

PATIENT X

a one-act play

by Brent Englar

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CHARACTERS

MOLLY RODNEY, the spirit of a deceased woman (80-ish)

TAMARA, her granddaughter (35)

DONALD CONE, the spirit of a recently deceased man (60-ish)

JON, his son (32)

TIME

The present.

Eternity.

PLACE

The afterlife, from which Molly and Donald observe:

- An examination room in the clinic where Jon works as a general practitioner.
- An examination room in the hospital where Tamara works as a radiologist.
- Briefly, Jon's home.

Transitions between scenes are fluid. The same table and chair(s) represent each interior. The afterlife may be simply a few platforms, framing the present.

SCENE: Jon’s exam room.

At lights, TAMARA fidgets on the table. MOLLY and DONALD watch from the afterlife.

MOLLY
That’s my grandchild, Tammy.

DONALD
Is she sick?

MOLLY
Nothing serious, I’m sure.

DONALD
Why?

MOLLY
Rodney women are blessed with good health. I lived to see eighty-five. And I smoked!

DONALD
What about Rodney men?

MOLLY
They die young.

JON enters in his doctor’s coat.

JON
What can we do for you, Ms. Rodney—

TAMARA
—About time! Do you know how long I’ve been sitting here?

MOLLY
And we hate to wait.

JON
What’s the problem?

TAMARA
My eyes.

JON

What about them?

TAMARA

I’ve developed X-ray vision.

JON

You realize I’m a general practitioner.

TAMARA

I’ve already seen an ophthalmologist. He was no help at all.

JON

Have you considered a psychiatrist?

TAMARA

In your coat pocket is a pen, two sticks of gum, and forty-seven cents.

JON

What flavor gum?

TAMARA

How the hell do I know flavor? It’s linty.

JON

Ms. Rodney—

TAMARA

—Tamara. Christ, you make me sound like my Gramma.

MOLLY

I raised her from a baby—ever since her mother . . .

MOLLY sighs. JON hands TAMARA a specimen cup.

JON

Tamara. We’ll need a urine sample.

TAMARA

The problem’s my eyes.

JON

Who’s the general practitioner? Down the hall, twelfth door on the right.

TAMARA exits with the cup. JON takes the pen, gum, and coins from his coat pocket. He places the pen behind his ear, slips half the coins

and one stick of gum into his pants pocket, and returns the rest to his coat pocket. He thinks for a moment, then chews off a fingernail and drops it into his coat pocket. As this happens, DONALD and MOLLY converse.

DONALD

What happened to her mother?

MOLLY

Never mind.

DONALD

I thought you said “good health”?

MOLLY

She’s plenty healthy. Enough to run off with an airline steward when Tammy was two.

DONALD

I was an airline steward.

MOLLY

Cheats and liars, the lot of ’em!

DONALD

Excuse me—

MOLLY

—What?

DONALD

The preferred term is “flight attendant.”

MOLLY snorts.

DONALD (Cont’d)

What was your daughter’s name? Tammy’s mother?

MOLLY

Why?

DONALD

I don’t remember. . . . Strange.

MOLLY

Not strange. There’s lots here you won’t remember.

TAMARA re-enters with the filled specimen cup.

TAMARA

Here.

She thrusts the cup into JON’s hand and stares at his coat pocket.

TAMARA (Cont’d)

One stick of gum, still linty, and twenty-four cents. And a fingernail.

JON

That’s unbelievable! How?

TAMARA

I woke up one day, and when I looked at things I saw through them. It was my birthday.

JON

That doesn’t—what do you want me to do?

TAMARA

I want you to cure me, doctor.

JON

I don’t know how to cure—people would kill for this gift!

TAMARA

Mister, I’ve seen things no one should see.

JON

skimming through her chart

You’re a radiologist?

TAMARA

Yes.

JON

You work with X-rays.

TAMARA

This isn’t an occupational hazard!

JON

You work at a hospital?

TAMARA

YES! I already wrote all this on the—

JON

—Calm down.

TAMARA

Don’t tell me to—

JON

—All I mean is you must know doctors more qualified than me to—

TAMARA

—I can’t tell people I know! Why do you think I’m talking to you?

JON

A mutual patient recommended me?

TAMARA

Your office is literally the farthest I can drive during lunch.

JON

You can’t beat the rent.

TAMARA

Stop joking and HELP ME!

JON

I DON’T KNOW HOW!

TAMARA

Shock. Well, at least you got my piss.

She starts to exit.

JON

Tamara. Ms. Rodney—

TAMARA

—I will NOT be recommending you.

