

THE BEST WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN

**By
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THE BEST WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN

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THE BEST WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN

For my mother, who makes every moment the best.

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Cast of Characters

Joanna (Female) – 40s, romance novelist by profession, but a practical realist in her personal life; close but combative with mother; insecure about relationships with men; sarcastic; hard exterior

Margie (Female) – Joanna’s mother; mid to late 70s; energetic; retired college theater professor; optimistic and fun-loving; showing early signs of dementia

Paul (Male) – 50s; former college professor now forensic lab technician; awkward; introverted

Lewis (Male) – 40s; Paul’s younger brother and Joanna’s former schoolmate; second-rate Hollywood movie producer; frenzied and superficial

Voice only parts (can be recorded):

Exercise Instructor –Female; unnaturally perky

Priest – Male (could be doubled with Lewis)

Congregation – a combination of non-distinct voices

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ACT 1 SCENE 1

A living room in suburban Connecticut. A radio plays “How Can I Keep From Singing.” MARGIE enters singing along to the radio loudly, off-key and making up words as she goes along. She opens a window, enjoying the beautiful day, goes to open a second window and the screen falls out. Margie continues singing, describing her actions in song (i.e. “How can I keep the screen from falling?”) as she tries to put the screen back in, her annoyance with the screen increasing, the mangled lyrics and discordant singing becoming more pronounced. JOANNA enters through the front door, setting down her purse and keys. Margie does not hear her. Joanna sneaks up behind Margie to intentionally startle her.

JOANNA. SOUNDS LOVELY, MOM! *(Margie screams and hits her daughter, half-seriously/half-playfully while the two scream and laugh.)*

MARGIE. What the- You scared the crap outta me! *(Margie turns off the radio.)*

JOANNA. Doing my civic duty.

MARGIE. Music-hater!

JOANNA. There were noise complaints. Dogs were howling.

MARGIE. God gave me this voice. I’m only-

MARGIE and JOANNA. -singing to get even.

JOANNA. I know. *(Joanna kisses Margie on the cheek.)*

MARGIE. Is it time for church? I’m not dressed yet.

JOANNA. It’s Friday.

MARGIE. Right.

JOANNA. I’m dropping off these. *(Joanna pulls a set of keys from her purse.)*

MARGIE. You found them!

JOANNA. This is my set.

MARGIE. Oh.

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JOANNA. You should change the locks.

MARGIE. They'll turn up.

JOANNA. It's been over a week.

MARGIE. They're here somewhere. Help me look? *(Joanna and Margie start looking for the keys. Joanna picks up Margie's basket.)*

JOANNA. You're crocheting? Be careful mom, it's a slippery slope. Soon you'll be wearing housecoats and eating dinner at four-thirty.

MARGIE. I'm getting a walker and bedazzling it!

JOANNA. *(Picks up a copy of her recently published novel from the coffee table.)* I have news!

MARGIE. Spill!

JOANNA. My editor's ordered a second printing.

MARGIE. That's wonderful, honey!

JOANNA. Apparently, readers dig my provocative take on Catholicism.

MARGIE. I'm not sure how I feel about that nun being so promiscuous.

JOANNA. She's a novitiate – hasn't taken her vows yet.

MARGIE. A technicality.

JOANNA. It's the whole point! She's young and unsure, 'torn between a passionate lover and a life devoted to God.'

MARGIE. I must admit I enjoyed the steamy parts!

JOANNA. I'm glad?

MARGIE. It would make a fabulous movie! Drama, intrigue- it has a happy ending, right?

JOANNA. You haven't finished it?

MARGIE. It's your seventh book. They're starting to blend.

JOANNA. My type of happy ending. She's not rescued. She chooses her own path.

MARGIE. Hollywood loves those empowered women types.

JOANNA. *(Puts the book aside and resumes searching for the keys.)* I'm not so sure.

MARGIE. Didn't you say it was a best seller?

JOANNA. Top one hundred on Goodreads. Not exactly New York Times. Respectably expected. Like me.

MARGIE. Imagine it on the big screen! Sister Beatrice in the confessional- her prayer interrupted by the gardener sneaking in and pulling her rosary to his sweaty- *(Joanna puts her hands over her ears and makes noise to stop Margie from*

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continuing.)

JOANNA. Stop! I don't have the funds for therapy.

MARGIE. Why don't I call Kathy Marshall? Her son's in the movie business. Remember Lewis from school?

