THE LIGHT IN WASHINGTON

A Christmas Play for Voices

by
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Performance Script
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CHARACTERS

FREDDIE (6): The narrator (to be voiced by an adult or teen actor). Observant, stubborn, matter-of-fact, carrying the sharp indignation and unvarnished sensory world of a boy on a mission.

FRED VAUGHAN (30s): Freddie's father. Strained, feverish, torn between domestic duty and an unbearable ghost; shifting from nervous calculation to broken clarity.

FRANCES VAUGHAN (20s–30s): Freddie's mother. Weary, sharp-eyed, anchored to the hearth and her sick infant.

WALT WHITMAN (49): The Great and Good Friend. Broad, weathered, gravelly-voiced; hospital tenderness overlaid with street philosopher irony.

PETE DOYLE (20s): Horsecar conductor. Easy, rhythmic, cheerful Rebel drawl; unbothered working-class authority.

DEPOT CLERK (50s): Harried, flat, mechanical.

OFFICER ENOCH (40s): Washington municipal patrolman. Loud, blustering, suspicious.

ZEKE (OFF-MIC): Horsecar relief driver / hostler.

NOTES FOR PERFORMANCE

- Speeches are numbered straight through the script, so a director can call out a speech by number ("from 47").
- Sound cues are numbered separately (FX 1, FX 2…), set in capitals, and underlined. The companion Sound Cue Sheet gives each cue in full, with what comes just before it.
- FREDDIE (NARR) marks Freddie's narration, as opposed to his lines in the scene. If budget allows, use a separate, closer narration mic.
- (UNDER) means the sound continues quietly beneath the dialogue until the next cue replaces it.
- No speech runs over onto a new page. Print on one side only and leave the pages unstapled, so pages can be slid aside silently.

ACT I: THE PARLOR (BROOKLYN)

FX 1: DOOR OPENS ON SQUEALING HINGES; CLOSES SOFTLY. MANTEL CLOCK TICKS; FAINT SNORE FROM THE NEXT ROOM (UNDER).

1 **FREDDIE:** *(stage whisper)* Ma?

FX 2: CLOCK TICKING ALONE.

2 **FREDDIE (NARR):** No “I’m here, Love.” No whimper from Little Fool. No cough. She’s taken the needy, whimpering rascal to the doctor, then. But there is another sound… a faint snore.

FX 3: STOCKINGED FEET ON BARE FLOORBOARDS.

3 **FREDDIE:** *(whispering to himself)* Put your books down, Freddie—gently. Tiptoe past the tanning balm, Freddie—quietly.

4 **FREDDIE (NARR):** Well, that’s what Ma calls it—it smells nothing like leather dressing to me. But I can’t—not without at least stopping to look. It’s not even as tall as I am, on a tabletop mussed with some dry red needles. For a moment, its sad little crimson paper stars and strings of popcorn and cranberries give me over to the ruby-red stars and gleaming beads at Macy’s glorious store. Everybody knows about his stars. It’s because his hand is painted with a red star, like the red harp on Da’s hand.

5 **FREDDIE:** *(whispering to himself)* Nudge the door open, Freddie—softly. Sneak a peek—sneakily.

FX 4: BEDROOM DOOR HINGE: A FAINT SCRAPE.

6 **FREDDIE (NARR):** The bedroom is scented with bay rum and peppermint, odors which always make Ma frown and look away. There's a carpetbag on the floor, half-stuffed with clothes, but still pried open like a mouth at the dentist's. And there is Da, sprawled across the counterpane, a giant, a rag doll. Drops of drool sparkle on his proud copper muttonchops like gems; drops from his eyes are leaving tracks across his pale cheeks. Da's fist is closed around some treasure. But all I can see is the dangling gold chain.

FX 5: A MAN'S HEAVY, DRUNKEN SLEEP-BREATHING (UNDER).

