Something to Keep Us Warm

Stephen Gregg
The living room of the Tuffler house. The Tuffler family consists of NORMA and GABRIEL, and their two teenaged daughters: MINCE, 16, and ELODIE, 14. What gives us a sense of the room are six objects: a LAMP, Norma’s CHAIR, a BASKET at her feet that contains the tablecloth that she’s working on, a DINING TABLE for four, a COAT RACK. It’s cold out, and the coat rack holds their objects of warmth: scarves, mittens, jackets.

On the floor is a pile of PILE OF UNWRAPPED PRESENTS that counts as one object.

At rise, Norma sits in the chair, working on a tablecloth that drapes from her lap into the basket. A ski cap keeps her head warm.

Mince enters, bundled against the cold. )

NORMA

(Her standard cheer!) Hello hello hello hellooo!

MINCE

Hi, It’s freezing out there!

NORMA

Your nose is all red!

MINCE

I need you to make me a scarf ASAP.

NORMA

What a good assignment. Thank you! I will. As soon as I finish this tablecloth.

MINCE

Any chance of sooner? It’s freeeeeezing and it’s supposed to get colder.

NORMA

(the tablecloth:) This won’t take too much longer.

(The DOORBELL rings. Elodie passes through in a badly made Halloween costume, which consists of a tail, ears, and what seems to be a short white beard.)
(aggressive) I’VE GOT IT! (re: the pile of objects) That junk’s in my way.
And she’s gone. As she leaves, a GHOST ENTERS: a Halloween ghost, not a Hamlet ghost. It picks up the lamp and leaves with it. When ghosts take away objects, the characters don’t notice it, neither do they see the ghosts, though Norma senses them.)

That’s a terrible costume.

Don’t say anything!

Of course not.

What is all that stuff?

They’re presents. Don’t look at them. They’re a surprise.

Hey, you know I told you about the girl in my class who was killed last week by a poisonous snake?

No, I don’t remember that.

She was a basketball player. They’re going to do a memorial for her, a giant cloth banner that’ll hang in the gym. It’s gonna say “We’ll miss you, Marilyn.” And I sort of volunteered you to make it.

I’d love to!

Thank you. The thing is, it’s due Sunday.

Whoa! Sunday! I’d better get started then.
MINCE

Great!

NORMA

As soon as I finish this.

MINCE

I was thinking maybe it’d be a good break from that.

NORMA

I can do both!

(From off, the sound of children screaming, running away in sorrow.)

NORMA

A little while ago I looked out the window and I saw a ghost.

MINCE

So did I.

NORMA

I saw a lot of ghosts, all up and down the street. They were all different sizes.

MINCE

They’re just Trick or Treaters.

NORMA

No, if they’re Trick or Treaters, why are they all ghosts?

MINCE

They’re not.

NORMA

Where are all the turkeys? Why didn’t I see a single pilgrim?

MINCE

You must have looked at the wrong time.

NORMA

I still think it’s a strange thing. Trick or Treaters on Thanksgiving. It’s different from my day. In my day it was just a meal with your family. Nobody wore costumes. Nobody rang your doorbell.

(Elodie passes back through.)
NORMA
Elodie, what were those children dressed as?

ELODIE
Ghosts.

NORMA
Could you get a glass of water for your dying mother?

ELODIE
I’m not headed to the kitchen.

And she’s gone.

MINCE
I’ll get it.

NORMA
I’m not thirsty. I just like to hear her snarl. What’s she giving away?

MINCE
Those orange and black peanut things that nobody eats.

NORMA
Oh I love those. (beat) I don’t even remember why she’s mad at me.

(The sound of a car pulling up.)

NORMA
(re: the car sound) And? Are you going to your party?

MINCE
Yeah, right after dinner.

NORMA
Excellent!

MINCE
Yeah.

NORMA
Will the party have ... what’s the word ... will there be....

MINCE
Alcohol.
NORMA
No. (Re: alcohol) Will there be?

MINCE
No.

NORMA
But at the party, will there be...why can’t I think of this word? It’s a type of person.

MINCE
Parents.

NORMA
No.

NORMA
What’s the word ... people you want to kiss?

MINCE
I don’t think there is a word for that.

NORMA
Answer the question.

MINCE
Yes.

NORMA
Good. How many?

MINCE
One.

NORMA
No kissing. But go to the party.

MINCE
I am.

NORMA
Your father said you could go?

MINCE
No, but he said he was going to apologize to me.
That’s not the same thing.

GABRIEL (OFF)

Hello!

NORMA

Hello hello hello hello!

(Gabriel enters.)

GABRIEL

It it coooold.

(He loads up the coat rack with the things that keep him warm.)

