

VERY BAD BIRTHDAY PRESENTS

By Bradley Walton

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VERY BAD BIRTHDAY PRESENTS

A One Act Comedy

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SYNOPSIS: Tammy’s little cousin is turning twelve tomorrow. Tammy hasn’t been twelve for a solid four years, and she has no idea what to buy for a present, but she’s under a lot of pressure to make sure it’s something good. Now, she and her friend Owen have half an hour to figure something out before their ride picks them up from the store. Neither of them have any ideas. But other people in the store do, and they are very strange people with very bad ideas. The question is...can Tammy and Owen come up with anything better?

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(2-3 female, 1 male, 1-4 either, 0-8 extras; gender flexible, doubling possible)

TAMMY (f)	A teenager trying to find a birthday present for her twelve-year-old cousin. <i>(161 lines)</i>
OWEN (m).....	A teenager, Tammy’s friend. <i>(149 lines)</i>
CLERK (m/f)	A clerk in the store where Tammy and Owen are shopping. <i>(34 lines)</i>
CUSTOMER (m/f).....	A customer in the store where Tammy and Owen are shopping. <i>(8 lines)</i>
AUNT REBECCA /UNCLE RALPH (m/f).....	Tammy’s aunt or uncle. <i>(11 lines)</i>
AMBER (f)	A twelve-year-old girl. <i>(23 lines)</i>
AMBER’S DAD or MOM (m/f).....	Amber’s parent. <i>(18 lines)</i>
LORI (f)	Tammy’s twelve-year-old cousin. <i>(7 lines)</i>
EXTRAS (m/f).....	Optional. 0-8 Shoppers in the store where Tammy and Owen are shopping. <i>(Non-Speaking.)</i>

DOUBLING OPTIONS: CLERK, CUSTOMER, REBECCA, LORI, and either AMBER or MOM can all be played by the same actress. CLERK, CUSTOMER, RALPH, and DAD could all be played by the same actor. Other combinations are possible.

DURATION: 30 Minutes

STAGING

The only thing required to stage the play is a box in which to put props. It needs to be big enough to hold a furnace filter. It is preferable, although not required, that the box be hinged, as it doubles as the trunk of a car. Since the play is set in a large department store, there can be optional department signs to the effect of “Health and Beauty,” “Electronics,” “Pets,” etc.

PROPERTIES

ONSTAGE

- Toothpaste
- Green mouthwash
- Furnace filter

PERSONAL

- Purses (2) – TAMMY and REBECCA
- Cell phone – TAMMY

COSTUMES

OWEN/TAMMY – are both contemporary teenagers and dressed accordingly.

CLERK – is dressed as a retail worker in a large department store.

CUSTOMER – is a bit eccentric, and his or her attire may reflect this.

AUNT REBECCA/UNCLE RALPH – is very uptight and should be nicely dressed.

AMBER – is only twelve but should have a bit of either Goth or juvenile delinquent vibe.

AMBER'S MOM or DAD – should look at least a little disheveled.

LORI - is REBECCA/RALPH'S twelve-year-old daughter and should be dressed very nicely.

AUTHOR NOTES

This play came about as a result of my daughter and I discussing possible birthday presents for one of her friends. I thought a box of cat litter would make a great gag gift. Also, we had a furnace filter that had been sitting in the trunk of our car for months, and I suggested that as well. This conversation occurred while we were out shopping with my wife. In retrospect, she was remarkably tolerant in putting up with the two of us.

AT RISE: *A box, preferably hinged, down center, containing the props that will be used in the play. There may also be signs such as "Health and Beauty," "Electronics," "Pets," etc. that indicate the play is set in a large department store, but these are optional. OWEN and TAMMY enter. TAMMY is carrying a small purse.*

OWEN: When's your cousin's birthday party?

TAMMY: Tomorrow.

OWEN: And you waited until today to buy a present?

TAMMY: I'm terrible. I know.

OWEN: Not really. I probably would've done the same thing. How old is she gonna be?

TAMMY: Lori will be twelve.

OWEN: That's a tough age to shop for. Any idea what you're going to get her?