7 **FREDDIE (NARR):** Sometimes I don't know Da. But all the time, all day and each night and every week, I need to know. This need of all times makes me dare to take his great hand, to try and discover his treasure. When he sleeps like this, it's a hard sleep. He might not ever know.

8 **FREDDIE:** *(whispering to himself)* Uncurl his fingers, Freddie—cautiously.

9 **FREDDIE (NARR):** Da doesn’t move much as I pry his fist open—slowly. The locket’s filigree catches the lamplight in fine gold swirls. What is this? What is this?

FX 6: LOCKET CLICKS OPEN.

10 **FREDDIE (NARR):** There is the face that always turns up when Da is deep in his book. It’s a fierce face with dark whiskers and a cocked tarpaulin hat. The Great and Good Friend of Olden Times. The One Who Sees Everything, Loves Everyone, and Gives So Freely. Da’s Secret Not to Be Named around Ma. The Comrade I Must Meet Someday.

FX 7: BEDDING RUSTLES; BED ROPES GROAN.

11 **FREDDIE (NARR):** The little cameo holds me fast; more than when I’ve seen the picture in Da’s book. I meet the Comrade’s gaze and can’t pull away. So I don’t notice that Da is watching me from under his droopy eyelids, as if he’s a mile away, with some sort of little smile on his lips. But once he sees I’ve got the secret locket, there’s a jolt. His eyes fly open. The green lanterns shine on me. My heart leaps in my throat with terror. I can feel my face pleading with his face to not darken and storm and rage.

12 **FRED VAUGHAN:** *(whisper thick with liquor and sleep, surprisingly gentle)* That’s the Comrade You Must Meet, Love.

13 **FREDDIE (NARR):** I turn the locket over in my palm. The back isn’t solid gold—it’s glass. Trapped behind the crystal is a little swirl of silver hair, laced through with dark strands. Plaited into a tiny basket, like a hummingbird’s nest.

14 **FRED VAUGHAN:** His beard is very white and bountiful now, you know, Son.

15 **FREDDIE (NARR):** White and bountiful. My thumb trembles on the rim of the gold case. And there is the dark, fierce sailor in the picture—before the frost came for his hair. And now: white and bountiful. The one who gives so freely. And my Da knows him! Da has had St. Nick’s true face locked up in his pocket all along.

16 **FREDDIE:** *(breathless, tugging his father’s sleeve)* Ask him if I’m on the “Account of Good Children.”

FX 8: LOCKET CLICKS SHUT.

17 **FRED VAUGHAN:** *(sniffs, blinks hard; a wet, raspy belch)*

18 **FREDDIE (NARR):** He slips it down deep into his waistcoat pocket, over his heart, until the chain vanishes beneath his lapel. And his great hand reaches my cheek like the soft caress of a wing. He looks right into my eyes. Outside our front window the street is already turning dark. A horsecar rattles somewhere far off, and a wagon rolls by. But the haze is gone from Da's eyes. Now, he's got that look which means he wants something. Sometimes it means there will be pie. Sometimes it means there will be trouble.

FX 9: KNEES CRACK; BOOTS SCRAPE AS FRED CROUCHES.

19 **FRED VAUGHAN:** *(low, urgent)* Freddie. Listen to me now. With both ears. Your mother's going to be back soon. Let's work in harness, you and I. You know how your mother is about the cars. You know how she is about… about spending our lucre, and winter travel, and me going off.

20 **FREDDIE:** *(quietly)* I know.

21 **FRED VAUGHAN:** Well, Sonny, I'm taking the cars south to Washington on lodge business. She'll set her face like a flint. She'll say it's foolishness. She'll say the capital is full of fever and mud and soldiers, and there's other Brothers who can take the funds.

22 **FREDDIE:** So you won't go?

FRED VAUGHAN: She’ll try to keep me from it—unless you make it your idea. When she walks in with little Frank, I’ll tell her the Lodge has called on me for our errand in Washington. Before she can open her mouth to say No, that’s when you strike. You don’t ask—you plead. Tell her you’ve never seen the great marbled Capitol