

**GLADYS IN WONDERLAND**

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Published by Playscripts, Inc.  
450 Seventh Ave.  
New York, NY 10123

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CHARACTERS 5 women, 3 men (with doubling)

GLADYS.....female, 87, somewhat disheveled in appearance.

DORIS.....female, Gladys' daughter.

MORT.....male, any age. An unexpected visitor in a white suit.

FRANK.....male, Gladys' younger brother.

KAREN.....female, 30's, Gladys' grand-niece.

{DENNIS.....male, any age, a meal deliverer.

{HENRY.....male, 40's-50's, Gladys' nephew.

{MILDRED.....female, 80's, Gladys' best friend.

{LILLIAN.....female, a nursing home resident.

{ETHEL.....female, a nursing home resident.

{MYRNA.....female, 50's, Frank's second wife.

Note: Bracketed characters can double.

TIME: The present

ACT ONE Scene one: Mid-morning. Gladys' home.

Scene two: Early afternoon. The same, then, a small area of a nursing home.

ACT TWO Scene one: Late that afternoon. Gladys' home.

Scene two: Two days later. A funeral parlor.

SETTING

The living-dining area of Gladys' home, where traditional furnishings predominate.

The nursing home visit requires just three chairs side by side downstage.

In Act Two, Scene two, there should only be the suggestion of a casket:: Flowers banked around an open space, possibly on the house side of the footlights.

## GLADYS IN WONDERLAND

ACT ONE, Scene one

Spotlights up on DORIS in separate space.

DORIS

So there she was with orange juice on her cereal, a bowl of brown stuff sitting there, with a sticky mess of orange glue on top of it. I said, Mom, did you put orange juice on your Wheaties? Why not? she says. It's all going the same place ...

(LIGHTS UP ON GLADYS SEATED AT THE TABLE)

... At least she still reads the paper. Mom always did read the obituaries.

GLADYS

(READING)

Herman Ovitz, seventy-nine, killed when a truck rounding a bend veered into the path of his car .... Now I wonder what kind of truck it was? I wish they'd put that in the paper. I mean, was it carrying cat food or potato chips? Think of that: Old Herman flattened by an eighteen-wheeler full of Doritos ... imagine the crumbs.

DORIS

Uncle Frank says we should have put the house in my name years ago. Then we could make the right decisions now. But it was hers. How could I have done that? Now, it's so hard to know what's going on in her mind.

GLADYS

And I wonder if the Doritos people would send anything to the funeral parlor? Like a floral arrangement with chips and dip on the side? ... we extend our deepest sympathy ... and we dare you to eat just one.

DORIS

Mom's friend Mildred says when she calls her up, sometimes Mom goes on and on about Dad, like he just stepped out for the paper. He's gone nearly fourteen years now, but I've begun to wonder whether she thinks he's still around somehow.

GLADYS

What if Herman was creamed by a tractor trailer carrying cat food? And suppose the man hated cats all his life? Think of it. Old Herman, sent to his eternal reward by a truck chock full of Meow Mix.

DORIS

When I say, Mom, what'd you have for lunch? She says, I had lunch for lunch, what else? ... I tell her I'm worried she's not getting the proper nutrition. Sure I am, she says. I had some just the other day with chocolate syrup on it. Sometimes she just cracks me up.

GLADYS

Or maybe Mr. Ovitz was done in by a chicken truck, feathers flying, egg yolks splattered on the median strip. And did they chase all the chickens back into their crates before, or after they carted Herman off to the morgue? I wonder about things like that.

## DORIS

The idea of her living alone getting worse and worse is keeping me up nights. Uncle Frank says it's only a matter of time before something happens. And what if it does? She is eighty-seven. Sometimes it's like she's gone already. Like someone else is living in my mother's house, walking the halls, wearing her clothes, sleeping in her bed. It's as if my mother's gone south for the winter and she's never coming back.

(LIGHTS DOWN ON DORIS)

## GLADYS

George always says, check the death notices every morning and if you don't find your name, you might as well get dressed and comb your hair, because nobody else is going to do it. I just love to read the obits.

(DOORBELL RINGS)

Now, who's coming to see me at this hour of the morning?

(CROSSES TO DOOR)

Yes?

(MORT ENTERS)

## MORT

Hi, there. Is this six-twenty-six Sudbrook Lane?

## GLADYS

Well, if it isn't, the mailman's brought an awful lot of stuff here that doesn't belong.

## MORT

Then you must be Gladys Overmeyer. Top of the morning to you and have I got news for you.

GLADYS

Did I win the Lottery? Have you got a check made out for a million dollars?

MORT

Not exactly. Allow me to introduce myself. The name's Mort. Glad to make your acquaintance and I am **your** angel of death.

GLADYS

My what?

MORT

You know, death? Kick the bucket? Buy the farm?

(PAUSE)

GLADYS

Did Mildred send you? I've told that girl a hundred times she ought to lighten up. Angel of death. That's a good one. Oh! Where are my manners this morning? Have a seat.

MORT

Thanks. Don't mind if I do.

GLADYS

Doris says I shouldn't let people in. She says you never know whether they might be crooks or perverts. But crooks and perverts don't run around in white suits, do they?

MORT

Well, not in October, anyway.

GLADYS

Now you just make yourself at home. Can I get you something? A piece of cake, a cream donut, maybe?

MORT

No, thanks. Got to watch the excess baggage, or I'll have to get my next suit from Omar the tentmaker. But enough about me. I've come here today to---

GLADYS

You want to sell me something, don't you? It wouldn't be a vacuum cleaner, by any chance? Lord knows I could use one. My electrolux is shot.

MORT

No, I'm---

GLADYS

An electric broom, maybe?

MORT

No, I'm not in sales. I do transportation. I take people when they're ready to go. George and I traveled together. Once.

GLADYS

You knew George? But we've never met, have we?

MORT

Oh, I never meet anybody until they're ready. And you ... are ready.

GLADYS

Ready for what?

MORT

Ready to go.

GLADYS

Go where?

MORT

The details get figured out along the way. Like I said, I just do transportation.

GLADYS

Sounds far-fetched to me. People just up and go with you without knowing---

MORT

Sure. Everybody does sooner or later. It's just a question of when.

GLADYS

I thought it was a question of where.

MORT

Trust me, it's all taken care of. I've come to escort you---

GLADYS

Is this like a date?

MORT

You've got it. The date you're set to go, the date you die. Gladys Overmeyer, **this** is your death.

GLADYS

You sound like Bud Collier on that old TV show. Or was he on Beat The Clock?



MORT

Look, dearie, all I know is --- you're cashing in your chips, giving up the ghost, shuffling off this mortal coil, putting out to sea, goin' to glory. This is the big exit, you've got your sailing orders, the sands of life are running out and---

GLADYS

All right, already. But I never heard of such a thing.

MORT

Get serious.

GLADYS

Oh, I've heard of it, but it's still a little sudden.

MORT

Sudden? How old are you?

GLADYS

You're not supposed to ask a lady that. I have had a few birthdays, but---

MORT

A few? Try eighty-seven.

GLADYS

Everybody says I don't look a day over eighty-five.

MORT

You're a riot, sweetheart. And I still say you're going.

GLADYS

Well, this is a fine how-do-you-do. You get up one day, eat a donut, read the paper, and some clown in a Good Humor suit says you're going to die.

MORT

What? You want me to wear black and carry a scythe? Why be dreary?

GLADYS

Death is just a bowl of cherries?

MORT

Pretty much. First you're here ... and then... you're there. Everybody knows that. Right?

GLADYS

Still. A person would like a little notice. This come-as-you-are stuff is for the birds. Besides, I can't go today. I have to put out recycling tonight. It's bottles and cans. Or is it newspapers?

MORT

Oh, that's rich.

GLADYS

It's a busy week.

MORT

What? You've got to clip some more coupons, maybe? Eat another cream donut?

GLADYS

You don't expect me to up and die and leave behind three cream donuts, do you? And Doris brought me some bananas that are still a little green.

MORT

I'm supposed to wait for your bananas to ripen?

GLADYS

What if somebody decides to drop by?

MORT

Stick a note on the door...“Stepped out for a while”. Look, sweetie, read my lips, this is it, your big finale.

GLADYS

Maybe I'm not ready for my big finale.

MORT

Some people think you are. I didn't want to say it, but your date got moved up.

GLADYS

You mean somebody wants me to go?

MORT

Three people, actually. And when we get three or more calls the case comes up for review and here I am.

GLADYS

Who? Who are they?

MORT

What does it matter? You've had a good run. Isn't it time to---

GLADYS

WHO?

MORT

Okay, okay. You asked for it.

(PULLS OUT A NOTEBOOK)

Let's see. We have a Frank.

GLADYS

Oh, great. My own brother, the old fossil, wants me dead. That's nice. Very nice. Who else?

MORT

Well ... Doris.

