

RUNNING FROM HEAVEN

By Jeff Dunne

© 2021 by Jeffrey A. Dunne
jeff@bearcreations.org

CHARACTERS

LEVAR	A man in his late twenties or early thirties
NANNA	An woman in her 60's or beyond
SUSAN	A woman in her mid-twenties
GEORGE	A man in his late 60's or beyond

The director is encouraged to consider cross-ethnic casting for this play.

SETTING

A lighthouse in Maine. The stage should include the outside of the front door as well as the living room inside. The room should have exits leading into the kitchen and back into the house (i.e. towards the lighthouse).

SCENE

(Levar and Nanna are standing outside the front door of a house in Maine.)

LEVAR

Okay, you've seen it up close, Nanna. Can we leave now?

(Nanna just stares at him, impatient, and continues to do so through the next line.)

Nanna. Can we leave? We came to the door like you wanted. *(Pause.)* I don't think anyone is even home. There aren't any cars around. *(Pause.)* Nanna? Can you hear me? *(To himself.)* Great. She's gone again. She's gone, and I'm stuck standing in front of a stranger's house looking like an idiot. No, worse. A trespassing idiot. In the middle of we-shoot-strangers-on-site-here Maine.

NANNA

Are you gonna just stand there, Douglas?

LEVAR

I'm not... Never mind. Can we go now?

NANNA

What are you waiting for? Let's go in.

LEVAR

We can't just walk in. It's not our house, Nanna.

NANNA

Just open the door—

LEVAR

(Ultimately frustrated...)

We can't just... *(He gets control of himself.)* We can't just go in, Nanna. It's not our house, and no one's home.

NANNA

If I had a blowfish for every time someone said I can't...

(Susan comes on scene inside the house, and notices that someone is at the door. She heads towards it.)

LEVAR

Enough! Enough. Come on. Let's go.

(He turns and starts to go. Susan reaches the door and opens it.)

SUSAN

Can I help you?

(Levar jumps back in surprise, then recaptures his wits.)

LEVAR

I'm so sorry. My grandmother just wanted to see your house. I think—

NANNA

There you are! It took you forever to answer the door—

LEVAR

We didn't knock, Nanna. *(Back to Susan.)* I'm sorry. She's a little... you know. Ever since she had a stroke—

NANNA

Don't just stand there gaping, honey. Let's go inside.

(She starts to enter, but Levar stops her.)

LEVAR

She's been a... a little unpredictable.

NANNA

Hogwash. Now let's go inside. I haven't waited all this tim—

LEVAR

Nanna!! Stop! This is not your house—

NANNA

Don't be foolish!

(She tries to go in, but Levar restrains her.)

LEVAR

I'm really sorry. She's been obsessed with coming to Maine, and with lighthouses. I thought that maybe if we finally came up here, but...

SUSAN

It's okay.

LEVAR

It really isn't. She can get so uncontrollable at times. The doctor said she thinks it's a form of dementia that—

NANNA

Doctor's a poopy-head.

(Susan laughs softly.)

A big, fucking poopyhead!

LEVAR

Oh my god, Nanna! *(To Susan...)* I'm so sorry.

SUSAN

It's alright. Sometimes when I get really upset, I'll call someone a poopy-head too.

(Levar and Susan share a smile.)

NANNA

Why are we still standing out here, Douglas? Let's go inside and—

LEVAR

We're not going inside. We're going home.

NANNA

Don't be a dunderheaded marmot.

SUSAN

It's okay. If you think going in for a few minutes might help...

LEVAR

I don't know. It could make things worse. The doctor said that playing along might encourage her to go deeper into... you know.

(Nanna blows a raspberry at Levar, wrenches herself free from him, and strides past Susan into the house. She immediately makes herself comfortable on the couch. Levar and Susan watch until she sits.)

LEVAR (CONT)

I guess we *are* going in. Thank you for... (*he motions at Nanna*) understanding. I'm Levar.

SUSAN

I thought she called you Douglas.

LEVAR

She's been calling me that since the stroke. I don't know why, and I can't get her to stop.

SUSAN

Could be worse. She could be calling you pooppy-head.

LEVAR

Good point. I should be grateful for that.

SUSAN

Susan.

LEVAR

Nanna's name is Irene, although she never answers to that anymore.

(An intercom beeps, then...)

GEORGE (OFF)

Everything okay, honey?

(Susan goes to the intercom and presses a button.)

