

BLACK WIDOWS
a full-length play

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Cast of Characters

Vera Krabitz, 72, landlord and thief, widow, speaks in a Russian accent, stylish dresser
Gwen Halsted, 73, thief, divorced
John McArdle, 55, homeless Vietnam Vet, amputee
Panhandler, feisty, male, any age
Auctioneer, male, any age
Moe Goodman, 35, LA detective
Security Guard, Hispanic male, any age
Lloyd, early 50s, homeless man with a beard
Process Server, male, any age,
Female water aerobics instructor, any age
Morgue Attendant, female, any age
Shelly the insurance agent, female, late 20's-early 30s

With doubling, the cast of characters would look like this:

Vera Krabitz
Gwen Halsted
John McArdle/Panhandler/Auctioneer
Moe Goodman/Security Guard
Lloyd/Process Server
Female water aerobics instructor/Morgue Attendant/Shelly the insurance agent

Synopsis:

Petty thieves Gwen and Vera, both in their 70s, have devised a way to address homelessness that is in line with their own greed. The women pretend to befriend men they meet through a church soup kitchen, give the men a place to live, take out multiple life insurance policies on them, then wait for the men to die. Until one night Vera gets impatient. First one hit and run victim, then another. Will the women get caught?

Time: the present

Place: Los Angeles

Setting:

The stage consists of three playing areas. The largest is a studio apartment on Skid Row. The second space serves outdoor locations and the third indoor locations. The playwright encourages the use of simple props and minimal furniture to suggest each setting and change of scene.

ACT I, SCENE ONE

Setting: outside a women's locker room at a convention hotel in Los Angeles

Time: late afternoon

(Enter Gwen, 73. She wears a tank top and shorts, a baseball cap, sunglasses and flip-flops. She carries a big handbag and is talking on her cell phone. Her hair is dyed.)

GWEN

Be sure to give Pookah just a half can of dog food. Clarice can have a whole can. And of course, they need plenty of water – tap for Pookah, ice cold for Clarice.

(Enter Vera, 72. She is wearing a low-cut bathing suit, sunglasses and mules. She carries a large canvas bag. She speaks with a Russian accent; her hair is dyed.)

VERA

Will you come on? We're late.

GWEN

It's their first day at Doggie Day Care. There's a thunderstorm in the forecast. Clarice gets frightened. I have to tell her--

VERA

Always fussing over those dogs. I'm not waiting any longer.

(Vera enters the locker room, then a water aerobics instructor with a whistle.)

WOMAN

Coming to class? We're just starting.

VERA

I'm not a very good swimmer.

WOMAN

We're in the shallow end the whole time.

VERA

Need to work up my courage. Maybe tomorrow...

WOMAN

Are you with the Sweet Adelines convention or AARP?

VERA

I'm a sweetie.

WOMAN

Then you're here all week. Come by any day at three-thirty for a free lesson.

(Enter Gwen.)

GWEN

What a workout! I need a nap. That Stairmaster—

WOMAN

Bring your friend. It's just us girls and a great way to relax before dinner.

(She exits.)

(Both women snap to attention. Vera quickly surveys the room and Gwen checks the restroom.)

VERA

(Throughout most of the scene the two women speak in a stage whisper)

All clear. Go to your post.

(She takes a large set of keys from her bag. Gwen grabs them and stands in front of one of the lockers.)

GWEN

It's your turn, Vera.

VERA

My glasses and hearing aid are in car.

(She takes back the keys and points to the door.)

GWEN

Not my fault you have a lousy memory. (Pause) If I switch, you've got to increase my percentage or I'm leaving.

VERA

All right. All right. Move it.

(Gwen stations herself by the door. During most of the scene she has her back to Vera. In assembly-line fashion, but with the grace of a basketball player going through a familiar drill, Vera displays a handbag. She quickly removes the wallet, takes out the cash and credit cards, and empties them into her canvas bag. Quickly and methodically she repeats this routine. When she's sure Gwen is not looking, she stuffs a bill into her bathing suit.)

VERA

(She pulls out a necklace, holds it up and makes a face. She starts to put it back, then changes her mind.)

Gwen, catch!

(Gwen fields the gold chain perfectly and places it in her handbag. Vera pulls out another necklace and tosses it to Gwen. Gwen turns thumbs down.)

(For a beat, the two women argue silently over the merits of the necklace. Gwen tosses back the second necklace. Vera returns it to its owner and moves on down the line. Another non-verbal argument ensues. Gwen points to her watch.)

GWEN

Somebody's coming.

(Low whistle)

False alarm.

(Vera scrambles to put back the evidence. She pulls a nail file out of her bosom, assumes a nonchalant pose and sits.)

VERA

Are you trying to give me stroke?

(Vera reaches into her bag, takes out a pill and a bottle of water, then swigs down the medicine.)

GWEN

Just doing my job. Do you want Mrs. Rich Bitch to walk in on us?

VERA

Stop gabbing and watch door. You're wasting precious time.

(She holds up a couple of condoms, laughs and puts them in her bag.)

Oo-la-la! She may be old, but she's—One for you, 10 for me.

GWEN

Quick. I hear voices.

VERA

(She reaches into her bag, pulls out a caftan, and yanks it over her head.)

Darling, it's five o'clock somewhere. Let's have a drink on verandah. My treat.

(Vera exits.)

GWEN

Coming, Mrs. Rich Bitch. I want to be successful like you. Who cares if you're a foreigner? I can learn from anyone.

(She pulls a caftan out of her bag and over her head, then exits.)

Scene Two

Thirty minutes later. An outdoor café. A table and two chairs.

Vera and Gwen are seated at a table, finishing lunch. They share a bottle of wine. Vera is divvying up the proceeds in the same way she would deal a round of poker.

VERA

Another windfall.

GWEN

Thanks to you. You could teach a course at the senior center. “New employment opportunities for retirees.”

VERA

And blow my cover?

GWEN

Write a book then. *Crime for Dummies*. But under a different name.

VERA

Share my ideas? Bring in competition? No. Less for me.

GWEN

(Gwen counts her pile of money and Vera's.)

Hey, girlfriend, your pile is bigger than mine. Equal shares.

VERA

You're still an apprentice. Sixty forty.

GWEN

Not after six hotel jobs.

VERA

Six for you. Thirty for me. Big difference. Besides, you owe me rent.

GWEN

Professionals keep their business and personal lives separate.

VERA

Not when you live in one of my apartments. Why can't you be on time with rent?

GWEN

Why spend money on a stamp when we're having lunch?

VERA

Always running up tab. Next month pay me by due date or I'll have to charge you late fee.

GWEN

I'll bet you'd charge your own mother a late fee.

VERA

If she was late. (Pause) Marriott's around corner. I have time for one more gig before my dinner date.

GWEN

Still seeing Mr. Dropkin?

VERA

Dropped him. Norman is my new love. Drives a red sports car convertible. You can have Mr. Dropkin.

GWEN

Don't want your hand-me-downs even if he is a teddy bear.

VERA

Good. I'll hold onto designer purse I was planning to give you. Now when we get to Marriott, you're in charge of sweep. Experience will be good for you.

GWEN

I'm quitting. My hotel days are over.

VERA

You want to become bag lady? You say Social Security check barely covers your groceries now. Mine is fat. You conning me?

GWEN

'Course not. When you work as a waitress, you can't declare all your tips or you'd starve. Makes for a puny retirement. I need to work.

VERA

I love to work. You should have married rich man like me.

GWEN

Lucky you. My blood pressure goes through the roof after every one of these jobs.

VERA

That's why you have Medicare Part D.

GWEN

Where are my nitroglycerin tablets? (Pause) The doctor says I could have another heart attack if I don't take care of myself.

VERA

Join a gym and lay off chips and chocolate.

GWEN

Will you look at that panhandler across the street? Nearly got creamed.

VERA

Serves him right. I can't stand these freeloaders. They're all over city intimidating decent people like me who pay big taxes. (Pause) If you quit, you'll wind up just like him, including phony limp.

(Yells)

Get a job!

GWEN

Will you stop the gloom and doom? I'll get a part-time job if I have to.

VERA

Where? McDonald's? Now he's standing in road, weaving between cars. Begging for fifty cents or a dollar. That truck driver nearly knocked him silly.

GWEN

Maybe he has a death wish.

VERA

An accident waiting to happen. I'll bet you lunch check he gets hit before we finish our wine.

GWEN

I refuse to work at McDonald's. It would have to be someplace upscale. A designer dress shop. Working security for a posh hotel.

VERA

At your age? Ha! (Pause) Damn fool's trying to collect in rush-hour traffic. Acts like he's Superman. Idiot! You think you're made of Teflon?

GWEN

Whew. That was close. Maybe he owns a big life insurance policy. Makes him feel brave.

VERA

Who'd insure him?

GWEN

When I die, my insurance will pay for two years of Doggie Day Care. After that, I don't want to think about what will happen to my girls—

VERA

Hmmm. Homeless person with assets. What an interesting idea.

GWEN

Oh, sure, a few bucks, a sleeping bag and 50 aluminum cans.

VERA

If we quit our hotel jobs, we have to replace income stream.

GWEN

You do very well managing your own real estate. I'm the one who needs the money.

VERA

Stick with me and you'll be rolling in it. I see a whole new venture. One dark night, Mr. Homeless falls down, hits his head and we get big bucks. I love it.

GWEN

What are you talking about?

VERA

We befriend these con artists, take out life insurance policies on them and name ourselves as beneficiaries.

GWEN

You've had too much wine. Time to go home and walk the girls before they make a mess. We'll talk tomorrow when your head is clear.

VERA

Will you stop obsessing over those pets of yours for once? Stealing wallets and credit cards is ... We need to think big for a change. Homeless are a market niche, an unexplored goldmine, waiting to be tapped by entrepreneurs like us – if we work it right.

GWEN

What if we die first?

VERA

Most of them are alcoholics or drug addicts. They die young.

GWEN

We might not be so lucky.

VERA

Then we'll pick an old guy. With health problems.

GWEN

You're joking, right?

VERA

I never joke about business.

GWEN

Sounds shaky. Why would they name us beneficiaries if we're not related?

VERA

We'll make believe we are.

GWEN

But that's fraud.

VERA

Getting cash advance from someone else's credit card – what do you call that? Hokey pokey?

GWEN

The rich bitches don't pay. The credit card companies do. Talk about rip-offs. They charge 24 percent interest. We're doing our best to even the score. But picking on a little guy? My father and his union buddies will come back and haunt me.

VERA

Are your father and his union buddies paying your bills?

GWEN

No, but—

VERA

Neither is that panhandler with bumps on his head. Let the government take care of losers like him who won't work.

GWEN

Uh, oh. That cab isn't stopping. He's gonna...

(She jumps up and waves her arms.)

