

She had a plan...

# The Perfect Way to Go

A Mystery

Dror Kahn





DROR KAHN

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*A Mystery*

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*To Madeline, Ezra, Saskia, and Sabella. Having you to love is  
enough.*



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# Preface

Dear Reader,

I'm Grandma Ruth, the hero of *The Perfect Way To Go*. Seeing the commotion I've caused, I'm having second thoughts. Here it is my Shiva, but instead of thinking about me and remembering stories, they're trying to figure out what happened. Maybe I messed up, but, to tell the truth, watching them is entertaining, like a show with my family as the cast. There's my son the doctor, Arnie and daughter-in-law Judy, my grandchildren, Diane, David, and Bob, Brenda, Bob's wife, and Aunt Pearl, Morty's younger sister, who's lived with us since we were married. They're not perfect, but I love them and that's enough.

Ruth

## The Shiva

**I**t should have been the end of a long day, but it isn't.

Judy, always proper and polite, is showing the last guests out at the door. If you know her, you can see her smile in her voice; stiff at the edges and with a display of expensive teeth. Remarkably, after so many hours of smiling, cheek kissing and noshing, her crimson lipstick has the same crisp edge as when the evening began. Her husband, Arnie, beside her at the door, says nothing. He is a doctor and has practiced communicating without speaking, as if not wanting to be held to his words, or he is saving them for more important things. His lips part without a sound while his eyes and the tilt of the head and the gentle, soft, doctor's hand giving a pat and a squeeze on the shoulder, do the talking. It's his bedside manner.

The living and dining rooms have blended with chairs from one in the other and platters of food, plates with remnants, utensils, and partially full glasses on the coffee and side tables. The three adult children, Diane, David and Bob and Brenda, Bob's wife, are seated, waiting for Arnie and Judy to complete

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the sendoff and return to the room. “Isn’t it funny that the longest good-byes are between people who hardly know each other?” says Brenda, but no one hears her. The words are just more noise, like the sounds that Pearl is making putting away dishes in the kitchen.

“Let’s go already,” Bob says to no one, looking at the time on his phone. It is 10:54.

David, is tracking the time on his Apple watch. He is expressionless. His right leg is in a cast that reaches from the thigh to his toes, which stick out, clenched in a sock, revealing his tension.

“Hey, I have a question,” says their younger sister, Diane, sitting on the couch opposite them. Neither responds or looks up, but she goes on, used to being ignored, “Did Grandma seem strange at the Seder?”

She looks from Bob to David and finally, exasperated, to Brenda, “Don’t tell me they have an over-under bet on when the last guest leaves.”

Brenda shrugs, “Are you surprised?” Diane looks at her watch. It is now 10:56. She turns to her brothers, “What time is it, eleven?”

They continue to ignore her. Angrily, she gets up leaving them intent on their devices.

From the doorway a woman is saying, “Arnie, I’m sorry. No matter the age, it is always hard to lose a mother. Ruth was a wonderful person.”

“Yes she was. She had a good long life. We’ll all miss her,” Judy is heard along with the sound of the front door opening. “Drive carefully.”

“This is a close one,” Bob is being a good sport, “It could’ve gone either way.”

“Shut up,” David thinks.

Then, instead of the door closing, it is Diane’s voice that they hear, “Thank you for coming. Please remind me, how do you know Grandma?”

“What the.., what’s she doing? They are already out the door,” Bob is irate.

“But the door hasn’t shut,” David says matter-of-factly.

“This is interference. She’s doing it on purpose. Brenda, tell him.”

“Leave me out of this,” she says.

“Ten fifty nine and thirty seconds,” says David with his wrist six inches from his nose.

“Forget it. It’s disqualified.” Bob has put away his phone.

“Fifteen seconds.”

“Why are you being such a jerk?”

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...”

Bob reaches over and violently covers David’s watch with his hand, holding him by the wrist. David doesn’t resist, just calmly turns his head to look Bob in the face and keeps counting down.

“It’s over. Diane interfered.”

“Bull. Pay up,” David says after reaching zero. He twists his hand, freeing himself .

Bob gets up and begins to walk. “Hey, where you going?” David sticks the crutch out to block his way, “Don’t Welch,” his voice now rising.

“What’s going on?” Judy interrupts. She, Arnie and Diane finally come back to the room. David pulls the crutch back.

“The usual,” says Brenda, “they made a bet.”

Diane looks at her brothers with the same innocent smile she had as a child when she revealed where one of them hid a toy from the other. “Do you know, the mother of that woman was

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Grandpa's cousin. I always wondered how she was connected," Diane tells them all.

"That's good to know," Bob shakes his head at her, then he adds sarcastically, "too bad we'll never see her again."

David gives a quick wink at Diane and moves his cast to make room for her to sit next to him on the couch, but before she can, Judy puts a tray in her hand.

"Hold this," she says and begins to load it with glasses.

"Bob, can you straighten out the chairs," she continues impatiently, "Why do I always have to spell out what needs to be done?"

Hearing this as directed at all of them, Brenda gets up and picks up a platter with smoked fish to bring to the kitchen, but Arnie gestures she should leave it be. He's going to have a bit more. She stacks dirty dishes instead.

"I wish I could help," David says, pointing at his leg in the cast.

"Oh sure, we know," Bob teases, "but you're a cripple."

David is stung by this. He reaches over for the crutch and awkwardly gets up. "Pearl," he calls to the kitchen, "leave the dishes. I'll load the washer." He hobbles towards the kitchen, his crutches thumping with each step, but before he reaches it, Aunt Pearl comes out holding an apron.

Pretending to misunderstand, David says with mock gratitude, "Thanks, is that for me?"

"You? Don't make me laugh. Stay out of the kitchen with those crutches. Go sit back down. I'll let you know when I need your help."

She brings the apron to Judy, "Put this on. That's an expensive dress."

"I tried," David shrugs. He is accustomed to being protected and spoiled by Pearl. Clowning, he goes backwards on the

crutches as if in reverse, retracing his steps to the couch. As he passes near the table where Bob is pushing in a chair, Bob keeps his foot out to trip the crutch. David reacts with theatrical exaggeration, almost falling and knocking over a lamp. By accident he puts his weight on the broken leg and cries out involuntarily.

“Hey, it still hurts. Take it easy.”

“Sorry, I forgot you really did break your leg. Why don’t you take one of your pain pills?”

“No way. Those pills scare me.” David drops himself onto the couch. He looks around the room. Feeling guilty to be sitting when everyone is working he says, “Mom, can we just relax for a few minutes?”

“If it were up to you we would always be relaxing. You don’t need to, but we still have an hour drive home,” she says. The tray is full and Diane heads to the kitchen, “Bring back a sponge,” she calls after her.

She returns to clearing the table and notices that Arnie is making himself a plate of food. “Arnie, haven’t you eaten enough?”

David continues, “Mom, Dad hasn’t had a chance to eat and neither have you. Just sit for a bit. It’s been hard. We should just have time together.”

Bob has finished with the chairs, “He’s right, let’s sit for a bit. You haven’t stopped since yesterday. Do you want me to make you a plate? How about a glass of seltzer?”

With a martyr’s sigh she sits down next to Arnie who has begun to eat silently. She turns her attention to him, “How are you doing, dear?” Arnie’s mouth is full, so he leans his head to one side, as if to say, “what can you expect?”

Bob and Brenda sit together in the love seat that was brought

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in from the foyer, Diane comes from the kitchen and sits next to David on the couch.

“Pearl, leave the dishes and come sit with us,” Judy calls to her.

With Pearl now joining them they are all sitting for the first time since the Seder. Each in their own thoughts. The silence is becoming obvious. Who will be first to speak?

“You know, all in all, if this was going to be, it worked out pretty well,” Bob says, “we’re all home for the Seder, we had a nice evening, then she goes to sleep. The end.”

“Did she even wake up after supper?” Brenda asks.

“She fell asleep right after we sang *dayenu*. I lost that bet,” Bob shakes his head and smiles at Diane without elaborating.

Brenda continues, “The last thing she did was sit with us all together. It was so perfect.”

“The perfect way to go,” Bob smiles, appreciating his own turn of phrase.

“And we have leftovers for the Shiva,” David adds with a smile, as he often does, he manages to get in the last line.

No one has noticed that Diane has been quietly crying, until now when she softly sobs. They politely stop their talking and let her continue. Her eyes are on her lap and when she looks up at them there are tears in her eyes. A box of tissues is passed from Judy to Bob to David who holds it out to her.

“I didn’t mean to joke,” he apologizes as she takes a tissue, “we all miss Grandma. We’re all sad.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Bob says, “You can cry. We’re just relieving the tension. Everyone does it in their own way.”

Judy crosses from where she is sitting by the table and gives David a nudge to make space for her to sit next to Diane. With obvious patience, she watches as he struggles to move over with

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his heavy leg in the cast and crutches on the deep, soft couch. Finally, there's room to wedge herself next to Diane.

She puts her arms around her and they bring their heads together until their foreheads kiss, something they've always done. "You know Grandma loved you," Judy says, and then after a beat, "but you loved her more." With a light tone she completes the two part repartee they had. "I love you," one of them says "But I love you more," the other replies.

Diane is expected to smile at this, but she doesn't. She pulls herself from her mother and wipes the tears with the tissues.

"It wasn't so perfect," she says seriously, "I killed Grandma. I didn't mean to, but I think I did."

## 2

### Diane

I came to Grandma's early to help Pearl get ready for the Seder, but I could tell as soon as I opened the door and smelled the chicken soup, that most of the cooking was probably done.

Sure enough, there was a mound of matzo balls already made and the brisket was sliced and staying warm in the oven, and like always, the bowl of string beans looked like green rubber bands. For the life of me I don't get why Pearl always boils vegetables like she's making spaghetti.

"Hello," I called loudly so that I wouldn't surprise them.