SUSAN

Everything's fine, Grandpa. There's someone at the door, that's all. I'll be up with your lunch in a few minutes.

NANNA

Don't keep him waiting for lunch. Old coot gets cranky when—

LEVAR

Nanna!!

SUSAN

(Chuckling a little...)

It's okay. She's right actually.

Course I'm right.

NANNA

Was(Susan smiles; Levar groans. Over the next several lines, the dialog between Susan and Levar continues smoothly, with Nanna's commentary mostly unheard by them.)

Grandpa likes his routines. Lunch has to be at noon...

SUSAN

Nothing wrong with a good routine.

NANNA

And always the same. Which isn't the worst thing.

SUSAN

It's like a good poop.

NANNA

Ham and cheese with ridged potato chips. It makes shopping easy.

SUSAN

Nanna's the same way about some things.

LEVAR

Not that I've had one today.

NANNA

Every night at 7:30 she has to have—

LEVAR

I'd wrestle a musk ox for a good poop right now.

NANNA

Nanna!!

LEVAR

What?

NANNA

Never mind.

LEVAR

Well it's true. NANNA

Never mi— LEVAR

Better than sex. NANNA

Nanna! LEVAR

Not with a musk ox, Douglas. NANNA

I don't believe this. LEVAR

Have to be a dang fool to try *that* a second time. NANNA

Oh my god. I'm so sorry. What were you saying? LEVAR
(*Turning back to Susan...*)

Nothing. SUSAN
(*Utterly amused.*)

Well please do. LEVAR

It's okay. SUSAN

She's a handful, alright. LEVAR

I think she's delightful. SUSAN

Yeah? Give it a few minutes. LEVAR

NANNA

Old coot is gonna start getting impatient.

SUSAN

He can wait for a bit. It won't kill him.

NANNA

Don't say I didn't warn you, honey.

LEVAR

So... you live here with your grandfather...

SUSAN

No. This is my dad's house. I come by a few times a week so he can get out and, you know... have a life.

LEVAR

Ah. Is your grandfather... *(he motions towards his head with a twirling finger)*

SUSAN

No, he's still got his wits. Just... doesn't try to use them much anymore.

(The intercom beeps, and Susan immediately hits the button.)

I didn't forget, Grandpa.

GEORGE (OFF)

I hit the button by accident.

SUSAN

(Sarcastically...)

Uh huh. Of course you did.

(She shakes her head and rolls her eyes.)

NANNA

Told you.

SUSAN

(Kindly, patronizingly...)

It's like you know him.

What'd you expect, silly girl?
NANNA

Nanna, stop.
LEVAR

You stop.
NANNA

Nanna...
LEVAR

NANNA
(Mocking...)
Stop stop stop. No wonder all the pixies run away from you.

SUSAN
(Meaningfully surprised.)

What was that?

(Susan has an odd look on her face.)

LEVAR
Pixies. It's her way of saying "lighten up". I think because... *(He notices her look.)*
Are you okay?

SUSAN
What? No. I mean, yeah. Fine. That phrase just...

LEVAR
I think she says that because of some old fairy tale or something. Pixies that are running around and afraid of stopping.

NANNA
Can't let Him catch up, or it'll all be for nothing.

SUSAN
What'll all be for nothing?

NANNA
Always loved this couch.

LEVAR
You've never been here before, Nanna.

Don't be silly, Douglas.

NANNA

What'll be for nothing?

SUSAN

(Nanna is still fascinated with the furniture, and finally Levar answers.)

I could never get her to give me an answer to that. It has something to do with pixies running away from *Him*. In the story the pixies have some kind of special prize or package or something, and they're running so that this *Him* can't catch up and take it back.

LEVAR

Irene?

SUSAN

(Nanna doesn't respond.)

Nanna?

(She looks at Susan.)

What are the pixies carrying?

(Nanna raises her forefinger, then shakes it back and forth a little in a "no, no" gesture. Then she winks.)

Is it a secret?

(Nanna nods conspiratorially.)

Did they steal it from someone?

(Nanna smiles impishly.)

Did they steal it from *Him*?

(Nanna shrugs like a little girl who refuses to admit to doing something naughty.)

SUSAN (CONT)

Did they steal it from you?

(Nanna's expression suddenly turns annoyed, disappointed, and she goes back to looking at the surroundings in appreciation. Susan looks at Levar, but he just shrugs a "this is how it always goes" expression.)