Look out, mister. Whew. That was close. There he goes again, bobbing and weaving.

Doesn't he see the guy pulling out of that parking space?

(She jumps up and rushes forward.
Vera restrains her.)

VERA

You wanna play in traffic? Then give me your pocketbook.

GWEN

The guy almost got hit. How can you sit there and do nothing?

VERA

You try to save this guy. You think he'll be grateful? First he'll deck you, then break your collar bone to steal gold chain from around your neck.

GWEN

Look at him. He's so weak from hunger. He can barely carry his own cardboard sign. It's dragging below his knees.

VERA

Part of his act. See, what did I tell you? Now there's two of them fighting over a dollar from that soccer mom in SUV. It's survival of fittest.

GWEN

My Mama told me never to kick a man when he's down.

VERA

You'll be kicking an insurance company. Like Mrs. Rich Bitch, only bigger. These companies have billions. They'll never miss it.

GWEN

He might.

VERA

You have big heart, Gwen. Have you forgotten? He'll be dead.

GWEN

Yeah, but it could take a long time. What makes you think the homeless would trust us?

VERA

Who would suspect a couple of Christian women they meet through church soup kitchen?

GWEN

Ha. Haven't set foot in a church in 30 years except to rob the poor box.

VERA

No halos floating over this hairdo. That's ok. All we need is **appearance** of one.

GWEN

Street people don't con easily.

VERA

Ok. Takes time. Form bond. Tell 'em about your brother who's Vietnam Vet.

GWEN

I don't have a brother.

VERA

Do I have to do all your thinking for you? Make something up.

GWEN

I'd have to buy a whole new wardrobe. Sturdy shoes. A neck up to here. No jewelry and no spandex. Besides, befriending the homeless will be like herding cats. What's to prevent this panhandler from skipping town? How will we know when he's keeled over and we can cash in?

VERA

We give him reason to stick around. Keep tabs on him. When he dies, we'll know.

GWEN

Are you talking about helping him along like what's-his-name, Doctor Death?

VERA

No. Insurance companies don't pay for suicides.

GWEN

This guy can't stand still for five minutes. What makes you think he'll stay put?

VERA

Hmm. What do panhandlers want most? A place to live. We'll give him a place to live.

GWEN

Sounds like you're developing a social conscience like my father. Rob from the rich to pay the poor. I'm poor, but you're not.

VERA

You can never have too much money. Why you think I come to America? To visit Niagara Falls?

GWEN

How many scams are you talking about?

VERA

One or two should do it. (Pause) I can see that house in Hollywood Hills now. Living with stars. Barbra, Angelina, Brad, Harrison.

GWEN

You have a five-bedroom house now. How much more do you need?

VERA

I want mansion with live-in cook. And you?

GWEN

A house with a yard for the girls and a garden for me. The American dream. Parents never had it.

VERA

You will. Now then. We need to be sure this homeless man is terminally ill or an alcoholic. Keep booze flowing. That will boost him along to heaven or to—

GWEN

Uh, oh. That SUV isn't stopping. He's down. Get up, get up before another car--.

VERA

I'm getting excited. (Pause) Waiter, give check to her.

GWEN

(Digs through her purse and pulls out a dollar)

My father would want me to do this.

(She starts across the street.)

VERA

So would mine, but there's not a drop of Socialist blood in my body. Capitalism. Exploitation. Yes!

(She runs after Gwen.)

Are you in? Are you in?

Scene Three

Time: late morning a week later

Setting: outside a church soup kitchen. Enter Vera and Gwen.

GWEN

So that's what non-denominational looks like.

VERA

Unitarians ask too many questions. (Pause) But this soup kitchen is perfect for us. So glad I find it.

GWEN

You have great instincts.

VERA

Congregation is small and people are old. Desperate for volunteers. A pulse? You qualify.

GWEN

The good book is not high on my reading list. What if they expect me to quote chapter and verse?

VERA

Relax. You are recent convert. Just remember: Church people are big on respect. Be sure to call homeless people guests.

GWEN

And what are you going to be doing while I'm ladling soup and cleaning pots?

VERA

Meeting with my broker. One of us needs to be an expert on life insurance.

GWEN

We're in this together. What are you doing to help me?

VERA

Getting out of hotel business is your idea. Don't cry if your hands get dirty. Consider this apron a present. Now you're an official do-gooder.

(She hands Gwen an apron, then a hairnet.)

GWEN

What's this for?

VERA

Part of uniform. They don't want your hair falling in soup.

GWEN

I look terrible in a hairnet.

VERA

Think of it as cover-up.

GWEN

A hairnet has no style. It makes me look like an old lady.

VERA

You are an old lady. That's best cover of all. Who suspects grandmother? It's perfect con. We'll never get caught.

GWEN

I'd rather wear a baseball cap.

VERA

(Vera chases her and stuffs the hairnet in Gwen's pocket.)

You want to blend in, not stick out.

GWEN

I hate hairnets. They remind me of the waitresses at the old Five and Ten.

VERA

Stop fussing over small stuff. (Pause) We're looking for someone with no family. Poor health -- but not so bad that insurance company denies application. Policy must be in force for two years. Otherwise, we can't collect.

GWEN

Why don't you stick around if you're so concerned about finding the right--?

VERA

You do PR, I do problem solving.

GWEN

Next time I want to dress up and meet smart people while you do the grunt work.

VERA

I am your mentor. I know what's best.

GWEN

How long before I start making six figures like you?

VERA

Old Russian proverb: First you sweep, then you go higher.

GWEN

I'm not Russian. My Daddy used to—

VERA

Don't forget to wear rubber gloves. You never know what germs these people might have. First thing you know, you pick up something. Then I get infected. Well, I'm late for lunch with Norman. Ta ta.

(Vera exits.)

GWEN

Big mouth. Big head. Bossing me around. Always putting yourself first. (Pause) Gwen, that's how you get rich. So move it.

(She puts on the apron.
Lights shift to the soup kitchen. A large menu appears at the front of the room. Gwen pours iced tea. She clears dishes and wipes tables, sets out napkins and plastic ware. She repeats this routine several times. Lights indicate the passage of time. John McArdle sits off to the side. His trumpet is nearby.)

JOHN

Stop cleaning up after these people.

GWEN

Welcome, sir. What can I—

JOHN

I been watching you the past two hours. This isn't a restaurant. It's a soup kitchen. Everyone here walks in on their own. They can bus their own tables -- unless you wanna be a martyr. This church loves martyrs.

GWEN

Oh. No, I don't want to be —

JOHN

A saint? Don't tell those other women. They'll blackball you.

GWEN

Thanks for the tip. Our little secret. (Pause) What'll you have? Split pea with ham or clam chowder?

JOHN

I'm homeless, not illiterate, lady.

GWEN

No offense. I'm new. Announcing the specials is a carryover from my waitressing days. Name's Gwen. What's yours?

JOHN

I'll take the chowder. Any rolls? Or do we have to get by with those crackers left over from the Vietnam War?

GWEN

I'll check. You sound like a regular. Maybe you can show me the ropes.

JOHN

Just make sure the soup's hot and there's plenty of it. Coffee ready?

GWEN

How do you like it, Mr.?

JOHN

McArdle. Scalding. Black. Three sugars. The real thing, not that artificial stuff.

GWEN

Coming right up.

(While Gwen fills his order, John takes a swig from his flask. She returns with a tray of food.)

The soup is nice and thick, lots of potatoes and carrots. How are you today, Mr. McArdle?

JOHN

My leg hurts. Damn. It's not supposed to rain in southern California.

GWEN

The church has an outreach worker. Anything we can do to help?

JOHN

That's what the VA is for. But they won't spring for a new prosthesis. Money's going to Afghanistan.

GWEN

Push back. Make some noise. Ask your family to write a letter to Washington.

JOHN

I'm on my own.

GWEN

Then I'll write one for you. Just tell me what to say. Who's your congressman?

JOHN

What's the zip code for under the freeway?

GWEN

You can use this address.

JOHN

Waste of time. (Pause) My soup's getting cold and I'm hungry, lady.

GWEN

Love to hear you play sometime.

JOHN

Here? Against the rules.

GWEN

In church then.

JOHN

And stand side by side with the brethren? They won't go for it. We're in different leagues. I don't pass the sniff test.

GWEN

Jesus was homeless.

JOHN

Yeah, all down hill after that. (Pause) What's for dessert?

GWEN

Cherry cheesecake.

JOHN

Too rich. Anything else?

GWEN

(Whispers)

It's a soup kitchen, not a restaurant.

JOHN

Then I'll take two rolls and a couple of plastic bags.

GWEN

Sure. You want some bread?

JOHN

See those five guys over there waiting for a table? Go make nice to them.

GWEN

Friends of yours?

JOHN

You see me waving? Most people eat and leave.

GWEN

How come you're still here?

JOHN

I like watching the newbie's. Wonder how long you'll last with the Holy Rollers in the kitchen.

GWEN

See you again, Mr. McArdle.

JOHN

Not if I win the lottery.

GWEN

What's the first thing you'd buy?

JOHN

A big bottle of good Scotch.

(He picks up his trumpet, puts it in a potato sack, and gathers up the food.)

GWEN

Maybe it's time to come in off the street.

JOHN

You mean live in a shelter? Forget it.

GWEN

You'd have a hot meal and a roof over your head.

JOHN

Too many fights.

GWEN

I'll bet you can hold your own. Ex-Marine?

JOHN

Yeah, but why bother when I don't have to? Under the freeway suits me fine.

GWEN

Just last week a homeless man got killed over a pair of tennis shoes.

JOHN

Shelters have too many rules. Can't play my trumpet.

GWEN

You're a free spirit. How much roaming can you do with a bad leg?

JOHN

If that's the dessert, I'll pass.

GWEN

What would you say if I told you you could have your own place?

JOHN

You're nuttier than some of the people who come here for lunch. What kind of weed are you smoking?

GWEN

I'm serious. The church has a benefactor, a real estate developer who wants to do a good deed before she dies.

JOHN

I'll take four pieces of white bread for the road and two plastic bags.

GWEN

You said it yourself. Your trumpet will get rusty.

JOHN

There's an overhang. It's protected.

GWEN

You can see the apartment tomorrow after the kitchen closes.

JOHN

What's the catch?

GWEN

There is none. This woman's got religion all of a sudden. She wants to make a difference.

JOHN

A teetotaler?

GWEN

Uh, no. She bends her elbow now and again.

JOHN

Don't want to rush into anything I'll regret.

GWEN

Sleeping under the freeway must be hard on your back. All that concrete. All that wet ground

(He sneezes.)

God bless you!

(He sneezes again.)

JOHN

This weather has knocked me back.

GWEN

Then give yourself a break and come inside.

JOHN

Why me?