TAMMY: None.

OWEN: Shouldn't you maybe have figured that out before now? Especially since your mom is picking us up from the store in half an hour.

TAMMY: The movie we just saw was longer than I was expecting.

OWEN: That's not what I meant.

TAMMY: I was dodging the question. Wanna help me brainstorm?

OWEN: What do twelve-year-old girls like?

TAMMY: I have no idea.

OWEN: What did you like when you were twelve?

TAMMY: That was four years ago. I don't remember.

OWEN: How can you not remember?

TAMMY: I was in 7th grade. That was middle school. I've spent the last four years trying to block that part of my life out of my memory.

OWEN: How about music? Everybody likes music.

TAMMY: Mostly, yeah.

OWEN: What bands did you like when you were twelve?

TAMMY: Bands that I would never admit to liking now.

OWEN: So get her a CD by a band that you would never admit to liking now. Problem solved.

TAMMY: I don't know what kind of music she likes.

OWEN: Don't worry about what kind of music she likes. Get her something by a band that you know you don't like and we're done.

TAMMY: No. I feel like I should at least put some thought into it.

OWEN: You will have put thought into it. You'll have thought of a band you don't like.

TAMMY: And I'd feel weird buying music by a band I don't like just because I don't like them. That seems messed up. And what if somebody I know sees me buying it at the checkout?

OWEN: Then you tell them it's a birthday present for your twelve-year-old cousin.

TAMMY: But what if they know my cousin and they make fun of her for her taste in music and it's not even a band that she likes? Or worse...what if it's one that she does like and I've inadvertently shared her secret with the world? No. I can't do that.

OWEN: Why?

TAMMY: Because the one thing I clearly remember about being twelve is the immense pressure to conform socially, and that included music in a big way. So, no. It's too risky.

OWEN: Get her a gift card to an online music store.

TAMMY: I don't wanna get her a gift card! That's lazy! That would REALLY make it look like I haven't put any thought into the present.

OWEN: So you're more worried about what your choice of gift says about you than about whether your cousin likes it?

TAMMY: Not *more* worried. Just as worried. And her parents are really judgmental.

OWEN: So you're actually buying a birthday present to make four people happy...you *and* your cousin *and* your aunt and uncle?

TAMMY: Right.

OWEN: You know buying one thing for four people makes the job five times as hard?

TAMMY: No, I didn't know that. Is that some kind of statistically-supported fact?

OWEN: No. That's common sense. However many people you're trying to please, the level of difficulty increases exponentially.

TAMMY: Then if I'm trying to please four people, shouldn't that make it sixteen times harder, instead of five?

OWEN: I was trying not to crush your soul. Also, I don't do math.

TAMMY: It's not hard math.

OWEN: It's still math.

TAMMY: I think we should avoid music.

OWEN: You're the one buying the present.

TAMMY: No music.

OWEN: So then what?

TAMMY: I don't know.

OWEN: Okay, well, my mom asked me to pick up some toothpaste, so I'm gonna go do that.

TAMMY: Good plan. Let's get toothpaste and maybe I'll come up with an idea.

OWEN: Are you hoping to be inspired by something in the toiletries?

TAMMY: I was thinking maybe I'd see something between here and there.

OWEN: It's not that far to the toothpaste.

TAMMY: But this store sells everything. There's bound to be something along the way.

OWEN: I'm sure there'll be lots of things. Whether they're things you'd want to give a twelve-year-old girl is a whole other matter.

TAMMY: Or maybe there'll be something in the toothpaste aisle that inspires me.

OWEN: Seriously?

TAMMY: Yeah.

OWEN: Like what?

TAMMY: I don't know. We're not in the toothpaste aisle. We're still at the front of the store.

OWEN: What could you possibly see in the toothpaste aisle that would—

TAMMY: Like dental floss might make me think of rope, or something like that.

OWEN: You want to give your twelve-year-old cousin rope for her birthday?

TAMMY: No! It was an example.

OWEN: Can you imagine your cousin unwrapping a present on her birthday and inside is coil of rope? The look she'd have on her face?

