

WHEN THE LIGHTS COME ON

By Jeff Dunne

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CHARACTERS

RICCARDO	An Italian immigrant who came to New York decades ago and opened a café just off Broadway.
GENE	Riccardo's nephew, a kind, thoughtful, and genuine young man trapped in the café's 'usual'.
MAGGIE	Riccardo's daughter, a young woman who shields an inner kindness via a gruff exterior.
DI	A strong but uncertain young woman, uncomfortable in her first visit in the big city, but determined to not let fear stand in her way.

SETTING

A small café just off Broadway.

SCENE

(Lights up on a coffee shop, currently without customers but with the air of tension from employees expecting the post-Broadway rush of a Saturday night after the theaters release their audiences into the wilderness of downtown New York. A small Christmas tree is seen in the back of the café, a brightly-lit attempt to replicate the one in Rockefeller Plaza, but with some candy canes and a few less 'dignified' ornaments added as well. A small performance area has a microphone stand, a stool, and a guitar waiting for its human companion.

Gene steps out from behind a counter. He is busboy, waiter, cashier, host, cook, electrician, and anything else that his uncle and employer, Riccardo, needs him to be. Gene looks over the tables, checking to make sure they're ready. They are. Seeing things are ready, he takes a seat at one of the tables – a tired man who just wants to get off his feet for a few minutes after a long day. That is, of course, when Riccardo comes out.)

RICCARDO

What are you doing? I don't pay you to sit around and—

GENE

Everything's good.

RICCARDO

The pecan pie's almos—

GENE

There's two more in the walk in. Left side. Top shelf.

RICCARDO

Well what about the bruschetta?

GENE

Nobody orders bruschetta after a show, Uncle Rick. They want coffee, they want pie. Maybe a sandwich.

RICCARDO

What about the silverware?

(Gene wearily gets up, walks behind the counter, and pulls out a big basket filled with rolls of forks and knives wrapped up in cloth napkins. Riccardo looks for a moment, then...)

What about the—

GENE

Relax. We're all good.

RICCARDO

Have you heard from... *(he motions at the empty stage)*

GENE

(Confused that he would even ask him.)

No. Why would I—

RICCARDO

If he doesn't show up, I'm gonna have you play.

GENE

You know I don't play the guitar.

RICCARDO

(He sounds serious, but asking the impossible is their running "thing" ...)

Then why are you just sitting around instead of learning hmm?

GENE

Uncle Ricky...

(Just then, the lights on the tree unexpectedly go out.)

RICCARDO

I thought you said you fixed that.

GENE

I did. But you have so many lights on that tree now, it thinks it's on Broadway. I'm telling you, it's just gonna keep blowing fuses.

RICCARDO

Then get a bigger fuse.

GENE

It doesn't work that way, Uncle Rick. You gotta—

RICCARDO

I don't see the Rockefeller tree going out every night. Just fix it before any customers come in. Maggie! Come watch the front while I grab a smoke!

(Maggie enters just as Riccardo exits and Gene walks over to the tree.)

MAGGIE

Went out again, huh?

GENE

I told your father he put too many lights on it. Hell, he had too many lights on it *last* year, and then he goes and does this. I swear, does he ever listen to anyone?

MAGGIE

Nope. Never listened to anyone but ma.

(Just then, Di enters. She has the air of someone who is lost, hoping that the café will feel familiar... but it doesn't. She looks around, unsure whether to approach the counter or take a seat. Maggie just looks at her in silence, unhelpful to the last. Gene watches this, mostly his cousin, before shaking his head in mild condemnation of her cruel sense of humor, then calls out.)

GENE

Go up and order, then sit anywhere you want.

DI

Thank you.

(Gene nods a 'you're welcome', then disappears behind the tree to try to fix it. Di walks up to the counter.)

MAGGIE

What do you want?

DI

Something warm. It's so cold out there.

MAGGIE

Imagine that. Cold in December. Who'da thought.

DI

Do you have hot chocolate?

MAGGIE

That it?

DI

I'd like something to eat too. Nothing big. What do you recommend?

MAGGIE

The bruschetta's good.

GENE

(From behind the tree...)

Maggie...

DI

I was thinking maybe something like a slice of pie.

(Maggie just stares at her, waiting.)

Do you have pie?

(Maggie keeps staring...)

I...

(Gene steps out from behind the tree.)

GENE

Yes. Maggie's just... Yes, we have pie. Pecan, apple, a cherry jubilee, some kind of chocolate toffee thing—

DI

Oh, that sounds interesting. Is it good?

GENE

I don't know. Haven't tried that one.

DI

Well, I will. I'm kind of a chocoholic, and—

MAGGIE

So is that it?

GENE

Don't mind her. She's just warming up her attitude for the big crowd.

(Gene tosses a fuse into the air, then exits.)

MAGGIE

That'll be nineteen oh five.

DI

What?

MAGGIE

Nineteen oh five.

(Di is in shock.)

Nineteen dollars and five cents.

DI

I... maybe I'll just skip the pie.

MAGGIE

Whatever, hon. Just the hot cocoa... that'll be... eight seventy-one.