"We're here," Pearl yelled back from Grandma's room.

The table was already set. There really wasn't going to be anything to do.

I had a bunch of flowers and I brought them in so Grandma could smell them. She was in the wheelchair and Pearl got up from her chair and put down the book she was reading to her.

"Who is it?" Grandma asked.

"It's Diane," Pearl said, "she brought you something. Let's see if you can tell what it is."

"Oh, darling," Grandma said, "come here. Give me a kiss."

I kissed her cheek. She put her hand on my face, then with her finger tips felt my cheek and my hair and down to the nape of my neck, feeling my necklace.

"Diane, you came early," she said.

"Not early enough. Everything's done. I wanted to help."

"Show her what you have," Pearl said.

I put the flowers close to her face so she could smell them and almost immediately she smiled.

"Lilacs. Oh, divine. They're gorgeous," Grandma said.

"They're beautiful, Diane, thank you," Pearl said.

"Pearl, put them in the crystal vase with the handle and then take a nap and let Diane sit with me."

"Yes, boss," Pearl laughed and took the flowers. "Diane, maybe you can fix Ruth's hair while I get myself ready."

"I'd love to."

I sat down next to Grandma. I could see she had something on her mind from the way she wasn't talking. You know how it was, if there wasn't talking then she was thinking about something important. Around her, silence wasn't common. I held her hand. After a moment I asked, "Would you like me to do your hair?"

"I don't think it needs anything, does it?" she touched her head with the other hand, "It feels fine. Pearl is always such a fussy daddy."

I laughed, "You mean 'fuddy daddy'. You look fine." Then she took me by surprise and asked that I make her a little drink.

"Darling," she said, "what's that drink I used to have before dinner? The one with the cherry."

"You sometimes had a Manhattan."

"That's it. Do you know how to make it? There's some booze

in the cupboard in the dining room.”

I was surprised by this. We all know that she sometimes liked to loosen up with a cocktail, and we’ve seen her when she had a few too many, but I didn’t expect it on Pesach. “Grandma, do you really want to drink? There’s all that wine during the Seder.”

She laughed. “After 95 Seders you don’t need to tell me about the wine. Be a good girl and do what I ask.” She said it in that forceful way she had.

I got up to go. “You know what, bring some ice and we’ll make it here. I don’t want Pearl to see. She’s no fun.”

I went to the kitchen and put some ice in a glass and then went to the dining room to get the bourbon and vermouth. Pearl was still arranging the flowers and saw me with one bottle under my arm and my hands full. She frowned, but didn’t say anything.

Back in Grandma’s room I set everything on the dresser top and poured the liquors into the glass and stirred.

“Are you making one for yourself too?”

“No,” I laughed, “they’ll have to carry me out if I have a drink now and then wine.”

“That’s the idea,” she mumbled and then added in a normal voice, “this is why I have a wheelchair.” She could hear the ice clinking as I stirred the drink and she put her hand out, almost unnoticeably smacking her lips in anticipation. I put the glass in her hand and she took a sip. “Mmmm, perfect. You can be a mixologist.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think that’s my career path.”

Grandma laughed, “Not a job for a nice Jewish girl.”

She then said to me, “Diane, I want you to have this necklace,” she touched the pearls that were looped around her neck. She took a sip of the drink, “Put it on and tell me how it looks on

you.”

I was caught completely off guard. “Grandma, I have a necklace.”

“I know. But this is now for you.”

“I can’t do that,” I said, “You always wear these pearls. They are so ‘you.’”

She put her drink down and began to try to unclasp the necklace herself. “Help me with this before I break it. They’re real pearls.” I was afraid she would snap the chain so I helped her take it off. “If you don’t want to wear it tonight, then put it in your bag and take it home. It’s yours now,” she said, “I don’t want to talk about it anymore, except to hear you say “thank you” and maybe tell me that one day you will pass it on to your daughter.”

To be honest, I was pleased. I said thank you. It wasn’t the first time she gave me a gift. But she then said I should look in her jewelry box and see if there was anything else I wanted. I asked her why she was doing it and she said, “If not now, when?” I didn’t think much of it. Then she went on. “How else can I enjoy giving you things. I want to be in ‘attendance,’” she said as if it were the punchline to a joke. Under her breath she said to herself, “It will be like a free for all.” and to me she said, “Please, you go first, you’re blood.” I’m sorry Mom and Brenda, Pearl, but that’s what she said. I didn’t take much.

Maybe I’m stupid, but I didn’t think any of this was concerning. It had a closing ritual feel, but at her age it made sense to do things like that.

While I looked through the jewelry and described the pieces to her, she sat and sipped her Manhattan.

When I finished she asked that I now look in the top drawer of the dresser and in the back, under the slips, there will be a

medicine bottle.

I found it and read the label.

"It's Grandpa's medicine," I said, "Why do you have this? It expired over ten years ago."

"Don't worry about it," she said, "it's still good. Give me one pill."

The label had the warning in bold red letters. Do not take when drinking alcohol. Do not drive, etc. May cause dizziness, sleepiness, loss of balance. Do not exceed recommended dosage. Take one pill in the morning with food.

"Have you ever taken this before?" I asked, "What's it for? If you don't feel good, take one of your medicines. Let me call Pearl. She'll know."

"No," she snapped, "leave Pearl out of this. Give me one of the pills."

"Grandma, I don't think this is a good idea." I really meant it. Her expression changed. She looked as if I caught her doing something I wasn't supposed to see.

"What's not a good idea?"

"Taking medicine that's not yours." She looked relieved when I said that. I am so stupid. I should have known right then there was something else going on.

"Now you're a doctor?" she teased, "You know what is good for me? Diane, be a good girl and give me a pill."

What could I do? I wish I hadn't given in, but I never could say no to her, none of us could. I gave her a pill and she swallowed it with some more of the drink as I watched.

Slowly her face softened. I remember thinking that the medicine couldn't have worked so fast and wondering why she changed. Did I have any thought that this was wrong? Maybe for a moment I thought it was all a bit fishy, but nothing more,

and that passed. I am so stupid.

We were sitting side by side. "Remember how we used to sit and I'd read to you and then when you could read, you would read to me? Those were good times."

"They were," I said, "I loved to sit with you." I remembered how we fit into the same arm chair, our hips touching, and I remembered how she smelled and how sometimes she brushed my hair as I read.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you more. Come, give me a kiss."

I did, and she said, "It's going to be a big night. Let me rest. Go see if Pearl needs any help."

That was it. I didn't think anything, except she did seem to be different all night. Did you notice? All that talking. I think that medicine and the drink plus the wine was a big mistake. I should not have given it to her, not the drink and not the medicine. She'd still be alive. I feel it.

# 3

## The Shiva

“**I**killed Grandma. I am so stupid.” Diane looks around the room. Of course she is expecting someone to say she isn’t stupid, but what will they say about what she did?.

Judy is the first to speak. “You did the right thing. You did what she asked, and besides, it had nothing to do with her dying. Absolutely nothing.” Diane begins to protest that it did, but doesn’t get a sentence out when Judy continues. “Look, mixing the medicine with drinks may not have been advisable, but that was, what six, seven, eight hours before she went to bed. You didn’t do anything wrong.” She takes Diane’s hand. “You loved Grandma and it is natural that you worry, but there’s no reason to. Shake this thought out of your head and appreciate your last time with her as she would have wanted you to.” She looks around the room towards Pearl, “Tell her, Pearl. Ruth was fine, just a bit sleepy after all the drinks.”

Pearl agrees, “You didn’t do anything to her.”

Judy looks to Arnie to concur. He is taking a bite out of a piece of pastry and so instead of speaking, gestures agreement with his hand.

David, in a cheery voice says, “You had me there, Diane. For a minute I thought you were going to give a serious confession. I would have believed it too. You could do it.” Appreciating that he has everyone’s attention, he goes on. “I felt it about you since the time you locked me in the closet and scared the babysitter that I had run away. Remember?”

David tells them the story good naturedly, happy with himself for doing something helpful by changing the subject and lightening the mood. “I was about four. She put me in the coat closet then opened the front door and called for me like I had wandered out. The babysitter freaked out because she was on the phone with her boyfriend and not watching us. She got her good,” David laughs, “Bob, you’ve seen it too, right? Beneath that mild persona Diane is capable of murder.”

“Stop with the joking, David, this isn’t the time for it,” Judy scolds him.

David is annoyed that no one is appreciating his effort. Even Bob seems bothered. He usually jumps in when David tries to take center stage. His silence says more than words. “Hey, guys, “ David says, “let’s lighten up. The last thing Grandma would want is all these sour pussies.” He sees that Bob and Brenda are whispering to each other.

“What’s up? No secrets here.”

Brenda ignores him. While Bob holds her hand she says, “Diane, you didn’t kill Grandma. It’s more complicated than that.”

“Now what?” Judy is exasperated, “Arnie, what’s going on?”

Brenda continues, “Bob, do you want to tell it or should I?”

Letting go of her hand Bob reluctantly says, “I got it,” as if obligated because it’s his grandmother and his family and, yes, he’s the man.

## Bob

**W**hen Brenda and I arrived for the Seder Pearl let us in. Immediately Grandma called from her room, “Who just came?”

“Bob and Brenda,” Pearl called back loudly so Grandma could hear. To us she said, “She must have been listening for the doorbell. I thought she was napping.” We also had flowers and Pearl told us to bring them to Grandma.

“Hi Grandma,” we both said as we entered her room.

“It’s B and B. I recognize those voices. The newly weds.”

“We’ve been married three years,” protests Bob.

“You’ll be newly weds till I say you aren’t,” she said firmly.  
“Brenda, what did you bring today?”

“You tell me,” Brenda held the bouquet of flowers so Grandma could smell them.

“Lilies,” she said, “am I right?”

“Yes, and white tulips, but they don’t have as strong a smell.”