GLADYS

Doris? My daughter?

MORT

It says here, she's worried. You don't eat right, you don't move around enough---

GLADYS

She wants me to walk around the block three times a day. I mean, going to a store is one thing, but going out the door, around the block and coming back in again with nothing to show for it, what kind of sense does that make?

MORT

They call it exercise.

GLADYS

I call it applesauce. You said three. Who's the third? Come on. Who is it?

MORT

Ahh ... Mildred.

GLADYS

My best friend? If that don't beat all! Well. They've all got a hell of a nerve. If they think I'm going to keel over and die on their say-so, they've got another think coming!

MORT

Oh, goody. One of those.

GLADYS

One of what?

MORT

Look. When I show up and tell people it's time to go, some take a philosophical approach. They say: I've lived a good life. My bags are packed. I'm ready to meet my maker.

GLADYS

Well, I never pack my bags until the last minute. And I've met everybody I wanted to meet.

(PAUSE)

Except for Cary Grant. I always wanted to meet Cary Grant.

MORT

And where do you think he is?

GLADYS

Look, can I think about this a little?

MORT

Okay, okay, I'll wait. I'm not allowed to force the issue. In the meantime, a few people will be dropping by. Let me know after they've gone whether you still want to hang around.

GLADYS

I'm getting company? Who's coming?

MORT

For starters, that guy with the sparkling personality, your effervescent brother,

(DOORBELL RINGS)

Frank. Oh, by the way, I'll be in and out, but he won't hear me or see me.

GLADYS

Why not?

MORT

Because I am only visible to folks who are ready to go.

(TO AUDIENCE)

I'm sorry. Did I scare anybody out there?

(TO GLADYS)

You better get the door. I'll be back.

(MORT EXITS)

GLADYS

Hmmh! What a nerve!

(GLADYS CROSSES TO DOOR. FRANK ENTERS)

FRANK

Morning, Gladys.

GLADYS  
(ACIDLY)

Frank. What a pleasant surprise.

FRANK

A brother has to keep an eye out for his sister. Ma would have wanted it that way. Besides, Myrna had to bring the Olds in for its' six-month checkup and she gets her hair done today and I said, you know, I may just as well go and check up on Gladys.

GLADYS

How nice. Me, the Oldsmobile, and Myrna's hair, all on the same schedule. Can I get you some coffee?

FRANK

Oh, no. Never drink coffee. Can't remember the last time I drank coffee.

GLADYS

I drink it all the time.

FRANK

And what do you do with the cup after you drink that stuff?

GLADYS

Well, usually, I wash it out.

FRANK

You get yourself a magnifying glass and take a good look at the inside of that cup....

FRANK (CONT'D)

...That's what I did. I don't want my insides looking like that. That's why I started drinking water, only water, five times a day.

GLADYS

Don't you get tired of plain old water?

FRANK

No indeed! Myrna and I have come up with a whole range of different ways to take it in. Believe you me, I get out of bed in the morning and I can't wait to get to the table. That's when Myrna hands me a mug. Warm H<sub>2</sub>O. Starts the day off with a bang, I tell you.

GLADYS

Does it?

FRANK

Now, mid-morning, Myrna boils it, pours it into a bowl, puts a towel over my head and I sit and inhale the steam. Talk about a pick-me-up! I am ready for anything after that. After my nap, I like to take it in a glass, chilled. No ice, though. Don't want to get a cold in the stomach. Mid-afternoons, sometimes I take it warm, sometimes not. We decide on the spur of the moment. Evenings, I have it in a cup. Myrna checks it with a thermometer so it's just past tepid. Yes, indeed, a cup of warm water right before bedtime. You cannot imagine the difference it makes.

GLADYS

You're right about that, Frank.

FRANK

It keeps me at the top of my form. But you look pretty well, Gladys. Considering.



GLADYS

Thanks. I feel pretty well. Considering. Most of the time anyway.

FRANK

And the rest of the time?

GLADYS

Aww, everybody's got something. You know.

FRANK

What does the doctor say?

GLADYS

Well ...

FRANK

Well, what?

GLADYS

That's what he says. I look at him and he looks at me and he says "well."

FRANK

And then?

GLADYS

Doris takes me home. Sometimes we stop and get a shrimp salad sandwich or maybe a chicken salad on rye and I have a slice of Boston cream pie and---

FRANK

Has he checked your glucose lately?

GLADYS

My what?

FRANK

Glucose. Sugar. That's very important.

GLADYS

I don't know, Frank. Besides, why can't I eat what I want?

FRANK

The leopard never changes its spots.

GLADYS

Leopard?

FRANK

I guess you can't teach an old dog new tricks.

GLADYS

I don't know. Doris used to get Scruffy to jump our swinging gate, and that dog was getting up there.

FRANK

You never change, Gladys. You're always drifting through life. Never setting a course and sticking to it. Letting yourself be blown about like a leaf in the wind. Like some bit of flotsam and jetsam adrift on the sea.

GLADYS

You always did like boats, didn't you, Frank?

FRANK

Go ahead, have your laughs. In the end you've only yourself to blame.

GLADYS

Myself to blame for what?

FRANK

My big sister. Just look at you.

GLADYS

What? Don't you like this duster? I guess it's a little busy, but for jumping into in the morning I thought it was okay. Of course, if I'd have known what this particular morning would bring, maybe I would have chosen---

FRANK

Gladys, Gladys, Gladys.

GLADYS

Frank, Frank, Frank.

FRANK

I told Myrna I'd come.

GLADYS

I know. While she gets her hair done and the Olds gets serviced.

FRANK

But I knew right from the start. And you know what she said? Myrna said, Frank, Gladys will always be ... Gladys.

GLADYS

Really? Is that what she said?

FRANK

Those were her very words. But she said, you go, Frank. If you don't, you'll never forgive yourself.

GLADYS

Myrna's a gem. You couldn't have done any better for a second wife.

(PAUSE)

Oh, did I say that?

FRANK

Ma knew, Gladys. You know she did. Sometimes she'd look at you and just shake her head.

GLADYS

And that meant?

FRANK

She knew. The woman knew.

GLADYS

So it wasn't just the looking. It was the shaking along with the looking?

FRANK

It's like banging your head against a brick wall. You know you should stop---

GLADYS

I would say so.

FRANK

God knows I've tried.

GLADYS

What? Banging your head, or stopping banging your head?

FRANK

Time and time again, I've tried.

GLADYS

You've always been a trying person, Frank.

FRANK

But you come to a bend in the river, and the current carries you away.

GLADYS

Maybe I should be writing this down.

FRANK

I've done all I can do. I've said all I can say.

GLADYS

If I could only count on that.

FRANK

I'm worn out, I'll tell you.

GLADYS

You do look a little tired.

FRANK

Myrna said I ought to take my nap here and then she'll pick me up later.

GLADYS

Here, huh? How thoughtful of Myrna.

FRANK

I'll just lie across the bed in your spare room. I nap every morning, and then I'm up at twelve-fifteen, sharp as a tack.

GLADYS

I'll bet you are.

(FRANK EXITS. MORT ENTERS)

MORT

He's a bundle of laughs, isn't he?

GLADYS

George said Frank's idea of a good time is rolling pennies in those cardboard tubes you get from the bank. Still, that's no reason for me to want to check out.

MORT

Okay. Maybe your next visitor will convince you.

GLADYS

Who?

MORT

He's parking his car right this minute.

GLADYS  
(LOOKING OFF, RIGHT)

I never saw him before. Who's he?

MORT  
You want to hang around and find out, don't you?

GLADYS  
Of course. I mean, somebody's coming to the front door and I'm just going to fall down dead?

MORT  
Suit yourself. I'll be back.

(DOORBELL RINGS)  
I love my work.  
(MORT EXITS. GLADYS CROSSES TO DOOR.)

GLADYS  
Yes?

DENNIS  
(DENNIS ENTERS WITH CLIPBOARD & TRAY, SPEAKING RAPIDLY)  
Hello, Mrs. Undermeyer! Good morning to you! We are so glad to be here!

GLADYS  
Who are---

DENNIS  
Allow me to properly introduce myself. May I put this down first?

GLADYS

Sure, but---

DENNIS

Dennis Dean's the name and you are --- wait, don't tell me --- Gertrude Undermeyer!  
Correct?

GLADYS

Well, no.

DENNIS

We are so pleased to make your acquaintance.

GLADYS

Are you sure you have the right house?

DENNIS

Six-twenty-six Sudbrook Lane, correct?

GLADYS

But my name, mister, ahh ... Day, you said?

DENNIS

That's fine. You go right ahead and call me Dennis Day. Lots of my H-B's do.

GLADYS

Your what?

DENNIS

Homebounds. Actually, the complete term is homebound seniors. That's H-B-S's to us.....



DENNIS (CONT'D)

...I am Dennis Dean, as I said, and I am your personal...

