

THE END OF THE LINE

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Greg Cummings

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SYNOPSIS: Sometimes you just want to be left alone. Chuck is very self-conscious about his raspy voice and refuses to answer any of the numerous phone messages left by Nancy, the Welcome Wagon lady. We all go through various trials and tribulations in our lives, but Nancy's attempts to reach Chuck take the cake. As Chuck replays all of Nancy's messages, he prepares for her imminent arrival.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(ONE MAN, ONE WOMAN)

CHUCK (m)..... 39, new in town. Embarrassed by his raspy voice, he has become a virtual shut-in. *(18 lines)*

NANCY (f) 39, a Welcome Wagon Lady who loves her job. Maybe too much. *(15 lines)*

SETTING: Charles "Chuck" Wright's tiny studio apartment in Dayton, Ohio. It is relatively dark. The curtains are drawn. His furniture consists mainly of boxes. One box serves as a table, on which sits a telephone and a telephone answering machine. Another box-as-table holds a loaf of white bread, some mustard packets, and a block of American cheese. Other boxes are strewn about the room, some open, some not. Some are boxes from his move, others are clearly boxes from local area Dayton merchants.

AT RISE:

CHUCK sits on an inflatable chair, near the cheese and the answering machine. He wears black socks, shorts, and a t-shirt concealed under a worn bathrobe. CHUCK is engrossed, gleefully contemplating his wristwatch. Soon, his watch alarm beeps. CHUCK'S voice is a coarse, grating, nearly unbearable rasp.

CHUCK: *(Excited.) Ten minutes 'til three! (Turns off his watch alarm. He pushes the play button on his answering machine. It beeps. CHUCK speaks to it. With love.) If music be the food of love, play on! Play on, Nancy!*

From a nearby gift box, he takes a second inflatable chair and begins inflating it. The answering machine plays the bouncy voice of NANCY, the Welcome Wagon lady, reading from her official Welcome Wagon script.

NANCY'S VOICE: *(Bouncy.) Well, good mornin', neighbor! Good mornin', good mornin', good mornin', new neighbor of mine! Mr. Charles "Chuck" Wright, most recently from Lubbock, Texas! I'm sure sorry we missed each other, Mr. Wright! Oh, don't you worry, Mr. Wright, I'll call you back! And who am I? Well, sir, my name's Nancy! And who am I? Well, sir, I just happen to be your official Welcome Wagon Lady! So now, let me do my first official Welcome Wagon Lady duty: welcome! Welcome, Mr. Charles Wright, to your brand-new home: Dayton, Ohio!*

CHUCK finishes inflating the second chair, and places it next to the first.

CHUCK: *(With raspy love.) Chuck's chair, Nancy's chair. (Reads label on chair.) From Dayton's House of Inflatables!*

He begins searching the other boxes.

NANCY'S VOICE: And Dayton is a real honest-to-goodness community, Mr. Wright, full of honest-to-goodness folks just like me! And now: just like you! So, just give me a call, new neighbor, and I'll drop by with some very special coupons, redeemable for some honest-to-goodness goods and services right here in Dayton! Plus, a Welcome Wagon Gift Basket, just for you! Just full of actual honest-to-goodness goodies from some of our very finest Dayton area merchants. And trust me, Mr. Wright, these goodies are truly goodies!

CHUCK has found what he's been searching for, holds it aloft, and reads its label.

CHUCK: *(Beaming, raspy.)* Aha! A stainless steel All-American Cheese Slicer from Dayton's House of Cheese!

NANCY'S VOICE: So, give me a call, Mr. Charles Wright! Oh, we're neighbors now, I'm going to call you Chuck. It's much more neighborly! And again, my name is Nancy, and my number here at Welcome Wagon is 555-7879! That's Nancy, Welcome Wagon, 555-7879. I'll talk to you soon, Chuck! Welcome to Dayton!
(Hangs up.)

The answering machine beeps.

CHUCK: American cheese sandwiches for Chuck and Nancy!
(Gleefully slices the block of cheese.)

His watch alarm beeps. He turns it off. The machine plays NANCY'S next Welcome Wagon message.

NANCY'S VOICE: Well, good afternoon, neighbor! Remember me? Oh, come on, it's only been two weeks! It's Nancy! Your Welcome Wagon Lady! I am so sorry I missed you again! I know how tough these first weeks can be in a new town! What's the solution? Simple! Just give Nancy, your Welcome Wagon Lady, a call so she can drop off those fabulous discount coupons and those fabulous goodie boxes! I even have some special treats for you courtesy of yours truly, the Welcome Wagon!