GWEN

My brother's a Vietnam Vet just like you. Battles depression. If it wasn't for his wife, Betty, he'd be a hermit.

JOHN

A Vet, huh? All right. I'll take a look, but I'm keeping my options---

GWEN

Right.

(John exits. Lights fade to dark.)

Scene Four

The next day.

Setting: an efficiency apartment in a single room occupancy hotel. Furnishings are sparse. A door leads to the bathroom. John enters. He carries a potato sack and a sleeping bag. Gwen carries a bag of groceries and a broom and dust pan.

GWEN

Well, how do you like it?

JOHN

If your church lady dies tomorrow, heaven is not her first stop.

GWEN

It's a big step up from under the freeway.

JOHN

(He pokes his head in the bathroom.)

Mildew in the shower.

GWEN

Easy to fix with a sponge, some ammonia and a little elbow grease.

JOHN

You mean me? Where's the super?

GWEN

There's a certain amount of maintenance that goes with having your own apartment.

JOHN

I'm not the domestic type.

GWEN

(She removes cleaning supplies from the grocery bag and puts them on the table.)

A few basics to keep the bugs to a minimum. Guaranteed not to cut into your playing time. (Pause) How about some settling-in music?

JOHN

Need to practice first.

GWEN

Since when is a street performer shy?

JOHN

I'm not in the street. This is my new home.

GWEN

Glad you feel that way. Your benefactor, Mrs. Pritchard, will be here any minute. Act grateful.

JOHN

I thought she was doing this for herself. To make up for past crimes.

GWEN

True. But it's a blessing for you too. Raining outside, dry in here.

JOHN

So kiss up, you mean.

(Knock on the door.)

GWEN

Yes. Come in.

(Enter Vera. She carries an attaché case, pillow and a basket of fruit.)

VERA

Hello, Gwen. Welcome, John. What a fine biblical name you have. Right out of the New Testament.

JOHN

Belonged to my grandfather. He was an agnostic.

VERA

Oh, my. Well, we can't all be saved.

(Surveying the room)

Neat but not gaudy. (Pause) I brought you couple of housewarming gifts.

JOHN

Thanks for the pillow. Don't eat fruit.

VERA

Does it make you break out in hives? Strawberries had that effect on my late husband.

JOHN

No, too damn healthy. Uh, pardon my French.

GWEN

We'll give the fruit basket to the next tenant on the list.

VERA

I hope you'll be very happy here, John.

GWEN

I'm sure he will, Mrs. Pritchard. John was just telling me how grateful he is for the chance to have a roof over his head, weren't you?

JOHN

Eternally. Yes, er, thank you.

VERA

My Daddy taught me to treat everyone like a visitor.

JOHN

Good. I think I'll take a nap.

(Vera stops him.)

VERA

There are just couple of teensy formalities.

(She opens her attaché case and removes some papers.)

We need your signature on a few forms.

JOHN

What for?

GWEN

A waiver in case you slip and fall. That sort of thing.

JOHN

I'm tired. Can we do this another time?

VERA

Just take few minutes. You know how lawyers are. My board of directors will have hissy fit if I'm slipshod about—

JOHN

Oh, all right. (He signs.) What's this one?

VERA

You agree to keep place broom clean.

GWEN

Here's a broom.

VERA

Just one more and you'll be king of this castle, John.

JOHN

What's this about a life insurance policy?

VERA

We take out life insurance policies on all of our guests. That way if you die while living here, my foundation is beneficiary. Then we can help more guests like you for many years to come.

JOHN

You'll have a long wait. I plan to stick around.

VERA

Good for you. Tomorrow I could get hit by bus. This policy protects foundation's assets and continues our good work after I'm gone.

JOHN

If you're taking out a life insurance policy on me, I should be able to name the beneficiary.

VERA

Standard procedure in a case like this. Strictly boiler plate. I'm sure Gwen and I will kick bucket before you do, John.

JOHN

I don't know. Could be a deal breaker.

GWEN

If you're not interested, there are plenty of other people on the street who won't think twice about taking your place.

VERA

My foundation is paying rent on apartment and we're paying for policy. We get to name beneficiary.

JOHN

If it were up to me, I'd name my kids.

GWEN

You have a family?

JOHN

Back east. Haven't seen them in --

GWEN

Your kids will get your life insurance policy from the VA. (Pause) After we leave, you can celebrate.

(She pulls a bottle of Scotch out of her grocery bag and holds it up like a carrot before a horse.)

VERA

Just sign on dotted line. Gwen will be witness. Then you can party.

JOHN

You just said the magic word.

(He signs. The two women take the paperwork and exit.)

VERA

Now we get a rubber stamp of John's signature. If insurance company asks about your relationship, you're in LA. Be creative. You're making a documentary together. Opening organic food co-op. Starting nonprofit for homeless...

GWEN

After that, we file a couple of life insurance policies?

VERA

Twenty, not two.

GWEN

Wow. You do think big. Ten for me and 10 for you.

VERA

Seventy-30. It's my apartment.

GWEN

That's not fair, czarina. I'm supplying the sweat equity. Sixty-forty.

VERA

You're not putting any capital into this project. Besides, it will be minimum of two years before we see return on our investment.

GWEN

Then I'll cover his food and miscellaneous. Sixty forty.

VERA

Watch out for miscellaneous.

GWEN

It's not like he has dry cleaning or needs gas money.

VERA

He's boozier.

GWEN

He covers that himself with panhandling. Well?

VERA

My house in Hills is within reach. Sixty-five thirty-five.

GWEN

I'm getting fed up with you ordering me around, Miss High and Mighty. You're in America. Royalty went out with the Boston Tea Party.

VERA

You think I just come over on boat?

GWEN

Maybe you ought to go back on the boat.

(They're still arguing as the lights
fade to black.)

Scene Five

Two years later. John's apartment. 8 pm. He has decorated the apartment with curbside castoffs. A large pickle jar containing coins and dollar bills sits on the table. He is playing the trumpet. His cane is nearby.

(Knock at the door)

JOHN

It's open.

(Enter Gwen. She is wearing a Wal-Mart vest and carries a paper bag.)

GWEN

Love that sound. Makes me want to swing and sway.

JOHN

Here for the usual white glove?

GWEN

Just a social call. Bringing some cheer.

(She sets a bottle of rum, a large bottle of Coke and a bottle of Scotch on the table.)

JOHN

What's the occasion?

GWEN

Coming up on your second anniversary. Ice?

(He uses the cane on his way to the refrigerator.)

JOHN

Coming up. Where's the great benefactor?

GWEN

On a date.

JOHN

What about you? You have a fella?

GWEN

One of the geezers at work wants to have dinner with me, but I keep telling him I'm busy.

JOHN

He have bad breath?

GWEN

Aiming higher. Vera's boyfriend drives a Porsche.

JOHN

Could be a decent guy. Decorated my entire apartment with gems from thrift stores. You just need patience to sort through--

GWEN

Been patient my whole life. Want something he can't offer.

JOHN

What's that?

GWEN

To stand out in a crowd. The guy at the store is a schmo like me. When Vera goes shopping, the sales clerks treat her like a celebrity.

JOHN

They're kowtowing cause she has money.

GWEN

Then I want the same and lots of it. At the Big W, I feel invisible.

JOHN

Know the feeling. Most people look past the homeless like we don't exist.

GWEN

I know right where you live. Me and my coworkers are just one or two paychecks away from being on the street. Talk about feeling small. One day I see a guy I used to date. He holds his arms open wide, like he's about to give me a great big hug. Comes walking toward me. Wow. I say to myself. So I open my arms big and wide and walk toward him. Then he gets close and walks right past me into the arms of a woman right behind me.

JOHN

Second class. Second rate. Tell me about it. (Pause) So how can you be a snob and work for the Big W?

GWEN

Where I work is no reflection on my personal aspirations. Strictly a matter of paying the bills.

JOHN

Glad to know you still have dreams. (Pause) What's your pleasure?

GWEN

To be a millionaire like Vera. Throw my weight around a little. For now, though, I'll settle for rum and Coke. Tall one, short on rocks. (Pause) Don't stop playing on my account.

JOHN

Time for a break. So...what's the plan....a Beverly Hills mansion with a man who likes to shop at Wal-Mart?

GWEN

A bungalow with a yard for my dogs. That's what I want.

JOHN

I love bungalows. When I was growing up in Brooklyn, well, that's another story. In LA even a cottage breaks the bank. You must buy lottery tickets.

GWEN

Something like that. What about you?

JOHN

Got the American dream right here.

GWEN

You're not joining me? Bought the Scotch just for you.

(She pushes the bottle toward him. .
He looks at it.)

JOHN

Taking an overdue vacation from this stuff.

GWEN

(She sputters, then pours herself
another drink.)

Is there something you're not telling me?

JOHN

You and Miss Vera have given me a chance to turn myself around.

(He raises an imaginary glass.)

To my benefactors. Wow. I'm getting all choked up.

GWEN

Has your doctor told you to stop drinking? You've been looking a little yellow lately.

(She feels his forehead, and then takes his pulse.)

JOHN

My liver's fine. The doc at the VA says I could live another 10 or 20 years.

GWEN

Wait till I tell Vera. She'll be so...pleased.

JOHN

There's more. Got me a gig playing jazz for old hippies couple nights a week, starting real soon.

GWEN

(She pours herself another drink then gets up, opens the door, looks outside and comes back in.)

Just checking to make sure I'm in the right apartment. You been talking to the other church ladies behind my back?

JOHN

No. Been watching you.

GWEN

Really? Well, then I better go. Getting late. This neighborhood is a little shaky and my car's in the alley.

JOHN

To see you working at your age has been an inspiration.

GWEN

Me? Strictly a necessity. After the divorce...

JOHN

You have goals. I do too. See this pickle jar? Every nickel and dime I collect in beer money goes right here.

GWEN

Saving for a new trumpet? The old one's....

JOHN

No. Planning to bring my kids here for a visit now that I have a place of my own.

GWEN

Your kids? They can't stay here. There isn't enough....

JOHN

I'll put them up at the Y for a few days.

GWEN

That's no place for—

JOHN

They're grown. They'll be fine.

GWEN

When? Why? Are you sure you're all right?

JOHN

Almost have enough for two airline tickets. Couple more weeks of staying off the sauce should do it.

GWEN

You talk like you been going to those Bible classes.

JOHN

No. Want to give them some hope... just like you've given me. You're a real standout in my book. Always thinking of others.

GWEN

Go on. You're making me cry.

JOHN

My turn to do something for you. What'll it be?

GWEN

Stop gushing and sit down and have a real drink with me.

JOHN

Can't. Made a promise to myself. You're a Christian woman. You wouldn't want me to...

GWEN

Bend your elbow with me? Kinda day I had, you bet I would. Sing a hymn if it makes you feel better. Twelve year old Scotch....

