

The Most Wonderful Afternoon

by Anne Nygren Doherty



Contact:
Anne Nygen Doherty
(415)385-7293
anne@nmtsf.org

THE MOST WONDERFUL AFTERNOON

CHARACTERS

MAGGIE: This slightly frowzy maternal narrator appears 55-65 but makes references as if she is much older. Intelligent and funny, she hides complex feelings and thoughts behind her polite, passive-aggressive, middle class veneer. In flashback scenes, we see her play herself near this same age, as well as in young motherhood and middle age.

BONNIE: MAGGIE'S daughter, a painter and spiritual seeker who "merges" with Nature. She appears as 5 years old, 9 years old, 16-17 years old, as a young bride, and as a young mother.

MA: MAGGIE'S mother claims to have Second Sight. Accustomed to tragedy, she makes the most of it. We see her in her 50s/60s and mid to late 70s.

CHARLES: MAGGIE's husband and former WWII soldier. Nicknamed "The General" for good reasons, Charles appears as a young dad and in middle age.

JASON: BONNIE'S yoga teacher fiance/husband, late 20s and mid 30s. A spiritual seeker whose naivety gives him confidence.

KATHRYN: MAGGIE's best friend who harbors a painful secret and comes back from the dead to save her. Once stuck in the past, she displays her spiritual freedom through humor.

SETTING

The present (2016-9): a stage or club or community center.
Flashbacks: Deerfield, Illinois

There is no SET to speak of. Just a folding table, an easel, the "portrait" and props. SOUND plays an important role in establishing tone and mood. One might say that Sound is almost a character; certainly it's an extension of Maggie's unconscious.

MAGIC helps tell the story. Treat it as if it is real. (It is.)

ACT BREAK

This version contains no act break. If an act break is desired, dramatic material exists to seamlessly provide one. In fact, because the lead role is demanding, an act break may be preferred by most actresses. Without a break, the play runs 85 minutes.

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

I wrote THE MOST WONDERFUL AFTERNOON in response to the 13 deaths of friends and family, plus my own near death, that occurred in an 18 month period somewhere around the blur of 2013. From this I learned three things: there are indeed, as Shakespeare said, "more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in [our] philosophy"; those "things" can be found in Nature; and, that if one can accept death before it happens, it's a gift to those one leaves behind. One more thing: laughing helps. There's much more humor in this play than one may perceive at first glance. When the play isn't funny, it should feel fun. With the use of magic, the ghost, and the blurring of time lines, it should feel like something surprising and wonderful is just a moment away. Besides, playing up the humor will make the end all the more poignant. Too serious a tone could kill it. And the author has seen enough death already!

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2:00 pm, a rainy spring afternoon. An auditorium or stage, as might be part of a community center. Outside, thunder, wind. Center stands an empty easel. Off-stage, someone loudly bumps into chairs and generally pokes around. MAGGIE, the noise maker, an older woman with damp, windblown hair, wearing worn, dated rain gear, and carrying an umbrella and a large, sturdy tote bag, tentatively and exasperatedly pokes her nose onto the stage. Then, squinting into the lights...

MAGGIE

I'm Maggie Caldwell. Bonnie's mother. You're all here for the auction, right? Wish I could see your faces.

(exasperated, worried)

... Igor... Mr. Zakrevsky... The man in charge... said he'd meet me at the stage door. But he doesn't seem to be here yet.

(peering out)

Are my grandkids here? Is anyone I know here?

(pulling out a dated cell phone)

I tried calling Igor, but... my little dot things are gone. Any of you have dots...?

No answer. A rumbling.

MAGGIE

The last few days have been so weird. Can you believe they're claiming this is "just" a tornado watch? My mother's cousin was blown clear to another state during a tornado watch. They found his body in a tree.

Thunder. MAGGIE bustles off and returns with a card table and a cloth, which she sets up as she speaks.

MAGGIE

Right before I left the house, I got a call from our caterer saying their van was stuck in a flooded underpass. I told them, "Don't risk your lives saving our champaign and caviar!"

(spreading the cloth)

I wanted to have the auction at my house where you could get a flavor for how Bonnie grew up. Igor said there wouldn't be room for you, so I brought some homey touches. This was Bonnie's grandmother's. Bonnie used to say her real talent came from her.

(pause)

Igor was right about the crowd... but what is it with Russians and caviar?

(pause)

Sorry. When I'm nervous I can't control what comes out of my mouth. Why, when I was president of the Deerfield Tuesday Afternoon Ladies Club, I once introduced Mrs. Peters as Mrs. Pecker... I like people, but I hate public speaking.