She exits. JON sighs, makes a few notes, and exits.

MOLLY

Typical useless doctor.

DONALD
Jon is my son.

MOLLY
Who’s Jon?

DONALD
The doctor.

MOLLY
That clod? Why didn’t you say so before?

DONALD
I only just remembered. Oh, I’m Donald. Cone.

MOLLY
Molly Rodney.

DONALD
Molly . . .

MOLLY
Donald.

DONALD
Molly, what are we doing here?

MOLLY
We’re dead.

DONALD
But what are we doing here?

She only stares.

DONALD (Cont’d)
How long have you been dead? If I may ask?

MOLLY
You asked. I don’t know. Couple years.

DONALD
And in all that time—

MOLLY
—Isn’t that much time.

DONALD

It’s longer than I’ve been dead.

MOLLY

How long have you been dead?

DONALD

Why can’t I remember?!

MOLLY

Donald. Listen to me. If it’s something you want to remember, you will.

DONALD

When?

MOLLY

There’s really no hurry. Look here . . .

Lights change and music begins to play: the uncertain strains of a sixth-grade orchestra giving its first concert. MOLLY and DONALD listen and watch as though the scene were just beyond the audience.

MOLLY (Cont’d)

That’s Tammy on the end. Second row. I made her dress. She’s eleven.

MOLLY closes her eyes. One violin in particular is louder.

DONALD

This is a memory . . . ?

MOLLY nods.

DONALD (Cont’d)

How did I get it?

MOLLY

Up here we can share.

DONALD

Up?

MOLLY shrugs.

DONALD (Cont’d)

I’m sorry . . . why do you want to remember this?

MOLLY
Don't like it?

DONALD
“A” for effort?

MOLLY opens her eyes. The music abruptly cuts off and lights return to normal.

DONALD (Cont'd)
I'm sorry.

MOLLY
No, they're lousy.
She laughs.
Tammy's my only grandchild. I want to remember everything.

DONALD
Can you watch anyone you want?

MOLLY
You mean live?

He nods.

MOLLY (Cont'd)
Long as they remember you.

DONALD
Why is that a rule?

MOLLY
God only knows.

DONALD
Is there a God?

MOLLY
Haven't seen any.

DONALD
Maybe He doesn't remember you.
He thinks.
I guess Jon remembers me.

I should hope so. MOLLY

Can we watch Jon? DONALD

Sure. MOLLY

How? DONALD

Just look. MOLLY

DONALD does.

SCENE: Tamara’s exam room.

JON enters on crutches and sits on the table. He is wearing a backpack.

DONALD
What if he was doing something embarrassing? Like in the bathroom?

MOLLY
Nobody’s making you look.

DONALD thinks.

MOLLY (Cont’d)
I know this room . . .

TAMARA enters in her doctor’s coat.

TAMARA
Good morning, Mister—

JON
—Hey.

TAMARA
Doctor Cone?

JON
Jon.

TAMARA

What are you doing here?

JON

I need an X-ray. Hurt my ankle.

TAMARA

No you didn't.

JON

Um, I think I'd know—

TAMARA

—Your ankle's fine.

She points to her eyes.

Remember?

JON

You're right, it's a ruse, I'm sorry. But I really do need an X-ray.

TAMARA

Wait right here . . .

She starts to exit. JON takes off his backpack.

JON

Dr. Rodney, please, I need your help. My father died two months ago.

DONALD

Two months . . .

TAMARA

I'm sorry?

JON

We weren't close. But he left me this.

He opens his backpack and takes out a combination safe.

To be precise, I inherited a safe deposit box, as next-of-kin, and this was inside.

TAMARA

A safe?

JON

And no combination, no explanation, not even a letter. He died unexpectedly, I guess. I mean, he did—plane crash. He was a flight attendant.

MOLLY

I’m sorry . . .

JON

Anyway, in a nutshell . . . I mean, bigger than a nutshell . . .

TAMARA

You want me to look inside.

JON

Please.

TAMARA glances at the safe. She gasps.

JON (Cont’d)

What is it? What?!

TAMARA

Please go.

JON

No!

TAMARA

I have other patients.

JON

What’s in here?

TAMARA

Goodbye.

She exits. JON stands, bewildered.

DONALD

Can we watch someone else?

MOLLY

You don’t need my permission.

DONALD closes his eyes. He concentrates.

JON deliberately places the safe on the examination table. Then he grabs his crutches and exits.

DONALD opens his eyes.

DONALD

It didn't work.

MOLLY

Who are you looking for?

He is silent.