JOHN

Ooh, that's tempting. Uh, maybe just a short one. Now tell me about your dogs. Used to

have a black Lab. Friendliest mutt in the neighborhood.

GWEN

I know this sounds silly. My dogs are in a play group. Just like little kids. They love it and I do too.

(Gwen starts filling his glass as the lights fade to dark.)

Scene Six

Two weeks later. 9 a.m. Saturday morning. John's apartment.

(Lloyd, a grizzled homeless man in his 40s, enters. He tosses in a sleeping bag, a beat-up backpack, and a large clear plastic bag full of aluminum cans. He has an old guitar case slung over his shoulder and is wheezing from exertion.)

LLOYD

My heart's somewhere on the fourth floor. My lungs in the janitor's closet on the--

JOHN

Sit down, Lloyd. Take it easy.

LLOYD

I really appreciate your sharing your place with me, man. Only next time how about you find an apartment right off the lobby?

JOHN

I'm sorry, man. Forgot to tell you to take the freight elevator.

LLOYD

Whole lot better than sleeping in the woods under a tarp. Reminds me of our days in Vietnam. Only back then we had a tent, an M16 and a cook.

JOHN

If you call that cooking. (Pause) How about some coffee? Mine's almost as good as those three dollar lattes.

(He picks up his cane.)

LLOYD

Thanks. Nice place. Very homey.

JOHN

Stay for as long as you want. I owe you.

LLOYD

Just till I get back on my feet. Persona non grata at the shelter. Blacklisted.

JOHN

How come?

LLOYD

Still get nightmares. Wake up screaming. Doesn't exactly endear me to my fellow inmates.

JOHN

I'll bet they have medication for that now.

LLOYD

Gallo's cheaper and no need to worry about taking it with water or on an empty stomach.

(He pulls out a flask)

Chaser?

JOHN

No thanks.

LLOYD

Too early?

JOHN

Drying out.

LLOYD

Don't say. You in a program?

JOHN

Best move I've made in a long time. Starting a job next week and the VA's giving me a new leg. My luck's changing.

LLOYD

Wow. Does it rub off? I could use a little--

JOHN

I'll introduce you to the source of my inspiration.

(John gives him a high five.)

To better times for both of us.

LLOYD

I'll pass on the booze if it's a problem for you.

JOHN

Make it a short one and hide the flask while I get out some mugs.

LLOYD

(Hides the flask.)

What gives?

JOHN

This church group is helping me turn myself around.

LLOYD

You getting religion?

JOHN

Not really. Wanna see my kids. We're back to talking again.

LLOYD

Didn't know you have a family. Got a daughter in Fresno. Wanna see her picture?

(Pulls out his wallet.)

Little princess. She's 18 now, probably graduating high school.

JOHN

Planning to go?

LLOYD

Nah. They don't want me showing up and spoiling the celebration. (Pause) Your coffee's boiling over.

(John tends to the coffee.)

Your shower work?

JOHN

Yup. Just put a clean towel out for you. Soap and shampoo are on the shelf.

LLOYD

My own towel. Geez. This is living. Could be in there 20 minutes just enjoying that water, feeling it run down my face -- without some dumb ass banging on the door yelling 'next'.

JOHN

The Marines have landed. Got your back.

LLOYD

Semper fi.

JOHN

You betcha. Up to a little music?

LLOYD

Been so long, old Bessie and I are strangers. She's out of tune and I--

JOHN

It's just us. The neighbors won't mind. Dixieland?

(He picks up his trumpet.)

LLOYD

Know any Johnny Cash?

(He pulls out his guitar.)

JOHN

Wait a minute. I have a tape I'd like you to listen to.

(He inserts the tape, they sit back.)

LLOYD

Is that us? Back in our Vietnam days?

JOHN

Yeah. We were pretty good.

(A knock at the door. John answers it. Enter Gwen and Vera, both nicely dressed. Gwen carries a large box covered in wrapping paper and tied with a bow. Vera carries a camera.)

GWEN

Greetings.

JOHN

Hi, Gwen. Mrs. Pritchard. Meet my friend Lloyd.

VERA

What wonderful beard. So biblical.

JOHN

He's a musician too.

VERA

Must be exciting to play before live audience. All that applause. In real estate, all I hear are complaints.

LLOYD

I'm a street performer like John.

VERA

That sounds like challenge. Unpredictable cash flow, bad weather, poor acoustics. (Pause) Here for dinner?

LLOYD

John's a whiz in the kitchen. You can smell his stew in the park across the street.

VERA

Really? Home cooking? A man of many talents. So generous of you to share your evening meal with—

JOHN

Just following in your footsteps.

VERA

I'm flattered. Live in neighborhood, Lloyd?

LLOYD

Sort of.

JOHN

He'll bunk here till he finds a place of his own.

VERA

Cozy. So California. This town is lousy with actors waiting tables, doing temp work. Off to a job tomorrow?

LLOYD

It's on my list of things to do.

VERA

While you're here, do me a favor, Lloyd. Take our picture for my scrapbook. Come on, Gwen, John. Scrunch together now.

(She hands the camera to Lloyd.)

LLOYD

Fancy camera. This button?

VERA

Yup. Say blintzes.

(The three of them pose for Lloyd.)

Remember terms of lease? I tell my tenants it's their Pledge of Allegiance to United States of Vera. One landlord indivisible with penalties and fees for all who ignore it.

JOHN

This apartment is big enough for both of us.

VERA

Studio is for soloist. As musician, Lloyd, surely you can appreciate—

JOHN

I don't get it. I thought you'd be happy I—

VERA

Lease clearly says you can't sublet.

JOHN

I'm not. We're sharing.

VERA

If you want to be Boy Scout, do it on your own nickel. Not here.

LLOYD

(Packing up his guitar)

Don't want to cause you no trouble, man.

VERA

Well, you are. Booze at this time of day? Your friend is causing you to backslide, John.

JOHN

You've got it all wrong.

VERA

Don't kid me. I can smell it.

LLOYD

He's right. I'm the one who—

VERA

Our church is big on family values. What would church ladies think about two grown men sleeping in same...

JOHN

Good Christian women like you?

VERA

This apartment belongs to me. I make rules. You ever hear of social services, mister? It's their job to help people like you. And this....

(Indicating his backpack and garbage bag of aluminum cans)

Don't forget your luggage and collectibles.

LLOYD

See you down on the corner, John.

(To Vera and Gwen)

What would Jesus do?

VERA

Good book says, The lord helps he who helps...

LLOYD

Semper fi?

JOHN

I'm sorry, man. Just following orders from Sarge here.

(Lloyd exits.)

You have some nerve coming in here, insulting my friend. Kicking him when he's down.

VERA

Not our problem. We can't help everyone.

JOHN

You may own this apartment, but that doesn't give you the right to barge in here unannounced and...

GWEN

Yes, it does. Read the fine print. Vera, please wait outside. John, I'll be right back.

(Reluctantly Vera exits. Gwen joins her.)

Why be a hard ass? Who cares if his friend stays a few days?

VERA

He's taking advantage. Like you said. We have limits. Now go back in there and—

GWEN

Mop up? Put on my Wal-Mart vest and—

VERA

What would I do without you?

GWEN

Find a new cheerleader.

VERA

Too old to start over. We're a team. And you're close to a fifty-fifty share.

(Gwen re-enters the apartment.)

GWEN

Sorry we set off on the wrong... We came to invite you to a party.

JOHN

For holy rollers? No thanks.

GWEN

I know you're pissed right now, but don't let this morning's argument erase two years of good relations between us.

JOHN

Make it short.

GWEN

Vera's foundation is being honored for the work she's doing. She's been asked to introduce someone who has turned his life around because of her help. The ceremony and awards dinner are at the church tomorrow night. You'll be our guest.

JOHN

You've got to be kidding. After all the insults just now--

GWEN

This is very important to her. Name your price. She'll understand. She's a businesswoman.

JOHN

Lloyd moves back in.

GWEN

I'll see what I can do. First you have to attend the dinner.

JOHN

Nope. Then I have no leverage.

GWEN

I could modify the lease and ask Vera to sign it. But she won't do it in advance.

JOHN

I need the lease changed before the dinner AND an apology from Mrs. Pritchard.

GWEN

Vera's not good at admitting her mistakes. In the meantime, here's a present for you.

JOHN

You mean bribe. I need your commitment in writing.

GWEN

Saturday night after the dinner is the best I can do.

JOHN

Good. I'll tell Lloyd.

GWEN

Surprise him when you have the new lease in hand. Your friend lives on the street. He can wait a few more days.

JOHN

I'm not making a speech at this party.

GWEN

Just smile and wave. Vera will do all the talking. Now open your present.

(He opens the box.)

JOHN

Size 36 regular. You been looking in my closet?

GWEN

Used to work in retail.

JOHN

Snappy tie. Next thing you know I'll be wearing Dockers.

GWEN

You're no longer a street person. Turned yourself around. You need to look the part.

JOHN

Thanks. I get to keep them? Wear 'em to my new gig?

GWEN

Of course. I'm really glad we could work this out. (Pause) About Saturday. Parking can be a problem out front. We'll pick you up at seven thirty out back. OK?

(Gwen exits. John starts putting on the shirt. Vera is waiting.)

GWEN

John likes his new outfit. He'll meet us in the alley.

VERA

Good job. You're catching up to me.

GWEN

A compliment from you? I need a chair.

VERA

Don't act so surprised. I have high standards, but I'm fair. (Pause) We'll go together. I'll stop by for you at seven.

(Gwen and Vera exit in opposite directions.)

(Light shift indicates the passage of time. Fade to dark. Sound of an automobile idling.)

VERA

You're late. Get in.

(A car door slams.)

John might not stick around.

GWEN

Will you stop worrying? He'll be there. (Pause) Think about the awards ceremony. The people at the soup kitchen think you're the best thing since holy water.

VERA

That's what I like to hear.

GWEN

There he is waiting for us under the streetlight. All spiffed up. Slow down, will you, Vera? Slow down. Do you hear me? You're going to hit—

(There is a thud, a man's screams and the sound of broken glass. Lights up on Vera and Gwen seated next to each other in a "car.")

John. John. Omygod. Vera, he's.... Didn't you see him wave?

VERA

Foot's asleep. Stepped on the wrong pedal. The accelerator. I—

GWEN

Is he moving? Maybe he's still...Omygod. I've got to help him ...

VERA

We already have. Two years' worth.

GWEN

Where's my phone? Open the door. He was standing right in front of you. You must have--

(Vera turns on the automatic locks.)

VERA

Maybe we can boost him along, you said. Way back when.

GWEN

A joke and you know it. John's become like my little brother.

VERA

Really? I was beginning to think a little more than that. No?