(PAUSE)

Homey-Meals-For-Homebounds representative. I always hesitate when I say that because I used to work for The Howdy Team. You know, visiting people when they've just moved into a neighborhood? See, I used to be with the Howdys and now I'm with the Homeys and sometimes I get the howdys and the homeys mixed up. Anyway, I'll be bringing you your food from now on. Didn't they tell you?

GLADYS

Bringing me my food?

DENNIS

Yes, indeedy. The plan was set up by, let's see,

(CHECKING HIS CLIPBOARD)

Doris Wynant. That would be your daughter?

GLADYS

Doris sent you?

DENNIS

Exactly. She spoke with Mrs. Sewald probably, or it may have been Mr. Dawson. Sometimes he mans the phones when Mrs. Sewald is out. That's the only time I feel comfortable saying that. You know, "man the phones"? "Woman the phones" sounds so awkward, don't you agree?

GLADYS

I guess so.

DENNIS

At any rate, someone should have been in touch with you. As soon as your daughter's call came in, you were put in the set-up cycle, and the first move we make is to evaluate your particular situation.

GLADYS

My situation?

DENNIS

Oh, yes. Step Two is an in-depth needs-assessment critique. Actually, that's a two-parter. The first part is your assessment of your needs or --- in lieu of the party making the actual assessment by his or herself, a competent personal representative could be named. But it's always best to have someone on-site, preferably, who can say what is or is not needed and what would or would not be in the best interest of the homebound individual. But that's only the A part of Step two.

GLADYS

There's a B part?

DENNIS

Absolutely, Mrs. Undermeyer.

GLADYS

Overmeyer. My name is Overmeyer. Gladys Overmeyer.

DENNIS

Are you sure?

(FLIPPING THROUGH PAPERS ON HIS CLIPBOARD)

GLADYS

About my name? Yes, I think so.

DENNIS

There must be an error somewhere and --- well, there you are. Overmeyer, Gladys L. My goodness, you were right.

GLADYS

I'm glad.

DENNIS

That explains a great deal. Ordinarily, I work with the I to P grouping, and I don't often pick up the Q to Z's, so naturally, I wondered how you ended up on my sheet. Now I see you were really I to P all along! Where were we? Oh, yes. Our assessment takes in the physician's analysis, balanced with the homebound's preferences. Still with me?

GLADYS

Kind of.

DENNIS

Let me explain using what I call my pickle preference example. Let's say that you like dill pickles.

GLADYS

I don't.

DENNIS

Well, let's just say for the sake of my little example that you do. Now, **you** like dill pickles. But your medical professional has indicated on his N-EV, that's the nutritional evaluation form, that dill pickles are medically contra-indicated. Too much sodium....

DENNIS (CONT'D)

....maybe? What do we do?

(PAUSE)

GLADYS

Am I supposed to tell you the answer?

DENNIS

Well, while we would dearly love to provide you with dill pickles, there would be a flag on your chart for the dietitian.

GLADYS

Green, I guess.

DENNIS

What?

GLADYS

The color of the flag. Pickles? Green?

DENNIS

Oh, that's cute, Mrs. Overman.

GLADYS

(QUIETLY)

Meyer. Overmeyer.

(MORT ENTERS)

DENNIS

So! Shall we see what we have here today?

MORT

I'm all a-twitter, aren't you?

(WITH A FLOURISH, DENNIS UNCOVERS THE TRAY)

GLADYS

(TO MORT)

If I'm supposed to eat this stuff, you're going to have to help me.

DENNIS

Oh heavens, no! The personal representative is never allowed to sample anything on the tray. All this yummy food is for you alone.

MORT

He can't see me. Remember?

GLADYS

Oh, yeah.

DENNIS

Now, I know this is an exciting morning for you---

GLADYS

You don't know the half of it.

DENNIS

Ooh! Just look! Sautéed medallions of liver: a valuable organ meat and today's protein element, served on a bed of wild, brown rice. That's for fiber, to assure adequate roughage for digestion and elimination. We all know how important that is.

GLADYS

I hate liver.

MORT

You're the one who wanted to stay.

DENNIS

Preconceived notions about how things taste! Tsk, tsk. Dennis doesn't tolerate that. We're going to take teeny little bites, and before you know it, that piece of liver will just disappear!

MORT

Are we having fun yet?

DENNIS

Look what else is here! Garden fresh vegetable medley. That's for all those vitamins and minerals, minus butter, salt and pepper, of course. Those are the no-no's according to your medical professional. You'll notice that the red beets, cauliflower and broccoli have been pureed because of your dentition situation. For dessert, you have a generous serving of blueberry Jell-O. Some of my seniors say it leaves their lips blue, but it's such a pretty color on the tray, don't you think? I'll bet you can hardly wait to dig in, and while you do, we'll have a nice little chat so we can get to know one another better. I'm going to be coming every day, and we don't want to be strangers, do we, Mrs. Overunder?

(LIGHTS DOWN)

ACT ONE, Scene two

(SPOTLIGHT UP ON DORIS, OUTSIDE THE MAIN SET)

DORIS

I'm afraid I'm going to have to put her somewhere. You know what she said to me the other day? She said, I'm going down Ma's. I said you can't do that. Why, she says. Because, I said, your ma's not there. Well, where is she, she says. She's gone, I said. Gone where? Mom, I said, your mother is dead. She's been dead a long time. Are you sure, she says to me. What about Pop? Him, too? Yes, I said, him, too. Hmmh! she says. So I took her over to the mirror. Look, I said. Mom, you're eighty-seven years old. If your mother were alive, she'd have to be a hundred and ten. Oh, she says to me, you're so silly. Ma's not a hundred and ten. Well, of course she's not a hundred and ten, I said, she's dead. She died a long time ago and you forgot. How could I forget that, she says. I don't know, I told her, but you did. So she sits there for a minute, takes a couple of bites out of her donut. Then, very carefully, she folds the tissue over the rest and closes the box. There, she says, now it's all ready. Ready for what, I ask. Ready for me to take it, she says, later on, when I go down Ma's.

(LIGHTS DOWN ON DORIS, LIGHTS UP ON GLADYS AND MORT)

GLADYS

I thought that guy would never leave. Any more liver and blue Jell-O and I slit my throat.

MORT

That would wrap things up fast.

GLADYS

You never give it a rest, do you?

MORT

It's my job.

GLADYS

Like him. He sure is into his job.

MORT

I'll say. What about that story he told you about driving into the side of that woman's house?

GLADYS

Yeah. And before he even stops to find out whether anybody's hurt, he takes off---

MORT

Just so the meatloaf on the tray won't get cold!

GLADYS

Gets a ticket for leaving the scene of an accident---

MORT

But he gets the meatloaf there on time! Unbelievable!

GLADYS

It was probably lousy meatloaf anyway.

MORT

What makes you say that?

GLADYS

Oh, everybody's meatloaf is different.



MORT

It is?

GLADYS

Sure. Take Grandpa Sam's, for instance. Now that was meatloaf to write home about. Not that you ever did, of course, because you were already at home when you were eating it. Aunt Sophie's? That was something else again. You could wrap it up and use it for a doorstep.

MORT

Heavy, you mean?

GLADYS

Like a brick. And then every time somebody had a baby shower, she'd make this thing called frosted meatloaf salad.

MORT

What was that?

GLADYS

She took two cups of shredded veal and added horseradish, cucumber, mayonnaise, sour cream, cottage cheese---

MORT

Wait a minute, wait a minute. I don't want to know.

GLADYS

Weak stomach, huh? Be glad you didn't have to eat it.

MORT

It's not that. It's just --- I start hearing all this stuff and I --- I just don't want to hear it.

GLADYS

Why not? We're only making conversation. Helps pass the time.

MORT

May I remind you that time is the one thing you are out of?

GLADYS

Says you.

MORT

Let's cut the chatter.

GLADYS

Suit yourself. I just don't see why a little conversation---

MORT

Look. I get too ... involved. The more I know about you and stuff like Aunt Sophie's meatloaf, the more I get stuck, see? I'm supposed to take you from here to there and that's all I'm supposed to do.

GLADYS

Here to there, here to there, you sound like a broken record. And I still say I'm not ready to go.

MORT

Great.

GLADYS

But I am ... considering it.

MORT

Ahhh, progress.

GLADYS

Tell you the truth, I've been thinking about my obit. What's it going to say?

MORT

The usual. Gladys Overmeyer, dead at the age of eighty-seven, blah, blah, blah.

GLADYS

That's just it. My blah, blah, blah is so --- blah. All I've got is, Gladys is dead. She baked a mean pineapple upside down cake.

MORT

Come on. You've done more than that.

GLADYS

Oh, yeah? How about --- the Windex people held a moment of silence today in memory of Gladys Overmeyer. The woman was crackerjack at cleaning windows. People came from miles around to see themselves reflected in Gladys' double panes. Why couldn't I have been somebody famous? Like a flamenco dancer? Or a famous painter? Or the lover of a famous painter?