Rumble. MAGGIE ducks out and returns with a folding chair.

MAGGIE

In fact, I'm more afraid of public speaking than I am of my own death!

She goes off and returns with a large canvas, covered with a rain spattered cloth. Wind.

MAGGIE

I was afraid "she" and I would never make it. But here she is - what you're waiting for. Bonnie's last painting.

(heartbroken)

Letting go of it is the hardest thing I've ever done...

She sets the painting on the easel.

MAGGIE

Bonnie finished her a life time ago, right before she left us. It's the only painting of hers I own. I keep it in my house, in a special place, where I talk with her once in a while.

(gently touching the painting)

It's a self-portrait. Quite lifelike. Especially the eyes. They glow... Igor was the first gallery owner to recognize my daughter's potential. He's seen everything she's ever done. Except this. Imagine the look on his face if I started without him...

(pretending)

"Sold to the man with the red beard for \$250,000! Make the check out to Maggie Caldwell!"

Suddenly, she becomes aware that a note on feminine stationery has appeared on the floor....

MAGGIE

Was that there before?

She touches it. The lights flicker.
MAGGIE pulls out brown readers.

MAGGIE

“We can’t let the weather hold us back. Tell them about Bonnie’s background.”
(frustrated)

What?...I’m sure Igor thinks a good story will add to the what’s-it-called “provenance.”
But I told him I’d never rehash Bonnie’s whole... not in public.

(pause)

I don’t care how much Igor owes the IRS. I mean...

MAGGIE circles back to the painting.

MAGGIE

I feel for you people, I really do. Bonnie and her work must mean a lot to you or you wouldn’t have braved the storm...But I just...can’t...okay... one story...and only until Igor shows up.

She puts the note down, takes off her rain gear, and composes herself.

MAGGIE

When I married Charles - that’s Bonnie’s father - we moved to Deerfield because it was far from the city and because my best friend Kathryn, her husband Bob, and all our neighbors were just like Charles and me. I don’t mean we were Irish or Italian...I mean, thanks to the war, we all had some horrible trauma we only spoke of if we were blind drunk; and the rest of the time, we listened to old Blue Eyes, clipped coupons and made babies, which, frankly, is a fun way to spend your...sorry.

(pause, retreating to painting)

... I mean, in Deerfield, Bonnie had a Forest Preserve behind her house. So it’s no surprise she favored landscapes, and even her few portraits were heavily influenced by trees and animals and birds. One might think life in Deerfield would have been utter bliss...

(incredulously)

But my mother was right: Life in the suburbs means you are always worried about driving in bad weather.

MAGGIE touches the cloth, as if she’s going to reveal the painting, but the second she touches it...Thunder. Flashing lights. Screeching brakes! YOUNG CHARLES in business attire, appears with MAGGIE, who is suddenly young and very pregnant.

YOUNG MAGGIE

The doctor said I'm fine. After I hit it, I had a contraction. But we're fine now.

YOUNG CHARLES

Good. I don't want what happens to Kathryn all the time to happen to you. Are you sure it was a fawn?

YOUNG MAGGIE

It was snowing so hard, I had to get out to see. Yes, it was a fawn. A spotted white tale fawn!

YOUNG CHARLES

But aren't fawns usually born in spring?

YOUNG MAGGIE

If you don't believe me, call the sheriff. He's the one who scooped it off the road. ... Charles, maybe this wasn't a normal fawn. When I saw the light leave her eyes, I felt something...leap from her right into...

YOUNG CHARLES

That's Ma talking, not us.

YOUNG MAGGIE

That's what you always say when I...

YOUNG CHARLES

(overlapping)
...when you kill deer with a station wagon?

YOUNG MAGGIE

That's not fair, Charles.

YOUNG CHARLES

I'm just trying to get you to focus on reality. If there's one thing I learned in the army it's the importance of seeing things the way they are. If you don't, it's not just your life you could be sacrificing, but a whole company of sons, husbands, fathers and...

YOUNG MAGGIE

Okay, okay! It wasn't a sign. It was a horrible accident. I shouldn't have gone out in the storm in my condition.

(pause)

But, Charles! Why did *THAT* fawn die in front of *OUR* car? Why would any deer with a will to live put even one hoof outside the forest preserve?

YOUNG CHARLES

Honey, deer are vermin. They don't think. They see a light, and they rush towards it.