GWEN

No. He looked up to me. Said I gave him hope. Let me out of here.

(She reaches for the door, Vera pushes her arm away. They tussle. Sound of squealing tires. The "car" pulls away.)

VERA

He was using you.

GWEN

We invited him. Remember? (Pause) You aimed the car straight at him. How could you?

VERA

Accidents happen every day all over this city. A bump in the night. Pull yourself together.

GWEN

A little petit larceny. OK. Fraud. OK. But this? No. No.

VERA

Like the Nazis with my parents. Mow 'em down. You're in the way.

GWEN

Hit and run? No. I can't.

VERA

You're in this up to your mascara.

GWEN

Me? You're the one behind the wheel.

VERA

Your name is on all those insurance policies.

GWEN

I don't know you, Vera. How can you be so cold blooded?

VERA

We thought he would die sooner. That didn't happen.

GWEN

He-he's doing good. Turned himself around. Stopped drinking. Planning to bring his kids here for a visit.

VERA

When Nazis murder my parents, you think they hang around and cry? I've seen worse than John has any day.

GWEN

I won't file a claim.

VERA

And pass up a half a million dollars? You're late with your rent now. Do you want to be out on the street?

GWEN

You always get paid.

VERA

If you back out now, the rent on your apartment doubles.

GWEN

I thought we were friends.

VERA

This is business. We set goal. I seize opportunity like Donald Trump.

GWEN

You're not going to get away with--. Someone could be watching and call the police.

VERA

Who? Winos? Drug addicts? Won't happen. But if it does.... Officer, I swear I didn't see him. The streets in this neighborhood are so dark. The man jumped in front of my car. I know this reflects poorly on me, but I got scared and I have poor reflexes....

GWEN

The police are smarter than that. They'll want to know what an old lady like you is doing on Skid Row at night.

VERA

KBG are smart. LA PD are not. If the police ask, I'll say I got lost.

GWEN

The church will get suspicious if we don't show up for the awards ceremony.

VERA

There is no awards ceremony.

GWEN

You-you planned this?

VERA

Yes. One of us has to keep her eyes on prize or we'd never— Stop acting like you didn't expect it.

GWEN

John trusted me. We were--.

VERA

Ok. It's unpleasant. But you've got to push past that. You think it's easy for me to come here by myself when I am widow? Many a night I go to sleep hungry so I can save money for my ticket. I learn to wait. Drink tea and eat thin soup. Years go by. What keeps me going? Always I focus on my goal, not nasty parts. It is a struggle. On way over

in ship, when U.S. is in sight, rats scurry near my bed and make me afraid. But I refuse to give in. Instead I concentrate on what I will do here, start a new life.

GWEN

Just like John. Saving to see his kids. Using his beer money for their plane fare.

VERA

Tonight I picture my new house in Hollywood Hills. Sitting in front of fire, drinking wine with Norman. Zoom! Zoom on my way to Chez Vera. You must do same.

GWEN

My stomach's churning. I feel sick.

VERA

There's a plastic bag and a box of swipes in the glove compartment.

(Gwen starts to cry.)

A man goes from living on the street to being respectable. All because of you--

GWEN

Then gets knocked down in the alley. Slammed. All because of a chance meeting in a soup kitchen.

VERA

Why the tears? John is a success story. Past two years he has three squares a day. A roof over his head. Music. He would have died going back and forth under freeway. Better off for knowing you.

GWEN

Not any more.

VERA

This is a new day for us. Once we have death certificate, we can file our first claim.

GWEN

You tricked me.

VERA

Americans make things happen or get left in dust. I learn that on freeway.

GWEN

We're supposed to be partners. You kept me in the dark while you--

VERA

I'm silent partner.

GWEN

I'm numb. Count me out.

VERA

Permanently? Good. More money for me. If you want to throw away all your hard work over past two years, okay by Vera. But I thought you were smarter than that.

GWEN

I'll go back to slip and falls.

VERA

What?

GWEN

Suing people for a living. After waitressing and before the hotel business. Supermarkets mostly. A banana peel here. Green pepper there. An easy five grand.

VERA

Until you break your arm and leg. This is sure thing and pain free.

GWEN

Painless for you. (Pause) So many supermarkets in LA. Between them and Wal-Mart, I'll manage.

VERA

You're older now. Women our age. A fall is worse than Alzheimer's.

GWEN

Do you stay up nights—

VERA

You think I get rich by clipping coupons?

GWEN

Inheritance. Your late husband. Naturally, I—

VERA

A pussycat. I'd still be living above a store if it was up to him.

(She stops the car and puts her arm around Gwen.)

When President declares war, he knows some people will die. Does that stop him? No. He thinks of big picture, who will benefit. After today, split is fifty-fifty.

GWEN

Really?

VERA

Yes, you've earned it. You've bent over backwards for other people your whole life. Waiting tables, at the Big W, helping out at the soup kitchen. Think of all the things you could do with the money. Buying a home of your own. A first.

GWEN

With a fenced-in yard for the girls to run and play. They'd love that. The apartment is so cramped.

VERA

With life insurance money, you could hire a decorator and then open a soup kitchen. Become a philanthropist.

GWEN

Wow. A philanthropist. Like Bill Gates. Wouldn't that be something? A girl like me from Brooklyn.

VERA

Better yet, start a shelter for homeless dogs.

GWEN

That's brilliant. So many in my neighborhood going hungry. Breaks my heart.

VERA

Now you can do something about it. What are you waiting for? Say yes and take the money.

GWEN

I can still see John's face.

VERA

What's one life when you can help hundreds, even thousands of homeless animals? Giving back. So American. So like you, Gwen.

GWEN

But John—

VERA

Tomorrow we'll go out and find stray. I'll bring my camera. New goal. We'll create poster puppy for your shelter. Picture him wagging his tail, so happy to be rescued, to have a home. I can see your name in *LA Times*. An awards ceremony in your honor. Lots of applause. Everyone will look up to you. (Pause) I know you're upset. I liked him too. When you get home, take Valium.

(She is still talking as lights fade to dark.)

Act II Scene One

Later that night. The alley.

(Enter Moe Goodman, a plainclothes detective in his early 30s. He carries a flashlight and a walkie-talkie. He bends over John who lies sprawled on the ground. He picks up John's cane. Moe checks John's pulse.)

MOE

Poor bastard.

(He shines his light on the ground.)

No skidmarks.

(Speaks into his cell phone.)

Hello, Myra, got a DOA in the alley behind Fifth and Main. Yeah, you know the drill.

(Light shift indicates the passage of time. Lights up on the local morgue. An attendant wearing scrubs greets Vera.)

ATTENDANT

Next of kin?

VERA

His cousin. See this photo of John, my friend Gwen and me? Taken at a family reunion just a week ago. All so healthy. Having fun. Little did we know...I've never--. Can't look.

ATTENDANT

Takes less than 30 seconds.

VERA

Faint at sight of blood.

ATTENDANT

None to speak of. Part of our job to clean him up.

VERA

If you're sure. Sorry. Can't do it. I'm Quaker. All this violence is very upsetting.

ATTENDANT

Then I can't release his remains. He'll be cremated, ashes sprinkled in an unmarked grave in a cemetery at the state hospital.

VERA

But I need a death certificate. Our family will—

ATTENDANT

Not unless you make an ID.

VERA

If I grit my teeth, maybe I can. Will I recognize him?

ATTENDANT

He's pretty banged up, but his face is still intact.

VERA

Ooh. My. What criminal leaves the scene of an accident?

ATTENDANT

You'd be surprised. A coworker. Your next door neighbor. People don't care who they hurt.

VERA

My late sister would want me to... I better—

ATTENDANT

Ready?

VERA

(Sobs)

It's him. It's him.

ATTENDANT

Take a deep breath. That's it. Now relax for a few seconds. Any other time, you could stay awhile. Unfortunately, we're about to close.

VERA

You can't go before I pick up death certificate.

ATTENDANT

Come back tomorrow. We open at nine.

VERA

I have other business then. Tell me where to go.

ATTENDANT

Administrator's office on the first floor. But she's very punctual about leaving.

VERA

She can wait. Call and tell her I'm coming. Elevator?

ATTENDANT

Through the double doors on your right. Probably gone by now—

VERA

I'm taxpayer. Call her. It's least you bureaucrats can do for senior citizen with death in family.

(Vera exits.)

Scene Two

A month later. John's apartment.

Gwen has been cleaning and packing up John's belongings. A few cartons and boxes dot the room. In the middle of it is a table and chairs and next to it a garbage can. She sits at the table and picks up John's trumpet and blows to disastrous effect, then puts it back in the potato sack. Enter Vera. She carries a manila envelope.

VERA

John ever talk to you about a Charles McArdle?

GWEN

Nope.

(Gwen lugs a carton to the table.)

Give me a hand, will you?

VERA

(Waving the manila envelope)

Never mind that now. We got trouble. A Charles McArdle is challenging our claim to one of life insurance policies.

GWEN

Could be his son. I wonder how he found out--

VERA

How? Why? Doesn't matter. He's taking me to court.

(She pulls out a document and waves it at Gwen.)

GWEN

You? That's a relief. Of course, you'll have the best lawyer money can...

VERA

These shysters cut into our profits.

GWEN

According to state law, his son doesn't have a chance. The company has to pay up. Couple thousand in legal fees. Max.

VERA

What if judge asks why he put my name on policy?

GWEN

You'll think of something. You always do.

VERA

I know about numbers, finance. (Pause) You're good with people. Housekeeping staff at hotel might have been suspicious if it weren't for you.

GWEN

Tell the judge he was your fiancée.

VERA

He won't buy it.

GWEN

Nephew?

VERA

Homeless man? Aagh.

GWEN

The judge won't know that.

VERA

You're insulting my family. Russian people...

GWEN

How about this? John McArdle, your partner in a property management company. The policy is strictly business. It's called liability, uh, what's the term—

VERA

Key man insurance.

GWEN

When the judge asks about John, you'll cry a little, dab your eyes with a handkerchief.

VERA

That is so--

GWEN

You want spontaneous? Use your fingers instead. Better yet, your sleeve.

VERA

I get it. Like Marlene Dietrich in *Witness for Prosecution*. Then compose myself for benefit of court and say—

GWEN

How much you miss him and his ability to work with all sorts of tenants. His sense of humor. His knowledge of the local real estate market. Tell the judge--

VERA

Your honor, I plan to use money to hire John's replacement.

GWEN

They don't make 'em like him any more.

VERA

Yes, I'm widow with small business. I need to find right person. It could take long time. I'm counting on insurance to keep me afloat until then.

GWEN

Use the same story on your lawyer. He'll eat it right up.

VERA

Good. Now I feel better. (Pause) What are you doing with all of this stuff?

GWEN

Packing it up for the people at the soup kitchen.