Although a seeming impossibility, CHUCK cuts himself with the cheese slicer.

CHUCK: Cut myself! Cut myself! Damn Dayton House of Cheese! *(He searches boxes.)* Where are you, Welcome Wagon First Aid Kit? *(He searches boxes.)*

NANCY'S VOICE: So, call me, Chuck. Nancy the Welcome Wagon Lady, 555-7879. Oh, and don't forget, mark your December calendar! Next week is Dayton's Fifteenth Annual Winter Carnival. Oh, they'll have everything from ice fishing to snow sculptures of Dayton's founding fathers! The Dayton Winter Carnival is an honest-to-goodness place to meet new neighbors and make new friends! And you can stop by and see me, Nancy, I'll be manning the Welcome Wagon booth! See you there! *(She hangs up.)*

The answering machine beeps. CHUCK finds the first aid kit.

CHUCK: Thank you! *(Reads label.)* Thank you, Welcome Wagon First Aid Kit! *(He searches through the first aid kit.)*

The machine plays NANCY'S voice reading another Welcome Wagon script. She is less upbeat now, more matter-of-fact.

NANCY'S VOICE: Well, good evening, neighbor. Boy, Mr. "Chuck," you and I sure do seem to be missing our connections now, don't we? By my calculations, you have been a resident of Dayton for four whole months now! You arrived in Dayton last December! Headline to Chuck: its March now, you silly billy sleepyhead, so stop your hibernating! And call me!

CHUCK: I cut myself, Nancy! I'll be fine. Thanks. *(He continues to search through the kit.)*

NANCY'S VOICE: I hope you don't mind, Chuck, but since we haven't actually yet heard from you, I took the liberty of mailing your valuable discount coupons directly to you at your home. Our local Dayton merchants are sure looking forward to meeting you and honoring the huge discounts those coupons provide! The coupons don't expire until December thirty-first of this year, but you sure don't seem to be in any big hurry, buster! *(Beat.)* Ha! I'm joking! I gotcha, didn't I? Admit it! Seriously, I'm only joking with you, Chuck. Oh, Dayton is famous for its down-to-earth, honest-to-goodness sense of humor! Especially from its Welcome Wagon Ladies! Ha! Ha ha!

CHUCK finds the Band-Aids and laughs.

CHUCK: Ha! Ha ha! Official Welcome Wagon Band-Aids! *(Bandages his cut.)*

NANCY'S VOICE: All joking aside, Chuck, please give me a call at your earliest possible convenience, so I can personally give your goodie basket to you. Yes, Chuck, you silly goose, I still have the basket of goodies from four months ago, and the Welcome Wagon organization requires me to deliver it to you in person. So, call me! Nancy, your Welcome Wagon Lady, at 555-7879. I can't wait to meet you, Chuck! *(She hangs up.)*

The answering machine beeps. His watch alarm beeps. He turns it off. He hurries his sandwich-making. The machine plays NANCY'S next message. This time she's not reading from a script.

NANCY'S VOICE: (*Excited.*) Chuck? Chuck, are you there? Pick up, it's me, Nancy! Oh, be that way! I'm just calling to see if you're O.K. Are you O.K.? It's April, Chuck, it's been five months now since you hit town. It's April now, I just wanted to make sure. Oh, oh, oh, and tell me: how do you like them? The goodies? The boxes of goodies I sent you? I know that you received them, I sent them registered mail. Aren't they special? I just love giving goodie boxes to my new neighbors! All of those kitchen helpers, the travel kits, the bathroom cleaning implements, I use all these products myself in my own home, so I know they're good! Oh, and Charles: psst! Shhh! And I mean: shhh! (*Whispers.*) I wasn't s'posed to mail all those goodies to you, I was s'posed to hand them to you in person. It's the official Welcome Wagon policy! Really! It's just that I know that some official Welcome Wagon bureaucrat would have given your basket to the next new Dayton resident, but I figured, 'Hey, I'm your Welcome Wagon Lady, those goodies belong to you!' What did I become a Welcome Wagon Lady for in the first place, huh? To welcome people! Duh! And there was no way some loony-brain Welcome Wagon front desk jockey was going to tell this veteran Welcome Wagon Lady how to do her job! (*NANCY is caught by her supervisor.*) What? Oh! Mr. Schaffer! You scared me! ...Yes, sir! I know it's after hours! ...Yes, sir, I know Welcome Wagon phones are only for official Welcome Wagon business... Yes, sir... Where's my official Welcome Wagon script? I...don't have one. I'm not ...I'm just talking. It's a - personal call, sir... Yes, sir, and I'm sorry, I know that personal calls are not allowed on official Welcome Wagon phones. I'll hang up right now, sir, and this will never happen again. Nothing like this will ever happen again, I can promise you that, sir. I can promise you that, sir. I can promise you that, I give you my word, you have my word, you can trust my word, sir. ...Yes, sir... Yes, sir. ...Yes, sir. (*She hangs up.*)