MORT

Look, what people do before I get here is not my concern. Besides, it's a little late for all that, isn't it?

GLADYS

But where does that leave me? The gas and electric company mourns Gladys Overmeyer's loss because she paid her bills on time.

MORT

Okay. So it hasn't been a life with a lot of headlines.

GLADYS

Well, why can't I have a really dramatic death?

MORT

Oh. Now, we're supposed to make up for the blah-ness of the last eighty-seven years?

GLADYS

I read about this woman who loved the opera. She was ninety-one and never missed a performance at the Met. She didn't have a lot of money so she always sat up in the rafters, you know, third dress circle or whatever? This one night, she has a heart attack, falls over the rail of the balcony, and lands in the orchestra pit. What a way to go! Think of the headlines.

MORT

Angry opera patrons storm box office for refunds after old lady swan dives into tuba.

GLADYS

Why couldn't I go like that?

MORT

You want to swan dive into a tuba?

GLADYS

Tell you the truth, I was never too good with heights.

MORT

Then let's forget that one. Anyway, when you're ready, all you have to do is sit down on a chair.

GLADYS

What chair?

MORT

Any chair. And if it were me, I wouldn't wait too long. Your tempus is fugiting all over the place.

GLADYS

What does that mean?

MORT

Time's a-wasting. I didn't want to mention it, but ...they're already talking about a you-know-what.

GLADYS

What you-know-what?

MORT

(WHISPERING)

Nursing home.

GLADYS

No!

MORT

I'm telling you, if you don't come with me, you'll be there before New Years rolls around.

GLADYS

That's not fair.

MORT

C'est la vie.

GLADYS

Don't talk foreign to me, mister.

(PAUSE)

Say, you're a pretty powerful fellow, aren't you?

MORT

Well, in certain circles I'm ... what are you getting at?

GLADYS

Could I try it out?

MORT

Of course not. Once you're dead, you're dead.

GLADYS

I mean the nursing home. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad. Maybe I'd love it. Maybe I'd be the Miss America of the whole place. I'd hate to throw in the towel without giving it a try.

MORT

Come on! You've been inside a nursing home.

GLADYS

Sure, as a visitor, but I was never an inmate.

MORT

You're asking for another delay, aren't you?

GLADYS

What else have you got to do today?

MORT

All right, all right. But I'm telling you, if this nursing home thing doesn't pan out, I'm pushing real hard for curtain number two.

GLADYS

Okay, okay.

MORT

Am I a soft touch or what?

(MORT LEADS GLADYS TO ANOTHER PART OF THE STAGE. LIGHTS SLOWLY UP ON LILLIAN AND ETHEL SITTING EXPRESSIONLESS & IMMOBILE ON TWO CHAIRS, WITH ONE EMPTY CHAIR BETWEEN THEM)

GLADYS

This is it?

MORT

You got it.

GLADYS

I just sit down?

MORT

What do you want, a velvet cushion?

(GLADYS SITS IN THE EMPTY CHAIR)

GLADYS

It's comfortable.

MORT

I'm happy for you.

(MORT EXITS. NO REACTION FROM LILLIAN & ETHEL. LONG PAUSE)

GLADYS

Pardon me. You ... ahh ... just ... sit here?

LILLIAN

Pretty much.

GLADYS

I see. Been here long?

LILLIAN

Long enough.

GLADYS

Ever get tired of it?

ETHEL

It grows on you.



LILLIAN

Like a fungus.

ETHEL

Lillian's such a cutup.

GLADYS

But, don't you ever do anything? Instead of just ... sitting here?

ETHEL

Such as?

GLADYS

Well ... get up? Walk around?

LILLIAN

That kind of thing takes energy.

GLADYS

Talk, maybe?

ETHEL

I thought we were doing that.

LILLIAN

So did I.

ETHEL

People are funny, aren't they?

LILLIAN

I would say so.

GLADYS

I just meant ... well, is there ever anything that you ....**do** do? Like knitting maybe? Do you ever sit here and talk and maybe knit or crochet while you're---

ETHEL

Everybody's got sweaters by now.

GLADYS

Afghans, maybe?

LILLIAN

You're new here, aren't you?

GLADYS

Tell you the truth, I'm sort of passing through.

ETHEL

Oh, that's rich. She's passing through. I like that. That's hysterical.

LILLIAN

Don't mind Ethel. She gets that way when we have chow mein for lunch.

ETHEL

I think it was chop suey.

LILLIAN

Look, dearie, let me tell you about this woman I used to know. After her husband died, she spent all her time knitting. She made afghans, turned them out once a week. Flame stitch.

ETHEL

Sometimes she did a rosette pattern.

GLADYS

That's pretty. I used to make---

LILLIAN

On every chair in the house? Soon she covered all the chairs in her kids' houses, too.

ETHEL

And their beds. And the ones in her friends' houses. They did a feature on her in the Sunday circular. Called her "the afghan lady."

LILLIAN

Then.....one day she started knitting a sweater for the refrigerator. Said she thought she'd make it a cardigan, with sleeves for the handles, so the Amana wouldn't get cold at night?

ETHEL

Lime green, it was.

GLADYS

Good Lord.

LILLIAN

That's what happens when you get into that stuff. We don't intend to fall into that trap.

ETHEL

No, indeed.

GLADYS

But isn't there anything else?

LILLIAN

Such as?

GLADYS

Don't they have things to do here?

ETHEL

You can tell she hasn't been here long.

LILLIAN

They're always that way in the beginning.

GLADYS

Now, just a minute.

ETHEL

Oh, we didn't mean anything. It's just that if you don't get the drill here, right away, you'll find yourself with a fate worse than death.

GLADYS

What are you talking about?

LILLIAN

Acts and crafts.

GLADYS

What?

ETHEL

Activities and crafts. You see---

LILLIAN

If you behave as if you have an ounce of brains, you automatically get put into the active group, dearie.

GLADYS

And?

ETHEL

And ... there's no end to what you'll have to go through.

LILLIAN

Dawn 'till dusk, it's walking and exercising, using machines, up and down the hall---

ETHEL

Treadmills, rowing contraptions, believe you me, they'll exhaust every single part of you.

LILLIAN

But that's not the worst of it.

GLADYS

It's not?

ETHEL

Oh, no.

LILLIAN

Just when you think you've done everything you can think of, they wheel in the carts.

ETHEL

Then you're really in for it.

GLADYS

What's on the carts?

LILLIAN

Elmer's Glue.

ETHEL

Old birthday cards.

LILLIAN

Construction paper, blunt-point scissors, scotch tape, markers, crayons---

GLADYS

What's so bad about that?

ETHEL

You have to make things.

LILLIAN

They put cardboard toilet paper rolls in front of you and you have to make thanksgiving centerpieces and Easter bunnies and flag holders for the fourth of July.

ETHEL

Do one, and quick as a wink, they come up with another. Every day, it's a new one. You'll be weaving strips of construction paper until you're blue in the face. And coloring and painting and gluing---

LILLIAN

Yarn, string, glitter they stick in front of you day after day after day.

GLADYS

Can't you say you don't want to?

ETHEL

Oh, you can say it. But they won't leave you be. If you don't make their yarn-covered coat hangers or whatever the project of the day is, they---

LILLIAN

Watch it!

GLADYS

What's the matter?

ETHEL

(WHISPERING)

Is she coming?

GLADYS

Who?

ETHEL

Ssssh!

(LILLIAN & ETHEL SIT MOTIONLESS WITH BLANK LOOKS. PAUSE)

LILLIAN  
(WHISPERING)

Is she gone?

ETHEL

She went in the office.

(LILLIAN AND ETHEL RELAX)

LILLIAN

That was close.

ETHEL

I would say so.

GLADYS

Who was that?

LILLIAN

The head therapist.

ETHEL

Miss --- "Are we having a good time today?"

LILLIAN

Madam --- "I'm only here to help you." What a crock. We never let her see us talking.

ETHEL

Never.



LILLIAN

If we did, we'd be in the activities room quick as a wink.

ETHEL

The last thing you want to do is act normal around her.

LILLIAN

The absolutely last thing. Haven't you ever been to a nursing home before?

GLADYS

Sure.

ETHEL

Did the people look normal to you?

GLADYS

Well ...

LILLIAN

What did you think they were doing?

ETHEL

Didn't you think it strange that everyone there seemed to have lost their minds?

LILLIAN

Like they all had some sort of collective illness, like the blue flu when cops all call in sick the same day?

GLADYS

I guess I didn't give it much thought.

LILLIAN

Why, if they didn't, they'd be doomed. Be making cardboard placemats with paper hearts stuck to them 'till the cows come home.

GLADYS

So you mean everybody pretends to be---

ETHEL

Nuts. Of course. You know where nursing home therapists come from, don't you?

