

ACT I

SETTING: *Various locations and times including – but not limited to – a mountainside with a spectacular view, a mountain cabin, a kitchen, a Christmas tree lot, a concert stage, a living room, a churchyard, a donkey pasture, a police station, and a prison yard. Everything is suggested with platforms, crates, lights and sound. Keep it simple.*

AT RISE: *The memory of musician SLAB BOGGS. We see his 1963 childhood home in War, WV. GUITARIST enters, takes his place, starts playing. After a moment, SLAB enters, singing “Jolly Old St. Nicholas.”*

SLAB

*Jolly old St. Nicholas
Lend your ear this way...*

(MOMMY enters SLAB’s memory.)

MOMMY

(Calling off)
Slab?

SLAB

*Don’t you tell a single soul
What I’m going to say...*

MOMMY

(Calling off)
Slab, where are you?!

(Music stops.)

SLAB

(To audience)
I can still hear her voice sometimes. Calling to me. Transporting me back in time...

MOMMY

(Calling off)

You ain't reading them comic books again, are you?

SLAB

No, ma'am.

MOMMY

(Calling off)

Best not be lying to me, Slab Boggs!

SLAB

(To audience)

I'm named for my daddy Jimmy Ray Boggs, a coal miner in War, West Virginia – but I was born early, and when Mommy brung me home, my brother took one look at me and said "Why, he's no bigger'n a slab of bacon!" I've been Slab ever since.

I got four brothers, all way older'n me. My mommy had me late in life.

MOMMY

(To audience)

Didn't see it coming. Thought I was done with that nonsense.

SLAB

(To audience)

Coal mining didn't pay much in them days, but I only recall one time when I felt poor. I was seven years old. The Sears Christmas catalogue had just come to the house.

(He pulls a 1963 Sears Catalogue from a crate.)

The Sears Christmas catalogue filled with pictures of toys. Mommy usually hid that catalogue soon as it got to the house...

MOMMY

I didn't want you kids dreaming about something you could never have...

SLAB

(To audience)

But that year, I got to it first. I took it up to my room, opened it up... There they were: Tinker Toys... Lincoln Logs... pogo sticks... Slinkies...

Then I saw it. The most beautiful guitar. A real, honest-to-goodness six-stringer made of birch and spruce... I had to have it.

MOMMY

(Calling off)
Slab! Come down for supper!

SLAB

Mommy! Mommy! Look at this!

(SLAB shows her the catalogue.)

MOMMY

Whoa now – where'd you get that catalogue?

SLAB

Look at this right here, Mommy. Ain't it something? I'm gonna go write Santa a letter, ask him to bring me this guitar for Christmas.

MOMMY

Slab...

SLAB

I've been real good this year. I know he'll bring it to me. I'll practice that guitar all the time, Mommy, and someday – someday I'll be playing the Grand Ol' Opry.

MOMMY

Son, this guitar costs twenty-eight dollars and ninety-five cents.

SLAB

So?

MOMMY

That's a lot of money.

SLAB

Not to Santa Claus.

MOMMY

Slab.

(Beat. GUITARIST plays the first two lines of "Jolly Old St. Nicholas." It's slow and sad; the sound of a broken dream.)

SLAB

(To audience)
That's when she told me. On that day I had to give up two dreams: Santa Claus and that guitar.

MOMMY

We ain't got the money, son. I'm sorry.

SLAB

Are we poor, Mommy?

MOMMY

We got more than some and less than others

SLAB

But we're too poor to buy that guitar.

(She nods. To audience.)

Christmas Eve night, I cried myself to sleep. Early next morning, while it was still dark, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

MOMMY

Slab, get up now.

SLAB

What is it, Mommy? What's the matter?

MOMMY

Shh. No need to wake the whole house. Put on your shoes and coat, let's go.

SLAB

(To audience)

We followed an old trail up the side of the mountain. The sky was beginning to lighten in the east.

(To MOMMY)

Where are we, Mommy?

MOMMY

On what's left of my daddy's land.

SLAB

Granddaddy owned land?

MOMMY

The MacAulay's has always owned land, ever since Angus MacAulay come over from Scotland in 1785, and made a farm. That farm was passed down from father to son 'til it all got bought up by the coal company. All except for this piece. This piece of land is all ours.

(She gestures over the hills in front of them.)

Just look at them mountains, Slab.

(GUITARIST plays music underneath the following.)

SLAB

(To audience)

Everywhere I looked, the Appalachian mountains undulated into the distance, green waves on an ocean of earth, ancient and mysterious.

(Music out.)

MOMMY

You asked if we was poor. If you count your wealth in money – then maybe so. But if you count your wealth in knowing who you are and where you come from... well, you come from these mountains, Slab. And that makes you one of the richest men on earth. You understand what I'm saying, son?

SLAB

That why you brought me up here?

MOMMY

Partly. Truth is I come up here every Christmas morning.

SLAB

You do?

MOMMY

Ever since I was a little girl. My mommy used to bring me.

SLAB

Why?

MOMMY

So she could show me who I was and where I come from – just like I done you.

SLAB

But why on Christmas morning?

MOMMY

Because there was no better spot on earth to sing her favorite hymn. Give a listen now...

(MOMMY starts singing "Go Tell It On the Mountain.")

MOMMY

(a capella)
While shepherds kept their watching
O'er silent flocks by night...

SLAB

I knew it of course. Our family sung it every year at Christmas.