LEVAR

So—

(Before he can get any further, the intercom buzzes, and Susan immediately hits the button.)

SUSAN

It's coming, Grandpa.

GEORGE (OFF)

I'm close to death up here.

(Nanna spins to look at the intercom, a grave expression on her face.)

SUSAN

Oh, for Pete's sake. If you're in such a rush, just come down and get it yourself.

NANNA

(Muttering.)

Fat chance.

GEORGE (OFF)

You know I don't want to miss anything.

SUSAN

Well then you'll just have to wait for a bit.

(We can faintly hear George "hrmph" through the intercom.)

LEVAR

We should go. I didn't want to interrupt...

SUSAN

It's fine. He's got at least a good twenty minutes before he'll die of hunger.

LEVAR

What did he mean about not wanting to miss anything? Are there boat races or something going on?

SUSAN

Sometimes, but that's not what he means. Ever since my grandmother passed, he spends his days up there staring out at the ocean, looking for a sign.

NANNA

(Muttering.)

Damn old fool.

(Levar gives her a scolding look.)

SUSAN

I was very little, so I don't really remember it all that well, but apparently just before she passed, my grandmother told him that she was only going away for a little while, and that she'd be back soon.

(Unseen by the others, Nanna silently mouths the quote as Susan says aloud...)

"Quick as the flip of a tuna's tail," she said. Then she closed her eyes and that was it.

(Levar softly chuckles in appreciation.)

Ever since, Grandpa's spent his days up there looking out at the water.

LEVAR

That's...

SUSAN

Sweet? Sad? *(Pause.)* Lonely?

LEVAR

Yeah. All of the above, I guess.

SUSAN

Yeah. It's been really hard on my dad. Grandpa and him used to do a lot together, so to watch him just... stop everything...

NANNA
(Muttering...)

All the pixies run...

SUSAN
When I was younger, Grandpa would come down more often and do things with me, but now... Well, it's a lot of stairs for him, so he doesn't come down unless he absolutely has to.

LEVAR
So he just stays up there all alone every day, staring out at the water?

SUSAN
Well, on the days that I'm here, I go up and sit with him. We play cards or chess, and talk while he keeps his lookout. I don't know what he does when I'm not here. I think my dad keeps him company most evenings, and sometimes on the weekends he'll convince him to get out and go for a walk or head into town for dinner or something.

(Nanna suddenly stands up.)

NANNA
Then I suppose that settles it.

*(She starts to walk to an exit away from the front door.
Levar rushes over and stops her.)*

LEVAR
What do you think you're doing?

NANNA
Going up to heaven, of course.

(Susan gets a very surprised look on her face.)

LEVAR
You're not dying, Nanna. And even if you were, you're not doing it in the back of some stranger's house.

NANNA
Oh, what's the matter with you, Douglas? Have you lost your mind?

LEVAR
Have *I* lost *my* mind?

NANNA

I'm just going up to heaven. What are you getting so flibberdy about?

LEVAR

Nanna...

NANNA

You think I can't handle a couple of stairs? I ain't that old yet.

LEVAR

I don't think you take stairs to get up to heaven.

NANNA

Douglas, sometimes I think you musta hit your head on something. Stairway to Heaven is right through here.

SUSAN

What did you just say?

NANNA

It's like he forgets everything.

SUSAN

(Insistent...)

What did you just say?

NANNA

I said that the Stairway to Heaven is right through here. And don't play games like Douglas here. You know what I'm talking about.

LEVAR

I'm sorry, Susan. She normally doesn't get aggressive at all. Incomprehensible, silly, but not—

(Susan raises a finger to silence him, then walks over and hits a button on the intercom.)

SUSAN

Grandpa, can you come down here?

GEORGE (OFF)

You know I don't like to—

LEVAR

Really, we'll just go—

(Susan waves Levar to silence as she cuts off her grandfather.)

SUSAN

Just come down, okay?

GEORGE (OFF)

Is everything okay, honey? Who was that? Was that Doug? What is he doing home?

SUSAN

It's not dad. Just come down for a minute, okay?

GEORGE (OFF)

I don't want—

SUSAN

(Not angry, but with steel in her voice...)

Grandpa!

(We hear a grumble of discontent through the intercom, but cut off as George releases the button and kills the connection.)

LEVAR

I'm so sorry. Nanna's a little crazy, but I promise she would never hurt anyone or anything. We'll just go. I didn't mean to—

SUSAN

(Looking hard, but not adversarially, at Nanna)

Why did you call the stairs that?