GLADYS

Not exactly.

LILLIAN

Nursing home therapists are kindergarten teachers who have bad knees.

ETHEL

See, they can't sit down on the floor with the little kids, but it's the same job.

LILLIAN

They all go to the same school.

ETHEL

That's where they all learn to talk like that, and make all that junk with cardboard and glue.

LILLIAN

Then, the ones who can sit cross-legged on the floor get jobs in kindergarten. The rest---

ETHEL

Get jobs in nursing homes.

LILLIAN

The poor little tots can't do anything about it, of course. They have to sit there and make all that stuff. But we---

ETHEL

Have a choice.

GLADYS

But how do you stand it? I mean, day after day, sitting here doing nothing?

ETHEL

Well, we could go for the big exit.

LILLIAN

But we're not choosing that.

ETHEL

Not yet, anyway.

GLADYS

You mean...?

LILLIAN

The only way out of here is horizontal. Once you're here, you're here. Until you're not anywhere anymore.

ETHEL

It's kind of like getting married.

LILLIAN

No it isn't. You can reverse direction on that. People do it all the time.

ETHEL

Like taking the veil, then.

GLADYS

You can change that, too.

LILLIAN

Don't mind her. She's Presbyterian.

GLADYS

But why does it have to be this way? Who made the rules for nursing homes?

LILLIAN

Can't tell you that, dearie. All I know is, there are two groups of people here: those with badges and those without. The people with the badges get to tell the people without the badges what to do. That's just how it is.

ETHEL

Sometimes I dream that we switch and we get the badges. After all, we've been around longer than they have. That ought to count for something, don't you think?

(HOUSE LIGHTS COME UP SLOWLY)

LILLIAN

I just wonder how they'll like it when it gets to be their turn?

GLADYS

You mean when they're sitting here and somebody's bossing them around?

LILLIAN

It's only a matter of time.

(LILLIAN COMES DOWNSTAGE, FOCUSING ON FACES IN THE AUDIENCE)

The only difference between us and everybody else is the date on the calendar.

GLADYS

(GLADYS COMES DOWNSTAGE, SAME ACTION)

That's right. If it weren't for that, we'd be out there somewhere instead of in here.

(ETHEL RISES TENTATIVELY, SAME ACTION)

ETHEL

Kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it?

(BRIEF PAUSE. MORT ENTERS)

MORT

So, what's it to be, Gladys, old girl? Go or stay?

GLADYS

Oh, I don't know. Whenever I have trouble making up my mind, George always flips a coin. Anybody got a nickel?

LILLIAN

Are you kidding? This is a nursing home, honey. They took my last dime when I walked in the door.

GLADYS

(FISHES AROUND IN THE POCKET OF HER DUSTER)

Wait a minute. Here's a quarter.

LILLIAN

Well, will you look at that!

ETHEL

I remember when I had quarters.

MORT

For crying out loud, will you flip the thing?

GLADYS

Okay. Heads, I go, tails, I stay. Ready?

MORT

Some of us have been ready all day.

(GLADYS FLIPS COIN, MORT CATCHES IT, ALL LEAN IN TO LOOK. A PAUSE)

GLADYS

Can I do best, two out of three?

(LIGHTS DOWN)

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO, Scene one

(SPOTLIGHT UP ON DORIS OUTSIDE THE MAIN SET)

DORIS

I feel guilty about Mom all the time now, and it's wearing me down. Ken wanted me to go with him on a business trip to relax, get away. So I got a woman from an agency to come by and I had my cousin stop in and check, just to be sure everything was okay. Still, the whole time we were gone, I had just one thought. What if something happens?

(PAUSE)

I lived through it over and over in my mind. I could see myself standing in the funeral parlor, people coming up to me, taking my hand, so sorry, Doris, we're so sorry. And I'd say thank you, thank you for coming. Over and over I'd say it. But deep inside there'd be this tiny voice saying, it's over. It's finally over. And I'd never have to walk into that house again and see her with her hair all wild and her blouse buttoned backward.

(PAUSE)

Even so, I could feel myself breaking into pieces at the thought of it. Messed-up hair, wrinkled duster, and all the rest, my mother would be gone. Gone for good. Gone forever. Gone.

(PAUSE)

But nothing happened. We were away four days and when we got back she was still there, waiting for my voice on the phone, my key in the door.

(PAUSE)

She raised me to tackle my difficulties, grapple with my problems, but this one...I just don't know. And it is my problem. She doesn't think she has a problem.

(LIGHTS DOWN ON DORIS, LIGHTS UP ON GLADYS & MORT. GLADYS IS EATING A DONUT)

GLADYS

Want a donut?

MORT

No, thanks. I'm on a hunger strike until you're a done deal.

GLADYS

Suit yourself. You know, Doris just brought me these yesterday but they're already stale.

MORT

They're not the only thing that's stale around here. How about it, sweetheart? Ready to kick the bucket?

GLADYS

Keep your shirt on. Just let me finish this.

(GLADYS SLOWLY FINISHES THE DONUT, CLEANS UP THE CRUMBS)

MORT

Well?

(DOORBELL RINGS)

GLADYS

Now who can that be?

MORT

We're never going to get out of here.

(GLADYS CROSSES TO DOOR, MORT EXITS, MILDRED ENTERS)



GLADYS

Mildred! What a nice surprise.

MILDRED

Hello, dear, how are you? You don't mind me dropping in, do you?

GLADYS

Mind seeing my best and oldest friend in all the world?

MILDRED

You can leave out the "oldest" part, Gladdie. You know your birthday comes five and a half months before mine.

GLADYS

Oh, I'm not counting anymore. It's good to see you.

MILDRED

Jake, our building maintenance man was taking some stuff over to this neck of the woods, and I said, that's right near Gladys'. I'll go along for the ride. Any chance to see you, Gladdie, you know I'd take it.

GLADYS

And some people say you wish I was dead.

MILDRED

What?

GLADYS

Never mind. How about some coffee?

MILDRED

Not right now. I thought I could help you out.

GLADYS

Help me with what?

MILDRED

Putting your affairs in order, dear. Have you taken care of your address book like I told you?

GLADYS

Taken care of it?

MILDRED

We talked about this on the phone last week. Remember? You need to go through it page by page and put a little star next to the names of all the people you want Doris to tell.

GLADYS

Tell what?

MILDRED

You know, when something happens.

GLADYS

Why does everybody have a one track mind today?

MILDRED

I read about this in the paper, Gladdie, and it's really a good idea, because then when the time comes, everybody will know. The sooner you get this done, the better off you'll be.

GLADYS

Why will I be any better off?

MILDRED

Because it's taken care of. It's one less thing to worry about.

GLADYS

Well, I'm not worried about it. Not now, anyway. And you can't worry about things after you're dead.

MILDRED

But dear, don't you see it will help whoever's taking care of things. This will make it easier for them.

GLADYS

Why do I have to make it easier for them? I'm the one who's dying.

MILDRED

It's a nice thing to do, Gladys.

GLADYS

Nice? Giving somebody a walnut cream cake is nice. Calling people up and telling them somebody died, I don't think that's nice at all, Mildred. Besides, why can't people just read it in the paper?

MILDRED

Lots of people don't read the paper these days. It's so upsetting. It's all about people dying.

GLADYS

But you want to know when I die?

MILDRED

Of course, Gladys. You're my best friend.

GLADYS

Oh.

MILDRED

And another helpful hint. All your important papers should be in a secure metal box.

GLADYS

What papers?

MILDRED

You know. Papers on investments, not that you have any, but your insurance policies, and most important, the grave deed should be in a strong metal box.

GLADYS

The grave deed?

MILDRED

The paper that shows where George is buried. You mustn't lose track of it.

GLADYS

I haven't lost track. I know where he's buried.

MILDRED

I know you know where he's buried but the cemetery needs that paper to open the grave. Doris will hand it to the funeral director, he'll give it to the cemetery, and that way, things will go smoothly. It will make a big difference.

GLADYS

Not to me.

MILDRED

You don't want problems at a time like that. If they don't have that paper they won't be able to bury you.

GLADYS

Then what? Would they leave me in the hearse? I'd be in a permanent carpool.

MILDRED

My Harry used to say, you should always know where the grave deed is.

GLADYS

George was like that about the TV guide.

MILDRED

If it's not in a safe place, there's no telling who might get hold of it.

GLADYS

You mean grave robbers?

MILDRED

Someone might use it to bury somebody else. I can tell you haven't given this a minute's thought.

GLADYS

But Mildred, once I'm dead and gone, what does it matter?

MILDRED

Oh, you think so, do you? Did I ever tell you about my Aunt Ida? A meticulous housekeeper, you could eat off the woman's floors. Anyway, after she passed away, her husband took up with this woman he met on a Knights of Columbus bus trip. Consuela, Carmelita, some foreign name like that. Well, three years to the day afterward, he dies. We think it was all that spicy food. Anyway, he and Ida owned a two-space grave plot. So, they put him in next to Ida. Then, guess what happened?