MOLLY (Cont'd)

It's easier when the person also wants to see you. Least that's what I've been told. Never had any problems, myself. Who is it?

DONALD

None of your business.

MOLLY

Oh. I see. No point in pride up here. Or secrets. You asked about my daughter, Wanda. That's her name. The man she married, Tammy's father—I told her not to marry him. You and me, I said, we can raise Tammy together—three Rodney women as one. No deadbeats need apply. But she wanted her baby to have a daddy, so they were married. And oh, they fought. We fought. Everybody fought, for two years, fought like snakes. Till one day Wanda met some steward on an airplane and flew off.

DONALD

Where?

MOLLY

She called me at night—collect—said she needed a break. I told her, what you just broke can't be put back together. Then I hung up the phone. Figured she'd call back, she never did. When Tammy was old enough to ask, I told her her mother was dead. Told the truth about her daddy. He ran out soon enough. Can't say I gave him reason to stay. And then it was just me and Tammy.

DONALD

But you know she isn't dead. Tammy's mother, you said she's healthy.

MOLLY

I know that now.

DONALD

Now?

MOLLY

I could watch her if I wanted.

DONALD
You don't want to?

MOLLY
No.

DONALD
You know, Jon's mother's name is also Wanda. She left when Jon was two years old.

MOLLY
Why?

He is silent.

MOLLY (Cont'd)
You don't remember?

DONALD
She's who I was trying to watch just now.

MOLLY
Well . . . if you want to bad enough, keep trying.

DONALD
I want to watch more of Jon, I think.

MOLLY
He's with Tammy.

DONALD
What?

MOLLY
See?

MOLLY points.

SCENE: Jon's exam room.

TAMARA and JON stand on opposite sides of the table; the safe is between them. TAMARA is wearing street clothes; JON is wearing his doctor's coat.

JON
How are your eyes?

TAMARA
Getting stronger.

JON
Stronger?

TAMARA
There’s more control. The more I practice.

JON
You’re practicing looking through things?

TAMARA
What else am I supposed to do?

JON
Like underwear?

She stares at him.

JON (Cont’d)
You could be a superhero.

TAMARA
Peeping Tamara.

JON
Or villain.

TAMARA
Listen, Dr. Cone, this is your safe. I don’t want it.

JON
Thank you for bringing it back.

TAMARA
Yeah, well, I should explain—last week, why I got so flustered . . .

JON
What did you see? What’s in here?

TAMARA
A picture of a woman.

JON
Who?

TAMARA unclasps a locket around her neck and shows it to JON.

Her. TAMARA

Where did you get this? JON

This is my mother. She died when I was two. TAMARA

This is my mother. When I was two, she left. JON

I was crushed. DONALD

My father never talked about her. You can see her picture in this safe? JON

Yes. TAMARA

What else? JON

It's on top of a pile, it's dark . . . I can't see everything clearly . . . TAMARA

Then how do you know it's her? JON

Because I recognize my mother. TAMARA

My mother. She left my father and me to have you. And then she died, apparently. JON

How old are you? TAMARA

Thirty-two. JON

I'm thirty-five. TAMARA

JON

But you can't be—

TAMARA

—She left my Gramma and me to have you.

JON

No, you said she died.

TAMARA

I always suspected Gramma was lying.

MOLLY

Oh Tammy, what would you have done with the truth?

JON

So she's alive?

TAMARA

I don't know. It's been thirty years, right?

JON nods.

TAMARA (Cont'd)

Hey, Jon?

JON

Yeah?

TAMARA

I'm your half-sister.

JON

Would you excuse me for a moment? I need a drink . . .

TAMARA

Um, sure. So I should just . . . ?

JON

Just a moment.

JON exits. TAMARA sits on the table and waits. Perhaps she tries, without further success, to see into the safe.

DONALD

They're half-brother and -sister . . .

MOLLY

Seem to be.

DONALD

That’s amazing!

MOLLY

How so?

DONALD

I mean, what are the chances?

MOLLY

That my daughter would break up two families—at least?

DONALD

How can you say—this is a miracle!

MOLLY

How so?!

DONALD

They can work together—with Tammy’s gift—they can find their mother! They can be a family again.

MOLLY

And you can watch.

DONALD

Molly, for the record, I never, never knew she had another child.

MOLLY

You see? If you want to remember something, you will.