YOUNG MAGGIE

I hate animals. You can't trust them not to run toward the light.

CHARLES and the pregnancy disappear. Back to the auction. Flashing lights. A rumble.

MAGGIE

(snapping out of it, shaken, to audience)

...Was I just struck by lightning? I heard under the right conditions you can get struck even indoors. ...no, probably foggy thinking. That happens at my age. I'm older than I look. And it really bothers me I can't see who I'm talking to. I think I was telling you about Bonnie and Deerfield and why animals shouldn't drive in bad weather. I mean...

(pause)

Don't worry. Nothing's going to stop me from letting go of Bonnie, I mean, her painting. And I won't let Igor down. It's the right thing. For Igor. For me. For all of us.

(pause)

But have you ever felt like someone was speaking through you? Like you're possessed by a spirit from beyond the grave? I just...relived a powerful memory...And now you know about the fawn when I've never told anyone about it before. Except Charles. And Ma. And Bonnie. And Kathryn.

(an idea)

You know, I told Kathryn about it once when we were both blind drunk... I mean...

MAGGIE, thinking, circles back to the painting again and examines it with her eyes.

MAGGIE

If I was Kathryn, I'd be too shy to speak. But if I was Ma, I wouldn't be scared. I'd just yammer on and on. She was Irish, born here. She thought leprechauns were hooey, but she believed in second sight. Her eyes would go gray, and she'd spout garbage. She called it her "Gift," but it boiled down to ESP. She said all mothers have it.

She touches the painting, and the second she does...Thunder. Lighting. MA appears in her kitchen with a cup of tea. Maggie's pregnant again.

MA

All mothers have it.
(ironically, but kindly)

Even you!

YOUNG MAGGIE

But...Charles and I don't believe in things like that...

MA

Really?... Then why did you drive into the city to see me - when you hate the city and you're just days from having your third child. After what happened last month in that blizzard, I'd think if you just wanted to talk, you'd stay home put your feet up and dial the phone, instead of...

YOUNG MAGGIE

(urgently)

Night after night, ever since the accident I dream I'm naked in the garden of Eden, tasting the fruit of a forbidden crab apple tree, when an evil fawn comes and nibbles it all to the ground. I wake in a cold sweat and...

MA

And?

YOUNG MAGGIE

What does it mean? Are the dreams a message from the baby, or for the baby...or was the death of the fawn some kind of sign? I didn't tell you before, but when the fawn died, I felt something...

MA raises her hand for silence and closes her eyes, as if listening to an inner voice. Then, her eyes pop open abruptly...as if she received a shock.

YOUNG MAGGIE

Well...?

MA

(evasively, getting more tea)

I think... I think Mother Nature isn't pretty. And you kids should've thought of that before you left the city for that high priced cemetery.

YOUNG MAGGIE

But Deerfield is considered one of the...

MA

(overlapping)

... one of the best places in four counties to hunt wildlife with a station wagon. Don't be stupid, Maggie. They've got icy roads in the suburbs just

like anywhere else. You were nuts to drive in your condition. Not only did you put the baby in danger, you could've wound up like...

YOUNG MAGGIE

...like Casey? You tell everybody what happened to him is a blessing.

MA

It's the kind of blessing I'd rather not have two of. The very same day your brother went to sea, I heard the Lord whisper in my ear: "You can't control the weather, but you *CAN* be prepared!"

YOUNG MAGGIE

I know.

MA

I wrote to warn him, but the letter was lost. A storm came, and he went out on the deck without thinking where his feet were going, and...

YOUNG MAGGIE

I was there when you had the vision. I was there when the telegram came. We weren't talking about Casey, we were talking about my dream, and the fawn, and now we're hashing over what happened to Casey like it was yesterday.

MA

I'm not changing the subject. I'm talking about motherhood and my gift, and the unavoidable tragedies that the Lord...

YOUNG MAGGIE

(exasperated)

Why do you and your whole generation have to go on about the tragedies of the past? To my generation, that's like dropping a ton of bricks on your own head. Charles saw enough death in the war. Did you know when we got engaged, we took an oath we'd keep our children away from Death and all related activities until at least 21?

MA

Really?! Then why, from all possible careers, did Mr. Bronze Star choose estate planner? All the man does is give advice to the rich and powerful about how to prepare for the end. He ought to call himself the Perry Mason of northern Illinois because every time he walks into a drawing room somebody keels over. And why didn't you listen to the weather report the other day before you got in the car and killed an innocent...?