GABRIEL

Why were those kids leaving our house crying?

NORMA

That’s Elodie. She’s taking this Thanksgiving Trick or Treating pretty seriously.

(Thanksgiving trick or treating is a new concept to Gabriel. He rolls with it.)

GABRIEL

How are you feeling?

NORMA

How was your day?

GABRIEL

It was fine, but I got an emergency request. There’s too much sun coming through the window at work, and they said they’ll pay five thousand dollars if anyone could make custom curtains.

NORMA

Five thousand dollars!

GABRIEL

We could get the roof fixed, finally. Maybe have enough left for a new water heater.
NORMA
I’ll do it! Curtains for that sterile looking airport. (re: the tablecloth) Right after I finish this. It’ll help keep us warm.

GABRIEL
It’s a tablecloth.

NORMA
It won’t be long.

(The doorbell rings.)

ELODIE
(Enters on her way to the door.) Got it!!

GABRIEL
Elodie, are you being mean to the Trick or Treaters?

ELODIE
No. It’s the cold.

(Elodie exits to the front door. Ghosts take away the coat rack. )

GABRIEL
I’m gonna go change.

MINCE
Wait. You’re supposed to say something to me.

GABRIEL
Later, when you’re calmer.

MINCE
I’m calm now.

NORMA
She’s right, Gabriel. You should apologize now.

GABRIEL
You’re right. So. I did want to say something to you. Mince, I’m sorry for speaking to you when you were so clearly in a terrible mood like that. When it was so obvious that no matter what anyone said you’d just jump down their throat no matter how reasonable they were being. I should have just noticed you were in the foulest of foul moods and said to myself, “There’s Mince. No force in the world could make my little girl pleasant today.
You’d better stay clear or she’s going to pick a fight with you. But I didn’t. I didn’t do it and look what happened. So I’m sorry, baby. (beat) I’m gonna go change.

MINCE

Wait.

GABRIEL

Yes?

MINCE

That was a horrible apology. And it doesn’t clearly state that I’m going to my Halloween party, which I am.

GABRIEL

I told the McPherson’s you’d baby sit.

MINCE

Exactly. You said I’d baby sit.

GABRIEL

You baby sit for them all the time!

MINCE

Not on Halloween.

GABRIEL

If it means that much to you, you should go to the party. I’ll baby sit myself.

MINCE

You’re not gonna baby sit.

GABRIEL

If need be.

MINCE

They’ll find another sitter.

GABRIEL

They can’t.

MINCE

When did you talk to them?

GABRIEL

It’s completely fine.
OK, fine. I’ll baby sit!

No I could use the ten dollars an hour.

I’ll baby sit!

No, you’re going to that party!

I’m gonna baby sit!

Great! Thank you, sweetheart.

(He starts to leave.)

Stop! That was not acceptable! You have got to do better! Practice if you need to!

I’m sorry.

Not you. (to Mince) Mince, you have got to do better. You’re sixteen! Disobey.

(Elodie starts to pass back through the room.)

Wait. Everybody, this is perfect. Elodie, stay here. I. It’s time for my surprise. I know you’ve all been wondering why I bought all these things, and I can tell you now, they’re Christmas presents. I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking I’m not going to make it to Christmas. But look! I’ve already lasted longer than they said. The doctor said if you’re lucky you’ll make it to Thanksgiving, and I guess that just proves I’m a very lucky person.

That’s wonderful. It’s a good thing I didn’t even notice what was in that pile.

Me neither.
ELODIE
I did.

NORMA
No it’s all right. You can look. We’re starting a new tradition. See those little envelopes on the presents? They have names in them. I thought instead of wondering, like everybody does, what’s in our presents, we’ll wonder which presents are for us. You see, on Christmas day we’ll open the tags and find out who gets what!!!!

ELODIE
What?

MINCE
That sounds so fun!

GABRIEL
Yeah, it’s a great idea. Like, for example, I look at this and I think, “I wonder who this is for?”

ELODIE
It’s a man’s ski parka.

GABRIEL
I hope it’s for me.

ELODIE
Of course it’s for you!

NORMA
Shhh! I hope it’s for you too, darling.

MINCE
This might work better with a bigger family.

NORMA
Nonsense. Pick out a present and I’ll show you how it works.

MINCE
All right. Here. It’s a diary.

NORMA
Now you see. That could be for anybody.

MINCE
“A girl’s own diary.”
NORMA
Well, how many girls are in this family?

MINCE
Two.

NORMA
There you go.

ELODIE
There are two diaries.