DI

Do you have a small one?

MAGGIE

That is the small one.

(Di is still obviously not thrilled about this, but feel trapped, she hands over a ten-dollar bill, the last of her money. Maggie gives her the change, then calls into the kitchen.)

MAGGIE (CONT)

One hot cocoa, extra small.

(Stunned, Di makes her way to a table and takes a seat to wait. Maggie starts reading a paperback. After a few moments, Gene enters. He has a new fuse, and also a very large steaming mug of hot chocolate and a slice of chocolate toffee pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. He walks over to Di's table, and places the drink and the pie down.)

DI

I... I didn't get the...

GENE

What?

DI

The pie. I didn't...

MAGGIE

She didn't get the pie, Gene.

GENE

Yeah, I know. The pie's mine.

(Maggie gives him a look.)

Hey, I never got a chance to eat dinner.

MAGGIE

And you went for the *chocolate* pie?

(Gene just grins at her.)

So if that's yours, why'd you put it down on her table?

GENE

Just putting it down while I finish with this. *(He holds up the fuse. He then looks at Di.)* Keep an eye on that for me, will you?

(Gene gives her a wink, and then goes to replace the fuse. Maggie shakes her head in bemusement. Di takes off a pair of gloves and puts them on the table. She wraps her hands around the warm cup to heat them up. She sniffs the drink, then takes a sip. Gene emerges from behind the tree a moment later, clearly stumped. He stares at the tree for a moment, then exits to check on the circuit breakers. Maggie calls out to Di.)

MAGGIE

You should eat it while it's warm. It's better that way.

DI

What?

MAGGIE

And before all the ice cream melts.

DI

It's... It's his.

MAGGIE

Gene's allergic to chocolate.

(We see the implications sink in, and Di's face softens into a smile. She takes a bite of the pie. A moment later, Gene comes back in, looks at the tree, and shakes his head.)

GENE

I told him it was too many lights.

DI

Did you check the new fuse? Sometimes you can get a bad one.

(Gene nods, and then goes to check while saying...)

GENE

Are you an electrician?

DI

Me? No. No, I'm in college. But my mother always had me put up our Christmas lights. After a while you learn to—

(Gene has reemerged from behind the tree with the fuse.)

DI (CONT)

Well?

GENE

Looks fine to me.

(He shows it to her.)

DI

Yeah, it looks good. Here. Let me take a look back there.

(Di goes to try to get the tree working.)

GENE

How's the pie?

DI

Oh, very good. Really delicious. And the ice cream gives it just the right touch.

(She returns, shaking her head.)

I don't get it. It should be working. Could it be the cord?

GENE

I don't think so. It was working just before you came in.

DI

Ahh, that explains it. It knows.

(She sits back at her table. Accidentally, and unnoticed, one of her gloves falls onto the floor.)

GENE

(Taking a seat to join her at her table.)

It does, does it? And what does it know.

DI

That I'm on my way to see its big brother.

GENE

The Rockefeller.

DI

Mm hmm. I wanted to make sure I saw it before I left, but somehow things kept getting in the way. Tonight's my chance.

GENE

Ahh. That explains it.

DI

Explains what?

GENE

Usually we don't get anyone for another half hour. Until the theaters let out, and then it's a big rush until two a.m.

DI

I would have loved to see a show, but it's so expensive.

(Gene nods in agreement.)

Do you see many?

GENE

Some. Sometimes they sell the unsold tickets at the last minute. I got to see Hamilton that way. But usually...

(He motions around the restaurant. She nods, and then they fall silent, a peaceful, easy moment of appreciating the quiet. Di takes another sip of the hot chocolate. Suddenly Gene gets up.)

Oh, hey. Wait a sec.

(Gene goes to the tree, takes off a candy cane, and returns with it. He puts it on the table next to the cup, and sits while saying...)

Try that.

(Di is uncertain as to his meaning, so Gene motions that she should stir it into the hot chocolate. She unwraps it and does so. She then takes a sip.)

GENE (CONT)

It's good, right?

DI

I can't really taste any difference.

GENE

Well, you need to give it a minute.

(Di nods, then takes another bite of pie.)

DI

Was this really your dinner? I hope...

GENE

(Waving it off...)

It's fine. I have a secret stash of bruschetta in the back.

(Maggie snorts in laughter, and Gene smiles over at her.)

So you're a student? Not here in the city, I'm guessing.

DI

Do I look that out of place?

(Gene shrugs a "yeah kinda" in response.)

No, not here. I go to school in Baltimore.

GENE

Maryland, right? Never been there. What's the school?

DI

Johns Hopkins.

GENE

Ahhh. A doctor.

DI

Someday, hopefully.

GENE

So what brings you to the Big Snowy Apple?

DI

Paperwork. Birth certificates. And, of course, the big Christmas tree.

GENE

Birth certificates?

DI

I need a copy of my father's birth certificate, but...

(A look of melancholy comes over her.)

GENE

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry.

DI

So I'm guessing from your accent that you weren't born here.

GENE

No. Uncle Riccardo came here about twenty years ago and opened this place. Then about seven years ago my mother passed away.