DONALD

I would remember a child! I met Wanda on a flight to Las Vegas. She was crying. I got her a soda and a tissue. She cried the whole flight. I got her more tissue, extra peanuts. That was all. When we landed I had time to kill, so I went to a phone—figured I’d call some friends—and there she was again. She’d just hung up; she was still crying. What could I do, I gave her more tissue. She said she’d just ended a relationship. She asked if I knew a cheap place to stay, she had no money. She flew to Vegas with no money. I bought her dinner, what could I do, and we talked. Mostly about me, I guess. She seemed to really admire the freedom of my job. I mean, I could talk for days about where I’ve been. You ever stand on the Great Wall of China, Molly? After dinner, we gambled some, I paid. I sound a bit like a sucker, I

know. I remember, every so often it was like she knew exactly which cards were coming. But mostly we lost.

MOLLY

Why Las Vegas?

DONALD

She said it was the next flight leaving when she'd bought her ticket. Anyway, next morning I flew out. I introduced her to my friends, she stayed with them—nice couple—the whole time I was working I was thinking of her. Turned out she felt the same. As soon as I could I flew back to Vegas. Within a year we had Jon.

MOLLY

And you never asked her—anything—about what she was running from?

DONALD

I didn't know she was running! She told me what she chose to tell me.

MOLLY

So it's her fault you didn't ask?

DONALD

Molly, she left me too! She left Jon! When he was just a baby, she left.

TAMARA

checking the time

Jesus, Jon, you fall in?

MOLLY

Like mother, like son.

DONALD

What?

MOLLY

'stead of dealing with a situation, they run off.

DONALD

Jon didn't run! He became a doctor.

MOLLY

Now, now—where the hell'd he go?

DONALD

He said he needed a drink.

MOLLY

Long drink!

DONALD

I’m sure he’s just . . . processing. Here, I’ll find him.

DONALD closes his eyes.

TAMARA gives up waiting. She leaves the safe on the table and exits.

DONALD opens his eyes.

MOLLY

Well?

DONALD

He’s having a drink.

MOLLY

Where?

DONALD

A bar.

MOLLY starts to exit.

DONALD (Cont’d)

Where are you going?

MOLLY

My granddaughter.

She is gone.

DONALD closes his eyes.

DONALD

Wanda . . . Wanda . . . Dammit, remember me!

He opens his eyes. A new idea occurs to him. Summoning his courage, he crosses from the afterlife into the present. He takes a moment to settle himself, then tries to pick up the safe. He tries several times from different angles, but he cannot touch it.

JON re-enters, still in his doctor’s coat, slightly drunk. DONALD watches, not daring to move.

JON
Ms. Rodney . . . ? Tamara . . . ?

Realizing TAMARA has left, JON walks unsteadily to the table and sits. After a moment, he picks up the safe.

JON (Cont'd)
This is all your fault.

DONALD
No!

JON
not hearing
I should just . . . get some dynamite. I'll say it's a medical emergency.

JON stands and starts to exit. As he passes DONALD, DONALD reaches out. JON shivers; he looks around but he cannot see DONALD.

Unnerved, JON exits with the safe.

DONALD
How do I get back?
calling in random directions
MOLLY! MOLLY! MOLLY!

No response. DONALD stands, petrified.

He breathes deeply and closes his eyes. He remembers an airplane taking off, a woman crying; she blows her nose. The crying becomes happy laughter; the roar and rattling of the plane become spinning roulette wheels, slots, dice rolling, much more laughter. Multicolored lights flash. A baby cries. A sudden, terrible boom, and everything stops.

DONALD opens his eyes.

SCENE: Tamara's exam room.

JON enters on crutches; his foot is in a protective boot. He sits on the table and waits, unaware of DONALD.

MOLLY (O.S.)
The hell are you doing down there?!

DONALD

Molly?

MOLLY enters as before, overlooking the present.

MOLLY

You can't just drop in for a visit!

DONALD

Help me!

MOLLY

Old fool! I don't know what to do.

DONALD

Then why are you here?

MOLLY

I told you—Tammy.

TAMARA enters, wearing her doctor's coat.

TAMARA

Good morning, Mister—

JON

—Hey.

TAMARA

What do you want?

JON

I never gave you the results of your urinalysis. Your kidneys are normal. Also, I broke my toes. For real this time.

TAMARA

I see.

JON

Can we start over?

TAMARA

No.

JON

Why not?

TAMARA
You left. You deserted me.

JON
I mean . . . Not deserted.

TAMARA
Deserted.

JON
I’m here now.

TAMARA
I didn’t invite you.

JON
You’re a doctor, this is a hospital—

TAMARA
—We already know you broke your fucking toes!

JON
I’m sorry! I mean it. I’m sorry.

She sits beside him.

TAMARA
How did you break your toes, Jon?