VERA

They're homeless. No place to keep dishes or coffee pot.

(Poring through the cartons)

Sardines. My favorite. (She puts it in her handbag) You can have pork and beans. (Pause) Anything of his you want?

GWEN

Just his trumpet.

VERA

For what? You gonna take lessons?

GWEN

A conversation piece. I'll turn it upside down and put flowers in it.

VERA

Just gather dust. You'll get more on e-Bay.

GWEN

I'll tell my friends it used to belong to Louis Armstrong.

VERA

They won't believe you.

GWEN

A game we play. I don't believe their lies either, but we like telling stories.

VERA

I've got next John picked out. Name's Yuri. A Russky like me. You know him from soup kitchen.

GWEN

Tall? Nice smile? Early 70s?

VERA

That's him. He has heart condition, but not serious. No family. No permanent address. Perfect candidate.

GWEN

Yeah. He and I have talked (Pause) I vote we quit now. If all the policies come in, you can buy that house in the Hills.

VERA

Then I'll have to furnish it.

GWEN

We may not be so lucky next time.

VERA

Are you kidding? We'll never get caught. Plus, real estate's a great investment right now. You ought to buy yourself--

GWEN

We could go to Canada. Start all over again stealing wallets and credit cards. Doctor says my health has improved. Lots of hotels there. I'd like that better.

VERA

And leave my dream house? Besides, all my men friends are here. Yuri's waiting for you at soup kitchen. You're always telling me there are no men our age on match dot com. Yuri's cute. Wanna boyfriend?

GWEN

Go out with a client? No thanks. I'm keeping this one at arm's length. John got too close. Your check from the insurance company clear yet?

VERA

Safe and sound. Not taking any chances after that last court appearance.

GWEN

Your crocodile tears are more than a match for their lawyer. What a coup.

VERA

In my genes. Your checks ought to be right along.

GWEN

Uh. Huh. Which boyfriend is it this time? The dancing friend or the eating friend?

VERA

Neither. My accountant. If I take Yuri to apartment, I'll be late.

GWEN

How could I forget? You always come first.

VERA

What time do you have to be at Big W?

GWEN

Two o'clock.

VERA

Fine. Then you can show Yuri apartment and do orientation. He needs to sign life insurance policy today. Sooner clock starts, sooner we collect.

GWEN

After today, you do the spy work.

VERA

You're better greeter. All that customer service experience you have from your favorite store. We'll take turns like in old days.

GWEN

I can still hear John's screams. Not going through that—

VERA

Don't worry. I have new plan. With this John we pump him with drugs first. He won't feel thing when we--.

GWEN

You're a regular Mother Theresa, Vera.

VERA

Must be this place. Need to shake it off before evicting one of my tenants this afternoon. Ahhh. Make sure he signs policy in two places. Use this pen.

GWEN

I have one.

VERA

Use mine in case he tries to con you with disappearing ink. (Pause) Tomorrow I'll buy new rubber stamp and we'll be back in business. I can't wait.

GWEN

Since you're in such a good mood, how about lending me a twenty?

VERA

Hah. Still owe me from last time. What's it for?

GWEN

Don't you listen to the news? They're taking up a collection inside for victims of Hurricane Katrina. All those people who lost their homes.

VERA

Forget it. They deserve what happened. During the war, you think I eat blinis and sour cream? No, I dig in ground for nuts like squirrels. They can do same.

GWEN

You ever think of John?

VERA

(Vera showers Gwen with a pile of bills that fall around her like leaves.)

All yours with your first check. And lots more after that.

(She puts her arm around Gwen and hands her the key, then exits. Gwen hesitates for a moment, then overturns the bag containing the trumpet. Then she tosses the trumpet in the garbage and picks up the money and exits.)

Scene Three

Two years later. A table for three at a restaurant. Vera and Gwen are drinking coffee. A third cup is nearby.

VERA

You look lovely. Nordstrom or Nieman Marcus?

GWEN

Nieman Marcus. And you?

VERA

My favorite boutique on Rodeo Drive. Tell me when you see Yuri come out of the men's room.

(She takes out a couple of pills, then drops them in the third coffee cup.)

GWEN

Why don't you just put up a neon sign?

VERA

People bring sugar substitutes to restaurants. Nobody thinks anything of it.

GWEN

He might taste something funny and get suspicious.

VERA

Odorless. Tasteless. He'll never guess.

GWEN

You're making me very nervous. (Signals) Waiter, bring me a stinger.

VERA

Not now. We've got to get him in car.

GWEN

Another fifteen minutes isn't going to make any difference.

VERA

Sure, it will. He'll be asleep by then. You gonna carry him?

GWEN

What if he comes back and wants dessert?

VERA

I'll tell him foundation is on a budget. Besides, we're late for awards ceremony.

GWEN

Here he comes.

VERA

Don't forget to snatch his billfold before we drive down alley.

GWEN

Just like the old days. Still stealing wallets. What's changed?

VERA

Size of pot, that's what. You want police to know who he is?

(Fade to black.)

A car door opens. There is a thump followed by a crunch. A man moans. Silence. Then a door slams shut.)

VERA

(Loud whisper)

We've got to get out of here. What are you waiting for?

GWEN

Car's stalled. What's that noise? Is he caught underneath?

VERA

Just drive.

(Light shift indicates the passage of time. Later that night in the alley.

Enter police detective Moe Goodman. He shines a flashlight on Yuri's body which is offstage.)

MOE

Shirt and tie. Hmmm. What's a guy like you doing in a place like this? Torn shirt. Lacerations to the head, hand and upper body. Grease marks on the clothing. No apparent leg injuries. No skid marks.

(He pulls out his cell phone.)

Hello, Myra. This is Goodman. Hit and run. DOA. Send a kit and an ambulance to Skid Row. The alley behind Fifth and Main. One more thing. Check the database for hit and runs in the vicinity. Go back awhile.

(He exits as the lights fade.)

Scene Four

The next morning. A street corner on Skid Row. A panhandler enters. He wears a cardboard sign that says, "Homeless vet. Will work for food. Please help." He bobs and weaves through traffic.)

LLOYD

(Holds up a dollar bill and waves.)

Thank you, sweetheart. God bless.

(He continues to negotiate traffic.
Enter Goodman. He is carrying a
stack of flyers.)

MOE

Just a minute.

LLOYD

Don't you guys have nothing better to do than harass poor people? What about all them bank robberies downtown? Go after them, why don'tcha? This is my corner and I ain't moving. Not all of us have pension plans and 401(k)s like you do.

MOE

The LA PD has a bad rep, some of it deserved. I work on Skid Row because I want to.

(He holds up the flyer.)

You know this man?

LLOYD

Maybe. You have a cigarette?

MOE

Don't smoke. What's his name?

LLOYD

He in trouble?

MOE

You could say that. He's dead.

LLOYD

In that case why should I tell you anything?

MOE

If it gets to be a habit, you could be next.

LLOYD

You're blocking my view. Can't make a living if I can't see my customers.

MOE

Hit and run two blocks from here. Not pretty.

LLOYD

For a work stoppage you've got to make it worth my while.

MOE

Buy yourself a bottle of water.

(He gives him a dollar.)

LLOYD

Name's Yuri. Can't pronounce his last name. We called him Yuri G.

MOE

Yuri live in the neighborhood?

LLOYD

This used to be his corner. When he come off the street, he give it to me.

MOE

He find a job?

LLOYD

Nah, religion. The church soup kitchen down the street. Holiness Gospel Church.

MOE

When you opened for business today, you notice anything unusual?

LLOYD

I'm not a morning person.

MOE

Take my card. If you think of something--. Or your friends notice...

LLOYD

Right. I'll ask my secretary to call you.

MOE

The Helping-Up Mission around the corner will let you use their phone.

LLOYD

This here's a full-time job. It's a busy corner.

(He hands back Moe's card.)

MOE

You're making money on his territory.

LLOYD

And I maintain it. Rain or shine. I owe the guy absolutely nothing.

MOE

He was one of you.

LLOYD

This is LA, not Mayberry.

(Moe writes a citation and hands it to Lloyd.)

What's this for?

MOE

Urinating in public just a moment ago. Fifty dollar fine or one night in jail.

LLOYD

Behind a tree. No harm in that.

MOE

Indecent exposure. A civil offense.

LLOYD

And you're for the poor and downtrodden? Uh. Huh. I bake cookies in my spare time.

MOE

How can I help you if you're not willing to fight back when people push you down?

LLOYD

Perfectly capable of fighting my own battles.

MOE

Understood. But you also need to look out for one another down here.

LLOYD

All right. I'll talk to my friends.

MOE

Thanks. I'm looking for the hit and run vehicle. Your friend's injuries suggest the car could have been damaged.

LLOYD

Maybe they needed a tow truck.

MOE

You got it. Anything suspicious.

LLOYD

I'll ask around, provided you rip up that ticket.

MOE

OK. You're now an official deputy.

LLOYD

This neighborhood's lousy with surveillance cameras. The accident may be on tape. You probably know that already.

MOE

It was dark. (Pause) How come you're so observant?

LLOYD

Those cameras have gotten me in trouble. Used to deal drugs before I cleaned up my act.

MOE

You have a lot of contact with cars, right?

LLOYD

Get clipped almost every day. Occupational hazard.

MOE

Regular hit and run goes right for the knees. You'd expect them to get broken or smashed pretty good.

LLOYD

So? I'm losing money, man.

MOE

Your friend Yuri's legs are fine, but there are grease marks and injuries on his upper body and face.

LLOYD

Hit lying down. If he was still sleeping on the street, it might make sense, but—

MOE

He a boozer or a druggie?

LLOYD

Sometime drinker when he had problems with the ladies.

MOE

Autopsy will show the presence of alcohol or rule it out.

LLOYD

You saying it wasn't an accident?

MOE

Possibly. Tell your friends to use the shelters instead of—

LLOYD

They'll do what they damn well please.

(Moe hands him a bill.)

MOE

Get yourself a burger and a cup of coffee.

LLOYD

I'm a vegetarian.

MOE

Tofu then. Be careful out there, Barney.

(He exits. Lloyd wades into traffic.)

Scene Five

Three weeks later. An insurance office. Shelly sits at a desk with a computer when Vera enters. Vera is dressed in black and carries a large purse and a dainty handkerchief.

SHELLY

Our receptionist says you want to check on the status of a claim?

VERA

Yes. I'm so upset.

(Cries)

My fiancée.

SHELLY

Please sit down.

VERA

Thank you. He was killed in accident. To have wonderful man come into my life at my age. Then pfft. It's more than I can—

(Cries)

SHELLY

What a blow. My condolences.

VERA

Such romantic. He used to play his violin and sing to me. Voice like an angel. So thoughtful. Takes out this policy just in case something happens to me, he says. Then you won't have to work so hard. Love of my life. Who cares about money? What I wouldn't give to have him right here by my side.

