE a fierce look*) . . . Mrs. Bradley called Mary pregnant . . . (*if looks could kill*) . . . Gladys Herdman drinks communion wine . . . It isn't wine, it's grape juice.

ALICE. I don't care what it is, she drinks it. I've seen her three times with her mouth all purple. They steal, too—if you shake the birthday bank it doesn't make a sound, because they stole all the pennies out of it. And every time you go in the ladies' room the whole air is blue, and Imogene Herdman is sitting there in the Mary costume, smoking cigars!

BETH. (*angry*) And you wrote all this down? What for?

ALICE. (*nose to nose with BETH*) For my mother and Reverend Hopkins and the Ladies Aid Society and anybody else who wants to know what happened when the whole Christmas pageant turns out to be a big mess!

MOTHER. All right, everyone, let's get quiet. Beth, will you and Alice please come up here so we can get started. Now, this is our last rehearsal, and we're going to . . . (*MRS. McCARTHY enters in apron, carrying a baking pan.*)

MRS. McCARTHY. Grace, I just wanted to tell you that we're all back in the kitchen making applesauce

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cake. We'll try not to bother you . . . I guess this is your dress rehearsal.

MOTHER. (*glances at the uncostumed crowd*) It's supposed to be. . . . Oh, Edna . . . didn't I hear that your niece had a baby a month or so ago? . . . A little girl?

MRS. McCARTHY. (*pleased and proud*) Yes! She's five weeks old, and . . .

MOTHER. Well, I wonder how it would be if I were to call your niece and ask if we could borrow . . . (*Mrs. McCARTHY, seeing the lay of the land and not liking it, leaps in.*)

MRS. McCARTHY. Grace . . . no! I could make up some lie and tell you the baby's sick or cranky or something, but the truth is that she's perfectly healthy and happy and beautiful, and we all want her to stay that way. So we're certainly not going to hand her over to Imogene Herdman. Sorry, Grace. (*MRS. McCARTHY leaves.*)

DAVID. Mrs. Bradley, you can have my little brother for Jesus.

MOTHER. (*newly hopeful*) I didn't know you had a new baby, David.

DAVID. He's not new. He's four years old, but he's double-jointed and he could probably scrunch up.

MOTHER. Well, I don't think . . .

IMOGENE. I'll get us a baby.

MOTHER. How can you do that?

IMOGENE. There's always two or three babies in cribs outside the supermarket. I'll get one of them.

MOTHER. Imogene! You can't just walk off with somebody's baby! . . . I guess we'll forget about a baby. We'll just use the doll.

IMOGENE. Yeh. That's better, anyway . . . a doll can't bite you.