NANNA

Honey, you know that's what they're called.

LEVAR

Nanna calls steps Stairways to Heaven. Ever since the stroke, she's—

NANNA

Oh, take that potato out of your rump roast. There's only one Stairway to Heaven, Douglas. Even Little Susie knows that.

(Susan reacts in surprise at being called Little Susie, as if the phrase and the voice awakened a memory.)

SUSAN

That's what my grandfather calls it too. The Stairway to Heaven. He says the top of the lighthouse is Heaven, and that's why... There's even a little brass plaque that says "Heaven" over the door when you get to the top.

NANNA

That was my idea. He thinks it's his, but I said it first. Old coot was always doing that. I think he knows it was my idea, though.

(There's a stunned silence. Levar is baffled, Nanna is impatient, and Susan is stunned. After a long pause...)

Now if you'll excuse me.

(Nanna turns and starts to exit.)

SUSAN

Margaret.

(Nanna halts as if she was just yanked back by a rope. She stands stunned for a moment, then slowly turns around to look at Susan.)

Grandma Maggie?

(Nanna is stunned by the name, which has unlocked a flood of memories for her.)

It's you, isn't it? I don't underst... But... It is you...

(There's a long pause, and then Nanna wipes a tear from her eye and takes on an overly matter-of-fact manner to hide her emotions.)

NANNA

Well of course it's me, you silly girl.

(Nanna suddenly starts off towards the kitchen.)

If I'm going to head all the way up, might as well bring lunch so—

(George enters.)

GEORGE

Alright, Susie. What's one hundred and thirty one stairs important?

(Nanna turns and stares at George. It is clear that she recognizes him instantly, and as he looks back and forth between the three of them, it is equally clear that he does not recognize her.)

Who is this?

LEVAR

Hello, sir. We're sorry to have disturbed you. Nanna and me came up to Maine to look at the lighthouses, and she just wanted to... She really liked yours and...

NANNA

You're such a poopy-head, Douglas.

GEORGE

Hah. My late wife used to call our son that sometimes. Oh, that brings back memories. His name's Douglas too.

SUSAN

Grandpa...

GEORGE

Well, you're welcome to sit for lunch if you want, but I got work to do upstairs. Susan, where's my sandwich? Might as well bring it—

SUSAN

Grandpa... This... *(She indicates Nanna.)* This is Maggie.

GRANDPA

Ayuh. Good name, Maggie. My late wife's name. Well, you enjoy now, uh'right?

(He turns to leave.)

NANNA

George, you old coot. You got donkey balls stuffed in that head of yours? Get back in here.

(George turns slowly, stunned.)

What'd you say?

GEORGE

Like you don't know.

NANNA

I don't who you think you are, but when you're in my house—

GEORGE

Our house.

NANNA

You're in my house. I built this house with my own two hands—

GEORGE

We built this house, you old coot. *We* did.

NANNA

I don't know you.

GEORGE

Grandpa, I think—

SUSAN

What's this about, young lady? Is this your doing? 'Cuz this ain't funny.

GEORGE

I think it might really be Grandma.

SUSAN

Your grandma's dead.

GEORGE

Just listen to her.

SUSAN

What's there to listen to? I can tell plain as day this ain't her. Just look at her. Does this look like my Maggie? Does she sound like my Maggie?

GEORGE

She... She said some things. And Levar said that... When did she have her stroke?

SUSAN

What? Oh. Uh, I guess that was 2004.

LEVAR

SUSAN

That's when Grandma passed away, wasn't it.

GEORGE

That don't mean anything.

SUSAN

(To Levar.)

When?

LEVAR

I don't remember exactly. Spring. Maybe April?

(Susan gives George a hard, meaningful look.)

GEORGE

Don't mean anything.

NANNA

George Thomas Clark, you get that beaver mutton out of your brain and stop acting like a moron.

(George stares at her for a long moment, then shakes his head.)

GEORGE

You ain't her. Maggie's gone.

NANNA

Then how come you're spending every day looking for me? Little Susie said that you've been waiting for me to come back. Like I promised.

(George gives Susan a sharp look, then turns back to Nanna.)

GEORGE

You ain't her anymore than that's Douglas. Now I think you should leave.

NANNA

You think I should... You think I should *leave*?!? After all these years looking for you, you think I should just leave?!?

GEORGE

(Turning to Susan...)

I'm going back up to Heaven. Bring me my lunch when they up the road.