“Beautiful. Go put them in a vase. Ask Pearl. She’ll know which one.”

Brenda left the room and I sat down next to her.

"So Bobby, when will you start a family," she just about always started a conversation like that instead of how are you, and I told her the same thing I always did, soon, but that we couldn't afford it until we got our careers settled and some of the debts paid and able to move into a two bedroom, and she said what she always said, "You have jobs, you both work. Isn't that enough of a career?"

It was a boring routine. "Things are going well," I reassured her, "we don't have any worries, it just isn't time for children. Most of our friends don't have kids yet."

She just sat there quietly, so I told her about our neighbors who got a dog instead of having a baby. I thought she would find that funny, or at least make some kind of comment, but she didn't. Instead she changed the topic.

"Bobby," she said, "do you see the medicine bottle on the dresser? I can't open it. Give me one of the pills."

I did. "Are you feeling okay?" I asked.

"Yes, but just a bit off."

Then out of curiosity I read the label. "Grandma, spit it out. I might have made a mistake," I said, "this is Grandpa's old medicine."

"Yes. That's right. That's what I want," and she reached out and took a sip from a drink she had next to her.

"What are you drinking? It looks like alcohol. You shouldn't be having that," I said, surprised and a little concerned.

"Bobby, since when do you check up on me? Don't you think I'm old enough to decide for myself?"

"Of course you are, but you can't read the label. It says not to take with alcohol."

She then took a more serious tone. "You need to trust that I know what I am doing and have thought about tonight. This is

what I want.”

“Are you talking about the Seder or something else? You’re scaring me. What do you want?”

“I want everyone to be happy. I want you and Brenda to get on with starting your family. To stop worrying about stupid money. If there’s something I can do about it, I want to do it when I can.”

I was getting a strange feeling that she was planning something. I didn’t ask her to explain it because I didn’t really want to know. What would be the point? I let her do whatever she wanted like I always had.

Brenda came back in the room and saw us sitting there so serious.

“Hey,” she said, “you two know we’re supposed to have a good time tonight?” We didn’t say anything. “What’s going on?”

Grandma spoke before I could. “We were talking about the future. Yours and Bob’s. What’s taking it so long?” She paused and waited, really thinking about this, like maybe she wanted me to answer. Then she broke the silence. “I wish I had just a little more ice and a little more of the sweet drink.”

“Are you sure? We’re going to have the Seder soon,” I said. She just shook her head and turned to me with the glass in her hand. I took it from her and went to the kitchen and got the ice.

When I was coming back Pearl saw me walk past the living room where she and Diane were talking.

“Is she resting?” she asked.

“Resting? Grandma? She’s talking, are you surprised?.

Diane laughed at that. She noticed the glass of ice.

“I already gave her a Manhattan, and she’s going to have wine later.”

"What am I going to do? She wants more vermouth." The three of us looked at each other. We each knew how pointless it would be to argue with her.

"She'll fall asleep at the table like at Thanksgiving."

"And David's birthday, and every other time we had wine," Pearl added. "And your father will again say he wishes he could fall asleep like that." All three of us laughed.

"Do you want to do an over-under when Grandma falls asleep?" I asked Diane.

"Sure," Diane said, "how about, before or after we sing *dayenu*?"

"Is that before or after the second glass of wine?" I asked.

"After," she said.

"Okay, in that case I'll take 'before'. She won't last much after the second glass."

"That's fine. I have 'after,'" Diane said.

"What's the bet for?" Pearl asked.

"Who gets to choose first what leftovers to take." Diane said, putting out her hand for me to shake. Pearl looked aghast, "What about your brother?"

"Don't tell him," Diane smiled at Pearl conspiratorially.

We shook hands and I went back to Grandma's room.

Brenda was by the dresser putting the cap back on the medicine bottle. When I gave her a questioning look, she shrugged as if to say what can I do, "She asked for a pill."

"Bobby, you got the ice," Grandma said, "Good boy. The bottles should be here somewhere. Don't make it too strong. I don't want to be *fershnickered*. Brenda, you watch him and tell me what he's doing"

"He's pouring some vermouth," Brenda said matter of factly.

"Now add a drop of the bourbon. Just a little bit," Grandma

said and then with a mistrustful tone added “Tell me if he’s doing it.”

“Oh, you don’t think I’ll do it right? I’ll tell you what I’m doing,” I said and I did my radio play-by-play schtick, “He’s holding a bottle, it’s a honey whiskey color. Yes, I can see the label, it’s a bourbon. He’s unscrewing the top. He puts the top down. He is picking up the glass with ice and vermouth, he’s tilting the bottle. Slowly, slowly. He’s pouring out a splash. Now he passes the glass to Brenda.”

“Perfect,” I could hear in Brenda’s voice that she was humoring me. She doesn’t appreciate this routine.

“Now give it to me,” said Grandma, also a bit annoyed. She took the drink and had a sip. “This is good,” she smacked her lips. The drink must have loosened her a bit because she went off on a tangent. “Would you like me to tell you of the first time Morty came to pick me up on a date?”

“Sure,” Brenda said and I sat down next to her. I won’t hear this story many more times, I thought. Boy, was I right about that.

Brenda and I smiled at each other. Both of us could tell the story about as well as Grandma could, but listening to her tell it was going to be pleasant enough and as always, it was about her enjoying herself.

Holding the glass Grandma began. “For our first real date Morty was going to take me to see a movie, but before that, you know, we had to first meet. I had a friend whose brother worked with Morty and she set it up, what you call a blind date. The four of us went to the zoo. Her brother brought Morty and she brought me. The zoo, like children,” she laughed at the memory. “As soon as I saw him I knew right away that I liked him even though he was short.” She smiled. “Then when we

were in the monkey house and we saw a couple of monkeys picking things off each other's back, Morty said, 'that's like us.' And I said, 'which one is you and which one is me?' and he didn't say anything, he just brushed my hair and showed me a twig he pulled out of it, like a magician. Right then I knew I would marry him."

"That is so romantic," Brenda said, on cue.

"My friend was watching this and later told me that he had the twig in his hand and just pretended to find it in my hair. She said she was sorry to introduce us, that I should keep away from him, that he was a liar and a sneak, but it was too late, I had made up my mind. On the way home he asked me, 'Pick one, a movie or roller skating?' 'Why?' I asked. 'What shall we do next time?' he replied with that twinkle he had. What nerve to assume that there would be a next time, and what a way to ask, but I like that about him and of course he was right. I told him I didn't care, so he said, 'In that case a movie. I don't know how to skate'. 'What would you have done if I said skating?' I asked and he said he would have started learning. Ha, ha. I knew then that he really liked me. But he was lucky, because he couldn't have learned enough in a week to keep up with me. You know, roller skating was big back then and I was very good. I could go backwards and on one leg."

"That's funny," Brenda interjected to show she was listening.

Grandma went on. "So now we had our first date set. On Friday, when he came to the house to pick me up he had a bouquet of flowers. They weren't wrapped in paper like from a florist and I should have figured something was funny, but I didn't. You know, I thought they were for me and you can imagine how thrilled I was. Flowers, on my first date. I reached for them, but he pulled away and didn't let me have it. 'This

one's for you,' he said and pulled out one red rose. The bouquet was for my mother. Mama was in shock, but happy. No one ever gave her flowers, and as we went out the door I could hear Papa already judging, 'Is he rich, what kind of man wastes money on such flowers as this?' and Mama going 'shush, they'll hear you' and Papa, said 'So? Why shouldn't they know what I think?' The real surprise came later when we got home and Mama showed us a small cross on a thin chain that had been tied around the bouquet. Morty was so embarrassed, but he was quick and confessed. He said that as he passed a cemetery on the way over he saw the flowers on one of the headstones and he heard a voice telling him that beautiful flowers would be appreciated more by the living than the dead, and so he took them. Mama said, he should now listen to her and take them back to where he found them. He did, but I kept my rose. Ha ha. Mama said I should not go with a *ganef*, who lies about hearing voices, but I didn't care. We got married in less than a half year and had Arnie in less than two years. We didn't have a pot to *pisch* in, but it didn't matter. We were a family. Then Pearl moved in with us to help with the rent. That was supposed to be only for a short time, and now look how long it's been."

"This is the best story" Brenda was cheerful, she turned to me, "Did you all know this?"

"Not all of it," I said, which was true. I didn't know about having Dad so quickly and I didn't know that Pearl moved in to help with the rent. One thing that I had heard before and which I heard now with a different emphasis, was that when they had a child they were a family. She didn't say it, but she didn't need to. She was saying that to me and Brenda. We are not a family, just newlyweds. I sat with my hands in my lap, relieved that Grandma couldn't see my face.

"Things are different now," I said, answering what hadn't been spoken "It's not like when you and Grandpa were starting out."

"What's so different? If anything things are better," she said a bit too fast, as if she expected this.

"You know, when you and Grandpa married you didn't have a plan. One thing led to another, and it always got a little better. You hadn't spent years studying and taken loans for your career. Brenda and I can't just take any jobs like Grandpa did. If we took a job in a store or a factory or a restaurant, it would be like throwing away all the effort and money we put in to get this far. I have a career, and I have to pay back a loan and Brenda has a plan and a loan. It's all good and it's all going to be better and better, but it's just going to take some time."

Grandma said nothing, as if she was bored with what even to me seemed like whining. Brenda tried to change the subject, "Everything smells so good. Everyone should be here soon."

"Yes, if the traffic isn't bad," said Grandma, "Your mother will want to start right away because the drive home is so long. I really think she should learn to drink. Bobby, when they come, make her a drink like you made me," she took a sip from her glass.

"I'll make it, but I can't make her drink it," I laughed.

Grandma laughed too, then turned serious and immediately to the point as if to beat Mom and Dad's arrival. "Bobby, how much money do you owe?"

"It is none of your business," I said. "It isn't something I'm ashamed of, but we don't talk about money."