GLADYS

I'm on the edge of my seat.

MILDRED

This Consuela person, she up and dies, and since there was no more room on either side, and she had spent all his money anyway, they put her on top of him. But that's not the end of it. The next thing you know, this Consuela's brother drops dead. Well. They put him on top of Ida. Imagine! Ida ends up with the brother of her husband's second wife on top of her, and she never even met the man! That's why you need to hang onto that grave deed. I'm telling you. Important papers like that should be in a strong metal box, so that in the event of a fire---

GLADYS

My goodness! First, grave robbers and now, fires.

MILDRED

Don't you remember when Alma Waters' house burned down?

GLADYS

Is she the one whose husband had the glass eye?

MILDRED

I don't know. The point is, when Alma's house was burning to the ground, I'll never forget it if I live to be a hundred, she went inside and calm as a cucumber, came back with her little metal box. She had everything in there. Firemen were running all over the place and Alma sat down on the side of the steps in her turquoise chenille robe holding that metal box. And you could see that she was a happy woman.

GLADYS

All because of a little metal box?

MILDRED

I'm telling you. It can make all the difference in the world.

GLADYS

Gee. I should have asked Santa for one years ago.

MILDRED

Gladdie, sometimes you are downright exasperating!

GLADYS

I don't mean to be, Millie, I just---

(THE BEEP OF A CAR HORN IS HEARD)

MILDRED

Oh, that must be Jake back already to pick me up. I've got to go. I'll see you Thursday for lunch, all right?

GLADYS

Sure.

MILDRED

And in the meantime, you get to work on that address book, you hear? You've got to take care of these things, believe me. I know what I'm talking about.

GLADYS

Okay. 'Bye, Millie.

MILDRED

Goodbye.

(MILDRED EXITS, MORT ENTERS)

GLADYS

That Millie, talking about how things ought to go smoothly. As if somebody's death was like an eighth grade graduation. Maybe I don't want it to go smoothly. Maybe I want things to be a little upset.

MORT

You want people tearing their hair out?

GLADYS

I don't care about their hair, but when a person dies, it seems like somebody ought to blink. Otherwise, it's as if their life didn't matter. I always thought that's why there's all that upset when a baby is born. You know, it's a new person on earth and people ought to sit up and take notice. I think when somebody dies, it ought to be the same way.

(PAUSE)

Oh, my.

MORT

What?



GLADYS

I just realized something. I'm oozing, aren't I?

MORT

Oozing?

GLADYS

That's what George used to say about people who say they're leaving and then take half an hour to get out the door.

MORT

Well, if the shoe fits, honey ...

GLADYS

I guess ... I guess I'm ready. So what do we do?

MORT

Behold the master at work. My dear, if you will take a seat.

(MORT CEREMONIOUSLY SETS A CHAIR CENTER STAGE)

GLADYS

(GLADYS SITS)

Will this be like the wicked witch dying in the Wizard of Oz?

MORT

Hardly.

GLADYS

Greta Garbo in Camille?

MORT

Everybody wants a whiz-bang finish.

GLADYS

Well, you only get one.

MORT

Now ---

GLADYS

(SHE HALF RISES)

Ahhh ---

MORT

What?

GLADYS

I ... okay.

(SHE SITS, BUT THEN JUMPS UP)

I just don't know.

MORT

Come on! Shall we run down the list? You can't eat what you want or do what you want, everybody talks down to you, nobody understands you---

GLADYS

Just because a person has a bad day doesn't mean it's time to check out. Besides, to tell you the truth, I'm...well, I'm scared.

MORT

Just trust me, all right?

(GLADYS SITS)

MORT

I'll count down. Ten, nine---

GLADYS

I feel like one of those astronaut people going to the moon.

MORT

Eight, seven, six---

GLADYS

Except I never wanted to go to the moon.

MORT

Five, four---

(DOORBELL RINGS. GLADYS JUMPS UP)

Oh, great!

GLADYS

Just hold off for one minute.....

(GLADYS CROSSES TO DOOR)

...Myrna!

(MYRNA ENTERS, LADEN WITH BUNDLES)

MYRNA

Hello, dear.

GLADYS

I forgot you were coming.

MYRNA

Frank still napping?

GLADYS

I guess. I forgot all about him, too. I've been a little busy.

MYRNA

Busy? What on earth have you got to be busy with, Gladys? If my husband were gone, heaven forbid, I'd just have nothing to do the whole day long. Well, just go ahead with whatever it was. Don't mind me one little bit. You know, dear, if you put fabric softener in the rinse water, your clothes wouldn't cling like that.

GLADYS

I'm at death's door and she's talking about static cling.

MYRNA

What?

GLADYS

I said I didn't know it was clinging.

MYRNA

I noticed the same thing, last time I was here, so I bought you some softener. Foodfest was having a sale. You can pay me later.

(MYRNA PULLS A BIG BOTTLE OF SOFTENER FROM A BAG)

GLADYS

That was nice of you, Myrna.

MYRNA

Oh, what else is a sister-in-law for?

GLADYS

I don't know. What else **is** a sister-in-law for?

MORT

Behave, Gladys.

MYRNA

And you'll always use it.

GLADYS

If I'm around long enough.

MYRNA

And Gladys, dear, heaven knows I'm the last person in the world to criticize, but when did you last wash this tablecloth?

GLADYS

Well...

MYRNA

Never mind. Here's what we'll do! Since Frank's not even up yet, we'll give it a good washing. And just for jollies I'll take down those kitchen curtains and throw them in, too. It'll be a real treat for you.

GLADYS

But it's a lot of trouble to wash curtains.

MYRNA

Nonsense. What's a sister-in-law for?

GLADYS

I thought we answered that.

MYRNA

And since we're doing wash, we may as well do your clothes.

GLADYS

You don't have to do that, Myrna.

MYRNA

Why? Did you do wash yesterday?

GLADYS

No, but---

MYRNA

Then, we'll do it today, and you'll have all clean clothes.

GLADYS

Maybe I don't need any more clean clothes.

MYRNA

What do you mean by that? Did you take your pills today, dear?

GLADYS

I guess so. Just---

MYRNA

Have we been making unwise dietary choices again? Too much sweet stuff plays havoc with your digestive tract. You ought to know that by now.

GLADYS

I'm all right. I'm just a little tired.

MYRNA

I better call Doris. She may want to move your appointment up.

GLADYS

What appointment?

MYRNA

With the doctor. Maybe she can get you in there today.

(DIALING PHONE)

This could be a reaction to your medication. Then again, it may just be diet.

GLADYS

Myrna, please.

MYRNA

(INTO PHONE)

Hello, Ken? This is Myrna ... yes, Frank's wife. Is Doris around? .... oh, she is .... well, you see ...

GLADYS

(TO MORT)

Can't you stop all this?

MORT

I've got nothing to do with folks who aren't checking out. Remember?

GLADYS

Big help you are.

(DOORBELL RINGS)

Now what?

(GLADYS CROSSES TO DOOR)

Karen!

(KAREN ENTERS WITH A SHOPPING BAG)

KAREN

Hello, Aunt Gladys. How are you today?

GLADYS

Fine. I'm fine.

KAREN

I thought you could use some company. Here's a pumpkin nut loaf I made. Chuck says it's a little stale, but you always dunk stuff in your coffee anyway so I figured it wouldn't matter to you.

GLADYS

Thank you, dear.

MYRNA

(MYRNA WAVES "HI" TO KAREN, SPEAKS INTO PHONE)

So when do you think she'll be back from the hairdresser's? .... oh, that long....



KAREN

I don't know, Aunt Gladys, you don't look any too chipper to me.

GLADYS

As a matter of fact, I was just about to---

MORT

Play by the rules, dearie.

KAREN

But I've got just the thing to pick you up out of the doldrums.

MYRNA

Karen, I'll be off the phone in a minute. I'm trying to get hold of Doris. I think we need a visit to the doctor's.

KAREN

Sounds like a good idea. I don't like her color.

GLADYS

Maybe I don't like your color.

MYRNA

Now, dear, Karen's just trying to help.

(INTO PHONE)

Yes, Ken, in my opinion, a medical professional ought to take a look.

GLADYS

I don't need to see the doctor!

KAREN

It might be wise, Aunt Gladys. Have we been eating the wrong things again?

GLADYS

I don't know. Have we?

KAREN

In the meantime, just look at what I've brought you. You were always such a wonderful seamstress. You are going to be absolutely fascinated by what I've got here.

(KAREN OPENS HER SHOPPING BAG & GLADYS LOOKS INSIDE)

GLADYS

Rags?

KAREN

Oh, you're such a stitch. It's scraps. For quilting.

GLADYS

Quilting?

MYRNA

(HANGING UP PHONE)

Doris is going to call the minute she gets in.