SHELLY

Let's make this as painless as possible. What is the deceased's name?

VERA

Yuri Galinskaya. I'll spell it for you. G-A-L-I-N-S-K-A-Y-A.

SHELLY

Date of birth?

VERA

January 9, 1937.

SHELLY

And you are the beneficiary?

VERA

Yes. He used to call me his little cabbage. My name's Vera Krabitz.

SHELLY

And the date of –

VERA

Here's death certificate. Just saying word makes me so upset.

(Cries)

When will check go out?

SHELLY

We usually pay in 30 days. According to our records, you filed your claim about three weeks ago. So... That's interesting. My system shows two beneficiaries on this policy.

VERA

Two? There must be a mistake.

SHELLY

You and a Gwen Halsted.

VERA

She's fake. An impostor. I'm Yuri's true fiancée. Don't pay her.

SHELLY

I'm afraid I can't do that. Her name is on the –

VERA

That hussy. All she wants is money. You look like a smart girl. Take her off your computer. You can do it. I bet you know how.

SHELLY

No, the insured wanted you both—

VERA

Yuri never wanted Gwen after he met me. She's a knockoff brand from Wal-Mart. I'm real love of his life. Only woman he loved before he—

SHELLY

According to our records, both checks are due to go out on the same day next week.

VERA

You've got to pay me first. Not that hussy. That impostor.

SHELLY

I'm very sorry, Ms. Krabitz. That's against company policy.

VERA

Of course, I own small business. We have procedures too. Mission statement. You have mission statement?

SHELLY

Yes. At Reliable Life, the customer always comes first.

VERA

Right. (Pause) I see you're wearing an engagement ring, Miss, uh?

SHELLY

It's Harrington.

VERA

Great cheekbones. You'll make beautiful bride. When's happy day?

SHELLY

In December when my fiancée's home on leave.

VERA

Always love man in uniform. My first husband so handsome in his. Makes me so proud. (Pause) Where is your fella stationed?

SHELLY

In Germany. Now about this policy...

VERA

Between now and then, what if an old girlfriend showed up, claiming he had proposed?

SHELLY

She'd be a liar.

VERA

Now you know how I feel about other woman. Gwen is phony.

SHELLY

That wouldn't happen. Allan and I have been together since high school.

VERA

You're lucky. Yuri and I just have a few years. But a match made in heaven. I play piano. He guitar. Oh—

(Starts to cry)

SHELLY

I thought you said he played the violin.

VERA

Uh, both. What talented man. So versatile. (Pause) Now about that hussy. She makes me so mad I could spit. Yuri so generous, sucker for sad story from an old flame down on her luck. Can't you do something?

SHELLY

I'll get fired if I—

VERA

Who will know? Just pend check in your system for a few days. I'd be so grateful.

SHELLY

This is business, Ms. Krabitz.

VERA

Then I'll sit here and hold my breath. If I die, it will be on your conscience. As one fiancée to another, you'll know I died for love. For truth.

(She holds her breath.)

SHELLY

Oh, for heaven's sake. Let me see what I can do.

VERA

Good. Just pay me first. That's all I ask. Make that hussy hold her breath. Maybe she'll keel over between now and then.

(Exit Vera. A moment later Shelly dials the phone.)

SHELLY

This is Shelly in the LA office. Give me the fraud and investigations department.

Scene Six

Moe is on the phone. He is at a desk with the yellow pages in front of him.

MOE

You tow a car from Skid Row on November 15 or thereabouts? Yeah, I'll hold.

(Pause)

Sarge, nobody every told us you needed telemarketing skills for this job. OK, so we're better paid, but-- No? All right. Thanks.

(Hangs up the phone, checks the book and dials.)

John's Auto? This is Detective Goodman with the LAPD. I need to ask you to check your towing records for November 15 and the following week. Car was in Skid Row near Fifth and Main.

(To himself)

Waiting is my middle name.

(He paces.)

Great. What kind of car? Mercury Sable. Right. License plate number? Got it. Thank you. Still there. Nobody picked it up? Hmm. On my way.

(Hangs up and dials.)

Myra, please check on the registration for California license plates Harry Charlie Peanuts 451 and call me back with the name and address.

(Lights shift to Vera's house. She is giving herself a manicure when the doorbell rings. She keeps working. The doorbell rings again.)

VERA

Keep your shirt on.

(Doorbell rings again.)

No soliciting. Can't you read? Where are your manners? In your car?

(Opens the door. Process server carries a manila envelope.)

PROCESS SERVER

Vera Krabitz?

VERA

Yes. Don't know you. Good--

(She tries to close the door, but he puts his foot in it.)

PROCESS SERVER

Just a minute. Reliable Life Insurance Company.

(He hands her the envelope.)

VERA

Miss Harrington came through. How nice of you to deliver my check in person. Priority mail would have been just fine. You get an A for customer service.

PROCESS SERVER

Sorry to disappoint you, Ms. Krabitz.

VERA

(Vera tears open the envelope.)

I have one hundred percent success rate with you people. Law's on my side, mister.

PROCESS SERVER

Not this time. Insurance fraud.

VERA

What? Ridiculous.

PROCESS SERVER

You'll be hearing from the state prosecutor's office.

(He exits. Lights fade to dark.)

Scene Seven

Later that same day. Police impound lot.

(Enter Moe in plainclothes. He is all over the lot, looking up and down the rows of cars.)

MOE

(He dials his cell phone.)

Sarge, when is the department coming into the 21st century? There must be five thousand cars in this lot. A Mercury Sable? Three days. When I'm commissioner.... Sarge? Sarge?

(He keeps searching.)

(Enter an auctioneer. He stands in front of a podium.)

AUCTIONEER

Here's a nice car. Two thousand Cadillac Eldorado. Starting at one thousand.

(Speaks very fast)

I have one. I want two. Have one. Want two. I've got two. Want twenty-five. Twenty-five. I need three. Need three. I've got three. Three. Want thirty-five. Thirty five. Want four. Do I hear four? Anybody else for four? Number 6753. Sold to the man with the Dodgers baseball cap.

Next item. Here's a nice looking car.

(Speaks very fast)

Two thousand two Mercury Sable. Starting at two thousand. I have two. Need twenty five. Twenty five. Twenty five. Got twenty five. Twenty five. I want three. Three. Three. Got three. Want thirty-five. Thirty five. Got thirty five. Need four. Four. Four. Got four. Need forty-five. Forty-five. Forty-five.

MOE

Stop. Did you say a Mercury Sable?

AUCTIONEER

Got forty-five. Need five. Five. Five. Have forty-five. Forty-five. Need five.

MOE

Stop the bidding. I need this car.

AUCTIONEER

Then hold up your hand.

MOE

No. Stop now.

AUCTIONEER

Security, get him outta here. (Pause) Don't be bashful, folks. I'm at forty-five. Forty-five. Forty-five. Would you bid five? Ok. Have five. Five. Need fifty-five. Fifty-five. Fifty-five.

MOE

LAPD. This is official police business. Stop the auction.

AUCTIONEER

I'm under contract with the city. Now step aside so I can do my job. (Pause) What am I bid? Need fifty-five. Fifty-five.

MOE

This car is the subject of a criminal investigation.

AUCTIONEER

This here's a public auction. Everything's for sale.

MOE

Not this one. A mistake. Been looking for this baby for hours. Gimme the keys.

AUCTIONEER

You're interrupting. I don't like your tone. Let me see some ID.

MOE

(Flashes his badge)

And you're disrupting my investigation. Give me the keys.

AUCTIONEER

Sorry, folks. Don't go 'way. We'll be back just as soon as you can say odometer. (Aside) Take care of it, Jack. Get him and the car out of here, then bring up the next lemon.

MOE

(Dialing his phone)

Dispatch? Goodman. Send forensics to the impound lot. Right away. Thanks.

Scene Eight

Two days later. A room in a police station. There are a table and two chairs and a door. Enter Gwen in prison garb. She paces.

GWEN

(She bangs on the door.)

Guard. Guard. Help. Help me. Where's my meds? You promised me over an hour ago. The mayor is a personal friend. He'll hear about this. Next month you'll be driving a cab.

(Enter Moe. He carries a plastic container with prescription drugs and a glass of water.)

MOE

Her honor knows we're shorthanded. She cut our budget.

GWEN

Blood pressure higher than a kite. If I have a heart attack and die, it will be your fault. On your conscience. What is your name, Officer? I want to remember it when I file a lawsuit.

MOE

Take a drink of water and try to relax, Mrs. Halsted.

GWEN

Tell me the name of your commanding officer.

MOE

Commander Jim Slatsky. Do you want me to spell it?

GWEN

No, just give me your card.

MOE

Don't have one on me. The budget. Rationing. They're on my desk.

GWEN

How very convenient. Where is the service in public service?

MOE

Blame your fellow taxpayers.

GWEN

This whole thing is a big mistake. Insurance fraud? The very idea. Do you know who I am? Did you giggle me?

MOE

Giggle you?

GWEN

On the Internet. When you type in my name, my foundation pops up. Don't tell me you haven't heard of my soup kitchen and my shelter for abused and neglected animals. The Bide A Wee?

MOE

Of course. My dog comes from the pound. Important work you're doing.

GWEN

Yes, we rescued 200 dogs last year. Glad you're finally coming to your senses, Officer. Now about my release—

MOE

Waiting on the charging documents. Could be a little while. A community leader like yourself. Maybe you'd like to help me with my investigation while you're waiting. Yuri Galinskaya. Sound familiar?

GWEN

I'm not good with names, especially foreign ones. Sorry. Can't help you. This past 24 hours. No sleep. Terrible food. Not even a comb or a toothbrush. Women screaming in the middle of the night. With all the crime in this city don't you have anything better to do than arrest a woman who's old enough to be your grandmother?

MOE

Yuri used to hang out on Skid Row. You're the beneficiary of his life insurance policy.

GWEN

Many of our clients have no family. They remember the soup kitchen when they die.

MOE

Your name is on the policy, not the soup kitchen.

GWEN

Then it must be my lucky day. Maybe he was a stockbroker in a previous life. Happens sometimes.

MOE

Not in this case.

GWEN

A veteran then.

MOE

No, he was Russian. Tall. Moustache. The kind to stand out in a crowd. (Pause) Your name is on 10 policies, not one, Mrs. Halsted.

GWEN

A man is generous to those who gave him a hand up and you automatically assume the worst. Shame on you, Officer. Dragging me in here on some trumped-up charge. No wonder my taxes are so high. The police department hires people who don't know what they're doing. Then those people get fired and the city has to hire more incompetents. The cycle goes on and on.

MOE

I'm a homicide detective, Mrs. Halsted. Yuri was the victim of a hit and run.