MOMMY

(a capella)
Behold throughout the heavens
There shone a Holy light

SLAB

But it sounded different up here. It sounded holy.

MOMMY

(a capella)
Go, tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born

SLAB

(To audience)
 As I watched my Mommy sing, and as I heard the mountains answer her back, I knew she was right. I was the richest man on earth...

(GUITARIST plays a few notes....)

And I knew that someday – somehow – I would get that guitar...

(GUITARIST accompanies them.)

SLAB/MOMMY

Go, tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born

(MOMMY exits. SLAB, now in the present, finishes the song as it becomes a snippet for a radio advertisement.)

SLAB

That Jesus Christ is born

Go, tell it on the mountain...

(During the following, ARNETTE COMBS, a veterinarian, enters her office in Pineville, KY. She is listening to the radio.)

GUITARIST as DEEJAY

Alllll right! That was Slab Boggs coming to you live from our studio here at WPNE, Pineville, Kentucky's favorite station for 24-hour Christmas music. Slab's in town for his Christmas Eve concert tonight at the Bell Theatre. If you haven't got tickets yet, you better hurry – there's only a few seats left...

(Lights fade on DEEJAY.)

ARNETTE

(To audience)

Got my tickets as soon as they went on sale last month. I'm taking my mother. Mama is a *huge* Slab Boggs fan. The only thing she loves more than Slab Boggs is our hometown of Pineville, Kentucky.

The thing about folks here in Pineville – you ask any of them how their kin came to be living in these mountains and they can tell you.

I call them "migration stories." Most involve escape – from famine... a bad marriage... the Jim Crow South... My mother's the town historian so I've heard them all. These histories, these stories, are based on fact. And I like facts.

What I don't like are those fairy tales Mama told me when I was little: princesses and witches and magic spells... oh, and that whole Santa Claus thing? Never believed it for a minute. "No way Santa could get around the world in one night, Mama," I'd say. "It's impossible." She'd say, "Make room for the impossible, Arnette."

But that sort of thing wasn't in my nature. I'm a practical person. So I took the love my mother felt for the world of fantasy and poured it on the animal kingdom. Got a sick or wounded pet? Dr. Arnette Combs, veterinarian, to the rescue.

I've always loved animals. When I was little, my brothers and sisters would tease me about it, call me St. Francis...

ARNETTE (cont.)

(To audience)

St. Francis, for those who don't know, is the patron saint of animals. Every Catholic in town has a statue of him in their yard. Even the Protestants like him. My friend Lana Chavies, a good Methodist, put a Francis statue on her daughter Nell's grave. Nell loved animals, too, she just...

(This is too sad to think about right now.)

After vet school, I came back here to practice. I loved my job. Even those late night emergency phone calls didn't bother me. My friend from vet school, Ginny Drain, hated those late night calls so much she gave up her practice and opened a donkey rescue over in Virginia. But like I said, those calls never bothered me.

Until today. Christmas Eve.

(GUITARIST plays a ring tone. ARNETTE answers as a spot comes up on FRANK MOLINO in his cabin.)

This is Dr. Arnette Combs...

FRANK

My dog, she's having trouble breathing...

ARNETTE

How soon can you bring her in, Mister...?

FRANK

Molino. Frank Molino – and I can't bring her in. Don't got a car. You gotta come here. Hurry!

ARNETTE

(To audience)

With the help of a full moon and a sky full of stars, I made my way to a place I'd never been before, a little cabin in the middle of nowhere. Inside I found the oldest dog I had ever seen...

FRANK

This is Lila.

ARNETTE

(To audience)

I knelt down and began my examination.

(To FRANK)

How old is Lila?

FRANK

40? 41? Something like that.

ARNETTE

Impossible. The oldest dog to have ever lived was 31.

FRANK

I know she's older than that. When was Ronald Reagan elected president first time?

ARNETTE

1980.

FRANK

That's the year I got Lila. The dog I had before, Rusty, he died right after the election that year. Guess he didn't want to live in a world where Ronald Reagan was President.

ARNETTE

(To audience)

Just then I felt something.

(To FRANK)

Mr. Molino?

FRANK

You find out what's wrong?

ARNETTE

(Hates giving this kind of news)

Mr. Molino... Lila has a big mass, here, in her belly. It's making her bleed internally, which is why she can't breathe...

FRANK

Can you get it out?

ARNETTE

I'm afraid not.

FRANK

But... Wait... Wait... Does that mean...?

ARNETTE

She's... she's not going to make it, Mr. Molino. I'm so, so sorry.

FRANK

Oh no. Oh my poor little girl... I don't want her to suffer.

ARNETTE

(To audience)

After I gave Lila the injection, Mr. Molino sat on the floor next to her, petting her poor body until it relaxed into death.

(To FRANK)

Would you like me to take Lila back to the clinic?

FRANK

No. Once the snow stops, I'll bury her next to Rusty. She'd like that.

ARNETTE

It's snowing?

FRANK

Probably a foot deep by now.

ARNETTE

That's impossible.

FRANK

See for yourself.

ARNETTE

(To audience)

He opened the front door. A foot of snow lay on the ground. Huge flakes swirled in every direction.

(To FRANK)

This can't be happening.

FRANK

Happens every Christmas Eve.

ARNETTE

No, it doesn't. The last time it snowed on Christmas Eve I was a little...

FRANK

You're talking in town. Weather's way different up here.