KAREN

Oh, that's good.

MYRNA

I'm so glad you're here, Karen. Now I feel more comfortable leaving her alone. I've got to get her wash done.

GLADYS

No you don't.

KAREN

You go right ahead. I just know she's going to be thrilled when she gets into this.

(MYRNA EXITS. KAREN PULLS STUFF OUT OF THE BAG)

Look, Aunt Gladdie, I've been tucking these old pieces in bags for years. Why, here's Chuck's old fishing pants! It's just tons of stuff. I must have half a dozen bags down the basement and Chuck came up with the best idea. He said I ought to let you sort them and stack quilt squares!

GLADYS

How wonderful of Chuck.

KAREN

All you have to do is separate them by color and fabric. Then, each piece needs to be trimmed into a four and a quarter by four and a quarter inch square and ironed flat so it's ready to be quilted. Chuck's Aunt Bridget used to do this by the hour.

GLADYS

Is she the one they had to put away?

KAREN

Yes, poor thing.

(MYRNA ENTERS WITH LAUNDRY BASKET)

MYRNA

Do you do your nightgowns on cold water or hot?

GLADYS

I don't know. Warm, I guess.

KAREN

I always do mine by hand in cold water. They last longer.

MYRNA

Yes, but this is hers, so...

(MYRNA EXITS)

KAREN

Oh, look. One of Jason's little crawlers. Isn't it cute?

GLADYS

Ducky.

KAREN

I think that's a little dried oatmeal up around the neck. Oh, never mind. The whole bunch has to be washed anyway. When Aunt Myrna's done with the other wash, we'll put this in. I'll go get the other bag out of the car and lay it all out on the table.

(KAREN EXITS)

MORT

Did she say half a dozen bags in the basement?

GLADYS

Why can't they just leave me alone?

(DOORBELL RINGS. GLADYS CROSSES TO DOOR)

MORT

Is this an old indian trail?

(HENRY ENTERS)

HENRY

Afternoon, Aunt Gladys. Can I come in?

GLADYS

Sure, Henry. I didn't expect to see you.

HENRY

I just need to sit down somewhere for a while.

GLADYS

Go ahead. Make yourself to home.

HENRY

Thanks, Aunt Gladdie. You know I've always felt close to you. I just need to talk to somebody.

GLADYS

Well, I guess I've got a couple of minutes.

HENRY

Truth is, I don't know how to say this. Mary kicked me out.

GLADYS

What?

HENRY

She threw me out of the house. She says I'm stuck in a rut, that I won't try anything new. I don't know what she's talking about.

## GLADYS

I can't believe it, Henry. You two are like franks and beans. A couple of salt and pepper shakers.

## HENRY

I thought so too. But I went to get my haircut yesterday afternoon, and the oil topped off in the mercury and the air pressure checked in the tires, like I always do the third Monday of the month, and when I got back, she had packed all my clothes in suitcases. They were all lined up on the front porch. She even put Petey's cage out there. There that poor bird was, his feathers all ruffled up, shivering in the breeze. Nearly broke my heart.

## GLADYS

No!

## HENRY

She even had the lock changed. I tried my key and it didn't work. Mrs. Grimes across the street said the locksmith came right after I left. She must have had the whole thing planned. I couldn't get into my own house. And when I knocked on the door, she threw my cigar band collection in my face. Can you imagine?

## GLADYS

I'm awfully sorry to hear it. What did you do?

## HENRY

Well, I drove around for the longest time. Finally I went to the all-you-can-eat buffet at Lamston's. They have chicken and dumplings on Mondays and Mary and I used to...well, anyway, I went up there and it felt kind of strange going down that long line of food all alone. There I was, looking at the cole slaw, string beans, potato salad, which I like though Mary always said it gave her gas, pickled apple slices, bread pudding. I didn't feel like eating any of it, not a bite, but somehow I got through it. Skipped the dutch apple pie though. You know they give you a slice of dutch apple pie that's about this big?

GLADYS

Do they?

HENRY

Anyway, I sat there working my way through the chicken and dumplings, and I thought and I thought and then I came here.

GLADYS

Here?

HENRY

Last night. I sat out there. Parked down the end of the street so nobody would see me.

GLADYS

Bless your heart, Henry. For goodness sake, where did you sleep?

HENRY

Sitting in the car. It was a little hard on Petey. Poor bird, the cage was on a slant on the car seat. He hopped around for a while, and then he sort of leaned up against his seed cup and drifted off.

GLADYS

You should have come in or something.

HENRY

I knew that's what you'd say. You always were a welcoming person, Aunt Gladys. You always did have a warm heart, no matter what else folks said about you.

GLADYS

After all, Henry, you are my oldest nephew. Can I get you something? Coffee, maybe?

HENRY

Oh, I don't want to put you to any trouble. But that would be nice.

GLADYS

What about something to eat?

HENRY

No, no, I don't want to be a bother.

GLADYS

Well, if there's anything I can---

HENRY

A couple of fried eggs, over easy, though, would just hit the spot. And of course, if you had a little bacon, that would be great. That and some buttered toast will hold me 'till supper.

GLADYS

Supper?

HENRY

Not that I have any appetite.

GLADYS

No. Of course not.

HENRY

You know, while you're getting that together, is it all right if I bring in my suitcases?



GLADYS

I guess....

HENRY

I just hate to leave my shirts all stuffed in a bag. They get all wrinkled. Would you have a few hangers?

GLADYS

Down the hall in the spare room, there's ... no, hold on. Frank's in there right now.

HENRY

But the spare room is empty most of the time, isn't it? I think I could get all my things in there. Might be a little tight, but I'll manage.

GLADYS

Your....things?

HENRY

Not that I'll be staying for any length of time, you understand. I'll just go get my bags.

(HENRY EXITS. PAUSE)

GLADYS

What's the matter with everybody? To him, I'm a short order cook. To her, I'm a quilt stacker. All these years, all this time, and nobody knows me. Myrna thinks I don't know how to wash clothes. Frank's convinced I'm a nitwit. Mildred talks to me like I'm in the second grade. And Doris, my baby, sends a stranger here to bring me food. They've all got me stuck in some other time. Making meals, sewing things. I'm too tired for all that. And they keep trying to fix me. Like I'm a car they can tinker with. I've lived my whole life with these people and nobody knows who I am. Why is that?

MORT

You make them uncomfortable.

GLADYS

What did I do?

MORT

You changed.

GLADYS

How?

MORT

Lots of ways. And they want the old Gladys, the way Gladys used to be. Or they want a new, improved Gladys. That's why they keep tinkering. You remind them of the day it's going to be their turn to change. And they don't want to think about that.

GLADYS

Why can't they just accept me the way I am now?

MORT

They can't handle it.

(PAUSE)

GLADYS

So I should die?

MORT

Well, when you do, they'll all breathe a sigh of relief.

GLADYS

Because?

MORT

Because it's your turn, not theirs. And that means they don't have to go yet.

(PAUSE)

GLADYS

I feel like Fay Wray when they gave her to King Kong.

MORT

What do you say? Come on, before somebody else beats a path to your door.

GLADYS

All right, but ...can you tell me what it'll be like?

MORT

The million dollar question. That's what everybody wants to know. Look, it's just... different.

GLADYS

That's the best you can do?

MORT

Well ... I heard a preacher say once, it's like ... before a baby is born, if the baby could choose, it would choose to stay where it was, in the world it knows, where it's comfortable and everything's familiar, and all its needs are met. But the baby can't do that, it has to move on. So, screaming and yelling it goes from the place it was to a world far more beautiful than anything it ever imagined.....How does that sound?

GLADYS

Not bad. Not bad at all.

MORT

So, what do you say, old girl?

GLADYS

Okay. And I'll count to three.

(GLADYS SITS)

Do I look all right? Maybe I should have had my hair done.

MORT

Here's a gilt-edged guarantee. Once we get out of here, you will look like you looked on your last best day.

GLADYS

My last best day, huh? All right!

(MYRNA ENTERS)

MYRNA

That washing machine is acting up, Gladys. It's making a big boom-boom sound when it spins and water's flying all over the place. Doris better get a plumber in here. And maybe while he's here he could look at that faucet over the tub. Do you have any idea what that constant drip, drip, drip is doing to your water bill? You have to stay on top of these things. Now take these counters. They ought to be wiped down with ammonia once a week and scrubbed every day. I'll see what I can do with them. Look at this spot here...

(MYRNA CONTINUES THIS PATTERN THROUGH END OF SCENE)

MORT

Come on.

GLADYS

One.

(KAREN ENTERS WITH SHOPPING BAG)

KAREN

Soon as I get this sorted, I'll call Chuck and get him to bring over the rest of those bags. They all smell a little musty after being down the basement, but we'll spray a little air-wick around and you won't hardly notice it after a few days. Let's see, we've got cotton and another cotton and a corduroy, they can be washed together, and here's a jersey, I guess that's jersey, that can go with this stuff here and then ...