"I understand. If you don't want to tell, it's okay. I'll ask Brenda," she said.

"Hey, don't do that to me," Brenda said, "leave me out of this."

I looked at Grandma, sitting there with her cocktail, patiently

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waiting for me to answer, so I did. “I owe another 130 thousand and Brenda owes 80.”

She was sharp with numbers, “Two hundred and ten,” she said in under five seconds. “I have that much. I have even more.”

I thought she was bragging. She went on, “It took us a long time to save, but we did it. With the house, I may even be a millionaire.”

It was almost as if saying this jarred her memory because she changed track and asked Brenda to give her another pill.

“I already gave it to you, remember, when Bob got the ice.”

“Well, okay then,” she said, “that should be enough, but just in case, I’ll take one more.”

Okay, I admit it, when I think about it now, I should have said something, but there are times I had a bad headache or was congested or stomach upset and I’d take a bigger dose. You’ve done that, right? But now, I’m remembering that I had a funny feeling when she said, ‘that should be enough, but just in case I’ll take one more’.

Dad, what was that medicine anyway?

## The Shiva

Arnie has finished his food and is looking at the ceiling, as if the answer to what the medicine is is up there. Then he looks towards Pearl, to whom they are all accustomed to look for advice. She is looking back at him as if she too is waiting to hear what he says.

It is Diane who speaks. “She planned this. It all makes sense. The way she woke up just in time to sing *dayenu* and said things to each of us.” Did it sound rehearsed to you? *Dayenu*, this. *Dayenu*, that.. Enough to see Bob married. Enough to have Pearl with her, and then how she said good night to each of us one at a time.”

“Did you catch how when we said “Next year in Jerusalem” she laughed and said ‘I don’t think so?’” Brenda added.

“Dad, you prescribed that medicine to Grandpa. Could we really have killed her?” Bob is concerned.

Before Arnie can answer, David jumps in angrily, “What do you mean ‘we’? I had nothing to do with it.” There’s a different kind of silence now. It has the weight of an accusation no one wants to deal with. David feels it’s on him to explain. “Look, I’m

not blaming anyone, but Bob is always trying to pull one over. Even the way he gave Grandma another drink after he made the bet with Diane she'd fall asleep early. Give me a break. That wasn't right." He pauses as if realizing that complaining about a bet he wasn't a part of makes him look foolish. He changes tack. "Tell the truth, Bob, what were you thinking when Grandma said she had enough money to cover your debts, as she drank bourbon and asked for another pill? Did it cross your mind that wasn't healthy? Did you calculate what your share of the inheritance would be?"

Bob is silent. Brenda is the one to react, but only in the anger in showing her face. She waits for Bob to speak up for himself. Instead Judy steps in. "Bob, you don't need to say anything. No one takes him seriously. It doesn't matter what went through your mind. You were just doing what Grandma asked and we all know that her asking was a command that had to be followed."

"But Mom, just look at him, he looks guilty," David blurts. Judy has enough of this, "And how does guilty look, David? Maybe look in the mirror."

This accusation stops David. "I look guilty?" "You gave her the means," Judy says, and seeing how her words have hurt him quickly adds, "but you couldn't have known."

She turns to Pearl. "Remember that night last winter when we all watched that movie where everyone kills the same guy."

"Yes." Pearl says. "It had the detective with a funny mustache." "Yes. They were on a train," says Judy, "Come on, David, I'm sure you remember. You were the one who kept explaining to Grandma what was happening. What was it called?"

"Murder on the Orient Express," he says. "Yes," says Judy. "And you told Grandma how none of them was the murderer, because they all were, or they all weren't or

something like that.”

“Yes,” David laughs, relieved, “and that makes me guilty?”

“Didn’t you find it very peculiar how interested Grandma was in that idea? I did. She was asking all these questions and kept asking if it really meant no one was guilty.”

“It was a complicated plot,” David says, “it made sense she wouldn’t get it right away.”

“Umm,” Judy says, “There’s no way we could have known, but this is what she was doing by having each of you give her a pill.”

“It’s a sin to commit suicide, but she found a way around it,” says Brenda, impressed

“She wanted to die after the Seder. I’m sure of it now. It explains the necklace and everything she said,” says Diane.

“But why?” asks Brenda.

“I don’t know,” says Judy, “Pearl, Arnie, what do you think?

Arnie is about to answer when Pearl cuts him off, “If this is what she wanted then we should be happy for her. Why would we want to question it now?” She sees Arnie wipe his mouth with a napkin, a sign that he is about to speak and she adds, “Sometimes it is best to not look too closely and to leave things that can’t be changed as they are and go forward with love and joy. Ruth got what she wanted. Arnie, we should celebrate her life. Am I right?”

Arnie gets up and sits next to Pearl.

“You are always right. And I must say that the food tonight and at the Seder was wonderful,” he looks at her with an affection that makes his eyes become wet and swollen. “You knew Mama, and Papa longer than I did. If anyone should be sad, it is you,” he pauses, “My heart is sad for you,” he pauses again, “I wonder if Mama thought of you when she decided to

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do this." He takes her hand in both of his. She looks at him, her head slightly tilted, listening.

Arnie looks at them, like a storyteller around a campfire. "There is something only Pearl and I know, that you all need to know," Arnie begins.

# 6

## Arnie

This all began when Pop was still alive. He was having concerning symptoms so I sent him for tests and when I got the results I called and told Pearl I was coming over with Chinese for all of us.

“Is something wrong?” Pearl right away asked. I guess she must have expected this. “I’ll tell you everything later. Is Mama there?”

“No, it’s her bridge day.”

“Ok, I’ll see you soon,” I said, relieved that Mama would be out. It would be better if I could first tell Pop. If Pearl would have been out, that would have been even better.

I called in the food order and drove over to pick it up. The whole time the emotions that I practiced hiding from my patients were rising. I should have anticipated it would affect me, but I didn’t. Pop was such a positive person. He had me almost convinced that every test would come out in his favor. I wasn’t ready for this and I wasn’t ready to give him the news.

There was traffic, but I didn’t mind. I had time to pre-mourn him the way I tell the families of my patients to think about the

person while they are still alive. I was remembering his favorite stories. How his eyes sparkled when he told how he outsmarted the world. You know the ones I mean. The story of how he got from being a dishwasher to busboy, a big step to the front of the house, by telling the boss he could polish the brass bar rail and using lemons from the dirty dishes to do it. Then the one where after the second time he saw a customer fumbling with reading the menu because a screw fell out of their glasses, he bought a little screwdriver that he kept with him, and the third time it happened he was ready and fixed the man's glasses on the spot and got offered a job. Pop was something else. How do you tell a man like him that now things were hopeless?

When I got to the house Pearl took the food from me and told me to go talk to Pop while she set the table.

He must have known why I was there because he didn't let me tell him. Right away he said, "Arnie, mix us a couple of drinks, I want to talk to you." I wanted to speak to him alone, while Pearl was in the other room, but he held up his hand, "Let's have a drink before we eat. Everything else can wait."

I made the drinks and while we sipped he started to speak. Pearl was listening from the dining room, though she said nothing. They kept no secrets from each other. Here's how it went.

"Son," he said to me, "it's a good thing you don't play poker because you are so easy to read. Your face, the way you walk, your posture, everything about you gives it away. For someone in your profession that's good, because you are a caring person and people can see that. Now I can see what you came to tell me. And it isn't good. Do me a favor and don't spell it out for me. I have a losing hand. I see it in your face."

When he paused to take a sip I started to say how sorry I was,

but he interrupted me.

“Of course you feel bad, but that’s the problem. Arnie, just as I can tell how bad you feel so can everyone else who looks at you. It isn’t helping anyone to know how bad it is. I’m glad Mama is out and isn’t seeing this. It will ruin her life. I can’t have that. Her happiness is the only thing I can do something about. You know what I’m saying?”

“Yes,” I said, but I didn’t really. He must have read that in my face too because he went on.

“The thing that keeps people going is when they believe that things will get better. When they have hope. The thing that will make Ruth continue to be happy is if she believes that I’m going to be okay. Nothing good will come from her knowing what is so obvious in your face. Nothing. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said again, and again he didn’t believe me.

“Her life will be ruined if she knows that I am dying and that there is nothing that can be done. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said. I did understand that. I had seen many times how an entire family would focus on the one sick person and that it took so much out of the joy of living for all of them. He was right about that.

“Now it’s my turn to talk,” I said, “as a doctor.”

“If you must,” Pop said.

“There is no way to sugar coat this. Your condition will get worse over time. It will be visible and obvious that you are sick. Mama will see this. You will need more and more attention. I can act like everything is going to be fine, but it will not fool anyone for long.”

Pop sat there thinking quietly. Finally he spoke, “So what do you recommend, doctor? We just say it’s over?”

Then Pearl said “I read that there are new experimental

medicines in Switzerland."

"They're just beginning to try some new therapies but, one they're not for this, and two, they don't work, and three we can't get them," I said, immediately regretting my argumentative tone.

"But," said Pop, "four, they have the secret ingredient we need."

"And what's that?"

"They give hope. That's all Ruth needs and that's all we need to give her."

"Pop, we can't get these drugs and there's no evidence they work"

"Arnie, for a doctor, you ain't so smart," he took on that teasing way he used to when I made a mistake, "Of course you can get them. It's as easy for you to get them as it is anything else. Right, Pearl? You write a prescription and Pearl will pick it up like she does everything else. You figure it out."

I just looked at him. He looked pleased with his own cleverness, a look I had seen many times before.

"You understand, right! We tell Ruth the bad news, but also that because you are a specialist you can get an experimental medicine that works wonders. You know what I'm saying. A miracle drug. Very potent, very dangerous if not taken properly. Take only as prescribed, no alcohol, blah, blah, blah. Ruth's and Pearl's job will be to give it to me and there will be no suffering and who knows how long I'll live. You can do that, right?"