TAMMY: You don't even know her! How would you know what the look on her face would be?

VERY BAD BIRTHDAY PRESENTS

OWEN: What would the look on any twelve-year-old girl's face be if somebody gave her a coil of rope for her birthday? Unless you intended it to be a gag gift. Which might be kind of fun.

TAMMY: Let's just go to the toothpaste aisle. Okay?

OWEN: And see what we see along the way?

TAMMY: Yes.

They start walking through the store.

OWEN: *(Pointing.)* There's the new *(Insert name of popular adult writer or book series.)* novel.

TAMMY: I don't think that'll fly.

OWEN: Ab toners.

TAMMY: Twelve-year-olds don't tone their abs.

OWEN: Six packs of Coke are on sale.

TAMMY: No.

OWEN: Mascara.

TAMMY: No.

OWEN: Soy protein.

TAMMY: No!

OWEN: Okay. Here's the toothpaste aisle. Start feeling inspired.

TAMMY: *(Staring at an imaginary rack of toothbrushes.)* Don't rush me.

OWEN takes a tube of toothpaste out of the property box on the stage.

OWEN: And here's toothpaste for my mom. I'm done here. You?

TAMMY: I'm thinking.

OWEN: I can tell. I've never seen anybody stare so hard at a rack of toothbrushes in my life.

TAMMY: She's too old for any kind of gift with any of the characters on the kids' toothbrushes.

OWEN: She might still be on the borderline. But if she did like any of them, she'd probably never admit it. So I think we can rule out anything *(Insert name[s] of two girls' licensed properties.)*.

TAMMY: Are you getting any ideas from this aisle?

OWEN: Me? Are you really asking that question?

TAMMY: Yes.

OWEN: A javelin.

TAMMY: What?

OWEN: A javelin. You know...one of those spear-type things they throw as a field sport.

TAMMY: Where did you come up with javelins?

OWEN: Looking at the toothpicks.

TAMMY: How about a real suggestion, please?

OWEN: That was a real suggestion. You didn't say it had to be good.

TAMMY: How about a good one, then?

A STORE CLERK enters.

OWEN: I don't have any. Why don't you solicit a second opinion? There's somebody who works here. Ask him.

TAMMY: I don't want to ask him.

OWEN: It's his job to help you.

TAMMY: Helping me pick a birthday present is not part of his job.

OWEN: It's not like he's doing anything.

TAMMY: I'd feel weird.

OWEN: Okay. Fine.

TAMMY: Thank you.

OWEN: *(To CLERK.)* Excuse me.

TAMMY: *(To OWEN, alarmed.)* What're you doing?

CLERK: Yeah?

OWEN: My friend here has a question for you.

CLERK: Sure. What can I help you with?

TAMMY gives OWEN a dirty look.

TAMMY: Um...this is probably going to sound weird, but...

CLERK: That's okay. I've been asked plenty of weird questions working here.

TAMMY: This is kind of out of left field.

CLERK: It's probably not going to come anywhere near some of the stuff people have hit me with.

TAMMY: Well...

CLERK: Are you going to ask me for a tricycle with training wheels?

TAMMY: No.

CLERK: Are you going to ask if you can put a goldfish on layaway?

TAMMY: No.

CLERK: Trust me. I've heard it all.

TAMMY: Do you have any suggestions for a birthday present for a twelve-year-old girl?

CLERK: Are you serious?

TAMMY: Yeah. Is that too weird?

CLERK: That's like asking me the meaning of life. Or how to calculate the exact resale value of a partly used, 100-count box of tea bags without knowing what brand they are. It's not a weird question. It's a hard question.

TAMMY: I'm sorry.

CLERK: Fortunately, I have an answer.

TAMMY: You do?

CLERK: I've worked in retail a long time. Ever since I dropped out of high school. I have a lot of experience. A lot of insight into human nature that I've gained as a result of working in this store. Observing people. Talking to people. Learning their habits. Figuring out their hidden desires. And I know exactly what twelve-year-old girls really want.

TAMMY: What?