JOANNA. Do not call her.

MARGIE. What could it hurt?

JOANNA. You know what a jerk he was to me.

MARGIE. All the more reason. The little prick owes you.

JOANNA. I don't wanna talk to him. For any reason.

MARGIE. He's quite successful, I hear. And divorced.

JOANNA. No way in hell, mother!

MARGIE. I want you to be happy.

JOANNA. *(Finds a stack of mail stashed in the couch cushions.)* Mom, you haven't even opened these!

MARGIE. It's a system.

JOANNA. We talked about this. Remember when they turned off the power?

MARGIE. It was an adventure. Like camping!

JOANNA. Without the s'mores?

MARGIE. Oh! I bought Malomars! Want one?

JOANNA. Don't change the subject. And yes, of course I want one. *(Margie gets the cookies and shares them.)*

MARGIE. You don't worry about me, I worry about you. That's the contract.

JOANNA. Let's renegotiate.

MARGIE. With a movie deal, you'd be set for life!

JOANNA. I don't need it! And I definitely don't need you trying to play matchmaker.

MARGIE. You're too picky.

JOANNA. I'm discriminating.

MARGIE. Don't you wanna find that special someone and live happily ever after?

JOANNA. That's what my books are for.

MARGIE. You deserve to be treated like a princess.

JOANNA. And yet I seem to have misplaced my tiara. It must be next to your keys. *(Resumes looking.)*

MARGIE. For a romance writer you're not very romantic.

JOANNA. Spend less time worrying about me and more time remembering to pay

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your bills.

MARGIE. I don't want you to be alone. It wasn't easy after your father died.

JOANNA. I know, mom. But you had me. I was spectacular company.

MARGIE. You were a pain in the ass.

JOANNA. I was entertaining.

MARGIE. Who's going to entertain you?

JOANNA. Netflix. Besides, I need my weekends free to help my doddering mother find her keys! (*Joanna dramatically pulls a set of keys from a potted plant.*)

MARGIE. How'd they get in there?

JOANNA. You don't know?

MARGIE. I'm a creative housekeeper.

JOANNA. Creative or crazy?

MARGIE. What do you mean by that?!

JOANNA. I'm kidding.

MARGIE. (*Agitated.*) That's really nice, Joanna! You waltz in, mock my singing, nag me about bills-

JOANNA. You know I don't mean / anything-

MARGIE. Why even bother coming by? I don't need that from you!

JOANNA. Mom, c'mon. Why are you-?

MARGIE. What, crabby?!

JOANNA. Well, yeah.

MARGIE. Just go.

JOANNA. Fine. You have a nap and I'll have a drink.

MARGIE. Wait- I need your help with the window screen.

JOANNA. Again? Mom, you know it pops out / if you-

MARGIE. I forgot!

JOANNA. (*Under her breath.*) Forgot the screen, the keys, the mail-

MARGIE. Don't you dare!

JOANNA. Admit it, mom. The house is too much.

MARGIE. It's not!

JOANNA. Why won't you even consider moving.

MARGIE. Because I misplaced my keys?

JOANNA. What if you fall down? Or use the stove and forget to turn off the gas?

MARGIE. You know I don't cook.

JOANNA. You liked Colleen's place.

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MARGIE. The halls smell like soup.

JOANNA. You like soup.

MARGIE. This is my home. I know where everything is.

JOANNA. Not your keys . . .

MARGIE. I'm not leaving.

JOANNA. Be practical, for once.

MARGIE. Practical is boring.

JOANNA. If you won't leave, then God help us both I'm gonna have to move back here.

MARGIE. You'd cramp my style.

JOANNA. Watching Jeopardy every night is not a style.

MARGIE. We'd drive each other crazy.

JOANNA. Perhaps we'd be delightfully crazy, like the Grey Gardens cat ladies!

MARGIE. You're really selling me on the idea.

JOANNA. You're forgetting things, ma. It's not good.

MARGIE. I've got a lot of important stuff taking up space in my brain. It takes me longer to pull things out.

JOANNA. It's not safe for you on your own.

MARGIE. What if I wasn't by myself?

JOANNA. Finally found your special someone? Do tell!

MARGIE. I could rent the basement out. Like we talked about when you first moved to the city. Reduce the rent in exchange for help around the house.

JOANNA. You want a stranger to live with you?