The answering machine beeps. CHUCK'S watch alarm beeps. He turns it off.

CHUCK: (*Making the sandwiches.*) Careful with the cheese slicer, Chuck, careful, careful.

The machine plays NANCY'S next message.

NANCY'S VOICE: (*Outraged.*) Oh good, Chuck! Fine! Don't pick up your phone! I don't give a damn if you never answer your damn phone! You know, Chuck-meister, most people, most humans, record their own voices for their outgoing messages! But not you! No, no, not our Chuckie! Our Chuckie-boy still uses the outgoing message that came with his machine from Radio Shack! I've never even heard your voice! I have no idea what you sound like! Die, Chuckster, die! No, don't die! Pick up the phone, you fugitive, you cunning bastard! I know you're in there! You can't hide from me forever! I know you're in there, Chuck-a-Buck, what are you waiting for? What are you waiting for, Chuck-ola! Pick up, pick up, pick up! (*Suddenly despondent.*) They fired me, Chuck. Welcome Wagon fired me. This morning. My supervisor heard the whole thing. I'm...still in shock. I don't know...I try my hardest...I go out of my way to do my best...and I'm fired. (*Beat.*) How do you get fired from an all-volunteer organization? I don't know, but I did. And...I don't know what to do now. And what do I do tomorrow? And the next day? Where do I go now? I've got no place to go. Chuck? Chuck?

The machine beeps, cutting her off.

CHUCK: (*Proudly presenting his completed work.*) Chuck's cheese sandwich! Nancy's cheese sandwich.

His watch alarm beeps; he turns it off. CHUCK searches through other goodie boxes. The machine plays NANCY'S next message.

NANCY'S VOICE: (*Lost, vacant.*) Hi, Chuck. Nancy, formerly of Welcome Wagon. So...how're ya doin'? I know I haven't called you for a coupla months, so...how're ya doin'? How's your summer goin? Good. Good. My summer was goin' so hot I closed all the curtains and pumped up the A/C full blast. (*More lost.*) My husband left me, Chuck. Just this morning. After nineteen years of wedded bliss, my Philip, he up and leaves me. Let me read you the Post-It note he left for me on the refrigerator this morning. (*Reads.*) "Dear Nancy, you have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I read about it yesterday in my proctologist's waiting room. So, I'm leaving you. Take care. Love always, your Philip." (*Sniffles.*) Trust me, Chuck. This is no joke. Oh, don't blame Phil, Chuck, I don't. He's really a very sweet, simple man. I think he just got a little jealous, what with me spending all my time at Welcome Wagon instead of staying home with him. What with me...spending all my time calling you. Trying over and over again, for so many months, trying to...reach you. Reaching out to you. Reaching. In vain. Oh, don't blame yourself, Chuck, I don't. Maybe I did go a little nuts there for a while. Maybe what my mother used to call good old fashioned stick-to-it-iveness has always been a clinical condition. Maybe tenacity and compassion and reaching out no longer have a place in our new, fast-paced world. Maybe nothing does. I don't know. I don't know what I need anymore, you know? Chuck? Are you there? Chuck? I'm...don't worry...this is the last...I won't call you anymore, Chuck. You must be a very, very busy man.

The machine beeps, cutting her off.

CHUCK: We make time for the important things, Nancy. (*HE finds the candles and candlesticks he's been looking for. He holds them aloft and reads their label.*) From Dayton's House of Illumination!

CHUCK searches another gift box. The machine plays NANCY'S next message.