NORMA
Now don’t think too hard. That’s like shaking a wrapped present. You know, I think this might really catch on. Someday, people might change the way they celebrate Christmas because of something I did. This could be my legacy, and not just for me but for all of us. People will call it having a Tuffler family Christmas. “Oh no. No thanks. We don’t need any wrapping paper. We’re a Tuffler family.” People will tell the story of how I invented it right before the end. Right before I went I made my mark on the world.

MINCE
Mom, we’re your mark on the world. Me and Elodie.

(Norma finds this funny. Then funnier.)

NORMA
You always know how to cheer me up.

(The doorbell rings. WHAT GETS SPIRITED AWAY.)

ELODIE
Mine.

GABRIEL
I’m gonna get changed.

(He exits. Offstage, we hear child’s voices, which stop Gabriel’s exit.)

CHILD’S VOICE (OS)
Stop! You’re mean!

ELODIE (OS)
Then go to somebody else’s house!
(A door slam. Elodie comes tromping back through.)

NORMA
What are you supposed to be?

ELODIE

NORMA
I meant, what is your costume supposed to be?

ELODIE
A dog with rabies. (re: the beard) This is drool.

NORMA
You’re a genius! A for concept. C minus for execution. You should have had me help you.

ELODIE
I asked you to help me.

(This was probably too sharp. It might puncture Norma, but then her natural cheer wins out)

NORMA
I’ll help you right now. I’m going to open an early present. Reach into that pile without looking. There’s a pair of Westcott Scissors.

(a secret)
They’re for me. We’ll fix those ears, and cut the tail. Rabid dogs have shorter tails. I have ideas for the drool, too. If you’re going to froth at the mouth, frenth at the mouth. Also, you need a twinkle. I’m going to make a twinkle for your eye so that the kids at the door know that even though the dog is scary, everything is going to be OK.

ELODIE
That sounds great.

(The doorbell rings.)

ELODIE
Be right back!

(Elodie exits. As it turns out, the entire pile of presents can be moved as one, which is what a couple ghosts do. Elodie comes bounding back in.)
ELODIE
I’m ready!

NORMA
What for?

ELODIE
For you to fix my costume.

NORMA
I will. As soon as I’m finished.

ELODIE
You said you’d do it now.

NORMA
I will. As soon as I’m done with this.

ELODIE
With a tablecloth that doesn’t fit any table in the house.

NORMA
Yes it does. I measured.

ELODIE
You measured wrongnnYou’re not gonna finish it! You’re too, too...!

NORMA
Too what?

ELODIE
You’ve been working on it for months.

NORMA
No.

ELODIE
Since July.

(For some reason this hits Norma. She has vague memories of that time.)

NORMA
July? Are you sure?
ELODIE

It’s crazy.

(The doorbell rings.)

ELODIE

You’re not yourself!

NORMA

Oh!

MINCE

(to Elodie, furious.) What did you just say?

NORMA

Who am I?

(Elodie knows she’s gone too far.)

MINCE

Get the door.

ELODIE

All I meant was--

MINCE

Answer the door.

(Elodie exits. Ghosts encroach. They take away the chair that mother sits on. She doesn’t notice, merely stands for the rest of the play. The stage is bare except for the table, the basket at her feet, the tablecloth that rises from it to her hands.)

NORMA

Every once in a while I see it, above the waterline; I’m not who I used to be. I get these moments of clarity. Clarity is overrated.

(This upsets her more and more: sadness but also anxiety.)

NORMA

I have so much that I haven’t finished. This. You.
MINCE
(possibly a bit abrupt) What is this?

NORMA
Our tablecloth.

MINCE
But this part.

NORMA
It’s pretty, isn’t it? I found it in the hall closet. This was the tablecloth we were using when you were about six. I can tell by the outline of the grape juice stains. (beat) I look up to you, Mince. At your age, to to know who you are and what you want? Since you were ten! What ten-year-old wants to be an art historian? I didn’t have that at thirty.

MINCE
You’re thinking of Elodie.

NORMA
That’s right. You’re the one who’s great at softball and volleyball.

MINCE
No, that’s Elodie.

NORMA
Of course. You’re too busy getting good grades.

MINCE
No, that’s Elodie.

NORMA
So wait. Elodie’s younger and she’s a better student and she’s a better athlete? That must be stressful.

MINCE
Sometimes.

NORMA
But there are good things about you, too!

MINCE
I know.
NORMA
So many wonderful things. They’re crowding each other out in my head. I can’t even think of just one.

MINCE
I’m really good at French.

NORMA
Yes! That’s so useful. If a family from Paris were vacationing in Albuquerque and they got lost in the North Valley and broke down, then you could help them find a mechanic, and if they don’t have enough money for a hotel just tell them, in their native tongue, to come here. You two can bunk up and the parents will take Elodie’s room. The kids can sleep in here! The sleeping bags are in the garage behind my open house signs. They’re hard to see but they’re there. I wish I spoke French.