MARGIE. You have your own life. I don't wanna be a burden.

JOANNA. All right, drama queen, you know I don't think of you like that.

MARGIE. Why don't we try this basement thing?

JOANNA. I don't know . . .

MARGIE. What's the worst that could happen?

JOANNA. The worst? Let's see- what if your renter turns out to be a wanted criminal-

MARGIE. Oh! Yes! And- and we capture him and turn him in for a huge reward, become media sensations!

JOANNA. Interesting.

MARGIE. All the television networks interview me, and I'm so delightful on camera that I get offered to host my own talk show.

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JOANNA. You always find the bright side.

MARGIE. Wait- you forgot the best part!

JOANNA. Did I?

MARGIE. Yes! You turn our story into your next best seller, which is made into a blockbuster movie! See? It's the perfect solution!

JOANNA. Perhaps your new renter will be too polite to mock your horrible singing?

MARGIE. And if I bothered you less you'd have more free time for dates!

JOANNA. Jesus, Mom!

MARGIE. *(Speaking in an English accent.)* My goodness! Such language!

JOANNA. No. *(Beat.)* No.

MARGIE. Chip chip! In character!

JOANNA. I'm not one of your theater students.

MARGIE. Kindly dispense with this crude method of speaking.

JOANNA. Don't make me do this.

MARGIE. Pardon? Your dialect is entirely foreign to me.

JOANNA. Oh, for God's sake. *(Speaks in an English accent.)* Please, mother, our priority must be the estate! It's fallen into disrepair!

MARGIE. I worry for your future.

JOANNA. I'm perfectly contented.

MARGIE. You mustn't be prideful. For marriage there's a window, and yours is swiftly closing.

JOANNA. We haven't the luxury of wishing. We must attend to the manor.

MARGIE. We shall acquire a boarder.

JOANNA. *(Dropping the accent.)* Fine. We'll do it your way. Reality please?

MARGIE. *(Dropping the accent.)* This will work out great. You'll see.

JOANNA. Should we put an ad in the church Bulletin?

MARGIE. I think I know someone from the college who'd be perfect.

JOANNA. A former student?

MARGIE. Something like that.

JOANNA. Okay. Let me know. And d'ya mind if I take care of the window screen on Sunday? I have plans. *(Joanna heads for the door.)*

MARGIE. A date? *(Joanna gives her mother a look.)* What? *(Blackout.)*

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SCENE 2

Two days later. Margie has been interviewing her new “renter” PAUL as he fixes the window screen.

PAUL. The work’s okay, I guess. Mostly routine tests and paperwork.

MARGIE. Do you like it?

PAUL. I find the predictability comforting. Boy, that sounds pathetic.

MARGIE. Not at all. Think of all the people you are helping.

PAUL. There’s a sign in the lab: “forensics mean convictions.”

MARGIE. See? I’m sure they’re especially important if there’s no eye witnesses.

PAUL. More important, actually. People are problematic- their memories unreliable.

MARGIE. You’re telling me.

PAUL. Especially in crimes. When emotions are heightened, perceptions are often altered from reality.

MARGIE. The things we remember are not what actually happened?

PAUL. All memories are part reality and part construction.

MARGIE. My past is a creative interpretation!

PAUL. More or less. I’m boring you.

MARGIE. No! I’m finding this very interesting.

PAUL. I haven’t talked about cognitive processing since I was at the college.

MARGIE. You had an excellent reputation among the faculty. You miss teaching?

PAUL. Not really. *(Referring to the replaced window screen.)* That’ll do it.

MARGIE. Just like that! You remind me of Stuart. He could fix anything.

PAUL. I’ve gotten pretty good since I’ve been at my mom’s. There’s always something to do.

MARGIE. I’m breaking the mother code. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s children, nor their handyman abilities.

PAUL. Nah. She’s wants her space back.

MARGIE. Well, I’m happy with our arrangement. Deal? *(Margie extends her hand and Paul shakes it.)*

PAUL. Deal.

MARGIE. I don’t know how Kathy would’ve handled it without you. Your dad.

PAUL. It gave me a chance to get back on my feet.

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MARGIE. Such an awful situation. Paul, your father, could he- towards the end, I mean- could he recognize you? Kathy didn't share much.

PAUL. I'd rather not talk about it.

MARGIE. Of course. I'm sorry. Didn't mean to pry. It couldn't have been easy.

PAUL. Anything else?