(KAREN CONTINUES HER PATTERN THRU END OF SCENE. FRANK ENTERS)

MORT

Hurry up.

GLADYS

Two.

FRANK

Gladys, that mattress is way too soft. Extra firm is what you ought to have. I tossed and turned the whole time. Now I'm ready for my cup of water. Best thing for you after forty winks. Keeps the system flushed out, lubricates the chassis in a manner of speaking. Yessir, you can't top H-2-0 for maintenance. A glass of water five times a day will ...

(FRANK CONTINUES ON....HENRY ENTERS WITH SUITCASE & BIRDCAGE)

MORT

Say it, already!

HENRY

How about if I put Petey right over here? One thing about Petey, he's got to have sunlight, otherwise he won't say petey boy at all. Now you watch, I'll put him here, near the window, and it'll be petey boy, petey boy all day long. I always hang up my shirts in the order I wear them. White, Monday and Wednesday, blue on Tuesday, striped on Thursday, then on Friday, I like to wear ...

(HENRY CONTINUES....)

GLADYS

THREE!

(LIGHTS OUT)

ACT TWO, Scene two

(LIGHTS UP ON MILDRED AND KAREN, FOCUSED ON THE “CASKET”)

MILDRED

Gladys, Gladys. Dear, dear Gladys. When they made her they broke the mold.

KAREN

Oh, there will never be another Aunt Gladys.

MILDRED

No indeed. I'm certainly going to miss her.

KAREN

You two knew one another a long time, didn't you, Miss Mildred?

MILDRED

From second grade on up. She was actually five and one half months older than I, but of course I never brought that up.

KAREN

It's awfully hard to lose a good friend.

MILDRED

Oh, yes. Gladys was the salt of the earth. We got together for lunch every week. My, my. Thursdays will never be the same.

KAREN

Perhaps, in time, you'll find someone else to have lunch with.

MILDRED

Actually...there is a woman on the fourth floor. She's a little fancier than Gladys. You know, if I'd have said to Gladys, why don't we get dressed up for a change, maybe try the Silver Tearoom, she'd have said, who wants to eat watercress? Do I look like a rabbit?

KAREN

You're right about that. Aunt Gladys was a real meat and potatoes person.

MILDRED

She just loved the Chat and Chew. Their potato chips were a bit greasy in my opinion, but Gladys was nuts about the place. I always took the chips that came with my sandwich and gave them to her. And those little packages of crackers? Well, if she didn't eat them with her lunch, she'd stuff them in her pocketbook and take them home. Why, she even took them off the other tables!

KAREN

All wrapped up in a napkin, right? I can just see her doing that!

MILDRED

Yes, anything went with Gladys.

(FRANK AND MYRNA ENTER, APPROACH THE "CASKET." A PAUSE)

MYRNA

Well, Frank, what do you think?

FRANK

It's Gladys all right.



MYRNA

You hit the nail on the head. I'll say this. She looks wonderful. Doesn't she look wonderful?

KAREN

Like a queen.

MILDRED

The queen mother.

FRANK

They did a swell job.

MYRNA

You know, to me, she looks as if...she looks exactly like....

FRANK

Like she's sleeping.

MYRNA

That's it, Frank!

MILDRED

Oh, they do wonderful work here.

MYRNA

No question.

KAREN

Of course....this was not exactly ... unexpected.

FRANK

Oh, no. Months ago, I told Myrna to lay out my black tie.

MYRNA

That's what he said. Myrna, lay out my black tie. Frank knew. He said to me, I've got a feeling. Isn't that right?

(HENRY ENTERS)

FRANK

That's what I said. I had a feeling.

MYRNA

I told him to go see her. That's why, in her final hours, he was at his sister's side.

HENRY

I'm sure glad I was there. We all knew it was coming.

MYRNA

Well, with her diet, what could you expect?

HENRY

Many's the time I said, Aunt Gladys, you are what you eat.

MILDRED

I loved her like a sister but, cream donut after cream donut. That's all the woman ate.

MYRNA

Frank said over and over, she's digging her grave with her teeth.

FRANK

That's what I said. Digging her grave with her teeth.

KAREN

But you couldn't change Aunt Gladys. She was like an old shoe.

HENRY

I stopped in to see her as often as I could. Not that I want to pat myself on the back, but I was pretty devoted to her.

MYRNA

Oh, we all did the best we could for Gladys.

KAREN

But things just seemed to fall apart after Uncle George died.

HENRY

Yeah, she was pretty much lost at sea after he went.

MYRNA

Not to speak ill of the dead, but neither one of them had any sense when it came to spending money.

HENRY

You can say that again. Talk about extravagance!

MYRNA

Frank always says...some people know how to handle money and some people don't.

FRANK

Both of them seemed to think that the thing to do with it...was to spend it!

HENRY

Well, with an attitude like that...

KAREN

I wonder what Doris is going to do with all that furniture? The dining room set, for instance. Chuck says --- he was sorry he couldn't be here but the game was going into double overtime --- he says that china cabinet would be ideal for his beer can collection. He's got nearly two hundred foreign brands now.

MYRNA

Well, not that Frank and I have given the subject a moment's thought but those green brocade curtains would look lovely in our living room. Naturally, we wouldn't take them this week.

KAREN

Oh, of course not.

MILDRED

I'm only grateful that she didn't linger. I would hate to have seen her linger.

FRANK

Nothing worse than lingering.

HENRY

Going fast, that's the best. Like Bernie Dorfstetler's dad. Dropped dead at the dinner table. Put his fork down and his head fell right into the mashed potatoes. Bernie said it's a good thing they didn't have gravy that night. Mashed potatoes right up to his ears.

(MILDRED, FRANK, MYRNA, HENRY & KAREN FREEZE. GLADYS & MORT  
ENTER. SHE IS NICELY DRESSED WITH HER HAIR DONE)

GLADYS

Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Where's all the "wasn't she a wonderful person?" stuff. And the "how are we going to get along without her?" They're not saying the right words!

MORT

I've said it before, I'll say it again. Some things are beyond my control.

GLADYS

Mildred telling everybody I took crackers off other people's tables. I only did that once. Myrna says I look wonderful. What's wonderful? I'm dead and I'm lying in a box. And Henry. "You are what you eat." Well, he's chicken and dumplings in a three-piece suit.

MORT

Come on, Gladys. Let's shake this dust off our feet.

GLADYS

I just want to see if they gave me a wrist corsage. I always wanted a wrist corsage.

MORT

It's a wake, not a prom.

(GLADYS & MORT CROSS TO THE "CASKET")

GLADYS

Oh my god! I knew I should have had my hair done before we went ahead with this. Look at that color! It's peacock blue!

MORT

I'd say it's more of a robin's egg blue, myself.

GLADYS

And I look so stomach-y. Why on earth did they put me in that dress? I was going to give that one to the Goodwill, now I'm wearing it for all eternity. Just goes to show you, you shouldn't put things off.

MORT

You do look kind of upholstered.

GLADYS

Prop me up, you'd think I was a chair!

(DORIS ENTERS. MILDRED, FRANK, MYRNA, KAREN & HENRY UN-FREEZE)

MYRNA

Oh, here's Doris.

MILDRED

Hello, dear.

FRANK

Hi, hon.

KAREN

Hi, Doris.

HENRY

How you doin'?

MILDRED

I'm so sorry, dear.

MYRNA

If there's anything I can do.

FRANK

Very sorry, hon.

KAREN

Condolences, Doris.

HENRY

Sorry it had to happen.

DORIS

Thank you. Thank you all for coming. Thanks.

(LIGHTS DOWN SLOWLY ON ALL EXCEPT GLADYS & MORT. GLADYS IS  
FOCUSED ON DORIS. A PAUSE)

MORT

What do you say, sweetheart?....

(GLADYS REMAINS FIXED ON DORIS)

....Hey. George is waiting.

GLADYS

George?

(GLADYS LOOKS OFFSTAGE, THEN TURNS BACK TO MORT)

Why didn't you tell me?

MORT

Couldn't. It's against regulations.

(GLADYS LOOKS BACK AT DORIS, THEN LOOKS AGAIN OFFSTAGE.  
SMILING, SHE STARTS TO EXIT, THEN STOPS)

GLADYS

Wait a minute. Who's that with him? Is that his mother?

MORT

Fraid so. Everybody's got to be somewhere, right?

GLADYS

Yeah. I guess.

(STARTS TO EXIT, TURNS BACK TO MORT)

Oh, I never said thanks.

MORT

You're welcome. Just doing my job.

GLADYS

(EXITING)

George, honey! And how nice to see you, Mother Overmeyer.

MORT

I've got to stop getting so involved.

(MORT TURNS TO AUDIENCE)

And you all out there? I'll catch you later.

(LIGHTS DOWN SLOWLY)



END OF PLAY