I don't like to lie, but I saw no harm in giving him a placebo. "Yes," I said. I was going to say more about his illness and give some instructions to Pearl, but he put his hand up to stop me.

"Now I'm hungry," he said.

We took our drinks to the table, which was now set with four places, one for Ruth. A half dozen food containers were in the

middle. We were almost finished eating when Mama returned.

"This is a surprise," she said when she saw me, "Is something wrong?"

"Why do you always think something is wrong when you see Arnie? He brought over some Chinese. Sit and tell us how you did at the game," Pop said.

Mama went to wash up and while she was out of the room Pop whispered to me. "I'll set you up and you just follow my lead. You understand? Swiss miracle drug. Pearl, you got it?"

When Mama started to eat, Pop did what I've seen him do before. He waited till she just put food in her mouth and so wouldn't be able to speak when he began. "Arnie has some good news and some bad news. As a matter of fact the good news is so good it undoes the bad news," he had the sparkle in his eyes and a smile when saying this. I'd seen this act before too. It was how he looked when he was being sly. It is remarkable that Mama never seemed to suspect she might be the one being tricked.

"You're hungry," Pearl observed, encouraging her to take another mouthful and not ask questions, "Card playing can build up an appetite."

"Mmmm, all that shuffling," was all Mama said.

Pop continued, "The test results were positive, like we were afraid, but before you get all worked up, listen to this," he paused for emphasis, then excitedly went on, "There's a drug. Arnie has a way of getting a new medicine from Switzerland that hasn't been approved here. It's a miracle drug. Right, Arnie?"

"Yes."

"The government is so careful with these things, it is ridiculous, but our son, the doctor, he's got connections." He turns to Arnie, "What did you tell me? It's like the answer to a dream.

It's going to get the Nobel Prize. It doesn't even have a name yet. Ruth, isn't that terrific? I'm thrilled and we're so proud of you, son."

Mama started to ask something about the test results. Pop shushed her, "What does it matter what the test says when we have the wonder drug. It all has to be hush hush. Pretend we're in a Hitchcock movie. Arnie will get enough to last forever. You or Pearl will give it to me. Just a pill a day, is that right?" He gave me my cue.

"Right," I said, "In the morning."

"It's very powerful, you said. So strong, we'll need to be careful not to take too much or drink alcohol, or do things that require good balance. What else did you say? Pearl, you're listening?"

"That's it. Just follow the directions and everything will be fine." I lied, going along with the story.

"Pearl, you'll need to make sure not to get confused and give me two on the same day like happens sometimes. This one could kill me. Arnie, write all this on the label."

Mama looked at us with great concern. "Arnie," she said, "maybe that's too strong to have around. Everyone sometimes makes a mistake. Just the other day Pearl didn't remember she had already put salt in the meatloaf and ruined it. Can't you get something not so dangerous?"

This wasn't one of the questions I expected and wasn't ready.

Pop was looking at me, counting on me giving a good reply. "That's just what I asked him," he said. "Tell her what you told me."

"Mama, I'm just grateful this exists and that I can get it. Just be careful. Follow a routine. And no more breakfast Bloody Marys." I smiled.

ARNIE

Pop lifted his glass as if for a toast, “The important thing is that I’m going to be fine thanks to Arnie.”

## The Shiva

They were still looking at Arnie when Judy spoke, “All this time you saw how we were thinking Grandma was poisoned, with your daughter crying, and you didn’t tell us it was a placebo. What were you thinking?”

“I was just listening like everyone else and wondering, what this all meant. What was going on?” Arnie looks around the room.

Diane hesitates as if she wants to raise her hand be called on to speak, before she says, “She thought it would kill her and she wanted to die.”

Judy starts to stand up, “Yes dear, I think we all agree on that, and in that case Ruth got just what she wanted and we can go home.”

Arnie puts his hand out signaling she should remain seated. He is still looking at Diane, waiting, knowing there will be more.

“But something doesn’t make sense. If that was a placebo then why did she die?” Diane goes on as Arnie smiles approvingly.

“Could the placebo work if she believed it strongly enough?”

David joins in, “Sure. I’ve read about that. The mind is very powerful. She believed so strongly that she would not wake up, she didn’t wake up.”

“I don’t think so,” says Brenda, “You can’t will your body die. A coincidence is more likely. Coincidences do happen.”

“Then I’ll go with that,” says David.

Judy is clearly impatient, “Arnie, please answer, what do you think?”

“I wouldn’t bet on it being a coincidence,” says Bob, “The odds of that are really big.”

Judy has enough. “Arnie, we still have the drive. Tell us already, what happened.”

Arnie sits still as if listening to the pulse in the room. Finally he clears his throat, “I don’t know,” he says and turns to Pearl, “You put Ruth to bed and were the last to see her. What happened?”

## Pearl

Morty's miracle drug worked for some time. Ruth believed in it and kept seeing what she wanted to see. From one day to the next he looked more or less the same. Sometimes he even looked a little better than the day before. How he felt she couldn't tell by looking and he wouldn't tell her.

We had a routine. I was up first and made coffee and got the paper. Ruth would bring it to him in bed and also give him his pills including Arnie's 'miracle' one.

At first she was surprised that he had a case of them. "I told Arnie to get as many as he could before they change some law," he told her. "I'm feeling pretty good. I think they're working," he said more than once.

There was one time when he was really sick. "Morty, take two pills today. You need something stronger," Ruth said.

"No. Do you want to kill me? Taking more than one is dangerous. Arnie said it would kill," he said angrily. I think he was having a hard time keeping up the appearance of everything going well. It took a few seconds until he calmed himself and

smiled. "It's experimental. Things take time. Let's see how it goes."

Obviously it didn't go well. Arnie came by more often and gradually we stopped pretending that he wasn't dying. "Should I keep giving him that pill?" Ruth asked. Arnie and Morty looked at each other then Arnie said, "No. It didn't work after all."

One time pretty near the end Morty said, "If suicide wasn't a sin I would pull the switch." Arnie, Ruth, and I were there and we all looked at him. I wanted to be reassuring or to say something positive, but nothing truthful came to mind, so I said nothing. We did the best we could to keep him comfortable and distracted and that's how it was till the end.

That was over 13 years ago. I hadn't thought much about it, but I noticed that for all that time she kept this miracle medicine, like a souvenir. I knew it was harmless so I didn't care. It hadn't occurred to me that she could accept that it wasn't a miracle drug and still believe it was deadly.

That is until before the Seder when she had Diane give her a pill with a drink. When she took the pill I right away thought about the joke she made when I brought her lunch, "The last supper was a Seder," she said, "what's for the last lunch? Ha, ha."

Later, when Bob came and I saw him with a second drink for Ruth and he mentioned that she took more medicine, I could see her whole plan. She figured out a really clever way around the suicide sin, I thought, except she didn't know one important detail.

This put me in a spot. What do I do now? Do I tell her? "Oh, by the way Ruth, you know that miracle medicine from Switzerland, Morty and Arnie and I lied to you, it is nothing, and it isn't deadly. I just thought you might want to know since

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I see you've been taking a bunch tonight as if you're trying to have them kill you. I didn't think that was a good approach.

I thought maybe I should tell you all, so we have an intervention, like I've read about. We'd need to do it before the Seder, while she was still awake and before she kept deluding herself. I imagined us all sitting in her room and telling her, "Ruth there's so much to live for. We love you. There's no reason to die."

Well, you saw what I did. Nothing. There was nothing that was going to happen taking those pills and therefore I didn't do anything about it.

Until after the Seder when I was helping her to bed. You were all gone and David was in the guest room.

Ruth started with me. "Pearl, can you give me one of Morty's pills?"

I went to get a glass of water. It gave me a chance to think. I decided that I will have to say something because I'm not such a big liar that I'd keep it up now and what would I say the next day when she woke up? When I got back to the room and gave her the glass of water I said, "Ruth, there's something I need to tell you."

"Funny, that's just what I was going to say. Pearl, there's something I need to tell you. What you have to tell me can wait. Please sit next to me," she said, so I sat next to her.

She reached out her hand for me to hold, so I held it. It was more fragile than a baby's. Her lips moved as she was getting the words ready. "This is it," she said, "tonight's the night."

She expected me not to know, so I pretended I didn't. "The night for what?" I asked.

"This was my last supper. It went just the way I hoped. You saw me when we sang *dayenu* I got to tell everyone a special goodbye. Did you notice? Could you tell it was prepared?"

"You were very natural," I reassured her.

"Good. I wanted to be sincere and memorable, but not have it be about me, you know, dying."

"I didn't think that you were dying," I said truthfully.

"I will be. Tonight. Sush, before you say anything, listen to this. I did it in such a smart way. Everyone did a little so no one is guilty. Like in the movie." Then she gets a sly look and says, "Pearl, do you want in? Give me one of Morty's pills." Really? I thought. "Diane, Bob, Brenda, and you, that is enough, plus I had a few drinks and passover wine."

"Hello," I said, still pretending that all this was a big surprise, "You're going too fast for me. You've been taking pills to die tonight?"

"You got it."

Now, if I thought she really had taken some kind of poison, you know, if the pills were real, I would have called 911, but this wasn't an emergency, so I didn't get excited and we kept talking. I wonder if that gave her the feeling this was normal, or maybe she thought that I didn't care.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked calmly, as if this was a reasonable conversation.

"Because it's time to go."

"To go? You mean to die? You don't decide. You go when your body says it's time."

You know how she had this way of being ready to say something and was just waiting for the cue? That's what this was like. She right away replied, "My body keeps trying to quit but the doctors, God bless them, keep it going."

"And that's bad?" I was being logical. She ignored me.

"I've been thinking for a long time that one day I will leave on my terms. I didn't know when it would be, or how I'd know,

or how I'd do it, but I knew that the answer would come to me," she said proudly. "Do you want to know how I did it?"