MARGIE. We are good! Who knew the Marshall boys were so talented? Speaking of- how's your brother Lewis doing? Sounds like he's pretty successful in the movie business.

PAUL. I guess.

MARGIE. Lewis was in my daughter's class at Saint Mary's. He's divorced?

PAUL. Was. He remarried last month.

MARGIE. Oh my, that's quick! Well, good for him, I suppose. My Joanna has a book I think would make a great movie. It's a romance. *(The front door opens and Joanna enters.)*

MARGIE. Speak of the devil.

JOANNA. Suit up, lady! Time to get your Jesus on! *(Notices Paul.)* Oh. Hello?

MARGIE. Joanna, you remember Paul Marshall don't you?

JOANNA. *(Giving her mother a look.)* Umm, sure, Paul. Hi. Sorry to hear about your dad.

PAUL. Thanks.

MARGIE. Paul's taking the basement apartment.

JOANNA. Really?

PAUL. I've been staying at my folk's, but, it's getting cramped.

JOANNA. Uh huh.

MARGIE. Paul, why don't you take another minute downstairs. Size up what furniture you might need.

PAUL. Sure, Mrs. Wells.

MARGIE. Please, it's Margie. If we're gonna be roomies.

PAUL. All right, Margie. Nice to see you, Joanna.

JOANNA. Yeah, uh, you too. *(Paul exits.)* Tell me this is a joke.

MARGIE. He's a nice boy.

JOANNA. When exactly did he get out of the nuthouse?

MARGIE. Shhhh! "Treatment facility." That was over three years ago. He cared for his dad all through his illness.

JOANNA. Man of the year.

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MARGIE. Don't be so judge-y.

JOANNA. Mom, he's not living with you.

MARGIE. He's starting to turn his life around.

JOANNA. Starting? What is he, fifty?

MARGIE. He's got a very important job working for the police. He's a forensic scientist.

JOANNA. This isn't what I had in mind.

MARGIE. Maybe he could talk to his brother for you? Help get your book turned into a movie! *(Paul enters but Joanna and Margie do not see him.)*

JOANNA. Is that why you're doing this? I told you I don't want any contact with Lewis!

MARGIE. All that was years ago.

JOANNA. He's a jackass, mom. And Paul is a mental case. *(Joanna turns and notices Paul has heard her.)*

JOANNA. Dammit. Paul- I'm-

MARGIE. Joanna, apologize!

PAUL. No, it's okay. She's right. Lewis is a jackass.

MARGIE. Paul, my offer stands.

JOANNA. Mom, wait-

MARGIE. *(Speaking like a cowboy.)* Little lady, this here is my ranch!

JOANNA. Oh boy.

MARGIE. Ain't no one gonna tell me who I can and can't let on my land!

PAUL. Um, should I leave?

MARGIE. Don't you fret, partner. You're welcome to bunk here long as you put in an honest day's work. *(Paul, confused, looks at Joanna.)*

JOANNA. *(To Paul.)* Being here is really gonna help your psychological recovery. *(Joins in cowboy lingo.)* Beg pardon, ma'am, but kin need to stick together. Ain't no need to take in strangers. *(To Paul, no accent.)* No offense.

PAUL. I'm confused.

MARGIE. I'll always be your ma, but I gotta do what's best for me. Ya hear? *(No accent.)* It's settled. Paul, go home and pack. You can move in whenever you're ready.

PAUL. I'll be back in the morning. I guess. *(Paul moves towards the door.)* I'll be a good housemate, Joanna. You don't need to worry.

JOANNA. *(In Western accent.)* Head em up, and move em out!

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PAUL. *(Opens the door, stops. Tips a make-believe hat. Speaks in Western accent.)*
Ma'am. *(Paul exits. Joanna attempts to hide her amusement.)*

MARGIE. He'll fit right in.

JOANNA. I am not happy about this.

MARGIE. C'mon, Joanna. What's the worst that can happen?

JOANNA. The worst? Let's see- Mr. Mental Hospital relapses into the crazy and hacks you into a million pieces.

MARGIE. Paul says dental records can identify remains no matter what happens to the body!

JOANNA. I feel so much better now. *(Blackout.)*

SCENE 3

A spotlight rises on LEWIS, a Hollywood movie producer in his 40s. He is wearing a Bluetooth on one ear, which he "taps" when switching between callers. We catch him mid-conversation.