JON
The safe. I kicked it. When the dynamite didn’t work.

TAMARA
What?!

JON
I’m kidding. I’m sorry.

TAMARA
What’s so important that might be in there?

JON
Does your grandmother have what you have? Your power?

TAMARA
Gramma’s dead.

JON
Did she have it?

TAMARA
No!

JON
You’re sure?

TAMARA thinks.

DONALD
to MOLLY
Did you?

MOLLY
No!

TAMARA
Maybe sometimes . . . if I locked my bedroom door, she was pretty good at guessing why.

MOLLY
’cause I’m your Gramma!

JON
I think our mother had it.

TAMARA
We didn’t know our mother.

JON
Sometimes I’d catch my father watching me, like you’d watch a dog in someone else’s yard, you know? Can you trust it or not? He was gone a lot. Once I went through every closet in the house, every drawer, for some scrap about my mother—a last name, even. I didn’t find anything. What was weirder, though, is I didn’t find anything about my father either. No old letters, no bank statements. Barely a photograph. I think—now—he must have hid it all. Away from prying eyes.

TAMARA
Was he a criminal?

JON
No. I don’t think so.

DONALD

No!

JON

He was an ordinary guy. With ordinary secrets. Who shacked up with a not-so-ordinary woman and freaked out.

DONALD

I loved your mother.

TAMARA

Jon . . . It's not mind reading. I can't see inside your head.

JON

You're practicing though, right? Maybe someday you will.

TAMARA thinks.

MOLLY

to DONALD

Is that what happened to my daughter? She read minds?

DONALD

No. No!

MOLLY

Then why'd she leave?

DONALD

Why don't you drop in and ask her?

MOLLY turns away.

DONALD (Cont'd)

Molly, please. I need to see her.

TAMARA

to Jon

What happens now?

JON

We find our mother.

DONALD

Yes.

JON stands, grabs his crutches, and starts to exit.

DONALD (Cont'd)

She's your mother! You don't get to walk away—you're family! Listen to me, Jon, your mother's name is Wanda Myra Rodney. I don't know where she is, but I wanted to marry her—the moment we found out she was pregnant I asked. When you were born I asked again, I begged, but no—always no! And two years later she was gone. Didn't even leave a note.

TAMARA

Jon . . .

JON

Yeah?

TAMARA

For the combination—try nine, sixteen, eighty-six.¹

JON

Why?

TAMARA

That's the day she died, Gramma said—September 16, 1986.

DONALD

That's the day we met.

JON

What will you do now?

TAMARA

Become a supervillain?

JON

Your secret is safe with me.

TAMARA

Good.

JON exits. TAMARA thinks for a moment.

¹ The combination is always thirty years prior to the date of the performance. Please change this and Tamara's next line accordingly, as well as Donald's lines in the final scene.

MOLLY

Tammy?

TAMARA exits.

MOLLY (Cont'd)

I'm sorry, Tammy.

DONALD

She didn't ever call me.

to MOLLY

She called you.

MOLLY

What?

DONALD

When she left you and Tammy, she called to say goodbye, you said. Why didn't she say goodbye to me and Jon?

MOLLY

I don't know.

DONALD

I loved her. From the moment I told her to fasten her seatbelt. I would have shared everything with her, if she'd just asked. Why didn't she ask? It was only gradually I learned what she could do—her power to see through me. How do you open up to someone when you don't have a choice? I stayed away. I took longer, farther flights. I wrote down all my secrets and locked them in a safe. I'm the reason she left.

MOLLY

Like Tammy's father.

DONALD

What?

MOLLY

He loved Wanda. He was a deadbeat, but he loved her, I'll admit. And then it's like he stopped.

DONALD

I didn't leave. I stayed. I raised my child.

MOLLY

Me too.

DONALD
Jon . . . Jon, he can still find her. He can still—

MOLLY
—Donald—

DONALD
—Be quiet!
He concentrates.
Jon . . .

SCENE: Jon’s home.

JON enters, still in a protective boot but without crutches. He is dressed casually; perhaps he is drinking a beer. He carries the safe to the table, sits in the chair, and thinks.

DONALD (Cont’d)
Jon . . .

JON
to himself
Dad . . .

DONALD
Jon?!

JON
I don’t even care. Let it stay buried with you.

JON stands and starts to exit.

DONALD
September 16, 1986—Jon!

JON stops. DONALD crosses to him.

DONALD (Cont’d)
It’s the combination. I promise. Nine, sixteen, eighty-six.
reaching out
Jon . . .

JON shivers.

MOLLY
Donald.