CLERK: Mouthwash.

TAMMY: *What?*

CLERK: Mouthwash.

TAMMY: It sounded like you said "mouthwash."

CLERK: That's exactly what I said.

OWEN: Mouthwash?

CLERK: Mouthwash.

TAMMY: Okay. Um. Thanks for the tip. Appreciate your time.

CLERK: What's the matter?

TAMMY: Nothing.

CLERK: Don't you believe me?

TAMMY: Sure, I believe you.

CLERK: You don't act like you believe me. You act like you want to get as far away from me as possible.

TAMMY: No. No. Not at all.

CLERK: So if I get right up here like this and rub my head against your back (*Rubs head against TAMMY'S back.*) that's okay?

TAMMY: (*Trying not to squirm.*) Uh...sure?

CLERK: Cool. I'll do it some more. (*Rubs head against TAMMY'S back again.*) You have a nice back.

TAMMY: Thanks.

CLERK: I still don't get the impression you're trusting me about the mouthwash.

TAMMY: The suggestion seems a little...outside the box.

CLERK: It is outside the box. You work in retail long enough, that's how you learn to think. Because this store...it is the box. It's commercial culture solidified and in your face. Right here. Right now. Every second of every day that you're at work. Only, your mind can't take the box. Your mind wants to escape. So you learn to think outside the box. Because your mind wants to be free.

TAMMY: Obviously, you have a very free mind.

CLERK: Thank you. You see, little girls who are almost teenage girls...they want to fit in. They don't want to stick out and be a target and get made fun of. And nothing makes you stick out in middle school like bad breath. But I ask you...who's going to think to buy mouthwash for a twelve-year-old girl?

TAMMY: Her mom?

CLERK: That's right. But moms aren't cool. Mouthwash coming from mom...that's got a stigma attached to it. Nobody wants to go to school smelling like mom's mouthwash. So the kid is torn. Does she go to school and get made fun of because she has bad breath, or does she go to school and get made fun of because she smells like mom's mouthwash? But if some caring soul has the thought and the insight to give that girl mouthwash for her birthday...problem solved. Because it's okay to smell like birthday present mouthwash.

OWEN: What if it's the same mouthwash that mom bought?

CLERK: Doesn't matter. If it was a gift from somebody else, then it's okay.

OWEN: How are the kids at school going to know that?

CLERK: Pre-teen girls can sense these things.

OWEN: Oh...kay...

VERY BAD BIRTHDAY PRESENTS

CLERK: Trust me. I have watched and I have learned.

TAMMY: Right.

CLERK: You still haven't picked up a bottle of mouthwash.

TAMMY: I guess I should do that.

OWEN: Which one do you recommend?

CLERK: The name brand, mint-flavored, green stuff.

OWEN: Are you sure green is a socially acceptable color?

CLERK: It's more acceptable than yellow.

OWEN: What about the purple mouthwash?

CLERK: Stains your teeth.

OWEN: Does it have to be the name brand mouthwash? What about the generic store brand with the same ingredients?

CLERK: Are you kidding? Can you imagine a twelve-year-old girl opening a present on her birthday and inside the box is a bottle of store-brand mouthwash? She'd be humiliated!

The CLERK takes a bottle of mouthwash out of the properties box.

OWEN: Of course she would.

CLERK: (*Handing the mouthwash to TAMMY.*) Here.

TAMMY: Thanks.

CLERK: Don't mention it.

CLERK exits.

TAMMY: What am I gonna do with this?

OWEN: Give it to your cousin.

TAMMY: I can't give it to my cousin!

OWEN: Why not?

TAMMY: It's a bottle of mouthwash!

OWEN: It's the perfect gift!

TAMMY: What?

OWEN: Weren't you paying any attention to what the sales clerk said?

TAMMY: Yes! I was paying plenty of attention! Weren't you?

OWEN: Of course I was. Why?

TAMMY: Because you seem to have missed the fact that he's crazy!

OWEN: Just because he's crazy doesn't mean he's not right.

TAMMY: Do you really think that?

OWEN: No.