LEWIS. Darlene, baby, don't listen to 'em. They don't know the business. Remember how I almost got nominated for that Golden Globe? People don't forget that! Someone's gonna bite. I swear. All we need is one big backer and we're golden. Oh! That's someone now. Gotta go. Hey, baby, pick me up some of those almonds. Kay? The ones in the purple tin. Not the green tin! Got it? Love ya! *(LEWIS makes kissing sound and taps his Bluetooth.)* Lew here. *(Beat.)* Cal! Cally! Listen, I've got a hot, no, THE hot option and I'm givin' you first dibs. Trust me, you are dying to get your hands on this. It's gonna be the next tween mega hit. I'm talkin' franchise, merch- ahhh, hold on a sec, Cal, I, uh, got someone ringing in. Everyone wants a piece of this baby! But it's all yours. 'kay? Hold on and let me get rid of 'em and we can talk deal. *(Tap.)* Lew here. *(Beat.)* Ma, why are calling me? *(Beat.)* Jesus, Ma, I swear I was gonna call for your whole birthday thing, but the, uh, doctors, um, said I had to stay away from electronics. It's a . . . thing. This is the first call I've taken, I swear. I just knew it was you and I couldn't- *(Beat.)* I didn't wanna worry you! Ma, I gotta- *(Beat.)* Sure, sure, sure. Hold on, all right? *(Tap.)* What did I tell you, Cal? Word is out and they're knocking down my door like I got the only decent crack left in West Hollywood. This script is IT. I'm talkin'

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Disney huge. Hunger Games meets Harry Potter. Lord of the Flies meets Mean Girls. Game of Thrones meets Sixteen Candles. Swear to Allah Jesus Mary Buddha and the Dalai Lama. Picture it: It's the apocalypse - I've got you already, I know, right? And this kid finds out he's got a secret power that can save the planet, but he's unpopular and no one will listen to him, so he has to become Homecoming King to get . . . Ahhhhh, I gotta take this call. Think about it, Cally! When I tap back in, I wanna hear a yes! Got it? *(Tap.)* Lew talkin'. *(Beat.)* Why are you calling back, ma? Don't you know how "hold" works? *(Beat.)* Uh huh, yeah, I got the ah-book, I guess. You know I don't read stuff! *(Beat.)* Ma, I'm busy- *(Beat.)* Fine! Tell me about the stupid book and I'll just sit here and quietly listen. *(Tap.)* You with me Cal? *(Beat.)* Well, it's supposed to be a boy but yeah I guess a girl could work. I like that angle. I'm sure the writer can make a few adjustments. That's why we pay 'em, right? You got a star lined up already?! We need a name. *(Beat.)* Uh huh, well, sure if you know she's gonna be big. I trust you. Can she play a teenager? *(Beat.)* Thirty is a bit of a stretch. Is she flat, you know? *(Beat.)* Oh, wow, well good for her but that's-ah-a lot to cover up. Why. . . ? Oh oh oh. I got it now. Let me guess- one of your execs bedded a bimbo-actress-wannabe and now he's gotta buy her off! Been there, wrote the treatment. Am I right? What sucker friend of yours- *(Pause.)* Oh. Anyone can have a bad night, Cal. Right? Okay buddy, I'm gonna help ya' out 'cause that's the kinda guy I am. But Cal, if I take care of this, uh, problem of yours, it's a package deal, got it? Hold on. *(Tap.)* Uh huh. Mmm hmmm. Yeah yeah. Ma. Ma! What's this thing called? *(Beat.)* Is it sexy? *(Beat.)* A nun? Kinky! Who wrote it? *(Beat.)* No kiddin'! How about that. Give her my number and I'll see what I can work out. *(Beat.)* Aw, I'd do anything for you, ma! Consider it my birthday present. *(Tap.)* Cal, you're gonna love me. I'm talking ditch-your-mistress-turn-gay-adopt-an-Asian-baby-together love me. I've got THE hot romance title and it's perfect for your little "problem." You hear about that best-seller book about the sexy nun? Google it. It's Fifty Shades meets Doubt. *(Beat.)* Yeah, that's the one! Guess who's got the option?! *(Beat.)* Papers are gettin' the legal once-over as we speak. The writer's an old school chum of mine. And Cal, letting you in on this means you're committing to both, got it? The tween treatment and Catholics Gone Wild. *(Beat.)* You flatter me, sexy. Hey, it's good to be back in business with someone you can trust. Am I right? By the way, how's your wife? *(Blackout.)*

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SCENE 4

Margie's living room about a week later. Paul is sitting on the couch with books and notebooks around. Joanna lets herself in.