GWEN

I've told you everything I know. Maybe you need to go house to house to conduct your investigation like they do on TV.

MOE

We'll talk later.

GWEN

Bring your pen.

(He exits. Gwen spies a bug, chases it across the room and stomps it.)

(Enter Vera in prison garb.)

VERA

My cell is damp. Could they spring for humidifier? Of course not. Spiders and cockroaches big as quarters.

GWEN

Is your lawyer on his way? I've got to take care of my dogs.

VERA

Will you stop worrying about those stupid dogs? We have more important things...

GWEN

Vera, you're talking about my family. Pookah and Clarice are all alone. When is your lawyer coming exactly?

VERA

He's on his way. We need to keep quiet until he arrives. You think you're the only one who wants to get out of here? Wednesday is day I collect rent. If I am not there, deadbeat tenants buy lottery tickets instead of paying me.

GWEN

Ask your lawyer to call my vet. He makes house calls.

VERA

Are you crazy? Do you know how much my lawyer charges per hour?

GWEN

I don't care about the money. You know how much my girls mean to me. After all I've done for you, you're refusing to...

VERA

You carry this dog thing too far.

GWEN

Are you telling me you're not going to help two innocent dogs? They depend on me.

VERA

They're old dogs.

GWEN

We're old.

VERA

You're upset. My lawyer has fast car. Your dog will be ok.

GWEN

How would you know? You don't even own a parakeet. My girls need me now, not an hour or two from now. Please ask your lawyer to call my vet.

VERA

You can get another pet. A pedigree this time.

GWEN

I don't want another pet. These dogs are my life. You have Norman, I have Pookah and Clarice. When they go --

VERA

You have your work with shelter.

GWEN

Not enough. Don't you see that? If you turn your back on me now...

VERA

I have an itch that's driving me nuts. How about scratching my back?

GWEN

I can't listen to you any more. Should have quit long ago.

VERA

You're big shot. Rich. That's what you want. And now you're complaining?

GWEN

You're right. Mrs. Rich Bitch has arrived. I am beginning to sound just like you.

VERA

Congratulations.

GWEN

Bossy. Callous. Arrogant. (Pause) My god. How awful I've become. And this place. Just what I was afraid of all along.

VERA

Today is blip. Think about next week. You'll be home and--

GWEN

Without my dogs. I can't imagine anything worse.

VERA

For years you pamper those pets. They have better food than people at soup kitchen. (Pause) In my country during war, we eat stray dogs. It was that or starve.

GWEN

Monster. People and animals mean nothing to you. You treated John like an old dog. *Put him down before his time.*

VERA

Be quiet.

GWEN

So you can drone on like usual? My Dad used to tell me to think for myself. But I let you do it for me.

VERA

I lead, you follow. Shh. Somebody's coming. Put on happy face.

(Enter Moe. He hands Gwen a card.)

MOE

At your service, Mrs. Halsted. When your lawyer files a complaint, tell him to spell my name right.

GWEN

Please, Officer Goodman. I need to use the phone. It's an emergency.

MOE

You want to call your lawyer?

GWEN

My vet. My dogs. One of them is diabetic. She could go into a coma and die if I'm not there to give her meds. Please. My vet makes house calls.

MOE

Against the rules. I'm sorry.

GWEN

Please. You have a dog. I'll make a big donation to the Police Athletic League.

MOE

Are you offering me a bribe?

GWEN

I'm a philanthropist. I make donations to good causes.

MOE

One call. Make it short.

(He hands her his cell phone. She dials.)

GWEN

It's busy. Let me try again.

MOE

Can't. I'm late for a meeting.

GWEN

I'm begging you to call him for me.

MOE

You just told me I was incompetent.

GWEN

I'm sorry. Please give me your pen so I can write down his number.

(He does and so does she.)

Thank you, Officer Goodman. Dog lovers have to stick together. Please call him right away.

MOE

Detective.

(He looks at the card.)

See what I can do. (Pause) Can't promise.

(He exits.)

VERA

Are you wearing wire?

GWEN

After all we've been through, you still don't trust me.

VERA

You, not them.

GWEN

You said that before. Gonna frisk me? Would that make you feel better, partner?

VERA

Shut up. You're talking too much.

GWEN

I'm friendly.

VERA

Stupid. Now you owe that cop---

GWEN

Gullible. Like the women at the church. I looked up to you. Wanted to be just like you. But at what cost?

VERA

Give me break. This is LA. (Pause) Why all these questions?

GWEN

You conned me into thinking I could turn my life around. Just like John.

VERA

Everyone needs to have hope. Dreams. You go from Wal-Mart to leader in community. People at senior center respect you.

GWEN

I was starting to believe my own lies. You twisted things. You can't have that many insurers. You were greedy and I was too.

VERA

Ambitious. So American. My lawyer says they have no case. They're trying to frighten us like KGB.

GWEN

You're the one who makes me afraid, not the police. You play with people like a cat with a bird, string them along till they're of no use to you. Then poof! Yuri's up, then face down in an alley.

VERA

Are you forgetting where we are? They're trying to divide us. Don't let them--.

GWEN

You'd treat me like a dog if I let you. I'm turning myself in.

VERA

If you say one word, I'll-I'll

GWEN

That detective works for homicide. I'll do what I need to do to get out of here and take care of my girls.

VERA

(Throttling Gwen)

Have you lost your mind?

GWEN

You don't get it, partner. I call the shots now and I say—

VERA

All right. I get it. I'll tell my lawyer to call your stupid vet. But you've got to promise me—

(Gwen goes into cardiac arrest and falls to the floor. Vera runs to the door and is about to bang on it, when she stops, turns around and sits down at the table and waits.)

Having a heart attack? All out of nitroglycerine? I should have taken out insurance policy on you. Die. Die.

(Gwen slumps to the table. A beat. Enter Moe.)

MOE

Charlie, you have all that on tape? Vera Krabitz, you're under arrest for the murder of Yuri Galinskaya. Step this way.

(Gwen raises her head and looks over at Vera. She is very quiet. Vera exits, kicking and screaming as Moe escorts her off the stage.)

VERA

(Yelling in Russian)

Cyka! Copbaka! Habo!

Scene Nine

Three years later. Moe enters. A metal door slams behind him. Lights up on a jail cell. Vera, in prison garb, is playing solitaire. Her hair is completely gray and devoid of style.

MOE

Your friend's getting released tomorrow.

VERA

No friend of mine.

MOE

Partner then.

(Vera snorts.)

She wants to see you.

VERA

Now? Traitor? Three years she avoids me like cancer. Forget it.

MOE

The warden's given his approval.

VERA

To rub it in? You people are...always harassing me. I have rights too, you know.

MOE

Don't take it out on me. I'm just the messenger.

VERA

Done your job. Now beat it before I-I-

MOE

Call nine one one?

(He exits.)

(Light shift notes the passage of time.)

(Vera is as before. A metal door slams. Gwen enters in civilian clothes. Her hair is also gray.)

GWEN

I came to say goodbye.

(Vera ignores her and continues her game. Gwen takes a step closer and speaks louder.)

I came to –

VERA

(She keeps on playing.)

You said it. Now go.

GWEN

What's happening with your appeals? We were friends once. Is there anything I can do.... a message for Norman?

(Vera picks up Gwen's suitcase and throws it against the wall.)

VERA

Friends? Bah. You could have been millionaire. To give all that up. You think your dogs wait three years for you to pat their heads? They're horse meat by now.

GWEN

Wrong. My shelter is taking care of them.

VERA

And who will take care of Gwen? Here at least you have roof, three meals a day.

GWEN

I won't starve. Plenty of soup kitchens if I--

VERA

Charity? Ugh. Supermarket leftovers. Stale bread and cake. You'll be fat as house. Forget designer clothes. You'll be in sweat pants and baggy sweater down to your knees.

GWEN

Downsizing. Learned that in jail. When I walk out of here, I'll be free of you.

VERA

Free to go where? You have no money.

GWEN

I'll get a job. Been taking a correspondence course to become a vet tech. I could—

VERA

At your age? With criminal record?

GWEN

Then I'll volunteer. The shelter animals need me. I'm good with—

VERA

Dreamer. So American. They'll do background check. Nonprofits don't want you--

GWEN

Mine does.

VERA

You have no place to live.

GWEN

The shelters won't turn me away.

VERA

Shelters don't take dogs.

GWEN

You're jealous. Has Norman visited you even once? He was only interested in your money. I have something to love that loves me back. I can make a difference...

VERA

You're fool. You'll walk out of here with ten dollars in your pocket and bus ticket to nowhere. If you kept your mouth shut, you'd still have that Cape Cod in —

GWEN

I have friends.

VERA

How long do you think they'll stick by you when they see you have empty pockets? In America you've got to have money, especially when you're old. That's why they call it **Social Security**.

GWEN

And I worked hard for it. They can't take that away--

VERA

Pittance in this town. You'll be on the street. Dirt under your fingernails. Rummaging in the garbage.....Pushing a grocery cart. All by yourself.

GWEN

After this place don't mind being alone.

VERA

A people person like you? Baloney.

GWEN

Not any more. Only got me into trouble.

VERA

Trouble? You ain't seen nothing yet. You'll be looking over your shoulder to make sure nobody's following you. And when you do fall asleep, you'll have nightmares about Yuri. His friends will come after you for what you did. Your face was all over newspapers and Internet.

GWEN

The homeless don't read the newspaper and they can't afford a computer.

VERA

Wrong. Where do you think they spend their time? At the library. You're dead meat, dearie.

GWEN

I'll move north if I have to. Change my name.

VERA

Homeless have nothing better to do. They'll find you. You won't get away with...

GWEN

I couldn't let **you** get away with.... Why do you think I turned you in?

VERA

To get back at me for being rich.

GWEN

Not for being rich, for being greedy to the point of murdering those men. They never did anything to us. You sicken me. I sicken myself.

(Vera starts to protest)

Always mouthing off. Sit down and shut up for once. When I walk out of here, I plan to do some good in the time I have left.

VERA

Trying to buy your way into heaven? Who are you kidding? A thief, a murderer like you? What will you use for brain?

GWEN

Managed ok for more than 70 years without your help. All your talk about money turned my head around. There's more to life than watching my bank account and the stock market go up and down.

VERA

You—

GWEN

I said, be quiet. The dogs at the shelter been kicked. I have too. They wag their tails and act glad to see me cause they know they can trust me. Me. Gwen Halsted. (Pause) When I leave here, I plan to be the kind of woman I was pretending to be all along.

VERA

You--.

GWEN

When I leave here, I can start a new life. It's a whole new day out there.

(Gwen bangs on the door.)

Guard, guard. I'm ready. Open up.

(Gwen exits. A metal door slams behind her. Lights fade to dark.)

END OF PLAY