"No," I said. "I want to know why and why now."

"Oh, that's so boring. I'm doing it now because earlier was too soon and if I wait it will be too late." She stopped as if she said something profound that I was supposed to think about.

"We both know it's downhill fast for me. How many appointments do we have for next week? Which one will give me the bad news, and if not this week then next week? What do I need this for? At my age I've seen plenty of times how ugly and miserable the end gets. I don't want to go through that," she then repeated, "What do I need it for? Really, to live how much longer? For what?" she paused, "I guess if I were a sports fan I'd want to see who wins the next game, but what do I need to see? If there was a baby coming, or even kittens, but there isn't."

"You're always looking forward to your dinner and a nice drink," I said, "You like Jeopardy. We never miss it."

I could see that it got her thinking, "Well," she said, "nothing's perfect. I can't keep putting it off."

"What are you putting off? Ruth, listen to yourself. You have it backwards. 'Putting it off', Everyone wants to put 'it' off," I said emphasizing 'it'. I went on, "Are you sad, depressed?" I gave a gentle squeeze to her hand, to show I was sincere.

"Not depressed. I'm afraid," she said.

I wanted to ask, 'afraid of what?' but I knew, so instead I said, "don't be afraid, everybody goes through this." I almost said 'and they come out okay,' but I caught myself.

"I'm afraid if I wait too long I'll be sorry I didn't do it when I could," she said, coming back to that idea.

We remained sitting side by side. I was trying to figure out how to break the news to her about the 'miracle drug'. Maybe

she thought my silence meant I needed to be reassured because she held my hand now as if I was a child that she was comforting.

“Pearl, it’s going to be fine. I was counting on you to understand and not to stir things up. You know, now that I can’t read and watch TV, I’ve had a lot of time to think back. I keep remembering how we used to save money when we were starting out and how long it took to save for the first car and then for a bigger apartment, and how long it took to save to buy the house. You were still a kid, so you didn’t know.”

“Oh, I knew. I wasn’t that young,” I wished I was. I remember it being hard.

“Well, you know what is going through my mind now is how it’s all going to go to pay for a few more years of suffering,” she said.

“It’s a good thing you have it,” I said.

“Yes. Money. Morty used to go out of his way to buy gas at a station that was a penny cheaper. Sometimes it was on the way home from a party and I’d say, “it’s only a penny” and he’d do his multiplication for me and I never said anything, but I wanted to sock him. ‘One cent times fifteen gallons is fifteen cents a fill up, once a week is seven dollars and eighty cents a year and in ten years that’s seventy eight dollars.’ Do you remember this? Remember cutting coupons. Save, save, save. It was one of our hobbies.”

“That was a long time ago,” I said, “We’re not that careful anymore. Luckily.”

“Anyway, it’s all taken care of. It’s done. Tonight’s the night. If there’s anything you want to tell me, any secrets to get off your chest, things you’ve been saving for my death bed, now’s the time,” she said this with a straight face, as if she actually thought I might have been saving something.

## THE PERFECT WAY TO GO

“Ruth, you’re not dying tonight,” I said.

“Oh yes I am,” she said.

“Look at yourself. How do you feel?” I said, “Do you feel like someone who is going to die.”

“But I took so many of those pills and had drinks. Morty and Arnie said this would be like poison.”

“Maybe they were wrong. It also didn’t work as a medicine. It might have expired. All I know is that you look and sound fine to me.” I left out that we had lied to her the whole time.

This stopped her. She began to cry. Not bawling, but real tears and sniffling.

“But I’ve planned it all out,” she said while sniffling, “I’ve said what I wanted to say to everyone. This was my last passover, my last supper, and This is how I want it to end and how I want you all to remember me.” she stopped and then said, “Thank you for everything.”

We were quiet for a few minutes, in our own heads. Then she picked it up again. “I’m ready. I want this over with. It was going to be so beautiful. I planned it so everyone will be here and all be together. There’s even enough food left over for lunch. I planned it perfectly. And everyone had a good time tonight. Now what will happen?”

I didn’t want to be fresh, but I couldn’t help myself, “What will happen is that instead of everyone crying tomorrow, you will be here for lunch with me and David. He probably has some new jokes to tell.”

“No,” she said, stubbornly insisting, “I will be crying. This is not what I want.”

I just sat next to her and let her cry.

“You’ll feel better about this tomorrow,” I finally said.

She got angry at me, “Why is it so hard for you to understand

what I'm saying? Of course I'll be happy to see David and have lunch. That's not the point. How much longer will it be enjoyable? This year I can't see and I'm sitting in a wheelchair. Next year, if I'm alive, who knows what I'll be like, except I am certain that it'll be worse. It will never be a better time to say goodbye and I'll never be able to do it if I couldn't do it now."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"What are 'you' sorry for? You didn't do anything."

"I sorry you aren't getting what you want."

"So, do something."

"What can I do?"

"Think, something will come up."

Then I helped her go to bed. She wanted to take more of the pills and I didn't stop her. She asked for a night cap and I warned her she'll have a headache in the morning, but she didn't care, so I gave her a bit of vermouth with a glass of water.

"Good night," I said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I hope not," she said.

"Oh, Ruth," I said, pretending my feelings were hurt, "how can you not want to see me. I'll have your coffee and some matzah with butter, and a scrambled egg. And I'll read you the paper."

"No," she interrupted me, "that's not what I want."

"So I won't read the paper," I joked. I was at a loss. What could I do? You know what she's like when she doesn't get her way. I left her and went out of the room.

I felt crummy. In a way this crazy plan not working was my fault since I let her believe those pills would be deadly. Now it was on me to think of something.

I went to finish up with a few more things in the kitchen. While I was emptying the dishwasher I was playing in my mind if there was something I could do. I was so used to doing what

## THE PERFECT WAY TO GO

she asked of me and to tell the truth, I don't have such a strong opinion one way or the other about this, especially after seeing her with Morty till the end. You all remember what that was like. She wasn't crazy, so why shouldn't she have this ending if it's what she wants? Who was I to deprive her of it? See where my head was?

What went through my mind were murders in movies, really sick thoughts, I can't even tell you how it made me feel that I was actually thinking of how I could kill her, but there I was racking my brain and the best I could come up with was suffocating her.

Should I be ashamed to have even thought this? I imagined holding a pillow on her head, but immediately began to shake in revulsion. I couldn't do it. No way. Then I thought of the plastic bag from the cleaners, the ones that we were always warned against playing with. That was like a classic. Just put it over her head and walk away. I didn't know if I could do that, but I did go on the computer and look it up.

I typed 'death by plastic bag'. The first thing that came up is the suicide help number, so it obviously is a thing people do, and then there were many links. I wasn't surprised. I started to read. There were pages of warnings, that it might not work, that it was unpleasant. There are ways to do it with some other gases and there were different suggestions, but the more I read the more convinced I was that I wasn't going to do it. It was like reading about swimming with sharks or skydiving. I was intrigued and absorbed and at the same time drifting further and further away from actually considering doing it.

Sorry Ruth. I sympathized with her. I wished she did have a way of getting what she wanted. It would be fine with me, and selfishly I thought it would give me a lot more time to do

## PEARL

what I wanted to do if I didn't need to care for her anymore. I'm ashamed of that, but it's the truth.

I went to bed thinking of what it would be like to be with Ruth the next morning and from then on, knowing she didn't want to be here. Would she be angry with me? I imagined her giving me a dirty look every time something wasn't right, when she dirtied herself, if she fell and broke her hip, God forbid. I could hear her, "Pearl, you let this happen to me. Why?"

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## The Shiva

Pearl is drained. Judy gets up, pours a glass of seltzer and gives it to her.

“You don’t need to feel any guilt,” she says, “You didn’t do anything and everything turned out the way that Mama wanted it. We’re having all this excitement over nothing.”

“Pearl, I am so relieved,” says Brenda, “for a few minutes I thought you must have given in to Ruth and found a way to, you know, do it.”

“Would that have been so bad?” asks David, “I mean, Grandma wanted this and it wasn’t so crazy.”

“Maybe, but it would put us on the spot,” says Brenda, “What would we have done?”

Bob replies, “Honey, what are you thinking? Do you think we would say Pearl murdered Grandma and tell the police? We’re not that kind of family.”

“Well, yes, I was thinking just that exactly. She was considering suffocating her with a plastic bag. That’s murder. I couldn’t let that go. Could any of you?”

“Brenda, dear,” Judy says, “this is completely unnecessary. It

didn't happen. Pearl wouldn't do that. There's no reason to get into what if's." She looks at Arnie, "Can we go home now? Please?"

"But not yet Mom," says Diane, "let's get some closure to this. Is it really possible that Grandma just died in her sleep. It's just too hard to believe."

"Does it matter why she died?" asks David. He lifts himself up and using the crutches, hops across the room to get a glass, "I'm ready to call it a night."

"Bob, Dad, what do you think? Does it really not matter?" Diane pleads.

"I don't know," says Bob, "what would we do if we knew something? She got what she wanted. She's not coming back. We can just pretend that it wasn't a placebo we all gave her and that her plan worked." He looks at Diane, "The important thing is that you didn't kill Grandma. That's how we started this and this can be where we end it."

Brenda is clearly unhappy with this and directs herself to Bob, "I can't believe you don't want to know the truth because it may make you need to do something unpleasant. I hope this isn't who you are."

Judy again comes to the defense of her son even as Arnie signals she should not interfere.

"Bob isn't anything but being reasonable," she says, correcting her daughter-in-law.

Arnie stops her from going further, "Brenda knows that. This is a good time to end this and we'll leave it as a Passover miracle."

"Brilliant solution," says David and hops back to the couch.

"But Dad," Diane isn't buying it.

They all hear Brenda scoff under her breath, "A Passover miracle, my ass."

"Excuse me?" Judy challenges her to repeat it.