NANCY'S VOICE: Oh, Chuck. I know I said I wouldn't call you again, but oh, thank you. I needed to...thank you. For your letter to me. What a sweet, kind thing for you to do. Thank you. I can't remember the last time anyone...a letter...no one has mailed me a letter since...well, I can't...I guess it's been so long I can't remember. It's been a very, very long time, Chuck. Thank you. You must have begged Welcome Wagon. They don't normally give out the home addresses of their volunteers. Or their ex-volunteers. It's one of their rules. Your letter meant a lot to me, Chuck. You're a man of few words, but your few words soothed my many wounds, Chuck. They healed me. You healed me. You're a saint. You're a...poet. (*Hangs up.*)

The machine beeps. CHUCK finds the fireplace starter he's been looking for, holds it aloft, and reads the label.

CHUCK: Direct from Dayton's House of Flame! (*Lights it.*) Flame!

The machine plays NANCY'S last message. CHUCK lights the candles, checks his watch, and makes his final preparations.

NANCY'S VOICE: (*Now very spiritual.*) Chuck. Chuck. (*Chanting.*) Om. Om. (*Pause.*) Today is December the first. Exactly one year since my first phone message to you, Chuck. December the first. This morning I received your latest letter to me, Chuck. Your one thousandth letter to me. One thousand letters. Sometimes five letters a day: so many good wishes, so much good advice and wise counsel. I see that now, that only after losing so much is my spirit able to truly welcome, truly welcome other spirits into my life. Can you sense that I'm smiling right now, Chuck? That I'm laughing? I am. For the first time, I am truly smiling and truly laughing. (*Pause.*) I am transformed. (*Pause.*) I thank you, Chuck. And what is my answer to the question you asked me in your last letter? My answer, as I'm sure you already guessed, is "yes." (*Joyously.*) I can't wait to finally meet you, Chuck! See you at your place at three o' clock! Today!

The machine beeps once, and then three times more; this was its last message. CHUCK'S watch alarm beeps. He turns it off. Offstage, a car horn.

CHUCK: *(Gleefully.)* Nancy! *(Removes his bathrobe, revealing his "I Love Downtown Dayton" T-shirt.)* Chuck's "I Love Downtown Dayton T-Shirt". *(From a goodie box, he removes an identical-shirt.)* Nancy's "I Love Downtown Dayton T-Shirt"!

CHUCK'S doorbell buzzes.

CHUCK: *(Bursting with glee.)* Nancy! *(Suddenly realizing and fearful.)* No! I forgot! I have a raspy voice!

The doorbell buzzes again.

NANCY: *(Offstage.)* Chuck? *(No response.)* Chuck? Are you in there?

CHUCK: *(Desperately trying to mask his raspy voice.)* Who...Who is it?

NANCY: *(Offstage, with a true spiritual love.)* Welcome Wagon Lady!

With great reluctance, CHUCK slumps toward the door. He stops. With one arm, he reaches offstage and opens the door. He closes his eyes and attempts great courage, in spite of his voice.

CHUCK: *(Trying to mask his raspy voice.)* Oh, it's the Welcome Wagon Lady! Please, come in! *(Attempting humor.)* Pardon the mess. I'm new in town.

Still offstage, NANCY erupts in boisterous laughter.

CHUCK: *(His eyes still closed, screams over her laughter.)* Oh, now you've heard me! Now you see me! I'm not a saint! I'm not a poet! You laugh... *(Pause.)* but you don't know *(Desperate for love.)* that even your laughter, for me...comes from heaven.

Still offstage, she stops laughing. CHUCK opens his eyes. They see each other for the first time. Their love is strong.

CHUCK: Nancy. You...remain. (*Correctly reading her thoughts.*) You...were laughing at my joke. "I'm new in town." (*Pause.*) Your eyes...oh my God...you understand me. (*Pause.*) You see me now...hear me now...with all my flaws. (*Pause.*) You...want my soul to grow, too. To glow...like yours. To grow...with yours. (*Pause.*) Oh! Looking at you...you make me feel like a poet. You make me feel like a saint. Thank you. Thank you, Nancy. (*Pause.*) Oh, where are my manners? (*Gestures.*) Welcome. Welcome, finally, to my home. (*Motions her inside.*)

From the hall, CHUCK is bathed in a warm glow, Nancy's warm glow. He is transformed. He beams. She is about to enter...

BLACKOUT.

THE END