JOANNA. Sorry. I was- I guess I should stop letting myself in, huh?

PAUL. People usually knock first.

JOANNA. Fine, new guy. *(Joanna knocks on the wall.)* Obviously, I'm looking for my mom.

PAUL. She's at church. *(Paul nervously returns to his books.)*

JOANNA. You're holding down the fort.

PAUL. The fort?

JOANNA. Making conversation.

PAUL. I thought maybe you were doing the thing? With your mother? I'm not great at small talk.

JOANNA. You don't say. *(Noticing the books.)* Whatch'a doin'?

PAUL. Oh, it's just a- sort of a role- it's a game thing.

JOANNA. Like Parcheesi?

PAUL. Is it 1975?

JOANNA. Okay, wise-ass. What is it? *(Paul hesitates.)* Writing your Una-bomber manifesto?

PAUL. No. It's just- it's Dungeons and Dragons. Okay? Go ahead. Make the jokes.

JOANNA. It is 1975! *(Paul looks embarrassed. Joanna softens.)* Sorry. I didn't know that was something people still do.

PAUL. People do.

JOANNA. How does it work? I mean, what's the basic gist?

PAUL. Well, each person is a character, and the game master creates different quests that the characters try to achieve.

JOANNA. You slay the dragon and rescue the princess.

PAUL. More or less.

JOANNA. I get that. Escapism keeps me in business.

PAUL. Better than reality.

JOANNA. Listen, I have to ask- what's in it for you?

PAUL. D&D? Cheap entertainment.

JOANNA. No. I mean my mom. You living here. What's in it for you?

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PAUL. Cheap entertainment? That was a joke. I know you're not exactly delighted by this situation. But I'm good with house repairs which your mother appreciates, and this isn't my mom's house which I appreciate.

JOANNA. Doesn't your mom want you staying with her?

PAUL. Mom needed my help. It's not the same as wanting it. Margie wants me here.

JOANNA. Nothing against you, but you're not the type of person I thought she'd be looking for.

PAUL. It's a good thing she has someone around, though.

JOANNA. What's that supposed to mean?

PAUL. Have you thought of getting her checked out by a doctor?

JOANNA. Because she forgets things? Newsflash – she's old.

PAUL. I think it's more than age-related cognition loss.

JOANNA. Just because your dad had Alzheimer's doesn't mean every person you meet has it.

PAUL. She gets really confused late in the day.

JOANNA. Look, you may be an ex-professor of brain science or whatever-

PAUL. Cognitive Biology.

JOANNA. You don't know her. She's dramatic. She likes pretending.

PAUL. I'm not talking about that. It's other stuff.

JOANNA. You've been here what, one week?

PAUL. Okay.

JOANNA. You weren't hired for your professional expertise.

PAUL. Fine.

JOANNA. Fix the sink when it gets clogged. Change the light bulbs when they burn out.

PAUL. Got it. Fix sink. Change light bulbs.

JOANNA. Thank you. (*Awkward pause.*)

PAUL. Are you gonna wait around for her or-?

JOANNA. We were supposed to catch a movie, but I guess she for- I'll wait.

Unless - I mean, technically you live here and I don't so feel free to kick me out.

PAUL. No, you can stay. We could, I don't know . . .

JOANNA. You wanna explain how to play this dungeons thing?

PAUL. It's not the kind of thing you can just jump into. Why don't we . . . (*Paul pulls out a deck of playing cards.*) Rummy?

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JOANNA. That'll work. *(Paul deals and they start playing as they talk.)*

PAUL. So, what's the deal with cowboy talk?

JOANNA. Sometimes my mom likes to "act out" our arguments theatrically. She thinks it lightens the mood. Don't be surprised if she suddenly slips into a character. And before you say anything, she's been doing that since I was a kid so this is established crazy.

PAUL. It's nice. You two. Being so close.

JOANNA. Sometimes a little too close. To be honest, it's probably a good thing she chose to have you here instead of me.

PAUL. Why's that?

JOANNA. I was always afraid I'd have to move home one day and it'd be just the two of us. Plan 'Old Maid'. It's how I'd know my life was truly over.