Thankfully Pearl changes the subject, "David," she says.

"Yes?"

"It's rather loud when you hop around, you know that, right?"

"I'm sorry. I can't help it. I hope it doesn't bother you," he says politely, but there is something new in his eyes, a fear.

"I'm not complaining," Pearl answers, "but it wakes me up when you get up in the middle of the night." She stops as if she said enough, but he doesn't say a word, just looks at her. So she continues. "The Seder night, after I went to bed I heard you and I thought you were going to the bathroom. I wasn't spying on you, but I didn't want to be woken right away again so I listened for you to return to your room, but you didn't for a long time. Then you did, and immediately went out again and came back."

"So?" David says defensively.

"So?" Pearl asks him.

Brenda picks up the thread, "So, what were you doing all that time? Did you see Grandma?"

"You're asking if I killed Grandma. Is that it?"

"It's a fair question," says Bob.

Judy is agitated, "Oh my God, this is getting worse and worse. Pearl, why did you bring this up now?"

David thumps his crutch on the floor as if it's footsteps in a horror movie. Thump, thump, thump. "She's afraid I'll come kill her in the middle of the night," David jokes with a forced laugh.

"Just answer," says Bob, "don't be a wise guy."

"Both of you, please," says Diane.

David looks around the room, "I'll tell you, but I'm curious, do you all really believe I killed her? Show of hands, who thinks I did it?" No hands go up. "Bob, do you want odds?"

THE SHIVA

“Shut-up,” says Bob.

“I’ll take that as a no. Well, I’ll tell you,” he begins. “I guess Pearl doesn’t like secrets afterall. If I knew that, I would have told you right away and saved us a lot of time,”

## David

Once everyone left I tried to go to sleep, but the bed in that room isn't comfortable, especially with this leg in the cast, so I took a boring book off the shelf and tried to read it to put me to sleep, but it didn't. I tossed around trying to get comfortable. I didn't know what time it was, just that it was very late when I gave up and got up and thought I'd get a shot of whiskey, my sleeping medicine, but the bottle wasn't in the dining room cabinet and now that I had it on my mind, I started looking for it. Grandma's door was open and the light was on and I peaked in and saw the bottle on the dresser and went in to get it. I guess I should have known that with the crutches I was loud, but I really thought Grandma was sound asleep and I could just go in and out and not bother her. Well, you guessed it, either she wasn't asleep or I woke her.

"Who is it?" she said.

"It's me, David. Did I wake you?"

"Oh, David," she sounded fully awake, "what time is it?"

"I don't know. It's late," I said.

"What are you doing?" she asked and I told her I couldn't

sleep and wanted a shot of whiskey and saw that the bottle was in her room. She asked me to give her some too. I suggested maybe a glass of water would be better.

"If I wanted water I would have asked for water," she said in that snippy way she can take. Dad, if she was that way when you were growing up, I don't know how you turned out so calm. I was being kind and she verbally wacked me.

Her glass was by the bed so I said I'll get some ice and she told me to skip it and just sit down and share the drink with her from the same glass.

That was fine with me. I poured us a bit of the whiskey, took a sip and I helped her sit up so she could drink, which she did. Then we had a pretty deep conversation that really took me by surprise. The gist of it was that she wanted to die that night and wanted me to help her because the plan she had was not working. That's what she told me. She said she was awake because she was waiting for what she took to take effect but it didn't seem to be.

She said, "I think Pearl was right, it must have expired."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. She went on, "David, did you notice anything different about me tonight?"

I thought about it. Every time I saw her she was a little older, weaker, maybe a little more confused, but I wasn't going to say any of that. "No, you were nice, like always."

"I was trying to say goodbye to everyone, to tell you all how much I loved you and that I was 'at peace' as they say at funerals. I always found that very phony, saying 'at peace.'" She paused, and then with that sarcastic way she had of emphasizing some words she said, "I want to be 'at peace', but I don't know how to do it."

## THE PERFECT WAY TO GO

I pretended that she was talking about going to sleep. "Lie down and close your eyes. I'll go back to bed too. Good night."

"Oh, don't be an idiot. You know I'm not talking about sleep."

"I'm not an idiot Grandma," I replied, annoyed.

"I didn't mean it, David. It's not your fault. You couldn't know, but I had a very nice plan and now I don't believe it is working." I expected her to tell me what it was, but she didn't. "Hold my hand," she said and I did.

"Your hand is so strong. I don't think you're still the way I remember you seeing you."

"I hope not," I said, "That was a few years ago and I've been going to the gym, and being on crutches is also exercise. Do you want to feel my muscles?" I joked.

"Sure." I put her hand on my bicep and flexed. "That's like a rock. I'm sure you are very handsome," she lifted her hand to my face and felt it. She started to laugh, "In movies blind people are always feeling faces as if they can see with their fingers. I can't tell anything except that you aren't fat and you will need to shave soon. Morty's face was rough like that in the morning before he shaved." I smiled and she said, "Oh, I can feel that. You're smiling. Am I right?"

"Yes. I like the way you're touching me."

"I'm glad. You are a sweet boy. You always tried to make me happy."

"Of course, Grandma, I love you."

"I know you do, and I love you too. I've been feeling a lot of love the last few days, planning this Seder. My life has really been playing before my eyes, like they say happens before you die. It's been pleasant. I wasn't scared. I had a beautiful plan for my farewell. But now I'm beginning to be scared of what will happen."

"There's nothing to be scared of," I said, not believing it.  
"I'm scared of being scared," she took her hand from my face.  
Did she feel that I was scared for her, I wondered.

"What will happen to me? I have three doctor appointments next week. I don't even know what for. The heart doctor, I know, but the others I get mixed up. Why am I doing this? Can you tell me? Do you know how long it's been since a doctor told me everything was fine? I bet when you go to the doctor it isn't frightening. I used to be that way. I even liked the doctor. I'd go over happily and my only complaint was if I had to sit a long time in the waiting room. Now it's a big pain, getting a car, the wheelchair, I have to plan ahead like it's an expedition, and I still need to sit and wait and then he pokes and does what he does and I wait some more and there's never a simple report. He has to explain things to Pearl, it's so complicated, and then we need to get me home and stop at the drug store. What for? I keep asking myself, what am I doing this for, what do I expect to happen? It's like a movie I don't like and I want to end, but I can't walk out because of all the people it would bother..... It's ridiculous at my age to worry about other people being bothered..... David, have you ever been at a show and you need to go and pee, but you force yourself to wait till intermission so you don't disturb and then there's a line in the bathroom? Isn't that the worst? I never want to go through that again.....there were times I was afraid to have a soda before the show because it might make me need to pee."

I laughed, "Mom would not let us drink before car trips because she didn't want us to stop for bathroom breaks."

Grandma laughed too. "We had to cross our legs and think of other things.....I'll tell you a secret, now that I wear these special diapers, it's still the same...Pearl says just pee, but I can't do it in

my pants, and it is such a job getting me on the pot....disgusting.” We both laughed.

“Isn’t this nice, chatting like this, even if it’s about peepee?” I said.

“It is. It’s very nice.”

“So isn’t this worth going to the doctor’s for?”

“Yes, but how about next time when it is about poop?” she wasn’t smiling. “And when I may not know who you are? When will it be the time to say, no more, like in the boxing matches Morty used to watch, ‘No mas. No more,’ Who will throw in the towel for me?”

I was surprised at how much she knew about boxing, and I told her that.

“You’d be surprised what I picked up while you boys watched sports. ‘Offsides’, ‘foul ball’, ‘pass interference’, ‘double play’, ‘birdie’, ‘bogey’, I can go on and on, but what I don’t understand is why only in boxing do they sometimes give up. In other sports they humiliate themselves. Sometimes it’s fifty to nothing and they keep playing. Really pretty stupid, don’t you think?”

I was going to explain that games were played by the clock or by the number of innings, and that the fans came to see a whole game, but she continued, “Don’t think so hard.”

“I’m not,” I lied, “I like sitting with you. That’s what I’m thinking.”

“Enjoy it while you can,” she jibed. I took her hand now.

“Grandma, what’s going on? We all love you and always will, like we did with Grandpa.”

“Yuck. David, that was the wrong thing to say. Of course we loved him, but those last few years, and they were years, were horrible. For him, for me, for everyone. I’m not going to pretend they weren’t. They were, what we would say, ‘the pits’.

Really like the pit of a peach. Hard and bitter. “

“That’s life,” I said and tried to be metaphorical, like she was, “Every peach has a pit.”

“I give up with you. Don’t you get it? I don’t want to go through that. I don’t want to be felt sorry for, and, yes, I’m scared of what it will be like. And I don’t want to go through all the money I saved my whole life for nothing,” she was annoyed and you all know what that’s like, “No more, no more, no more explaining to you what you already know.”

I tried to appease her, “What can I do?”

“Nothing. Like everybody else. You’re useless now,” then she started to think, “unless you still know those drug dealers from when you were in school.”

“Come on Grandma. That was years ago. It’s the middle of the night. Anyway I’m not buying you heroin so you can O.D. I can’t do that.” I was remembering those parties and clubs and the whole ugly scene I was into and thinking that I was lucky not to have died myself. There were a couple of times that I came pretty close and a time I had to put a guy in a cab to the ER. In the back of my mind it was nagging at me that I had some oxy for my broken leg and how I’ve been so careful because I was afraid to get hooked on it. I had it in my bag, just about the entire prescription. In other words, a lot. What was I thinking, I couldn’t get my head around it, but there it was, I was thinking of giving Grandma my opioid. Crazy, right? But she is very persuasive, not just the way she says things, it’s her look and in all honesty, she made sense, and I did want to make her happy. I could keep going and tell you that I thought hard about it, but I just remembered those last times I saw Grandpa. You all remember too, so I don’t have to tell you. We were beyond being sad, we all just waited, hoping it wouldn’t be much longer and

that he wasn't suffering. Then when he was having nightmares and hallucinations and nothing could shake him out of them. When he was awake we would go see him in bed and put on these brave faces, not that he could see us, and then go out and shake our heads and talk about anything except his condition because there was nothing to say. We all knew.