YOUNG MAGGIE

(picking up her purse)

Better yet, why did I come here? I should've stayed home, put my feet up...and...For gosh sake, Ma, was the deer a sign or not?

MA

(defensive)

What do you care? You don't really believe in my Gift. The Lord only sends signs to people who are paying attention.

YOUNG MAGGIE

Then Charles was right. The deer wasn't a sign. There's no such thing as signs. It really was just a terrible accident.

(leaving, angrily)

You know, fighting with you makes the rest of life seem easy.

MA

That's what I'm here for. To make your life better than mine. No matter how tough it is for either one of us to believe.

Thunder. MA disappears. So does the pregnancy. MAGGIE snaps out of the memory and dives for her thermos. A swig. Wind.

MAGGIE

It's lemon-flavored instant Lipton - used to be all the rage. Now, it's... an acquired taste.

(pause)

There's got to be a good reason for what's happening to me. I can't explain why, but right before the memories come, I...

MAGGIE confronts the picture then bravely touches it. She touches it again and again. Nothing.

MAGGIE

Huh.

Peeking under the cover (without revealing the painting), she examines it - while a large, bright cookie tin magically appears on the table. Turning back to the audience, MAGGIE discovers the tin.

MAGGIE

(remembering, questioning, excited)

Fabulous! So I must've brought them inside after all. With everything I packed, I forgot!

She opens the tin and grabs a cookie.

MAGGIE

We've got cookies! I don't believe in signs... but a couple days ago my arthritis just vanished. No kidding! I felt like I'd drunk from the fountain of youth. So I got out my famous chocolate chip cookie recipe and made enough for Igor and the grandkids. Igor adores them. Everyone does. It's been 10 years since I've had this much energy - I really am older than I look.

(pause)

I'm giving the grandkids my commission on the sale for college. I mean the one that's in college and the other who's about to go. The others are working and the oldest is expecting her first and ... My brother's still alive, if you can believe it, but he's cared for in a trust Charles set up ... I mean, I've got no use for money because nobody needs me anymore.

(exhausted, embarrassed by her verbal spew)

So please! If you eat, have at 'em!

While MAGGIE passes around the cookies to the audience, a pair of hands appears in the air behind her. The hands hold a pen and write another note on that distinctive stationery. MAGGIE is unaware.

MAGGIE

Igor must be in a panic. I hope he doesn't abandon his car and walk. I don't want him to wind up like my cousin. Or brother. Before Igor gets here, I'd better clear up what I said.

As she speaks, MAGGIE takes out items from her bag: a first aid-kit, radio, toilet paper, flashlight, thermos.

MAGGIE

Igor's a marvelous man. I'd do anything for him. But his gallery's on the skids - uh, in decline. He's getting old and fell behind on his taxes. He lost everything. So a few days ago, he asked if he could auction the painting because, frankly, the money would save his Rooskie derriere... I mean... Can you imagine a call like that? We were both in tears. But when he said we could have a party with champagne, I thought, what the hell...he's getting the painting in my will anyway.

She pulls her will from her bag, as the hands fold up the note.

MAGGIE

I got my will right here. Your will is #2 on the county's list for what to pack in your emergency kit. Number one is those yucky little food bars...

The hands flick the note to the table, where MAGGIE suddenly sees it. She looks around to see who delivered it.

MAGGIE

"Tell them about the day you knew Bonnie was special... And don't change the subject."

Lights flicker. Her fingers linger. The paper is familiar.

MAGGIE

You know, whoever's taking these messages for Igor shouldn't be so sneaky...uh, shy... and just tap me on the shoulder so we can send a message back. I'm not changing the subject, but you know what my mouth wants to say about Bonnie being special?

"Whiffle balls!" Those little plastic baseballs with the holes!

(realizing)

The barbeque! Bonnie was five. Ma and Casey were there. And Kathryn came without Bob.

(examining the note)

Poor, quiet Kathryn. Ever since she left us, not a day goes by when I don't wish...

The hands materialize into KATHRYN, who remains unseen and unheard by MAGGIE.

MAGGIE

What I mean is, that was the day. The sun was out and the birds were singing. That was the day I knew!

KATHRYN waves her hand. Thunder! MA appears, talking to MAGGIE and KATHRYN, who fiddles with her glasses as she silently takes her place in the memory. A waiter appears to signify Casey. YOUNG CHARLES tends the barbecue. Birds sing softly.

MA

That was the day I knew! All the way across the ocean, I felt the raging storm, and when my poor boy fell, I felt a sudden pain...

(indicating her heart)