PAUL. Like I did when I moved back home.

JOANNA. Crap. I'm not very good at the whole "thinking before you speak" thing.

PAUL. Don't worry about it. I find the honesty refreshing.

JOANNA. Really?

PAUL. Like an invigorating slap to the face.

JOANNA. You're welcome.

PAUL. Perhaps you should visit more frequently to inflict your honesty upon me?

JOANNA. Sure! I'll sit here and say increasingly thoughtless and obnoxious things to you when you're being perfectly nice. What's the worst that can happen, right?

PAUL. It's not bad at all. Sorry if I implied-

JOANNA. No- it's is this thing with my mom- She'll ask 'What's the worst that can happen?' and we both imagine these elaborate scenarios of how the worst actually works out beautifully.

PAUL. Like?

JOANNA. When I was a kid, I was always worried about missing the bus. To make me feel better, we'd imagine what would happen, like I'd miss the bus but a famous rock star would drive by in his limo and offer me a ride and free tickets to his concert – of course thinking about it now, that scenario has all sorts of creepy implications.

PAUL. An afterschool special in the making.

JOANNA. Or I'd miss the bus and while walking to school I'd see a burglary in progress, trip the culprit fleeing the scene, and receive an award from the mayor for my valor.

THE BEST WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN

PAUL. Followed by fame and notoriety.

JOANNA. But of course!

PAUL. If only we could imagine our way out of the worst.

JOANNA. It's a decent coping mechanism. Try it.

PAUL. Okay. Let's say I have a nervous breakdown. Lose my faculty position, have to sell my house, move back home with my parents, care for my ailing father as he deteriorates, and then start over with an entry-level job trying to gain a tiny bit of self-respect among the crap I've made of my life. *(Pause.)* Too much refreshing honesty?

JOANNA. But wait! You've forgotten the best part!

PAUL. Have I?

JOANNA. Yes! You end up living with a wacky, but delightful retired theater teacher, who has a brilliant daughter, with uncanny card playing skills, who teaches you advanced card strategy. *(Laying down her cards for the win.)* And you go on to win the world rummy championship!

PAUL. Followed by fame and notoriety?

JOANNA. But of course!

PAUL. You're right. That is the best part. *(Joanna, laughing, picks up the cards and begins shuffling. Fade to black.)*

SCENE 5

Margie's living room a few weeks later. Joanna has a laptop open on a table and moves two dining room chairs in front of it.

JOANNA. *(Yelling to her mother offstage.)* Mom, c'mon! I'm starting the video! *(Joanna pushes a button and we hear a cheery woman's voice giving energetic introductions to an exercise video. Margie enters.)*

MARGIE. I have a great idea- why don't we exercise by going to Marissa's for chocolate croissants?

JOANNA. You wanna walk fifteen blocks?

MARGIE. Walk or drive. The real exercise comes from picking all those croissant flakes off your shirt.

JOANNA. Sit down. Doctor's orders.

THE BEST WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN

MARGIE. I don't think that doctor knew what she was talking about. When I'm hungry I have trouble remembering. Chocolate would fix that.

JOANNA. She said exercise helps with memory, so we're trying it. *(Margie sighs and sits.)*

MARGIE. Yes, ma'am. *(Joanna turns up the volume on the video and we hear the instructor briefly followed by upbeat music.)*

INSTRUCTOR. *(Audio only.)* It's a beautiful day! Let's pick those apples from the tree! Pick! Pick! *(Joanna and Margie unenthusiastically reach up as if picking apples, talking over the audio.)*

MARGIE. This is insipid.

JOANNA. Work on your attitude, lady.

MARGIE. *(Mockingly cheerful.)* Isn't this stupid! Let's all follow the moron!

JOANNA. If it helps, just pretend you're picking the apples to throw at her stupid face.

MARGIE. Forget the apples. I'm pulling her hair out! Pull! Pull!

JOANNA. Yank those extensions! C'mon ladies! Yank!

MARGIE. Pull harder, Joanna! Yank that fake smile off her botox-ed face!

JOANNA. 'Oh dear! Someone's pulling my hair!'

MARGIE. 'What if they pull too hard and I lose one of my brain cells?'

JOANNA. 'Oh, that's right. I don't have any of those!' *(Margie and Joanna laugh with each other, barely keeping up with the exercise.)*

MARGIE. I'd rather turn into a dotty old woman than keep doing this.