I feel that I have to explain myself, that I was weighing it like it was a big dilemma, but I wasn't. I believed her and it was her choice and if the situation was reversed I'd want to be listened to. I mean it. I don't know if it will ever happen, but I want to be listened to. Anyway, what's the big deal? Remember how Grandma used to joke when she heard of a famous person dying, people die every day that never died before. Everyone dies, accidents, wars, crimes, illness, starvation, drowning, you name it. Really, what's the big deal? Why shouldn't she be able to take charge and do it on her terms, say her goodbyes, choose the day, and be happy and comfortable? Yeah, I know, I'm over defending myself, well so what, who was I to tell her she shouldn't do this?

"Grandma, I do have the painkiller I got for my leg. People overdose on that all the time, so if you're really serious."

She interrupted me, "That's wonderful. Why didn't you tell me right away? You know this is what I want."

"You're serious?"

"Of course. Go get them."

I did. I got the pills and put them where she could reach them and I poured more whiskey in the glass. I showed her where everything was and then we said goodbye. It was not so sentimental. I didn't really believe she would do anything and I didn't want to be there. To tell the truth, I felt like a coward. I didn't help her take the pills and I didn't try to talk her out of

DAVID

it. I went to bed. Yeah, I felt guilty, but I forced myself to think about something else. Maybe I'm repeating myself, but as far as I was concerned, I let her do what she wanted and I was actually proud of her for having the courage to do this. I did what I would have done if I heard she died. I remembered all kinds of things from when we were little and we stayed over and she made French toast for us, and trips we made, birthday parties with her and Grandpa and Pearl. I lay in bed and waited for something to give me a sign, but nothing happened. I probably nodded off, but I'm not sure. After a few hours I went back to her room. She was gone, you know what I mean, dead. There were still some pills left and the glass was almost empty. I took the pills because that seemed smart, and I left the room. I waited to hear Pearl's reaction in the morning.

Now you know. Mystery solved. That's it.

## The Shiva

“That’s it’ he says, ‘that’s it. You’re a lunatic,” Bob’s voice is rising. Brenda tries to calm him down, putting her hand on his arm. He shakes it off. “How can you say that so calmly? You just about murdered Grandma.”

“No he didn’t,” says Diane.

“What do you mean, he didn’t. You of all people. You were bawling when you thought you might have given her something that killed her, and now you, you, you’re defending him when he intentionally did it, in cold blood.”

Diane is confused and says nothing.

“This is some shiva,” says Judy, “Cold blooded murder is rather harsh, wouldn’t you say?” she asks no one in particular.

Bob goes on, “If you had a gun, would you have given it to her? Or maybe a razor blade to slash her wrist?”

“Listen to yourself, Bob,” says Judy, “He gave her what she wanted. That’s all he did. Arnie, am I right?”

“Not exactly,” says Brenda, “If you give a suicidal person the means to do it, it’s a crime.”

“No way,” Judy can’t believe it.

"Yes," Brenda says confidently.

"I'm afraid so," Arnie agrees.

"Did you know that?" Judy asks David.

He looks from one to the other, gathering his thoughts and finally says, "I wasn't thinking about the law one way or the other."

"You weren't thinking about the law, that figures," says Bob, "Now we can all think about it. What are you going to do?"

"Stop," cries Diane, "let's think about Grandma and stop fighting."

Judy puts her arm around Diane who is in tears, "It's going to be ok. They're just doing what they always do." Judy turns to Bob, "Will you act your age?"

"Oh my God, Mom, you can't always say that when you don't like something I say."

"I can take care of myself," David calmly says to his mother.

"Then what are you going to do?" says Bob in a challenging tone.

"Nothing. What are you going to do?" David's retort matches Bob's.

"Boys, this isn't productive or positive," Arnie calmly steps in, like a referee separating fighters in a clinch.

"What would be positive?" asks Bob, respectful of his father.

"How about we begin by accepting that this is what Grandma wanted," Arnie says.

"And we can do this while we drive home," says Judy, again trying to end this night and again being ignored.

"Grandma was a confused old lady who drank too much. She probably didn't know what she wanted," Bob objects. He turns to Brenda, "Didn't she tell you the same exact story every time you saw her?"

Still sniffling Diane says, "She did that with everyone. That's the way she was."

"Exactly," Bob says, "that's my point. She gets things in her head and she repeats them without thinking, like she memorized them and is doing the same scene over and over. Pearl, you know that. Tell us, how many times did she do this same scene, saying it's time to end it. I bet it was every time you took her to the doctor's, maybe more. How about each time you had to change her wet diaper?" Since Pearl doesn't say he is wrong, he is encouraged, calculates and goes on, "That's at least once a day." He looks smug, as if he has won the bet.

"That doesn't prove she didn't mean it," says Pearl softly.

"But you can't take that seriously," Bob says, "I say I want to kill my boss five times a day."

David can't help himself, "Then if your boss is ever found dead you'll be the number one suspect."

"No doubt about it," says Bob.

There is silence, interrupted by Diane sniveling and then Judy imploring, "Arnie, do something, you're the father, she was your mother. Please, I'm begging you."

"Okay," he says, "let's be reasonable about this. What's done is done. As a doctor I know that no one can know anything with absolute certainty, but we need to make decisions and live by them."

"Even if somebody dies by them," adds Bob.

"Regretfully, sometimes that's the case," Arnie admits.

"I really hate to bring this up," Brenda begins.

"Then don't," says David, sensing it won't be good.

Brenda ignores him, "We're witnesses to a murder."

"Oh come on, Brenda," Judy says, "you can't still be serious about this. We're beyond that. This is a family matter that we

will talk through and move on.”

“This is going to be awkward, but it’s better we get it over with now,” Brenda crosses the room to sit next to Bob. “When we’re with the lawyer and he reads the will, are we going to ignore how Ruth died and that it wasn’t natural?”

“So that’s what this is about,” says David angrily, “I had a gut feeling it wasn’t sentimental. You never really cared.” He directs this to Bob. “You’ve always been a greedy son of a bitch. You always only wanted what I got. You never cared about anyone.”

“Of course I cared, We both cared, I mean we care. You had no right to do this, to decide for yourself.”

“You are accusing me of killing her.”

“Because you did.”

David picks up one of his crutches and swings it at Bob, who grabbs it before it strikes him. With a twist, he pulls it out of David’s hand. “You want some of this?” he said and held the crutch back, ready to swing it.

Diane’s scream was like a car crash that caused them all to stop immediately and turn to see what happened. “Grandma,” she screams a second time, “Grandma, what did you do?” she is becoming hysterical.

“Everybody, stop and listen,” it is Pearl in a commanding voice they never before heard from her. It’s as if she is a different person. It silences Diane’s screaming.

“There’s more that you don’t know, but before I tell you, you should know that I’m disgusted that it has come to this. Why can’t we mourn and remember a good woman that we love and who wanted to leave us in a good way, without sadness and pain and suffering. You are spoiling what was a very generous thing she did.” She looks at Bob and Brenda first, then at Diane. “Stop crying, Diane. Take a tissue and wipe your nose. Ruth

would be so unhappy if she knew this is how her perfect ending turned out. Fix your clothes. Give David back the crutch," she says to Bob. "In this family we don't fight, we argue, but we don't fight."

"I need a glass of soda," she looks at Arnie who gets up and gets a bottle from the kitchen. They can tell she is pausing to give them time to calm themselves.

"David, when you hop around on your crutches you are so loud. I heard you when you went to Grandma's room and I looked at the clock. It was three twenty. I waited for you to come back to your room because I didn't want to be woken again. What was he doing there all that time, I wondered. Then I heard you when you came back and almost right away went to her room again and then returned and lay down. You really are loud. It was all very peculiar and I was curious, so quietly, not like you, I went to Ruth's room. She was up, fumbling with the pills on the night table. What are they, I asked her and she told me it was your pain medicine for the leg. I asked her if she took any and she said, maybe one or maybe two, she wasn't sure. She'd been drinking and was a bit tipsy, the way she gets. Yes, Bob, she was confused. 'I'm doing it,' she said. 'This is it.' Then guess what? Never mind, I'll tell you. She knocked over the pills and I had to pick them up for her. Are you following? David left the pills, but she probably didn't take enough until I put them back where she could reach them, maybe, we can't know for sure. She took some from him, some from me. It's like she got back to the original plan, sort of. Close enough, right?"

Everyone in the room is looking at Pearl. Brenda is the first to react. She shakes her head. "Pearl, I love you, I know you mean well, but this is hard to take seriously," she is smiling and

looks around the room. “It was a nice try, don’t you agree?”

Pearl is about to defend herself from Brenda’s implied accusation, but before she says anything, Bob stands up and faces Brenda, “Honey, I’m tired. Can we just agree that Grandma got what she wanted.”

Brenda bites her lower lip and shakes her head, showing him that she’s disappointed he doesn’t stand by his convictions and, perhaps more importantly, back her up, but she says nothing.

Arnie stands up and gives his hand to help Judy rise. “Diane, let’s go. Get your coat,” he says.

Judy goes over and gives David a kiss on the cheek, “I love you and always will. Don’t second guess yourself. You did what you thought was right.”

Arnie shakes David’s hand and says, “As Pop used to always ask, ‘Who was hurt?’”

Brenda, under her breath, so she can barely be heard, “All of us.”

## Afterword

End-of-life is a very personal time that many people do not discuss. It creeps up on us. Besides being as individual as each person is, it depends on physical, family and financial circumstances. The one thing certain is that it will come to each of us.

This story is intended to launch discussions on end-of-life issues.



## About the Author

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