DI

I'm so sorry.

GENE

We knew. She had cancer, and so in the end it was sort of a blessing, but I... I didn't want to stay in Amalfi.

DI

Amalfi?

GENE

Near Naples. To the south. South of Naples, that is. Well, south of Italy too, I guess. Anyway, I was seventeen, and I wanted... something different.

DI

Different is good. Can be, anyway.

GENE

Yeah. Can be. Yeah, I wanted to see the world. My uncle offered... I came...

DI

And have you seen the world?

GENE

Well... the world of Manhattan, at least. What about you? Where are you from?

DI

Iowa.

GENE

That sounds nice.

DI

You really don't know much about the States then, I guess.

GENE

What do you mean?

DI

Iowa is just about the most boring place in the world. All flat farmland. Unless you like corn, you won't find anything in Iowa worth looking at.

GENE

(Looking intently at her...)

I don't know about that.

(There's a beat, and then Di realizes what he is saying. She blushes, then picks up her hot chocolate to cover it.)

DI

Well, it's not as exciting as New York.

GENE

Don't know about that either. It's just a lot of tall buildings and people rushing around.

DI

Are you kidding?! I can't imagine what it must be like to live here. The Empire State building... the Statue of Liberty... Central Park...

Eh. GENE

And about a million museums. DI

Never go. GENE

You never go? How... how could you...? DI

Uncle Rick needs me here. Besides, I think to really enjoy these things, you need... GENE

What? DI

You need to be able to share them. It's not the same going by yourself. GENE

(Di sits back, looks critically at Gene.)

You want to know what I think? I think that's an excuse. DI

An excuse? GENE

Mm hmm. An excuse. You have a place here. You have a... a... purpose. No, not a purpose. You have a role. You have things you're supposed to do, and so you feel needed. And that's comfortable. DI

I suppose. GENE

And it's tough to give that up. Give up that security. I understand that. I had that kind of security, and then... DI

And then...? GENE

DI

And then... I didn't. One unlucky turn, and now everything's different. (*She takes a moment, and remembers where she is. A brightness comes into her voice.*) But different is good, right? And I'm in New York, this magical, terrifying city that my parents told me about, but would never take me to see. And I'll be darned if I'm going to let those fears get in my way.

(Gene looks at her, and a growing respect comes to his eyes.)

I didn't get a chance to see the museums, but I am *not* leaving this city without seeing at least one huge, bright, bigger-than-life Christmas tree.

(She stands up to leave.)

GENE

Wait wait wait.

(He points to the cup. She smiles, then takes a sip.)

What do you think?

DI

Different. Better.

GENE

I knew you'd like it. Everything's better with peppermint.

DI

Actually, I don't really like peppermint.

GENE

What?

DI

That's not what made it better.

(He's obviously confused, but Di just smiles at him, and then grabs the glove that's on the table. She puts down her last \$1.29 as a tip, smiles one more time at Gene, and walks to the door.)

The plaza's...

(She points in one direction. Gene shakes his head and points in the opposite direction. She nods in thanks, and exits. Maggie and Gene watch her go. After a few moments, the Christmas tree suddenly lights up. Gene is startled, and clearly confused about everything.)

GENE

I don't get it.

MAGGIE

Clearly.

GENE

What?

MAGGIE

You know you're my favorite cousin...

GENE

I'm your only cousin.

MAGGIE

But you're also kind of an idiot.

GENE

Oh? You think you can fix the stupid tree?

(Maggie rolls her eyes at him in disgust, then turns back to reading her book.)

What? What?!

(The lights on the tree go out again. Gene stands up, stares at the tree. A moment later, Di enters again.)

DI

Did you see... *(She spots her fallen glove.)* Ah, there it is.

(She goes over and picks up the glove. She turns to leave, and Gene suddenly notices Maggie giving him a 'don't be an idiot again' look. Suddenly he understands.)

GENE

Umm...

(Di turns back and looks at him.)

I was thinking...

(Di senses that something important is happening, and watches Gene as he struggles to find words.)

Maybe if I... look at the Rockefeller tree I can figure out what's wrong with this one.

(At this, Maggie smiles, then goes into the kitchen.)

DI

(Smiling...)

If you think it would help...

GENE

Nah. Not really. But if you wouldn't mind the company...

DI

No. I don't mind.

GENE

You sure?

DI

As long as your uncle won't mind.

GENE

Oh, he'll be furious.

DI

Then...

GENE

It'll do him good to work the tables one night. Keep him from smoking the rest of the pack. You know, something different.

(He walks toward the kitchen to get his coat, but Maggie comes out with it. He smiles a thank you at her, and she gives him a look to say "go, we've got it covered". He turns back to Di.)

Besides, I'm really curious to see what happens when you get close to that tree.

(Di gives him a confused look.)

DI

What do you mean?

(They start to exit.)

GENE

Let's just say I've got a hunch.

DI

A hunch? About what?

GENE

That the world works a little different when you're in it.

DI

Oh?

GENE

And I could definitely do with a little different.

(They exit. A moment later the Christmas tree lights up again. Maggie smiles, then lights out.)