TAMMY: Then why—

OWEN: Because we only have about twenty minutes before your mom picks us up.

TAMMY: Would you really give a young girl mouthwash for her birthday just to be done with the shopping?

OWEN: I'm not the one giving it to her. It'd be on your head.

TAMMY: I'm not doing it!

OWEN: So put the mouthwash back on the shelf.

TAMMY puts the mouthwash back in the property box. A CUSTOMER enters.

CUSTOMER: Excuse me. I was in the next aisle and I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with the sales clerk.

TAMMY: Um. Yeah.

CUSTOMER: Mouthwash? As a birthday present? That's the most ridiculous thing I've heard in my life.

TAMMY: Yeah. That was kind of bizarre.

CUSTOMER: If you want the ideal present for a twelve-year-old girl, get her a box of cat litter.

TAMMY: What?

CUSTOMER: Seriously. You can't go wrong.

TAMMY: My cousin's family doesn't have a cat.

CUSTOMER: Even better! Think: It's a large, heavy box. She'll barely be able to lift it and she'll go nuts trying to figure out what's inside. She'll either open it before all of her other presents, or save it for last, and when she rips off the wrapping paper...it's a box of cat litter! She'll look at it for a couple of seconds, trying to figure out if it's a joke, and then if you're lucky, she'll dump it all out on the floor, to see if there's something hidden inside. It'll be hysterical. She'll remember her twelfth birthday for the rest of her life! And she'll learn a valuable lesson.

OWEN: What lesson?

CUSTOMER: You can't judge something by its weight or size...it's what's on the inside that counts. And if she dumps the litter onto the floor, she'll learn two more lessons.

OWEN: What are those?

CUSTOMER: That not every cloud has a silver lining, and that it's a major pain in the rear end to clean up a whole box of cat litter. Especially if there's carpet on the floor.

TAMMY: That's terrible.

CUSTOMER: I know it might seem harsh, but really, it's not. Kids these days are coddled and have a horrible sense of entitlement. It's good to take them down a notch once in a while. Sure, she'll think you're a jerk who gave her cat litter for her birthday, and she probably won't speak to you for years, but when she gets older, she'll understand that the real present you gave her was the gift of character building. You think about it for a while, and you'll realize that I'm right.

The CUSTOMER exits. TAMMY is stunned.

OWEN: You okay?

TAMMY: Did I actually just have a conversation with a complete stranger about giving my cousin cat litter as a birthday present, or did I imagine it?

OWEN: I don't know if it really qualifies as a conversation...I think she did most of the talking.

TAMMY: So I didn't just zone out and have a really vivid daydream?

OWEN: No.

TAMMY: I was afraid of that.

OWEN: How is it the cat litter suggestion makes you question reality, but not the mouthwash?

TAMMY: Because the reasoning behind the mouthwash actually made some small amount of sense. It was a completely messed up kind of sense, but I could follow the thinking.

OWEN: I'm guessing cat litter lady hates kids?

TAMMY: Either that or she's a public school teacher.

OWEN: Probably both, then

TAMMY: This isn't what I was expecting when I asked if you minded going to the store with me after the movie was over.

OWEN: So what's it going to be...mouthwash or cat litter?

TAMMY: Neither!

OWEN: I guess this means we keep wandering aimlessly through the store?

TAMMY: We have an aim.

OWEN: Right. We—meaning you—just have no idea how to achieve it.

AUNT REBECCA enters, carrying a purse. She looks around but does not see OWEN and TAMMY.

TAMMY: Ohmygosh.

OWEN: What?

TAMMY: That's my Aunt Rebecca!

OWEN: Is that a bad thing?

TAMMY: She's my cousin Lori's mom!

OWEN: That's great!

TAMMY: That's awful!

OWEN: No, it's not! You can ask her what to get Lori.

TAMMY: But then she'll know that I haven't gotten anything yet and that I don't know what to get!

OWEN: So?

TAMMY: She'll think I'm a horrible cousin.

OWEN: I don't think this is as big of a deal as you're making it out to be.

TAMMY: I told you... they're very judgmental.

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