ELODIE (OFF)
SO CALL THE POLICE! WE DON’T CARE!

See what your sister’s up to.

(Mince exits.)

ADULT VOICE
IS YOUR MOTHER HERE?

NO.

ADULT VOICE
WHO’S IN CHARGE?

I AM!

ADULT VOICE
WELL I’M CALLING THE POLICE!

IT’S NOT ILLEGAL!

(Doors slam. Gabriel enters, in more casual clothes.)

GABRIEL
What’s going on?
I’m not sure.

(Mince enters.)

What’s happening out there?

Elodie’s been acting a little strangely at the door. She’s not giving candy to the Trick or Treaters. She’s taking it.

She’s what?

Which I think is kind of funny.

Elodie, come in here!

(Elodie enters.)

What?

What are you doing?

Trick or Treat. It’s a trick!

It’s a mean trick. You’re supposed to give them something.

I did. I gave them a memory they’ll have for the rest of their lives.

(to Mince) You ready to go?

To go where?

I’m going to take you to the McPhersons. It’s too cold to walk.
MINCE
I’m going to go to my party.

GABRIEL
We discussed this already.

MINCE
I changed my mind. You didn’t apologize.

GABRIEL
I did.

MINCE
Apologize for real or I leave.

GABRIEL
You’re right. You’re actually right. I’m sorry. sweetheart. I’m sorry that I got so angry that I couldn’t clearly explain to you why were wrong. I let you fluster me and as a result you may not have realized how mistaken you were.

MINCE
I’m going to the party.

GABRIEL
You’re going to the McPhersons.

MINCE
I’ll see you all later.

(She starts to leave.)

NORMA
Mince, wait! Go later, after the meal. I’m done.

(This freezes them all.)

NORMA
I’m finished with the tablecloth. Isn’t that good news? Time for our Thanksgiving meal. Is it still chilly in here?

GABRIEL
How about a scarf?

NORMA
Yes please.
(He takes an invisible scarf from the invisible coat rack, settles it around her shoulders.

NORMA
Thank you sweetheart. How about some dinner music?

GABRIEL
Good idea.

(He goes to the invisible stereo, turns it on. Beautiful music plays: the same beautiful music we heard at the top of the play.)

NORMA
And ...some light so we can see this better.

(Mince turns on the invisible lamp, the better to see the tablecloth. )

(Mince pulls the tablecloth a bit of the ways from the basket. The next section is a different tablecloth: )

NORMA
This one has a bit of red wine. You weren’t born yet.

Now Mince pulls the tablecloth from the basket. It’s long, long, long. It stretches across the room. It’s been created from other tablecloths, different colors and widths. )

NORMA
Just in time for our Thanksgiving meal. (Beat) But you know, I have this terrible feeling. I have this awful feeling I forgot to make any food.

(This panics Norma and paralyzes the others.)

MINCE
Mom. Duh. You had me and Elodie make it.

I did?

NORMA

ELODIE
I’ll be right back.

(She exits.)
NORMA

Now let’s see. Is it the right size? Yes, it’s perfect. Hold this.

(She hands one end of the cloth to Gabriel, then wraps the tablecloth around herself.

Following his wife’s lead, Gabriel wraps the tablecloth around himself.

GABRIEL

Elodie?

(He tosses it to her. Elodie hesitates, but then wraps herself. As she does so, Mince enters with two invisible bowls of Halloween candy.)

MINCE

Here we go. We’ve got plenty of food! Peanut things. And candy from all over the neighborhood.

(Mince wraps herself with the remaining tablecloth.

The doorbell rings. )

NORMA

Ignore it.

NORMA

Just right. Shall we take our places?

(All four shuffle to the small invisible table where they take their places. Mince sits at one end. Mince can take the remaining length of the tablecloth and toss it over the table. They smooth it. It fits perfectly.

NORMA

Perfect.

GABRIEL

It’s beautiful, Norma.

NORMA

Oh girls, what a spread you’ve got for us. Candy corn. Baby Ruths. Pop Rocks—now festive! Thank you!
It was nothing.

Father, would you like to serve the peanut things?

Mince, orange or black?

I'll take the orange.

(He serves her some.)

Black for me.

(Two insistent, futile rings of the doorbell.)

Mince?

(The DOORBELL rings. They ignore it.)

I'm going to start with Sweet Tarts.

Wonderful. Good food prepared by my daughters. And you see, we have something to keep us warm.

Bon appetitt

While we all give thanks.

(Perhaps one more DING DONG.)

END OF PLAY