(He starts to exit.)

NANNA

You used to say it's heaven 'cause that's where you'd find your angel each morning.

(George stops in his tracks. There's a long pause, and then just as he looks like he is about to turn back, he exits. Nanna watches him go, then collapses onto the couch. She is too shocked to cry, but is clearly emptied of all the vitality and quirkiness that had filled her before. There's a prolonged stillness as everyone adjusts.)

LEVAR

Nanna?

(He sits next to her.)

SUSAN

Maggie... I... I don't know what to say.

NANNA

Nothing. It was all for nothing.

SUSAN

I'm here.

(Nanna looks up at Susan, who then goes and sits next to her on the couch. Nanna pulls her close, and Susan hugs her.)

NANNA

I thought once I finally found my home... Through all the haze... After all these years... I never doubted that if I could just find the lighthouse, then everything would be alright again.

LEVAR

Oh, Nanna...

NANNA

I just never expected this. Never even imagined making my way home only to find I wasn't welcome here no more.

SUSAN

You're welcome with me. I live just up the road a little.

NANNA

Apiece. You live up the road *apiece*. Didn't Douglas teach you how to speak right?

SUSAN

I grew up in New York.

NANNA

Well that explains it, I suppose.

SUSAN

If you want, you could...

(Nanna shakes her head.)

NANNA

That's sweet, honey, but I don't think so. This is where I was trying to get. This was the end of my tunnel. I guess the pixies can all stop running now. No point in hiding from *Him* anymore.

LEVAR

From who, Nanna? Who were you hiding from?

NANNA

Death, you silly boy. Death's who the pixies were hiding me from.

(She stands.)

Come on, Dougl— *(Pause.)* Come on, Levar. Let's leave these people in peace.

LEVAR

Nanna?

NANNA

For what it's worth, your Irene was already... you know. The pixies couldn't help her. That's why they hid me here.

(Levar stands.)

Nanna...
LEVAR

(He goes to hug her, but she takes him by the shoulders, assesses him, then takes his hand and starts to lead him to the front door.)

Time to stop.
NANNA

Grandma?
SUSAN

(Nanna stops and turns.)

Don't go.

NANNA
I'm sorry, honey. I can't stay here. But I'll watch over you. You and Douglas,

SUSAN
Watch over...?

(Nanna nods.)

NANNA
You've grown into a fine lady. Proud of you, Susie.

(Susan runs to her, and gives her a fierce hug. Finally they separate, and Nanna and Levar exit wordlessly. Susan goes back and sits on the couch, crying softly. After a few moments, George enters. He walks over to Susan, and she looks up at him, her expression a mix of hurt, anger, and frustration.)

GEORGE
I'm sorry, honey. It's a sick world where a stranger would come by just to play some kinda game like that. Musta been upsetting.

(Susan just stares at him. Finally...)

I'll go make my sandwich. You just take it easy.

(He starts to walk towards the kitchen.)

SUSAN

All this time... You were never waiting for her to come back, were you?

(George stops, turns, and looks at her.)

You said you were, but you had already given up.

(George just stands there, not knowing what to say.)

Then what are you doing up there every day?

GEORGE

It's what I told you. Waiting to see my Maggie again.

SUSAN

You mean you're waiting to die.

GEORGE

What I said.

SUSAN

Well you know what, Grandpa? I think maybe you already did. You just haven't realized it yet.

GEORGE

Just what's that supposed to mean?

SUSAN

I always had such respect for you. The way you refused to give up hope, refused to give up on love. I wanted to be like that. Wanted my life to be like that... to find someone who I'd never give up on. But now I see... You haven't been remaining faithful. You've just been remaining.

(Pause.)

GEORGE

Susie, honey. You can't let some crazy stranger—

SUSAN

(Suddenly standing...)

Don't. Maybe you closed your heart off so tight that you can't see what's right in front—

GEORGE

I saw! But I ain't gonna be a victim for some flatlander criminal who—

SUSAN

No! No. You saw with your eyes, but you never gave your heart a chance. And now we're both the victims. You just pushed away the one chance we're ever going to have to see Grandma again in this life. Maybe she wasn't her, but I think maybe she was. And now we're never going to know.

(Susan storms off, exiting towards the back of the house. George watches her leave, and we can see him thinking hard. He looks at the front door, then after a moment walks to it. He considers the door like it is something totally foreign, some unknown artifact. Finally he opens it and looks out.

Lights out.)