JOANNA. Give it five minutes. Then we can say we tried it.

INSTRUCTOR. Now we're Rockettes! Let's see your kicks! Up! Up! *(Joanna and Margie start kicking.)*

MARGIE. C'mon Joanna, kick her in the butt!

JOANNA. The crotch, mom! Go for the crotch!

MARGIE. Bulls eye!

JOANNA. Yowza! *(Joanna and Margie continue kicking and laughing. We hear the front door opening and Paul enters holding a bag.)*

MARGIE. Be careful, Paul! We're crotch kicking!

PAUL. I'll stay a safe distance. *(Joanna turns down the video volume.)*

JOANNA. Leave it to my mother to turn exercising into a violent activity.

PAUL. You're practicing self-defense.

MARGIE. Exactly!

THE BEST WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN

JOANNA. Paul, I believe my mother is corrupting you.

PAUL. But she looks so innocent!

JOANNA. It's the crocheting. The repetitive action hypnotizes.

PAUL. I think she's brainwashed me to bring her sweets every time I go out. *(Paul hands Margie the bag.)*

MARGIE. At least I use my power for good.

PAUL. There's a chocolate covered marshmallow for you, Joanna. You said you liked them, so I thought- well, anyway.

JOANNA. Don't think you can bribe me into forgetting you owe me seven bucks.

PAUL. We'll see about that.

JOANNA. I'm happy to take your money whenever you want.

PAUL. Deal. Well, deal later. Oh, before I forget, I emailed your phone number to Lewis so he can call you.

JOANNA. You what?

PAUL. To talk about the movie thing. Margie said- *(Joanna glares at Margie. Paul realizes he has stepped into something.)* I wasn't supposed to do that, was I?

JOANNA. I don't blame you, Paul. You've been conned by an expert.

PAUL. I'm sorry. I thought. There's no graceful way for me to get out of this, is there?

MARGIE. *(Mockingly whispers.)* Save yourself!

PAUL. I'll see you ladies later. *(Paul exits.)*

JOANNA. Dammit, Mom.

MARGIE. You don't always do what's best for yourself.

JOANNA. Why do you insist on creating such drama?

MARGIE. *(Speaking as if in a Spanish telenova.)* I am your mother! Soy tu madre!

JOANNA. You know I only had two years of Spanish!

MARGIE. Podría ser para tu bien. *(This could be so good for you.)*

JOANNA. Ahhh- Por que importante? *(Why do you care so much about this?)*

MARGIE. Lewis te podría ayudar. *(Lewis could help you.)*

JOANNA. Silencia! Over. Done.

MARGIE. Por que?

JOANNA. No mas! Do you hear me? Comprende?

MARGIE. Ungrateful child! I'm going to sit here and eat my chocolate in silence!

JOANNA. Thank God. Leave me the marshmallow. *(Margie hands Joanna the bag.)*

THE BEST WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN

MARGIE. He's sweet on you, Joanna.

JOANNA. What?

MARGIE. I can tell.

JOANNA. Oh, please.

MARGIE. The card games, the teasing. You like him, too!

JOANNA. What are you- thirteen?

MARGIE. Ah, love.

JOANNA. Nothing's going on with me and Paul.

MARGIE. Just an observation.

JOANNA. *(Eating the candy.)* Sweet mother of God, that's good. I'll give him that.

MARGIE. Make sure to thank him for the candy.

JOANNA. I'll send a note.

MARGIE. Your father loves to make you happy. *(Pause.)*

JOANNA. What're you talking about?

MARGIE. *(Yelling.)* Stuart! Jo loves it!

JOANNA. Mom- this wasn't from dad.

MARGIE. Daddy always brings you your favorite.

JOANNA. Dad died, mom. A long time ago. Remember?

MARGIE. He just came home.

JOANNA. No, mom. That was Paul. He rents the room downstairs. Remember?

(Margie looks confused.) You remember Paul, right?

MARGIE. Of course I do, silly. I'm just playing. Don't get so upset.

JOANNA. Mom?

MARGIE. Are you gonna keep hogging the loot? *(Margie takes the bag, picks out a piece of candy and enjoys it.)*

JOANNA. Maybe you should lie down for a while. What d'ya think?

MARGIE. I really love chocolate.

JOANNA. I know you do, mom. I know you do. *(Joanna grabs a satin pillow from the couch and hugs it to her chest. Lights fade to black.)*

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